

# Memo on scaffolding and debriefing in LQ's

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## Significance of scaffolding and debriefing in TBL

In Graz again I got confirmed that for many teachers and developers of learning tasks (including myself) the actual learning starts and ends with the execution of the task itself. Accordingly it is the challenge of the designer to try to optimize the impact of this activity. Until recently I had the impression that the principal means to manipulate that learning activity were the task specifications. By formulating smart specifications the designer can try to elicit such type of actions in working memory that it can be assumed to foster SLA. In the second section of the assessment tool it is tried to assess the degree to which this can be expected from a given task. Thinking it over and over it becomes clearer to me that there are at least two more factors within our reach of influence which can be characterized roughly as *scaffolding* and *debriefing* and have the potential of enhancing the learning outcomes substantially. The problem is that, by their nature, it is very difficult to incorporate them in a Language Quest as it is put on the web.

## Scaffolding

Already the concept itself is not quite unambiguous. Isabel gives the rather 'popular' definition as it is presented by Bernie Dodge. Although basically correct, this definition is not very specific and reveals little of the underlying theory. This has its implications in the way such a principle is applied. What puzzles me e.g. in the report of Isabel's SIG is the emphasis on vocabulary *learning*. As far as I know LEARNING vocabulary is not scaffolding. Learning is meant to be enduring, scaffolding is *per se* temporarily. In the case of vocabulary, scaffolding is providing vocabulary which is needed for the execution of a specific task and not known yet by the learner. Maybe it is in some cases practical to learn these words before you start with the task, but that is neither self-evident nor necessary, nor specific for scaffolding, as far as I can see in the concerning scientific literature.

In general educational psychology most descriptions of scaffolding draw on Vygotsky (1962) and characterize it as connecting new things (to be learned by doing a task) to existing knowledge. Mostly two functions are distinguished:

The first function of scaffolding is to make sure that the required activity is not beyond the zone of proximal development (in terms of SLA:  $i+1$ ). If the task requires knowledge or skills beyond that level help is needed to bridge the gap. For this function the metaphor of scaffolding is used, depicting the whole system of buttresses and supports (for the construction) and railings and banisters (for the builder) meant to prevent the construction to collapse and the builder to fall down. In the case of SLA these supportive devices will mostly have the form of language materials (vocabulary, chunks, etc) and (probably more frequently in later stages) of construction aids in the form of rules to form creative speech. This form of scaffolding is in principle applicable in a Language Quest, although it is not so easy to do so without being detrimental to its lifelike and functional character.

However the second function is much more problematic. In the scientific literature, from Vygotsky, via Bruner up to Ellis and Nunan, scaffolding is described as an interactive procedure to elicit co-operative learning. The entry in Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) states: "The building up of a target language structure over several turns in an interaction". This interaction is supposed to take place between an expert and a novice with a strong emphasis on learning from collaboration. Ellis (2003, p.350) e.g.: "'Scaffolding' involves the interactive work participants engage in to accomplish a task collaboratively." According to Donato (1994) 'scaffolded performance is a dialogically constituted interpsychological mechanism that promotes the novice's internalisation of knowledge co-constructed in shared activity (p.41). In this framework it is seen as a dialogue in

which the expert provides help as needed, but not more than that. It has the characteristics of a guidance in which the novices are stimulated to find or construct the solution by themselves with a tendency to promote learner autonomy. As e.g. Hogan and Pressley (1997) put it: "The instructor's goal in employing scaffolding techniques is offering just enough assistance to guide the students toward independence and self-regulation". Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) distinguish in that process the following (sub)functions:

1. recruiting interest in the task
2. simplifying the task
3. maintaining pursuit of the goal
4. marking critical features and discrepancies between what has been produced and the ideal solution
5. controlling frustration during problem solving
6. demonstrating an idealized version of the act to be performed

It is clear that these functions cannot be easily incorporated in a standardized form in a Language Quest. This becomes even more salient if we look at the concrete techniques that are suggested to implement these functions. Hogan and Pressley (1997, pp. 17-36) e.g. summarize them as

- 1 modeling of desired behaviors,
- 2 offering explanations,
- 3 inviting student participation,
- 4 verifying and clarifying student understandings, and
- 5 inviting students to contribute clues.

All of these functions can hardly be imagined to be incorporated in a standardized form in a LQ. This seems to be especially difficult for the 4<sup>th</sup> function which includes corrective feedback. As Hogan and Pressley point out:

*"As the students gain experience with new material, it is important for the instructor to continuously assess their understanding and offer feedback.(...) "Verifying and clarifying student understanding" is essentially offering affirmative feedback to reasonable understandings, or corrective feedback to unreasonable understandings"*  
(Hogan and Pressley, 1997, pp. 18-19).

These activities are as such highly individualized. They should link up to the novice's prior knowledge, which differs per learner. They should support the development without unnecessarily giving things away, which again is different per learner and per situation. Yet it is one of the learning agents with a probably high impact on retention of what is acquired from the mental actions evoked by the execution of the task. For corrective feedback, part of the function might be fulfilled by using spelling- and grammar checkers. But that leaves us at least two problems: they are only available for written language, which covers only a relatively small part of the speech production during the task execution and, secondly, they do not provide reinforcing, affirmative feedback. Anyway, for the most part the functions and techniques mentioned above remain uncovered. And I would be very curious whether we could think of other ways to incorporate this second function of scaffolding in a LQ, other than giving generic hints in the teachers' page. One could think of systematically organizing forms of peer tutoring, but that does not solve the problem of unfitness for standardized incorporation.

### **Debriefing**

Scaffolding is intrinsically meant to be temporarily. This implies that there should be a stage in which what was presented as external support should be internalized so that it becomes the property of the learners. So that they can perform the required activities by themselves and the supportive devices can be removed.

Partly, this internalization can be assumed to take place during the execution of the task, since we may suppose that manipulating the involved cognitive objects mentally, will leave traces in long term memory. But this effect can be reinforced substantially by making this process conscious and by organizing rehearsal and memorization. Debriefing is meant to do this job. Looking at existing products we can conclude that this is perhaps the most neglected element in TBL. Although e.g.

influential authors like Di Pietro (1987) and Willis (1996) devote more than one chapter in their books to this issue we do not find it implemented in LQs. Functions of debriefing and how it could be imagined is outlined very briefly in my report of the discussion in the SIG on FoF. One form might be to give a format for a sort of learner diary under 'conclusions/reflection'. But this does not cover 'the monitor part'. I mean: how to make sure that the learners' intentions are kept and their effects evaluated? For a substantial part of the process we have here the same problem as under scaffolding: How could such a stage be incorporated in standardized form in a LQ other than in generic hints in the teachers' page or in general terms in the same wording in every LQ?

### **Scaffolding and debriefing related to the CEF**

As was already worked out rudimentary in my report of the SIG on FoF, there is a connection between some aspects of scaffolding and debriefing and the CEF-levels of the learners. Basing ourselves on the CEF-descriptors it could be hypothesized that the pre-task part of scaffolding in the lower levels should focus stronger on setting out vocabulary, chunks, phrases and formula's whereas in the higher levels increasingly sources could be provided with explanations and possibly opportunities for exercising forms of creative speech. For accents in the debriefing the same could be assumed. Emphasis on content at the lower levels, on how to say or write relevant things, and planning vocabulary work, whereas at the higher levels there could (or even should) be more attention for rules that might help to avoid mistakes and errors.

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