

Scaffolding children's talk and learning

Carol Read

Abstract

Children are increasingly starting to learn English as a foreign language in formal classroom contexts at a younger and younger age. By the end of primary, there is a general expectation on the part of parents, curriculum planners and other institutional stakeholders that, as a result of this early start, in terms of oral proficiency, children will not only be able to do such things as sing songs, say rhymes and name familiar objects but will also be able to interact with others about matters pertaining to their everyday life and world. Yet evidence from research (see Moon (2004) this volume) shows that in terms of developing oral proficiency, and in particular, interactive and extended discourse skills, certain types of experiential language programmes are not necessarily successful in producing this outcome. In this paper, it is argued that one of the ways to improve oral proficiency in children learning English at primary level is to develop teachers' awareness and understanding of the importance of the quality of classroom interaction in developing talk and learning. It is suggested that on teacher education courses the related concepts of Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) and 'scaffolding' (Wood, Bruner, Ross, 1976) can provide a useful framework which will equip teachers with the necessary strategies and skills to build up and gradually extend children's interactive and discourse skills in appropriate ways at different ages and stages of learning.

Introduction

On pre- or early in-service teacher education courses for teaching English as a foreign language, there is typically a dichotomy set up between TTT (teacher talking time) and STT (student talking time), with advice to trainees usually being on ways to reduce the former and increase the latter. While this has undoubted validity in terms of increasing children's opportunities to practise the language and creating more symmetrical class participation (cf Van Lier, 1996), such a dichotomy on teacher education courses runs the risk of missing out on the vital area of the nature and quality of interaction time between the two.

The importance of interactive talk in children learning their first language (e.g. Halliday, 1975, Bruner 1978) as well as for second language acquisition (e.g. Ellis 1994, Van Lier 1996) is well-documented. Vygotsky's theory of learning (Vygotsky 1962, 1978) as socially co-constructed between collaborating partners within a cultural context gives a fundamental role to interaction in the cognitive and language development of children and this provides a framework to describe children's progress and learning in a foreign language as well.

Vygotsky's theory of learning and the ZPD

Vygotsky's theory is described in detail in a wide range of child development and educational literature (e.g. Meadows 1993, Smith et al 1998, Light et al 1995, Lee 1999). For Vygotsky, the child develops cognition and language as the result of social interaction with more knowledgeable others in activities which have specific goals. As a result of the child's participation and the interactive, verbal give-and-take with a more skilled or knowledgeable person in the undertaking of everyday problem-solving and tasks, external, socially-mediated dialogue is gradually internalised and becomes an inner, personalised resource for the child's own thinking. At first, the adult or carer has all the language and cognition necessary to be able to perform a task and guides the child through relevant behaviour until he is able to perform the task independently and successfully. Through modelling behaviour and language, and familiarising the child with the processes and procedures involved, the adult leads the child to being able to act competently and confidently on his own.

The area in which the child can perform an action or task, provided that a more skilled or knowledgeable person is available to help, Vygotsky termed the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). This he defined as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky 1978, 76). In an everyday classroom context, this might be paraphrased simply as the gap between a child being able to do a task easily without any help or support at all, and a task which is simply out of reach for the child at the moment and cannot be attempted without guidance and help from someone who is more knowledgeable or skilled. In this way, the ZPD provides a valuable conceptual framework in an educational context for situating the level of

challenge in activities and tasks that may be appropriate for children at any one time – tasks which will challenge, stretch and extend learning but which are also achievable and which will allow for success.

The ZPD contrasts with the area of ‘self-regulated action’ (Van Lier, 1996) where the child can carry out tasks competently and independently. In interaction in the ZPD, the adult provides guidance through linking the task to previous knowledge and experience and enabling the child to participate in carrying out the activity in a meaningful way. Together the adult and child create ‘states of intersubjectivity’ where ‘participants are jointly focused on the activity and its goals, and they draw each other’s attention in a common direction’ (Van Lier, 1996, p. 161).

