Analyzing scaffolding questions in efl reading classes

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the use of scaffolding questions in EFL reading classes. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from sixty-four teachers of English as a foreign language. The findings reported in this paper reveal how teachers utilized questioning to scaffold EFL learners' comprehension of text at pre-reading stage and the reasons for their choices of question types in the classroom.*

Keywords: *Questions, reading, scaffolding*

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, the need to enhance the quality of language learning among students at all levels of schooling has always been a concern for educators since the National Foreign Languages Project (VNFLP) launched by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2008). This project requires students to improve their competences and become more independent learners. However, most EFL students had difficulties in improving their reading skills. Using questioning at pre-reading stage is suggested as a solution to assist students in facilitating their reading comprehension. This paper, therefore, attempts to investigate this aspect of the questioning strategy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Reading comprehension

From the constructivist viewpoint, reading comprehension is the understanding of the text in divergent ways based on readers' individualized experiences or prior knowledge. To put it differently, reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning, in which readers combine new textual knowledge with their existing knowledge. From the sociocultural perspectives, however, Vygotsky (1978) puts the social factors as a prerequisite for individual cognitive development to take place. Thus, reading comprehension will not take place without the interaction with knowledgeable teachers or peers.

In this paper, reading comprehension is defined as a communicatively active process of deriving meanings from a given text-based making use of students' prior knowledge.

2.2. Scaffolding

Scaffolding has become an increasingly recognized term in instructed language learning. In the field of architecture, scaffolding is defined as a temporary structure installed to aid a newly-built construction in progress and withdrawn as such a construction is able to support itself. In the educational setting, the concept of scaffolding grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning and the term "zone of proximal development (ZPD) refers to a learning process by which learners are able to accomplish their tasks with the help of more informed people (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Scaffolding also refers to teachers' temporary support which must be removed as their students can independently complete a task.

In this paper, the term 'scaffolding' is used to refer to teachers' temporary support aimed at assisting students in learning activity accomplishment and the development of new understanding, which is gradually eliminated to reduce teachers' authority and enable students to take responsibility for their language learning.

2.3. Teachers' question types as reading scaffolding

According to Ajideh (2003), questioning at pre-reading stage refers to the instructional tool that stimulates student thinking, learning, and participation in class. Also, questioning, generated by the teacher or students, is one type of top-down processing activity that should be done before reading. This definition highlights the contribution of students' prior knowledge or common sense in making predictions and answering teachers' questions during pre-reading. Two types of questions used including open-ended questions and closed-ended questions. Their definitions and characteristics adapted from Lee and Kinzie (2012) are presented in

Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1: Characteristics & examples of open vs. closed teacher questioning

Question type	Open-ended question	Closed-ended question
Definition	A question leads to variety of acceptable responses/ answers which the teacher does not know.	A question expects one possibly acceptable response. The teacher already knew the answers and asked if students know the answers.
Cognitive level	Higher cognitive skills (prediction, reasoning)	Lower cognitive skills (recognition, recalling of facts)
Characteristics	Low-constraint detailed and extended answers	High-constraint short, simple answers

3. Method and participants

This descriptive study was to examine EFL teachers' practices of scaffolding reading comprehension using questioning. Data collected in this study include questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Sixty-four EFL teachers from eight state secondary schools in the Mekong Delta participated in the study.

Questionnaires were initially utilized to gain insights into teachers' practices of scaffolding questions in their reading lessons. Eight teachers of English, then, were randomly selected for semi-structured interviewed in order to explore teachers' reasons for their question type choices.

4. Results

The findings from the questionnaires reveal that approximately 85% of participants said that they always or usually asked questions to get draw students' attention to the topic. 78.2 % teachers always or usually asked questions to recall students' prior knowledge related to the topic, followed by those who usually asked follow-up questions to trigger students' responses (70.4%). 68.8% of those who answered the questionnaire indicated that they usually asked questions to require students to predict the content. 67.2 % teachers usually asked questions review vocabulary students already known. Nearly half of the respondents (48.5%) agreed that they used questions to ask students to explain information. A great number of teachers (60.9%) said that they usually used open-ended questions to scaffold more than closed-ended questions to scaffold (26.6%).

