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SCAFFOLDING AS A WAY TO DIFFERENTIATE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONS

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Abstract: This paper explores scaffolding as an effective approach to differentiate instruction in language education. It examines the theoretical foundations of scaffolding based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and integrates findings from recent studies to highlight its relevance in contemporary classrooms. The discussion transitions from theory to practice by presenting design strategies and practical implications for implementing scaffolding to support diverse learners. The paper emphasizes how calibrated assistance and gradual release of responsibility can enhance language acquisition, promote learner autonomy, and make challenging content accessible to all students.
Keywords: instructional approach, differentiation, scaffolding, Zone of Proximal Development, Zone of Actual Development, high and low support strategies

It is no longer a secret that differentiation is essentially about applying common sense in teaching. Any educator who has been teaching for more than a day will attest to the fact that students learn in different ways and at varied paces; they also have different motivations, interests, and approaches to assignments (Tomlinson, 1995). This is especially true for 21st-century learners, where every student is influenced by one technological tool or another—sometimes overwhelmed and left behind. Choosing the right instructional approach is more essential than ever.

A teacher must have a clear idea of what students should know, understand, and be able to do at the conclusion of a unit of study and at the end of each day in the classroom. Furthermore, successful teaching and learning strategies must be carefully aligned with clear, detailed learning objectives (Tomlinson, 1995). Clear objectives help guide the process and serve as a reference point for the final product. They are one of the essential components of instructional planning.

Since it is well recognized that some students may learn more quickly and thoroughly than anticipated, while others may begin to fall behind early on, it is evident that a success-oriented teacher must continuously evaluate each student's progress in relation to key objectives. Additionally, continuous assessment benefits teachers only if it enhances their ability to instruct a diverse range of students.

Another important consideration relates to mixed-ability classes. Teachers working with such classes often need to support academic language while providing students with grade-level content. A useful method for achieving this is scaffolding—temporary, adaptable assistance that fades as students gain independence. Scaffolding in language instruction enables students to tackle challenging tasks and gradually acquire discipline-specific language.

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The Results of Scaffolding in the Zone of Proximal Development

In this differentiated instructional model, the teacher supports each student with challenging but reachable tasks, so there is no frustration level. The cycle always returns to the Zone of Actual Development, and what the student can do independently grows throughout the school year.

The Zone of Actual Development	**The Zone of Proximal Development, or The Teaching Zone**		**The Zone of Actual Development**
This is what each student can do on his or her own without any support.	Scaffolds	Gradual Release of Responsibility	The student has added the task to his or her repertoire of work that can be completed independently and without any support. Now the student is ready to work on a new, scaffolded task.
	The teacher or a peer expert supports the student.	Over time, the teacher releases the responsibility for completing the learning task to the student.	

Note. From Robb (2004, p. 24).

Based on the table, there may be different responsibilities for teachers and students in scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (The Teaching Zone) and the Zone of Actual Development. However, in all cases, there is no frustration level, which could positively affect the language acquisition process.

With the strategy of scaffolding, a teacher progressively withdraws support and guidance as students gain knowledge and proficiency. Learning strategies, procedures, and content can all be supported through scaffolding. This requires careful planning, initial assessment of students' prior knowledge, and ongoing monitoring of progress to determine which supports are needed and which can be removed. As students mature, they encounter increasingly challenging tasks, necessitating new resources that will eventually be phased out.

Scaffolding aims to improve students' competence and help them become more independent learners. This is achieved by providing the appropriate level of instructional support based on the complexity of the task and the needs of the students. Scaffolding can be modified, reduced, or eliminated as students develop as learners (University at Buffalo, 2025).

There are several benefits of scaffolding, such as making students feel more comfortable trying new things, encouraging independence, promoting deeper understanding and better retention of content, reducing frustration, and giving instructors more opportunities for formative assessment.

When introducing new skills or complex content, teachers can employ scaffolding strategies. They can model tasks, provide feedback, and ask guiding questions.

