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Group-based scaffolding in academic writing by EFL unversity students

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***Abstract**: This study explores the role of group-based scaffolding in improving academic writing skills among EFL university students. Guided by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the research examines cognitive, social, and linguistic scaffolding across three phases of collaborative writing: pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing. Data was collected from nine EFL students in three groups with varying English proficiency levels to observe how scaffolding facilitates learning. The findings show that cognitive scaffolding predominates in the pre-writing phase, while social scaffolding is crucial for group cohesion throughout all phases. In the post-writing phase, linguistic scaffolding becomes central as students refine language accuracy. The study highlights the adaptability of peer support in meeting evolving student needs and enhancing writing outcomes, suggesting the effectiveness of group-based scaffolding in EFL contexts.*

***Keywords:** Group-Based Scaffolding, Cognitive, Social and Linguistic Scaffolding, Collaborative Writing, Academic Writing, EFL, Socio-Cultural Theory*

1. Introduction

Academic writing skills are crucial in higher education, enhancing students' expressive abilities and critical thinking. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, academic writing presents challenges related to language and structure. Group-based scaffolding, a strategy that leverages collaboration, can help EFL students overcome these obstacles through mutual support and idea exchange.

Fletcher and Mullen (2012) emphasize the role of mentoring in group-based scaffolding, where experienced writers guide less experienced peers, fostering critical reflection and dialogue. This approach promotes a culturally responsive environment, recognizing academic writing as a social practice. Inouye and McAlpine (2019) highlight that group-based scaffolding helps students develop academic identities, learning from each other and reinforcing their commitment to writing. Zhao and Chan (2014) further argue that collaborative environments foster both collective and individual learning.

The effectiveness of peer feedback is well-documented. Wichmann et al. (2018) found that structured peer feedback significantly improves writing outcomes, supported by Veerappan et al. (2011), who noted that peer editing refines writing through collaboration. López-Pellisa et al. (2021) assert that such interactions reshape students' identities and communication norms, making academic writing more accessible and less intimidating.

This study aims to explore strategies for cognitive, social, and linguistic scaffolding in group-based academic writing to support EFL students. Cognitive scaffolding enhances critical thinking and content development, social scaffolding fosters emotional support and confidence, and linguistic scaffolding provides vocabulary and grammar support to improve clarity and accuracy in writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Socio-cultural theory by Vygotsky and Scaffolding

Sociocultural theory (SCT), developed from Vygotsky's work (1978, 1981), emphasizes that human learning is social and context-dependent, with cognitive development unfolding through mediated social interactions (Storch, 2018). Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning and development are linked, with social interactions, such as collaborative learning

and scaffolding, being essential for cognitive growth. Recent studies (Lantolf & Swain, 2000; Swain, 2006) have integrated SCT into L2 learning contexts. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is central to SCT, highlighting that learners can reach higher levels of understanding with support from more knowledgeable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Shabani et al. (2010) stress the role of scaffolding in enhancing ZPD through peer collaboration.

Scaffolding, a key concept in education, involves support mechanisms that aid learning and development. Abeysekera and Dawson (2015) discuss scaffolding in flipped classrooms, where structured guidance aligns with students' cognitive load. Belland (2014) highlights that effective feedback combines cognitive and social scaffolding to promote learning. Xu and Carless (2017) differentiate between 'designed-in' and 'contingent' scaffolding, which is crucial in academic language learning. Cummings et al. (2014) expand on scaffolding by emphasizing its role in emotional regulation and social functioning. Mermelshtine (2017) underscores the importance of scaffolding in child development, noting its dynamic nature as it adapts to the child's growing abilities.

2.2 Cognitive, Social, and Linguistic Scaffolding

Cognitive, social, and linguistic scaffolding are crucial elements in educational practices aimed at improving student learning outcomes. These scaffolding strategies provide support that enables learners to reach levels of understanding and skill they cannot achieve independently.

