Macro and Micro Roles of Scaffolding in Developing Autonomy and Improving English Language Proficiency Among Japanese Learners

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Introduction

Under relatively ideal circumstances, proficiency tests are designed to separate a larger and diverse population of students into more easily managed subgroups of similar proficiency. A typical arrangement resulting from such tests would result in subgroups of high, middle and low proficiency. However, in reality, many teachers may find that their classes tend to consist of students of more mixed proficiency levels than they had initially envisioned. There are several reasons for this. One reason is due to absenteeism during placement testing periods which results in a higher risk that a student who did not take the placement test and thus having no score on which to base his placement be placed in a class not suited to his true proficiency level. In years where such absenteeism is especially high it becomes more likely that an increasing number of students may not be assigned to an appropriate class. A second reason stems from a perceived lack of willingness on the part of some students to make a sincere effort in taking the placement exam. Some students may simply fill in the ovals on their answer sheets at random or in patterns of their desire while others may doze off and sleep through some or most of the exam period. A third reason comes from students who choose to game the exam in a desire to get into an easier class; although counterintuitive to most test designers, this student's aim would be to produce as low a score as possible in order to be enrolled in a class in which the materials and pace of the class might make it easier to receive an excellent grade or to pass with a modicum of effort or class attendance. A fourth reason has to do with the limitations of the exam itself. For example, due to institutional constraints, it may be that only a written exam involving multiple choice questions is given. Such an exam may not accurately measure the proficiency levels of the students for courses in listening and speaking, and perhaps writing as well.

Another limitation of a placement test is that no matter how accurately it gauges how much knowledge of the subject a certain student has attained to date, it may not necessarily be able to predict how well this student may actually perform in attaining further knowledge and skill in the subject in a new environment perhaps away from home, and with more distractions both socially and from working demanding part-time jobs.

When the proficiency or performance range of the students in a given class is

perceived to be too great or significantly greater than expected a number of potential problems may arise. For example, teachers who tend to need some lead time during the months prior to the beginning of a new school year to prepare curriculum may discover after the first few weeks of class that the curriculum that they have prepared is ill-matched to a significant number of the students in the class. Of course, some adjustments can be improvised and the pace can be slowed down or increased, nevertheless the excessively wide range of performance levels may be too great thus creating an undesirable or untenable tension between the minimum standards of new materials (lexus, structures, functions, vocabulary, communication strategies) the teacher expects them to acquire and require extra remedial instruction which may come to consume increasing portions of each lesson and become the order of the day.

While some teachers may find a workable common ground on which to base a class for students of mixed abilities, others may wish to explore alternatives that would better maximize addressing the needs of the greatest number of the students and minimize the risk of alienating and thereby losing the attention or decreasing the motivation of students at the lower end of the proficiency/motivational spectrum. Indeed, the latter group may be quite used to being left behind in their previous academic endeavors and would most benefit from the additional scaffolding described in this paper for which we will begin forthwith our discussion of the micro roles that scaffolding can play for these students.

Micro Roles for Scaffolding

For higher level students in such mixed or heterogeneous classes I have created quizzes that contain several kinds of items including those that require short answers in full sentences on topics related to the previous lesson as well as simpler questions including higher degrees of scaffolding for those of lower ability. All students are given the choice of doing a mandatory two out of the three items offered in the top section of the quiz, plus one of two bonus items offered in the lower optional section. Although it may seem counter intuitive, higher levels students do not always select the easiest items but often seem to enjoy the challenge of attempting answers involving longer discourse. They seem to take pride in this and feel motivated to demonstrate their proficiency and take risks in order to increase their language knowledge through the teacher's feedback. This said, let us now turn our attention to what is meant by scaffolding and the role of scaffolding at a micro level (see Appendices 1-4). Further examples of scaffolding may be found in Cameron (2001).