- To support learning, teachers can use guided notes, visual organizers, diagrams, and activate prior knowledge.
- Teachers can also "chunk lessons into digestible bites" or divide learning into manageable segments (University at Buffalo, 2025).

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development serves as the theoretical foundation. The ZPD refers to the gap between what students can accomplish independently and what they can

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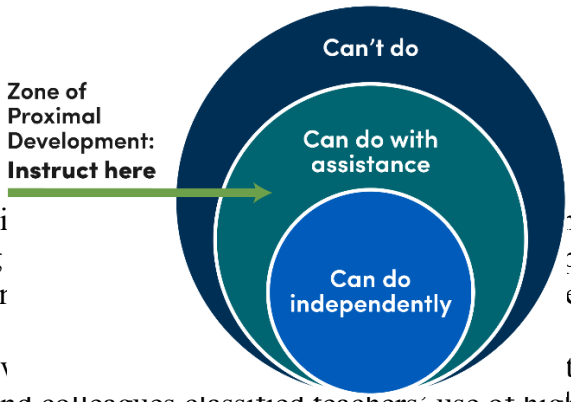
achieve with assistance. It is the additional space where students can practice, learn, and accomplish tasks they could not complete without guidance.

Teaching below the Zone of Proximal Development (see diagram) leads students to practice what they already know, resulting in minimal learning. Conversely, teaching only unfamiliar concepts causes failure and frustration, which also hinders learning. Scaffolding is used to reduce unnecessary challenges and support student success, even though the learning process often involves some degree of confusion and initial failure. By teaching within the ZPD, students can use prior knowledge meaningfully while receiving guidance and practice opportunities, ultimately enabling them to meet course objectives independently (University at Buffalo, 2025).



(Vygotsky, 1978).

Examples of scaffoldi n idea, modeling a new skill or method, providing ple options, using templates and guides, employir e on improving social and cognitive skills.

There is evidence sho tion by adjusting the level of support. Pentimonti and colleagues classified teachers' use of high-support strategies (such as modeling and explicit feedback) and low-support strategies (such as open-ended questions and prompts) in preschool language interventions. Teachers tended to use low-support scaffolds more frequently, while specific high-support actions were associated with improvements in children's language outcomes—especially for learners with lower competence (Pentimonti et al., 2017). According to Pentimonti et al. (2017) and Ertugruloglu et al. (2023), differentiation is not only about which scaffold is used but also about how much support is provided and for whom at a given time.

Research suggests that educators can employ several design strategies to use scaffolding as a differentiation tool:

- **Align language and content objectives.** To enhance language and content acquisition, make linguistic objectives (such as key connections or frames) explicit and link them to disciplinary thinking (Blair et al., 2024; Mahan & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2025).
- **Arrange supports from high to low.** As students become more fluent, transition from modeling, guided practice, and structured frames to prompts and open-ended questions (Pentimonti et al., 2017; Katamadze, 2025).
- **Prioritize interactional scaffolding.** Facilitate production and negotiated meaning by revoicing, encouraging elaboration, and recasting language during discussions (Johnson, 2019; Mahan & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2025).
- **Account for unpredictability.** Design tiered assignments and contingent questions that can be adjusted based on students' performance during class (de Oliveira & Athanases, 2017; Ertugruloglu et al., 2023).
- **Reflect and adjust.** Review video or lesson artifacts using techniques such as LACI's six Cs to determine whether supports meet learner needs, promote higher-order

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thinking, and are removed at the right time (Blair et al., 2024; Mahan & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2025).

Conclusion

Scaffolding can be considered an effective differentiation method in language education when it is contingent, well-designed, and temporary. While learning academic language, students can access challenging content through calibrated assistance, and deliberate fading of support helps preserve learner autonomy. To make language education accessible for every learner, teachers should implement design strategies such as aligning language and content objectives, arranging supports from high to low, prioritizing interactional scaffolding, accounting for unpredictability, and reflecting and adjusting based on student progress. These strategies ensure that scaffolding remains flexible, responsive, and focused on promoting independence while supporting academic growth.

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