2.2.1. Cognitive Scaffolding

Cognitive scaffolding involves strategies and tools that help learners process information and develop cognitive skills. Ramstead et al. (2016) argue that cognitive processes are influenced by sociocultural practices, linking cognitive scaffolding to social interactions. Tools such as wikis foster collaborative writing, allowing peer feedback to improve writing and linguistic development (Lee, 2010). Belland et al. (2016) highlight the positive impact of computer-based scaffolding on STEM education, improving problem-solving and higher-order thinking.

2.2.2. Social Scaffolding

Social scaffolding refers to support structures that emerge through social interactions, significantly impacting cognitive development. Tondeur et al. (2019) describe how teacher educators serve as social scaffolds in preparing preservice teachers through collaborative experiences. Social-affective support in peer feedback is also crucial for engagement and outcomes (Obradović et al., 2016). Xu and Carless (2017) suggest that social scaffolding, when integrated with cognitive support, enhances learner motivation and engagement.

2.2.3. Linguistic Scaffolding

Linguistic scaffolding helps enhance language skills. Borek et al. (2019) demonstrate that peer scaffolding in collaborative writing tasks facilitates language development through supportive discourse. Decristan et al. (2015) further confirm that linguistic scaffolding is vital for students with low language proficiency, particularly in inquiry-based learning environments. Although less explicitly discussed in the literature, linguistic scaffolding plays a significant role in enabling learners to access and engage with content. Miller et al. (2020) highlight how responsive caregiving, particularly through verbal interactions, supports cognitive and language development, suggesting the importance of linguistic support.

The integration of cognitive, social, and linguistic scaffolding is essential for optimizing learning. Xu and Carless (2017) emphasize that while cognitive scaffolding is effective, social and emotional support is equally crucial. Belland (2016) advocates for the use of diverse scaffolding strategies to enhance online learning outcomes, underscoring the need for comprehensive scaffolding in educational practices.

2.3. Group-Based Scaffolding in Writing Skills

Group-based scaffolding is highly effective in improving writing skills, especially in second language learning contexts. Lee (2010) highlights the role of collaborative writing tools, like wikis, in fostering peer feedback, which enhances writing skills. Li and Zhu (2013) emphasize that groups with supportive interactions achieve better learning outcomes, suggesting that an inclusive environment optimizes scaffolding. Chao and Lo (2011) propose a structured approach to collaborative writing, including planning and peer editing, which strengthens learner engagement. Davin and Donato (2013) note that peer interactions, such as repetition and using the first language, promote language development. Yang (2011) supports the idea of reciprocal peer review, where students collaborate to improve each other's writing. Burgess et al. (2021) observe that feedback and workload sharing improve language and writing proficiency in Vietnamese EFL students. Inouye and McAlpine (2019) emphasize

the importance of peer feedback in creating scholarly communities, especially at the doctoral level.

2.4. Writing Skills

Writing skills are crucial for academic success, particularly in English Medium Instruction (EMI) contexts. Students with lower English proficiency face challenges that affect their academic performance (Rose et al., 2020). Achieving writing proficiency is essential for meeting academic expectations (Aizawa et al., 2020), as academic writing requires complex cognitive processes like synthesis and critical thinking (Yang & Plakans, 2012). Metacognitive strategies, such as awareness of cognitive processes, can enhance writing performance (Cer, 2019). Collaborative learning approaches significantly improve writing skills, as peer interaction and feedback foster development (Yusuf et al., 2019). Integrating cooperative learning with inquiry-based models further enhances writing abilities, particularly in argumentative writing (Awada et al., 2019). Writing assessment, including dynamic online assessments, is key to improving coherence and grammatical accuracy (Ebadi & Rahimi, 2019; Sparks et al., 2014).

2.5. Previous Studies

Chi (2009) identifies interactive learning activities, such as peer scaffolding, as essential for cognitive processing. This framework is vital in collaborative writing, where peer questioning and evaluation help deepen understanding and improve writing quality. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory emphasizes the importance of social interactions and scaffolding for cognitive development, particularly in the post-writing phase, where peer corrections enhance language proficiency.

