Using Scaffolded Guidance to Train Students in Independent Writing

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Abstract: To lead students towards independent writing, the technique of scaffolded guidance was employed at two levels: within tasks (gradually decreasing the level of teacher support) and between tasks (progressively increasing the level of task complexity). Assessment based on accuracy and fluency showed that student writing ability improved after the training. Further analysis revealed that these improvements came in areas requiring low levels of cognitive ability (spelling and punctuation) while those requiring higher order cognitive skills (grammar and content) improved the least. Factors influencing the writing process included the level of student co-operation and the closeness with which the writing model was followed.

Many Thai students have problems with writing. They feel that writing is boring and difficult and that they cannot organize and express their ideas properly. I would like to present an approach based on an experiment I conducted to find a way of helping students to write more freely and independently. Since writing effectively involves both accuracy and fluency (Hedge, 1989; Raimes, 1987), I decided to train the students to write through the process of scaffolded guidance. This is an approach which aims to help students to work independently by giving them full guidance and teacher support at the beginning of the task and gradually reducing the level of support. The responsibility gradually shifts from teacher to students until the students are able to complete the task independently.

Scaffolded guidance is based on Vygotsky's approach to helping a child develop the ability to do a certain task without help or assistance (Faley, 1994). Vygotsky (1978) called the difference between what a child can do with and without help the "zone of proximal development". According to this view, the child should be given assistance which is always at a level one step ahead of its current ability.

Two kinds of scaffolded guidance are described below and the relationship between them is then shown in Figure 3:

1. Scaffolding between tasks

This is the differentiation of the level of guidance and complexity between tasks. In Figure 1 we can see that the proportion of guidance and complexity between the three tasks varies. The level of guidance in Task 1 is at the maximum level, while the level of complexity is at the minimum. The more the complexity of the tasks increases, the less guidance the students will get:

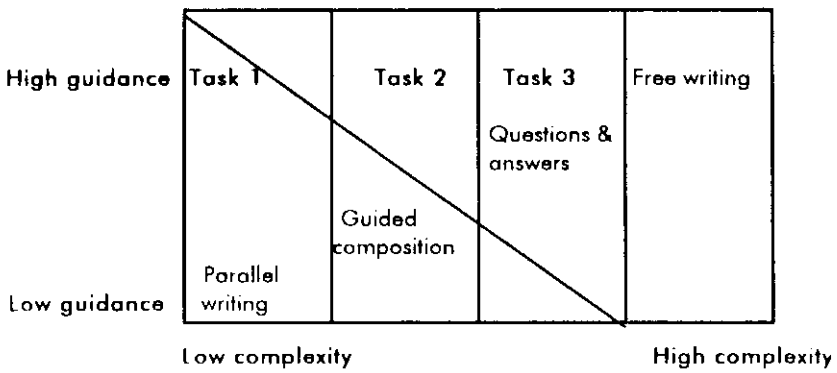

Figure 1. *Scaffolding between tasks*

The exercises for practicing writing start from what is really only a copying exercise to become gradually freer and freer until achieving the goal of free writing (Broughton et al., 1980; Pincas, 1982).

2. Scaffolding within tasks

Here the differentiation is between the roles of teacher and students and their respective responsibilities within the task. To illustrate the framework of how scaffolded guidance works within tasks, we can see from Figure 2 that scaffolding is at a maximum at the beginning of each task (Step 1) because the teacher is providing full support. In Step 2, students cooperate in groups and the teacher's support is at a medium level. In Step 3, there is no teacher support since her responsibility is only to give feedback to the students. Thus, the provision of support moves from teacher to other students in the group, and finally the student provides the support him/herself. So the teacher's support gradually decreases and the students' responsibility increases.

