American Journal of Alternative Education
ISSN: 2997-3953 (Online)
Vol. 2, No. 10, Oct 2025,
Available online at: https://scientificbulletin.com/index.php/AJAE

The Role of Scaffolding in Enhancing Learner Autonomy

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Article information:
Manuscript received: 15 Aug 2025; **Accepted:** 16 Sep 2025; **Published:** 17 Oct 2025

Abstract: This study explores the role of scaffolding in promoting learner autonomy within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. In modern pedagogy, learner autonomy is viewed as a fundamental objective that empowers students to take responsibility for their own learning. However, many learners still rely heavily on teacher guidance and struggle to regulate their learning independently. The research investigates how scaffolding techniques, grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, can gradually develop learners' self-regulated learning skills. Using a qualitative approach, classroom observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted among 40 EFL students and 3 instructors at a higher education institution. The findings revealed that scaffolding strategies—such as guided questioning, modeling, collaborative learning, and feedback—significantly enhanced students' motivation, self-confidence, and ability to manage tasks autonomously. The study concludes that scaffolding serves as an essential pedagogical bridge that transforms learners from dependent participants into self-directed individuals.

Keys words: scaffolding, learner autonomy, EFL teaching, self-regulated learning, constructivist approach, student-centered learning.

Introduction. In the 21st century, education is shifting from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches, emphasizing the development of autonomy and independent thinking. Learner autonomy, as defined by Little (1991), refers to the capacity of students to take charge of their own learning process—planning, monitoring, and evaluating their progress. Despite its recognized importance, many learners remain dependent on their teachers for direction and evaluation. This dependency often results in limited motivation and a lack of self-regulated learning strategies.

Scaffolding, originally introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), provides a structured method for supporting learners until they can perform tasks independently. Derived from Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), scaffolding emphasizes temporary assistance that is gradually removed as learners gain mastery. In educational practice, scaffolding may involve teacher modeling, guided questioning, feedback, peer support, or visual aids that help learners progress from dependence to independence. Numerous studies (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Benson, 2011) have confirmed that scaffolding not only improves performance but also encourages responsibility, reflection, and self-assessment—key features of autonomy. Nevertheless, many teachers apply scaffolding unconsciously without connecting it to the broader goal of learner autonomy. Thus, the present research aims to analyze how purposeful scaffolding strategies can systematically foster autonomy in EFL contexts.

Methods. This study employed a qualitative research design to explore teacher and student experiences of scaffolding. The participants included 40 undergraduate EFL students (aged 18–22) and three English instructors from Asia International University. The study lasted eight weeks and focused on

implementing specific scaffolding strategies during writing and speaking classes.

Data were collected through classroom observations, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. Observation checklists focused on teacher behaviors (e.g., modeling, questioning, feedback) and student responses (e.g., participation, initiative, self-correction). Students also completed weekly reflection tasks about their learning experiences. The intervention followed three stages:

1. **Modeling:** Teachers first demonstrated how to complete complex tasks, such as essay writing or oral presentations, by thinking aloud and showing step-by-step processes.
2. **Guided Practice:** Students then practiced similar tasks with teacher prompts and peer collaboration.
3. **Independent Performance:** Gradually, support was withdrawn, encouraging learners to work autonomously.

Data were analyzed thematically. Student reflections and interview transcripts were coded for recurring themes such as *motivation*, *confidence*, *goal-setting*, *self-monitoring*, and *reflection.* Triangulation among multiple data sources increased the reliability of findings.

Results. The results indicate that scaffolding significantly enhanced learner autonomy in several dimensions: motivation, self-confidence, strategic learning, and reflective thinking. Students reported higher engagement during scaffolded lessons. For example, one participant mentioned: “When the teacher showed how to plan and write the first paragraph, I understood how to continue by myself. It made me feel more capable.” Observation data confirmed that guided tasks such as “think-pair-share” and teacher questioning increased participation, especially among shy students.

Through progressive support, learners became more confident in managing tasks independently. Initially, many students hesitated to work without direct instruction. By the sixth week, 75% of learners completed assignments with minimal teacher intervention. Students began setting personal goals and reflecting on their learning process. The use of checklists and feedback sessions helped them identify strengths and weaknesses. For instance, one student wrote in her journal: “Before, I waited for my teacher’s comments, but now I check my own work using the examples we practiced.” Teachers found that scaffolding through *guided questions* (“What could be another way to express this idea?”) and *peer collaboration* (pair editing, group projects) had the strongest impact on learner autonomy. Visual organizers and rubrics also supported independent performance.

Discussion. The findings align with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, emphasizing learning as a socially mediated process. Scaffolding created a supportive environment where learners moved through the ZPD—from dependence to autonomy—through structured interaction. The gradual withdrawal of teacher support encouraged self-regulation and accountability. These results echo the conclusions of Hammond and Gibbons (2005), who found that scaffolding enables learners to internalize strategies and apply them independently. Similarly, Benson (2011) argues that autonomy develops not in isolation but through structured opportunities for independent practice.

In this study, scaffolding proved effective because it balanced guidance and independence. The teacher acted as a facilitator rather than an authority figure, promoting reflection, problem-solving, and decision-making. For example, instead of directly correcting errors, teachers encouraged students to identify and correct them collaboratively—an approach consistent with constructivist learning principles.

However, the study also revealed that scaffolding requires careful timing and awareness. If support is withdrawn too early, learners may feel anxious; if extended too long, they may remain dependent. Therefore, teachers must continuously assess students’ readiness to work independently.

These findings have important pedagogical implications. Teacher education programs should include explicit training on scaffolding techniques and their link to autonomy. Moreover, curriculum designers can integrate scaffolding frameworks into course materials, promoting gradual skill development

through clear stages of support.

Conclusion. The study concludes that scaffolding plays a crucial role in enhancing learner autonomy in EFL classrooms. Through guided interaction, feedback, modeling, and gradual release of responsibility, students become more self-reliant, motivated, and reflective. Scaffolding transforms the learning process into a partnership where teachers and learners share responsibility. For teachers, the practical implication is to plan lessons that include both *support* and *challenge*. Providing step-by-step guidance at the beginning and then encouraging self-correction and peer review can nurture autonomous learning habits.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of scaffolding on academic performance and examine its impact across different cultural and linguistic contexts. As modern education moves toward lifelong learning, scaffolding remains a vital pedagogical strategy to cultivate independent, self-motivated learners capable of continuous growth.

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