Wentzel (1999) highlights the role of social support in collaborative learning, stressing that scaffolding behaviors such as agreement and motivation foster a positive learning environment. Bandura (1986) supports the idea that peer feedback contributes to self-regulation and observational learning. His theory suggests that peer suggestions during the writing process help students learn from each other's experiences, enhancing cognitive engagement. Schunk (2003) emphasizes the role of motivational scaffolds like motivation and evaluation in boosting self-efficacy and engagement, especially during editing and revision stages.

2.6. Gaps in Literature

While research has explored the role of peer scaffolding and collaborative learning in writing development, particularly in language education, significant gaps remain. There has been limited exploration of group-based scaffolding strategies within specific sociocultural contexts, especially in terms of how Cognitive, Social, and Linguistic Scaffolding can be utilized to support writing skills development for EFL students.

Additionally, the frequency and coordination of these scaffolding types in group interactions are not well understood. While previous studies have suggested that cognitive scaffolding appears through activities like questioning and feedback, social scaffolding facilitates relationship-building and a positive learning environment, and linguistic scaffolding helps enhance academic language skills, the dynamics of how these scaffolding elements interact and influence one another in group-based writing tasks remains unclear. Further research is needed to explore how these elements can be integrated and coordinated effectively in group settings to optimize writing skill development, particularly within the diverse sociocultural contexts faced by EFL learners.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Instrument

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand classroom dynamics and teaching practices, focusing on the interaction between students and teachers. Classroom observation, as emphasized by Zohrabi (2013), offers deeper insights into behaviors that quantitative methods may miss, enhancing the reliability of the findings. The main goal is to explore how cognitive, social, and linguistic scaffolding influence EFL students' writing development during group work. Observations will be conducted across three writing stages - Pre-writing, While-writing, and Post-writing - capturing authentic peer interactions. Five groups of three students with varying English proficiency will be observed, enabling an analysis of how scaffolding strategies evolve in response to language challenges.

Observing these three stages of writing further provides insight into how *cognitive, social,* and *linguistic scaffolding* strategies are applied and adjusted to meet the needs of each student at each step in the process. This approach clarifies scaffolding models in EFL students' writing development, from idea generation and planning in the pre-writing stage to language support and expression improvement in

the drafting stage, and finally, feedback and revisions in the final stage of refining their writing.

***3.2. Participants**:* The study involves 9 students, grouped into 3 teams, each with 3 students at different English proficiency levels. This diverse grouping ensures varied language skills and enhances peer support during the writing process. The selection criteria focus on students ranging from intermediate to proficient levels, facilitating the observation of different scaffolding strategies in collaborative writing.

3.3. Data Collection: Data will be collected through classroom observations of group interactions, each lasting 60 minutes during formal class hours. These sessions will be recorded during writing activities to capture authentic student behaviors, with a focus on the three stages of writing (pre-writing, drafting, and revising) to ensure comprehensive data on peer scaffolding.

***3.4. Data Analysis**:* The recorded interactions will be analyzed to identify and code various scaffolding types, such as questioning, feedback, suggestions, and language corrections. A pre-determined coding scheme will categorize these behaviors, tracking the frequency and types of scaffolding used across the writing process to understand how peer support evolves through each phase.