Let us begin our discussion of the micro roles that scaffolding can play with the notion of discrete weekly units of material which are followed up by a short quiz on

each unit at the beginning of the subsequent class meeting. There are a number of purposes for this. This first is that it encourages a cumulative approach to learning occurring in a rhythmical fashion at regular--in this case weekly--intervals. Learning another language is a vast enterprise and it is useful for the student to see what may seem at first to be an overwhelming sea of material broken down into more manageable segments to which he can more effectively devote his attention. Furthermore, rehearsal for a comprehensive final exam, which due to its greater length and wider coverage of material, might seem overwhelming to some students without this kind of weekly preparation. Not only is this important for my classes in particular in order to encourage review of the material, but also because of the special non-traditional format I use that these quizzes and by extension the final examination will come in, will call for a period of getting used to for most students about which we shall elaborate later in this discussion. Thirdly, the weekly quizzes may provide important feedback for the teacher on how well the material was learned and retained and gives him some indication of how he might teach subsequent classes more effectively including how he might adjust or more finely calibrate his uses of scaffolding for these students.

At perhaps the most granular and hence perhaps most overlooked level of micro scaffolding there are within the individual quiz problems or items themselves opportunities to provide support for students who may benefit from it at the level of the individual word and even letter. One reason why this is useful is that it can both extend and provide gradual gradations of existing scaffolding, providing teachers with a wider array of micro scaffolding options.

For example, some teachers may find that for lower level subgroups of students within a given class, it may not be appropriate on a certain test to require the use of full sentences or fill-in-the-blank test items (Schere, 2010). The teacher in this case found that a test including such items had led to a "high failure rate" and "completely deflated the class' confidence." The solution was to redesign the test so that it "gave the students some multiple choice and word lists" and this led to the majority of the students then passing, thus giving them a sense of accomplishment which further encouraged their studies.

Problematic with such a solution is that while providing scaffolding by way of a simplification and a lowering of the cognitive load on the student for learning the material, it may also result in the untended consequence of shifting what was originally an opportunity for the student to demonstrate some kind of productive use of the target language (such as writing from shorter to longer chunks of discourse) to one that is more passive and receptive which is limited to mere recognition. Teachers who believe that productive language skills of speaking and writing depend on accessing and using language in a different way in the brain (Ellis, 2003), one that necessarily requires a greater cognitive load than demonstrations of recognition,

would be especially concerned. For all the teacher's good will in wanting to simplify his requirements for the student, by abandoning productive language use in the instance described above, this may not present them with a preferred or optimal solution compared with scaffolding implemented at the word or letter level (another kind of simplification) in a way that retains as much as possible the integrity of productive language usage. The latter can be part of a pedagogical path leading to successively more autonomous (that is, relying on less scaffolding) demonstrations of productive control over vocabulary and structures.

Another challenge scaffolding can deal with on this granular level has to do with the extremely fastidious requirements of perfection demanded by typically teacher-oriented educational settings prevalent in Japan such is described in (Sakai & Takagi, 2010). The authors describe Japanese English teachers as requiring "students to learn rules perfectly and memorize many words" yet at the lower end of the proficiency and motivational ranges students may struggle just to learn these rules and words only partially. What is at risk here is that at some point as he perceives the task at hand to be more than he can even muster a reasonable effort for, such students run the risk of simply giving up, at failing to attempt to answer any of the items in front of him at all, and being left behind.

Scaffolding can help prevent this kind of race to the bottom where large failure rates may result because the student may feel that there is nothing left to hold on to to draw him back into the task, that he is willing to struggle with the task but can not find a handle with which to grasp the language. With some scaffolding even here he can demonstrate at least partial knowledge of the language required so that each task does not have to be viewed as an all-or-nothing proposition as in a multiple choice question where there is only one correct answer or a cloze where only the precise spelling of the target word is considered correct. Appendix 2 for example illustrates a case where the student must supply seventeen letters and the cognitive load may be somewhat mitigated by the inclusion of the leading letter of each missing word. Students will feel greater incentive to attempt a partial answer here rather than simply giving up even if he can not spell the words perfectly once it is made clear to him that each correct letter he writes down might contribute to a better quiz result.

Scaffolding and Games

Sakai and Takagi (2009) further call our attention to lower level students' desire to study English in their own preferred ways of learning. But how might a teacher respond to a search for framing a course around what he perceives to be a way that has appeal for today's students? On the one hand, there are proponents of using games to teach students any number of subjects such as Katie Salen, Executive

Director of Design of Quest to Learn, the radical model school project in the U.S., who asserts that children enjoy learning through computer games (Dretzin & Rushkoff, 2010).