Table 2.2: The percentage of teachers' response to the items in teachers' practices

Items	Never & Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Usually & Always (%)	Mean	SD
I ask questions to draw students' attention to the topic.	1.6	14.1	84.4	4.05	.65
I ask follow-up questions to trigger students' responses.	1.6	28.7	70.4	3.86	.73
I ask questions to recall students' prior knowledge related to the topic.	1.6	20.3	78.2	3.98	.70
I ask questions review vocabulary students already known.	3.1	29.7	67.2	3.84	.76
I ask questions to require students to predict the content.	6.3	25.0	68.8	3.82	.79
I use questions to ask students to explain information.	12.5	39.1	48.5	3.42	.79
I use open-ended questions to scaffold.	4.7	34.4	60.9	3.67	.74
I use closed-ended questions to scaffold.	28.1	45.3	26.6	3.03	.84

The interview data show the reasons EFL teachers preferred to use open-ended questions to scaffold at pre-reading stage

- Students' English language proficiency

When asked why investigating teachers posed open-ended or closed-ended questions to scaffold at pre-reading stage, four participating teachers shared that they consider students' level. T6 clarified her views: "*In addition, open-ended questions enable low-achieving students take part in learning activities. For high-achieving students, they will be encouraged to answer in order to have bonus marks. For low-achieving students, they have more chances in seeking answer to open-ended questions.*" (T6, interview extract)

- Students' familiarity with the topic

Three out of six teachers expressed their concern students' familiarity with the topics or the level of difficulty of the topic. For example: "*I depend on the level of difficulty of the texts to choose appropriate question types.*" (T2, interview extract)

Có nhiều cách khác nhau để đạt tới mục tiêu bài dạy giáo dục hướng nghiệp, đảm bảo khả năng thực hiện của giáo viên đối với nhiều đối tượng học sinh; phù hợp với thời gian dạy học (45 phút/1 tiết); năng lực dạy học của giáo viên; điều kiện cơ sở vật chất ở địa phương, nhà trường…Do đó, giáo viên cần linh hoạt trong việc vận dụng

3. Kết luận

Giáo dục hướng nghiệp cho học sinh phổ thông là việc làm cần thiết và cấp bách cần sự quan tâm của gia đình và toàn xã hội. Việc thực hiện giáo dục hướng nghiệp ở trường phổ thông qua dạy học môn công nghệ 10_Thiết kế và công nghệ bước đầu được triển khai cho đến nay còn nhiều khó khăn và hạn chế. Song, đang từng bước được tháo gỡ

Tài liệu tham khảo

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Students' personalities

Two out of six teachers added another reason to choose the type of question they asked in reading lesson. For instance: "*In general, I consider students' personalities. If the majority of students are active, I can ask more open-ended questions to encourage students to share their ideas. For students who are shy and don't want to share ideas, I will use closed-ended questions.*" (T3, interview extract)

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shed light on how EFL teachers utilized questioning as a scaffolding strategy in reading classes. Based on students' English language proficiency, students' familiarity with the topic and students' personalities, teachers made a decision on question types in their reading classroom. It was reported that EFL teachers preferred to use open-ended questions to scaffold at pre-reading stage in this setting.

Some pedagogical implications are also made. Regarding to EFL teachers, this scaffolding instruction should be adopted based on students' need and the benefits of engaging actively in questioning session should be declared to students. With regard to lesson plan in reading classes, using questioning in a mixed-ability class can be challenging since lower-achieving students may receive less support from their teachers. The implementation of a variety of pre-reading activities including questioning will be the solution in this teaching context.

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