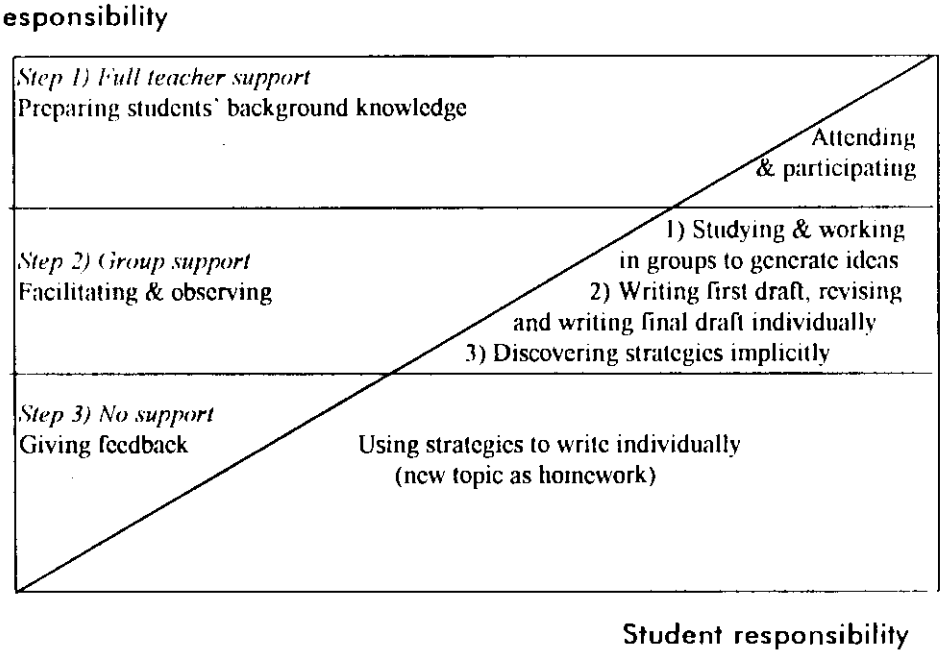

Figure 2. *Scaffolding within tasks*

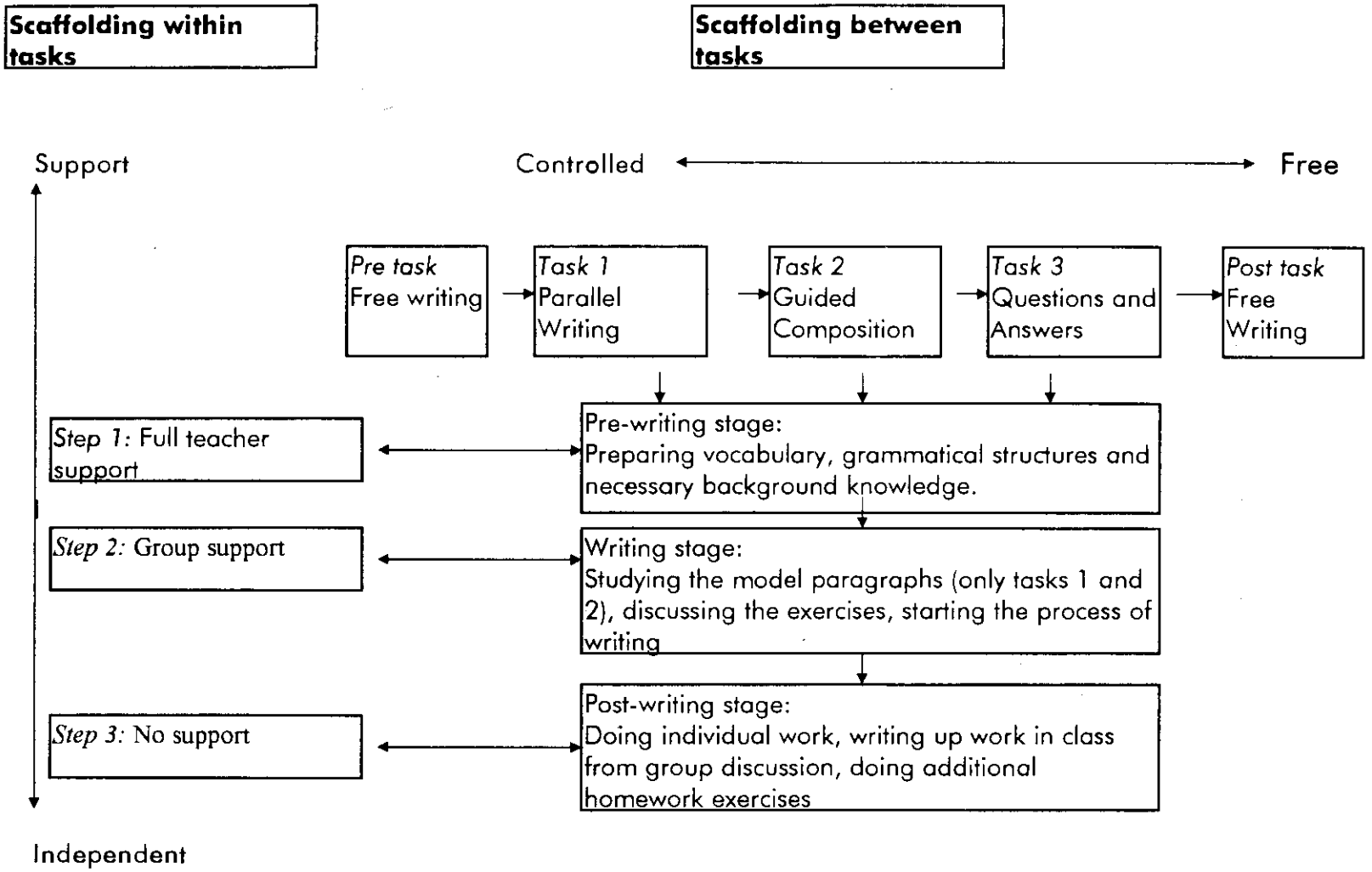

Figure 3. *Summarizing the procedures of scaffolded guidance*

Method

The experiment was conducted with a class of 44 students at the Islamic College of Thailand, a secondary school in Bangkok, but only 20 students' work was collected for the pre and post training tasks which were the main instruments. The other research instruments (experimental tasks, additional homework exercises, observation checksheets and semi-structured interviews) were used with only nine subjects who were selected as a representative sample.

There were three tasks (Parallel Writing, Guided Composition and Questions and Answers) which moved from more controlled to less controlled to reach the goal of free writing (See Dykstra and Paulston, 1976; Raimes, 1987).

Results

To see any changes in students' writing ability, it is necessary to look at both accuracy and fluency. Therefore, the marking of each exercise was divided into 5 criteria. To look at accuracy, the criteria of punctuation, spelling, organization and grammar were considered. To look at fluency, the criterion of content was considered. The findings can be divided into three main aspects:

1. The holistic effects of scaffolded guidance on students' writing

In comparing the results from the pre and post tasks, it was found that the mean score of the post task ($\bar{X} = 14.45$) was higher than that of the pre task ($\bar{X} = 9.40$). Thus, it can be said that scaffolded guidance enabled the students to write more freely and competently in independent situations where there was no task guidance or teacher support. In addition, the mean scores from the three experimental tasks and the three additional homework exercises during the experiment were nearly the same even though the complexity of the tasks increased. This shows that the students' ability increased, since they were able to attain the same level of performance in increasingly difficult tasks.

2. An analysis of the holistic effects of scaffolded guidance

It was found that the improvements noted above mostly came from the criteria of punctuation, spelling and organization. Content and grammar contributed less to any improvement. This suggests that the training provided in this experiment was more useful for students' abilities in punctuation, spelling and organization, and less useful for students' abilities in grammar and content.

3. The effects of scaffolded guidance on writing as process

The data from observation checksheets and semi-structured interviews showed that the process of writing, namely, brainstorming, peer feedback, first draft writing, revising, editing, and final draft writing, affected students' writing. The more the students followed the steps of writing, the higher were their scores. Furthermore, it was found that the students' attitudes towards cooperation in writing changed through the experiment. In Task 1, all groups were dominated by a single student. In Task 2, one group exhibited equal roles, while the other two groups had a dominant student. In Task 3, two groups