Scaffolding and its relationship to the ZPD

Scaffolding is the metaphorical concept used to describe the interactive verbal support provided by adults to guide a child through the ZPD and enable them to carry out a task that they would be unable to do without help. In the same way as Vygotsky’s theory and the ZPD, the concept of scaffolding is discussed in detail in a wide range of educational and child development literature (cf op cit). As the metaphor implies, scaffolding is temporary and can be put in place, strengthened, taken down piece by piece or taken away completely, as the child develops knowledge and skills and is increasingly able to act competently and independently. Originally developed by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) in the context of first language acquisition and parental tutoring of very young children, scaffolding is a metaphor that is based on the Vygotskian premise of learning as a socially constructed process and is frequently adopted to describe teacher intervention and support in other learning contexts as well (eg. Wood, 1998).

Scaffolding refers to the particular kind of help, assistance and support that enables a child to do a task which they cannot quite manage on their own and which brings them closer to a state of competence that will enable them to carry out other similar tasks independently in the future (Maybin, Mercer & Stierer, 1992). For Bruner, scaffolding ‘refers to the steps taken to reduce the freedom in carrying out some task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring.’ (Bruner, 1978, 19). It is ‘a process of ‘setting up’ the situation to make the child’s entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it’ (Bruner, 1983 p.60). The future orientation of

scaffolding together with the principle of ‘handing over’ to the child is important in differentiating and defining scaffolding as a particular kind of flexible help, assistance or support and relates closely to Vygotsky’s concept of learning and development as the result of joint participation in goal-oriented activity: ‘What the child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow’ (Vygotsky, 1978, p.87). As has been pointed out (e.g. Gibbon, 2002), it can be argued that it is only when scaffolding is needed that learning actually takes place because it is only then that work is taking place within the child’s ZPD.

The notion of the ZPD and promoting children’s learning through scaffolding is one that generally has a strong appeal to teachers (Maybin et al 1992), and this is perhaps because of the way it resonates with intuitive conceptions of what it means to intervene successfully in children’s learning (Mercer, 1994). However, the concept of scaffolding has also been referred to as ‘elusive’ and ‘problematic’ (Maybin et al 1992), as well as having ‘a slightly slippery nature’ and with ‘potential fuzzy areas’ (Smith, 2003). This is perhaps particularly so in the context of learning a foreign language, where language is both the content and the medium or vehicle for learning, and where the emotional and interactional context (the classroom) differs markedly from the context of first language acquisition and parental tutoring at home in which the term was originally developed.

Scaffolding in teaching a foreign language to children

In their original formulation, Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) identified six features of effective scaffolding. These were:

- creating children’s interest in the task
- simplifying the task, for example, breaking it down into stages
- keeping children on track by reminding them of the goal
- pointing out key things to do and/or showing the child other ways of doing parts of the task
- controlling the child’s frustration during the task
- demonstrating an idealised way of doing the task.

All these features strike a chord of validity in the context of teaching a foreign language to children. As Cameron (2001,10) has pointed out, Bruner also developed the dual concepts of ‘formats’ and ‘routines’ (Bruner, 1983, 1990) which are also highly relevant

in the context of language teaching. These are features of events which provide a context for scaffolding to take place, in the way that they combine the secure, familiar, non-threatening and predictable with space for development, growth, creativity and change.

van Lier (1988, 1996) and others (e.g. Gibbon, 2002) have argued that the processes involved in scaffolding, by which language and cognitive abilities are developed through interaction with others, may also operate in second or foreign language classrooms as well. van Lier (1996) emphasises how the notion of scaffolding highlights the dynamic nature of working in the ZPD and that this is characterised by a number of features and principles which he characterises as: continuity, contextual support, intersubjectivity, contingency, handover and flow.

Scaffolding as a multi-layered process

van Lier sees pedagogical scaffolding as a multilayered, or at least a three-stage, process which goes from 'global to local' or 'macro to micro' (van Lier, 1996, p.198).

Following van Lier's model of layers and levels of scaffolding, an example with a group of four-year-old beginners in Spain is as follows:

1 Global level: as part of a classroom learning routine and as a long term aim, but with no rigid time limit, children will learn to describe and talk about the weather. The intention here (following van Lier, 1996) is to repeat the procedure regularly, with variations and increasing participation and control by the children as this becomes possible.

2 Activity level: this involves planning a sequence of steps to carry out the activity, which, in this case, is incorporated into the lesson just before morning break e.g.