On the other hand, some critics deride these radical departures from traditional styles of teaching. Bauerlein (2009) argues that electronic gaming and other manifestations of an increasing reliance and use of electronic devices are distracting students with extracurricular diversions and contributing to decreasing levels of concentrated attention on sustained long form academic tasks such as essay and report writing.

In another example of technology as possible distraction, Oppneheimer (2007) describes a visit to an experimental school project in Worcester, Massachusetts, heavily funded by technology companies, in which he discovered a student spending more than twice as much time on his presentation project for secondary technical aspects involving graphics than for the writing and researching of the presentation's content which was the main objective of the course. The student "estimated that he'd spent approximately seventeen hours on the project, only seven of which had been devoted to research and writing. The rest to refining the presentation's graphics."

In any event, although this may change in the future, current teachers are not likely to possess the requisite game design know-how to pursue a completely game-like approach such as Salen's, however they might be able to glean the essence of what is so appealing to today's students in games beneath the veneer of lively attractive graphics. As with games, with the use of scaffolding at a micro level, they could award points based on the smallest units of effort, such as a point for each letter. While the points they "score" on the items of the weekly quizzes I have described above do not report their current score totals to them in real time such as they are used to seeing at the top of the typical game interface this would in principle be a step in the direction of rewarding students for each of the smaller efforts that cumulatively may result in larger and substantial learning gains.

Macro Role of Scaffolding

This brings us to the macro part of our discussion. Since 2009, I have calculated the quiz totals of my students and posted them at mid-term on a list at the front of the class. On the quiz that was taken the week prior to this and is being returned that day, I have also written down their cumulative points to date although only each student's total is listed on the chart posted at the front of the class for reasons of privacy. It appears that students sometimes have difficulty in connecting current or recent actions with longer term results and this may in part be due to issues involving brain development and maturity (Rappaport 2004, Spinks, 2002a, 2002b)

and suggests to me that teachers need to help students in this way to make their own connections with such consequences. Usually, on the day of this mid-term posting, gathering around the chart to see how they stand among their peers, a lively discussion ensues among certain groups of students who are probably friends which can be a constructive and valuable peer motivating event for the students increasing their awareness as to how they are doing at a macro level in the class. Extending the game-like analogy above, future plans include considering handing out individual grids on the first day of classes for the students to fill out themselves on a weekly basis. In this fashion, they can gradually move toward becoming relatively more autonomous learners tracking their own progress and regulating their own degree of effort from week to week as micro scaffolding of greater support from the teacher is also gradually withdrawn successively from one gradation to the next.

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Appendix 1
Word Selecton List
menu   welcome   no   I'd   certainly   beverage   go

like   thanks   thank   please   desert   there   peas

1．A: Waiter! I'd like the _____ , please.

    B: _____ you ____ , sir.

2．A: ____ _____ some potatoes, some _____ ...oh, and a green salad.

    B: _____ , sir.

3．Coffee, tea and cola are in the _____ section at the bottom of the menu.

Appendix 2
First Letter with Letter Count Scaffolding

1．A: Can I h _ _ _ you?

    B: Oh, n _ t _ _ _ _ . I'm j _ _ _ l _ _ _ _ _ _ .

Appendix 3
First Letter Only Scaffolding

2．A: C_____ you s_____ me s____ c_____ please?

    B: Sure, w_____ m_____ do you want?

    A: I __ l_____ a Minolta.

    B: T_____ o_____ very good. I___ a new m_____ .

Appendix 4
Date Scaffolding

Date: M _ _ _ _, 2 _ 1 _

Abstract

Macro and Micro Roles of Scaffolding in Developing Autonomy and Improving English Language Proficiency Among Japanese Learners

Research in applied linguistics has shown the need for and positive results brought about by scaffolding routines. Some applications of scaffolding for hetoerogeneous groups of learners of varying proficiency and motivation, both at the macro and micro levels, are discussed in this article.

日本人学習者の自律学習を促進し英語力を向上させる上でのスキャフォルディングのマクロ及びマイクロレベルでの役割

これまでの応用言語学の研究は，スキャフォルディングを行うことの必要性とその効果を示唆している。本稿では，多様な英語力と学習意欲を持つ学習者集団へのコース全体にかかわるマクロレベル及び一つの学習項目に関するマイクロレベルでのスキャフォルディングの応用について論じる。