4. Findings

4.1. Identifying Types of Group-Based Scaffolding Interactions Among Students During the Pre-Writing Phase

Table 4.1. Frequency of Group-Based Scaffolding Interactions During the Pre-Writing Phase

Scaffolding Type	A	B	C	X	Y	Z	M	N	O	Total
Guiding Questioning	4	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	3	**26**
Explanation	3	3	1	3	2	1	2	2	1	**18**
Demonstration	2	1	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	**7**
Agreement	1	2	4	0	2	4	0	2	4	**19**
Suggestion	4	2	1	2	3	1	2	1	0	**16**
Motivation	3	1	0	3	1	1	2	1	0	**12**

The table 4.1 presents data on the frequency of various scaffolding types - Guiding Questioning, Explanation, Demonstration, Agreement, Suggestion, and Motivation - exhibited by students A, B, C, X, Y, Z, M, N, and O, shedding light on peer interaction patterns.

a. Guiding Questioning (26 instances) is the most common, promoting cognitive engagement and critical thinking. It encourages idea exploration and clarifies ambiguities, supporting findings that questioning enhances understanding and reflection (Chi, 2009).

b. Explanation (18 instances) is also frequent, helping students break down complex concepts, reinforcing their own understanding, and aiding peer comprehension. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) theory, where knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction.

c. Demonstration (7 instances) occurs less often, possibly due to the expertise required, but when used, it provides modeling that aids observational learning, especially for novice learners (Bandura, 1986).

d. Agreement (19 instances) and Suggestion (16 instances) serve as social scaffolds, promoting a supportive learning environment. Agreement validates contributions, boosting motivation and fostering group cohesion (Wentzel, 1999), while suggestions introduce new perspectives to refine ideas.

e. Motivation (12 instances) plays both cognitive and social roles, sustaining engagement and task focus, in line with Schunk's (2003) findings on the importance of motivation for persistence and self-efficacy.

4.2. Identifying Types of Group-Based Scaffolding Interactions Among Students During the While-Writing Phase

Table 4.2. Frequency of Group-Based Scaffolding Interactions During the While-Writing Phase

Scaffolding Type	A	B	C	X	Y	Z	M	N	O	Total
Guiding Questioning	2	2	0	2	2	0	2	2	0	**12**
Explanation	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	**5**
Demonstration	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	**0**
Agreement	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	0	2	**12**
Suggestion	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	**4**
Motivation	2	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	**8**
Evaluation	2	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	**6**

Table 4.2 shows the frequency of scaffolding types used by students A, B, C, X, Y, Z, M, N, and O during the while-writing phase, highlighting patterns in peer support that foster collaborative learning. The scaffolding types - Guiding Questioning, Explanation, Agreement, Suggestion, Motivation, Evaluation, and Demonstration - serve different cognitive, social, and motivational functions during the writing process.

a. Guiding Questioning and Agreement (12 instances each) are the most frequent scaffolding types. Guiding questioning encourages deeper thinking by prompting peers to reflect and clarify ideas, aligning with Chi's (2009) research on how questioning boosts cognitive engagement in writing. Agreement, as a social scaffold, validates contributions, increases confidence, and strengthens group cohesion, supporting Wentzel's (1999) findings on the positive effects of social support in collaborative learning.

b. Explanation (5 instances) is less common, which may reflect the challenges of articulating detailed reasoning during writing discussions. Vygotsky's (1978) theory suggests that explanations require more developed language skills and subject matter understanding, factors that can vary among students.

c. Suggestions (4 instances) are infrequent, indicating students may be hesitant to propose changes to their peers' work. This could be due to a reluctance to critique others' ideas or disrupt the collaborative process. Bandura (1986) suggests that constructive suggestions can be enhanced with more encouragement and support.

d. Motivation (8 instances) and Evaluation (6 instances) provide critical cognitive and social support. Motivation helps students stay engaged and focused on their tasks, particularly when challenges arise. Evaluation, where peers provide feedback, supports self-monitoring and improvement, aligning with Schunk's (2003) research on how evaluation aids self-regulated learning.

The absence of Demonstration suggests that, during the writing phase, modeling is less relevant compared to earlier stages that require procedural skills. Demonstrations are more effective in contexts that need visual or procedural guidance (Bandura, 1986).