- The teacher (T) walks over to the window and looks out at the weather
- T invites the children to look out and asks what the weather's like
- T shows flashcards of different weather to the children in turn and asks *Is it ...? No / Yes.*
- T and children talk about the implications of the weather for playtime e.g. *Can we play outside today? / Do we need our coats?*

3 Local, interactional level: this involves the teacher in deciding from moment to moment when and how to prompt, help, encourage, praise, repeat, re-cast, or modify the steps in order to ensure (following van Lier, 1996) that the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult and that the children are always ‘intersubjectively engaged’.

An example of initial scaffolding

(Note: for reasons of space and the quality of the recording, the children’s responses here are summarised; they do not all respond neatly together in chorus and some respond in Spanish as well as, or instead of, English.)

T: *(walks over to window and looks out, looks at children and opens arms out questioningly)* What’s the weather like today? Let’s see now ... *(holds up flashcard)* Is it snowing?

PP: No!

T: No, you’re right. It isn’t snowing. *(PP chat excitedly in Spanish about snow)* Do you want it to snow? Do you like snow?

PP: Yes!

T: Me too! I like snow. *(T looks out of the window again and holds up the next flashcard)* Is it raining?

PP: No!

T: No, it isn’t raining. Very good. Is it cloudy?

PP: No!

T: *(looking up at the sky)* No, you’re right. It isn’t cloudy. Is it sunny?

PP: Yes.

T: Yes, it is sunny. You’re quite right. It’s a lovely, sunny day. And the sky is ...

PP: ...blue.

T: Yes. A lovely blue sky! Can we go outside to play today?

PP: Yes!

T: Do we need our coats? *(using mime)*

Some PP: Yes!

Other PP: No!

T: No?! Oh, yes. Yes, I think we do. It’s sunny but it’s a bit cold *(pretends to shiver)* Do we need our hats? *(using mime)*

PP: No!

T: No. You're right. It's only a bit cold. So ... today is (*looking out of the window again*)

Some PP: ...sunny!

Other PP: ... cold!

T: Very good! The sky is ... (*pointing to it*)

PP: ...blue.

T: Yes! A lovely blue sky! We need our ...(*using mime*)

PP: ...coats.

T: Excellent. But we don't need our ...(*using mime*)

PP: ... hats.

Over a period of time, a simple activity such as the one above evolves in a variety of ways according to the children's learning and their increasing ability to participate with confidence. The activity shares the features of Bruner's 'formats' and 'routines', in that it is safe, familiar and predictable, and yet at the same time allows space for active learning and creativity (cf Cameron 2004, this volume) to take place. As with a bedtime story at home (Bruner's best known example for explaining the importance of formats and routines), once you have established this or a similar activity as part of a learning routine in class, children will ritually expect and want to do it in every lesson and be the first to remind you if you forget. Typically, the children's initial, receptive understanding of the words to describe the weather soon become part of their output (although the speed of this varies for different children). This means that, after a time, the children respond to the teacher's initial question about the weather (*What's the weather like?*), without needing the support of the flashcards and additional questions (*Is it cloudy?* etc). They use an increasing amount of vocabulary which has been part of previously scaffolded events, more extended two or three-word, rather than one-word responses (e.g. *It's sunny* or *Is sunny* (sic) as opposed to just *Yes / No*). They also begin to experiment with more creative formulas e.g. *It's cloudy-sunny* (sic) and to offer their own ideas about the implications for play time e.g. *We need 'crema'* (ie sun cream to put on our faces). There also usually comes a stage in the scaffolding process when the children, in anticipating their playtime, will initiate the question about the weather themselves.

This illustrative example of how scaffolding can work in a class of four-year-old beginners of English in Spain raises a number of questions about what counts as scaffolding, rather than other kinds of help, in foreign language classes with children. It raises the issue of the nature and quality of interaction between the teacher and the children, and the way this may structure and promote or, conversely, restrict and stifle learning. It also invites consideration of the role of children's first (or second, in the case of multi-cultural classes) language in scaffolding their learning and development in a foreign language and, finally, the way that the strategies and procedures adopted by teachers to scaffold children's language and learning need to evolve and change as children develop, grow older and become more proficient in the language.