exhibited equal roles and the other group had a dominant student. It was also noticeable that those groups where roles were allocated equally generally achieved higher scores than the groups dominated by a single student.

Conclusion and Discussion

The results from a number of research instruments revealed that scaffolded guidance could effectively help the students to write since the holistic marks for writing suggest improvement through the experiment. This can be explained in terms of the three main characteristics of scaffolding which promote students learning as follows:

1. Ausubel's meaningful learning theory

One characteristic of scaffolded guidance relates to Ausubel's meaningful learning theory which states that students can learn by working from the known to the unknown (See Immanuell Kant, 1781 cited in Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988). Learners need to relate any new information to their existing framework of background knowledge.

2. Increasing complexity

This characteristic is based on Vygotsky's concept of a zone of proximal development. It argues that in order to motivate students to perform better, the task must be at a level just beyond the learners' current ability (Williams & Burden, 1997).

3. Decreasing guidance and support

Scaffolded guidance was designed with the characteristic of gradually decreasing guidance and support. This improved the students' learning because scaffolded guidance provided the students with opportunities to test their personal preferences and to investigate their use of strategies (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989).

A point for discussion is how to account for the analytic effects of scaffolded guidance. These findings can be explained in terms of Bloom's taxanomy (see Arends, 1989: 279) and language awareness (see James, 1984 and Watson Todd, 1996). Those areas which require only low level cognitive skills and performative knowledge (punctuation and spelling) improve the most, while the criteria requiring high level cognitive skills and all three kinds of knowledge: performative, intuitive and metacognitive (grammar and content) showed the least improvement. This suggests that the scaffolded guidance provided in this project, although beneficial for areas requiring only low-level skills and performative knowledge, did not provide sufficient support for the areas requiring high level skills and all three kinds of knowledge.

Thirdly, and perhaps more directly useful for teachers in the classroom, two aspects which clearly influenced the quality of students' writing were the extent to which they followed a model of the writing process and the amount of inter-student cooperation. By directing attention to these aspects of the process, teachers should be able to help their learners improve the quality of their writing.

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