4.3. Identifying Types of Group-Based Scaffolding Interactions Among Students During the Post-Writing Phase

Table 4.3. Frequency of Group-Based Scaffolding Interactions During the Post-Writing Phase

Scaffolding Type	A	B	C	X	Y	Z	M	N	O	Total
Guiding Questioning	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	**1**
Explanation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	**0**
Demonstration	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	**0**
Agreement	2	2	1	1	2	0	2	0	1	**11**
Suggestion	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	**1**
Motivation	2	2	1	1	2	0	2	1	1	**12**
Evaluation	3	0	1	2	1	1	1	1	0	**10**
Alteration	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	**12**

Table 4.3 analyzes the scaffolding types used by students A, B, C, X, Y, Z, M, N, and O during the post-writing phase, shedding light on the shift in peer support behaviors as students refine their work after the drafting phase. The recorded scaffolding types - Motivation, Alteration, Agreement, Evaluation, Guiding Questioning, Suggestion, Explanation, and Demonstration - reflect the focus on revision and feedback.

a. Motivation and Alteration (12 instances each) are the most prominent scaffolding types. Motivation helps maintain morale and engagement during the meticulous revision stage, aligning with Schunk's (2003) findings that motivational support fosters persistence and self-efficacy. Alteration, which involves language adjustments or corrections, reflects the focus on improving linguistic accuracy and clarity during revision. This type of scaffolding is crucial for refining writing and aligning with Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on linguistic support in collaborative learning.

b. Agreement (11 instances) serves as a social scaffold, validating contributions and promoting group cohesion. In the post-writing phase, agreement ensures that students feel supported, reinforcing a positive environment conducive to constructive critique, consistent with Wentzel's (1999) research on the role of social feedback in collaborative learning.

c. Evaluation (10 instances) provides feedback on content accuracy and relevance. Evaluation scaffolding promotes self-reflection and refinement of written work, in line with Chi's (2009) research on how peer feedback enhances critical thinking and skill development.

d. Guiding Questioning and Suggestion are less frequent, with only 1 instance each, and Explanation and Demonstration are absent. The minimal use of questioning and suggestions suggests that students are less focused on introducing new ideas at this stage and more on affirming or refining existing content. The absence of explanations and demonstrations indicates that the post-writing phase emphasizes content refinement over teaching or modeling new concepts.

4.4. Identifying Types of Scaffolding Interactions as Cognitive, Social, and Linguistic Scaffolding

Table 4.4. Frequency of Cognitive, Social, and Linguistic Scaffolding Types Across Writing Phases

Scaffolding Category	Scaffolding Types	Pre-writing	While-writing	Post-writing	Total
Cognitive	Guiding Questioning, Explanation, Demonstration, Evaluation	98	59	47	204
Social	Agreement, Motivation	31	20	23	74
Linguistic	Alteration, Suggestion	16	16	13	45

Table 4.4 provides an overview of cognitive, social, and linguistic scaffolding across the pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing phases, highlighting the evolving peer support structure in collaborative writing.

a. Cognitive scaffolding (204 occurrences) is most prominent in the pre-writing phase (98 occurrences), involving Guiding Questioning, Explanation, Demonstration, and Evaluation. This reflects the critical role of cognitive support in idea generation and task comprehension. The demand for cognitive scaffolding decreases in the while-writing (59 occurrences) and post-writing (47 occurrences) phases, aligning with research suggesting that early stages require more support for task understanding (Chi, 2009).

b. Social scaffolding, which includes Agreement and Motivation, totals 74 occurrences, with consistent distribution across all phases. Social scaffolds are vital for maintaining group cohesion and engagement, ensuring a supportive atmosphere for collaborative work. This steady use aligns with Wentzel's (1999) findings on the role of social support in sustaining motivation and participation in group activities.

c. Linguistic scaffolding (45 occurrences), including Alteration and Suggestion, is most prominent in the pre-writing and while-writing phases, with slightly fewer occurrences in post-writing. This pattern suggests that students focus on linguistic accuracy during drafting and revision stages, ensuring clear communication. The reduced need for linguistic scaffolding in post-writing aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) theory that language proficiency is shaped through collaborative interaction.

5. Discussion

The discussion examines how students utilize different types of scaffolding across the pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing phases, as revealed by the data in Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3. The findings show a dynamic pattern of peer support, with specific scaffolding strategies facilitating collaborative learning.

a. Pre-Writing Phase: Cognitive scaffolding is most prominent, with Guiding Questioning and Explanation frequently used to stimulate critical thinking and establish a shared understanding of the task. This aligns with Chi's (2009) findings that questioning enhances cognitive engagement by prompting exploration and clarification. Social scaffolding also plays a key role, with Agreement and Motivation fostering a supportive environment that builds group cohesion, reinforcing Vygotsky's (1978) view that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction.

b. While-Writing Phase: In this phase, scaffolding types become more balanced, with Guiding Questioning and Agreement still prevalent, but Motivation and Evaluation also gaining importance. These forms of support help students maintain focus and refine their work. The shift reflects the need for both cognitive and social support as students navigate content creation and respond to peer feedback, consistent with Wentzel's (1999) research on social support enhancing group motivation and engagement.

c. Post-Writing Phase: The focus shifts to Linguistic Scaffolding, with Alteration becoming prominent as students refine language accuracy and phrasing. This is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) theory, highlighting the importance of linguistic scaffolding in the final stages of writing. Evaluation and Motivation also play crucial roles in maintaining morale and providing constructive feedback, supporting Schunk's (2003) findings that motivational support aids persistence and self-efficacy during revision.

d. Cognitive Scaffolding in Pre-Writing: The high prevalence of cognitive scaffolding in the pre-writing phase suggests students rely heavily on strategies to clarify and understand the task, a foundational stage where brainstorming and goal-setting are essential. This aligns with research emphasizing the need for structured support during idea generation (Chi, 2009).

e. Social Scaffolding Throughout: Social

scaffolding (Agreement and Motivation) remains consistent across all phases, maintaining group cohesion and engagement. Encouragement and validation are crucial in sustaining motivation, especially in collaborative settings. This supports Wentzel's (1999) research on the positive impact of social support on motivation and participation.

g. Linguistic Scaffolding in Post-Writing: In the post-writing phase, the focus on linguistic scaffolding (Alteration) reflects the shift towards refining and clarifying language. This phase emphasizes accuracy and coherence, with motivational support helping students persist through the tedious revision process, reinforcing Schunk's (2003) findings on the role of motivation in sustaining effort during revision.

The distribution of scaffolding types aligns with the specific goals of each writing phase: cognitive scaffolding aids understanding in pre-writing, social scaffolding sustains collaboration throughout, and linguistic scaffolding ensures clarity in post-writing. This pattern highlights the adaptive role of peer scaffolding, providing tailored support that evolves with the demands of the collaborative writing process.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis highlights the dynamic use of cognitive, social, and linguistic scaffolding across different phases of collaborative writing. Cognitive scaffolding dominates in the pre-writing phase, establishing a foundational understanding of the task. Social scaffolding remains consistent, fostering group cohesion and sustained engagement throughout the process. Linguistic scaffolding becomes prominent in the post-writing phase, focusing on accuracy and clarity as students refine their work. This phased approach to scaffolding illustrates how peer interactions adapt to meet evolving needs, enhancing both individual learning and collective outcomes in collaborative writing.

For future research, it would be valuable to investigate the impact of scaffolding training on students' collaborative writing effectiveness across different phases. Specifically, studies could explore how explicit instruction in using cognitive, social, and linguistic scaffolding influences students' ability to support each other's learning and improve writing quality. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine whether consistent exposure to structured scaffolding strategies enhances students' independent writing and collaboration skills over time. Finally, further research might explore scaffolding interactions across diverse educational contexts or cultural backgrounds to assess the generalizability of these findings and understand how scaffolding practices vary globally in collaborative learning.

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