What counts as scaffolding

Following Maybin, Mercer and Stierer (1992), in order to know whether a particular kind of help counts as scaffolding, we first of all need to establish that the teacher is aiming to develop a specific skill, concept or level of understanding. In other words, although scaffolding in a classroom context does not necessarily need to apply to a well-defined problem-solving activity (such as building a pyramid from wooden blocks as in the original research by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976)), it does need to refer to the kind of help which is given in the attempt to carry out a specific learning activity which has clearly defined learning goals. Secondly, there needs to be evidence that the child can carry out the task successfully with the teacher's help. Thirdly, and relating to the 'handover' principle, proposed by Bruner (1983) and also included by van Lier (1996), there needs to be evidence that the child has achieved a greater level of competence and independent functioning as the result of the scaffolding which has taken place.

In the example given above, we could say that the specific goal of the activity is for children to describe the weather and recognise the implications of this for playtime. The evidence that they can do this successfully with the teacher's help lies in their increasingly confident responses over a series of lessons. The evidence of the children reaching a new level of independence and competence would be seen in the transfer and use of the same language to a new context, such as a story or game. It could also be seen, for example, in an exchange with the teacher in the playground, as has happened

to me, when a child rushes up and declares with a huge grin *It's sunny!*, thus demonstrating a new level of independence and choice in the language they use.

The nature and quality of interaction

In the weather example cited above, there are at least two instances of the kind of interactional exchange which has been said to account for over 70% of classroom discourse (van Lier, 1996) and which arguably tends to restrict and close down communication rather than promote it. This is the Initiation, Response, Feedback (IRF) model as seen in the exchange above e.g. T: *Is it raining?* PP: *No!* T: *No, it isn't raining. Very good.* The drawbacks of such a model frequently cited include the fact that communication in the real world does not happen like this, there is a demand on the learners to display what they know, every response is a test which is immediately evaluated by the teacher for its correctness, rather than responded to for its meaning, the third turn by the teacher giving feedback closes down the possibility for further communication, it does not represent the joint construction of discourse, the teacher dominates and the learners have limited opportunities to practise using the language themselves (cf the 'two-thirds' rule Edwards and Mercer, 1994) and the transfer of competence or independence to the learner is inhibited. In contrast to these considerable drawbacks, potential benefits cited are that IRF exchanges can enable the teacher to structure the interaction in order to lead the children's thinking and language output in a certain direction (van Lier, 1996, Gibbons, 2002), the children know immediately if they have answered correctly, it enables the teacher to maintain control of the class (although this is cited as a negative as well as a positive feature of Edwards and Mercer, 1994) and, if it is used well, can extend learners' output, prompting them to think critically and give evidence for or justify their answers.

As van Lier (1996) has pointed out, IRF can only be beneficial in developing interactive oral proficiency if it is used as a way of scaffolding interaction which leads to 'handover' and increased independence. He identifies two broad orientations of IRF which are display / assessment, on the one hand, and participation on the other. In the context of working with children, it is this latter purpose and orientation of IRF which may turn out to play a crucial scaffolding role in the foreign language classroom with young children. It 'reduces the freedom' (cf Bruner op cit) and thus the difficulty of turn-taking with another person in a foreign language. It creates confidence and

encourages engagement and participation through making responses achievable (often also within a predictable format). In addition to this, the feedback in the third turn allows for instantly positive affirmation and praise from the teacher which is vital in building up positive self-esteem and creating an appropriate affective atmosphere. As readers with experience of very young children outside the context of the classroom will know, and as van Lier (1996) also points out, the IRF format is also not so distant from interchanges which children will have experienced in real life. For example, an adult and child reading the storybook 'Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?' (Martin 1992) and looking at the last page together, the following kind of exchange, enacted as a kind of game, is easily conceivable:

Adult: Where's the green frog?

Child points to frog (possibly with adult guiding the child's index finger over the animals until it lands on the frog).

Adult: Yes! Here he is! Very good! And where's the blue horse?

Child points again.

Adult: Yes! Here he is! Very good! etc..

It seems, therefore, that in the context of young children learning a foreign language, IRF-type exchanges, if used judiciously as a strategic bridging device, may play an important scaffolding role in developing children's oral proficiency, leading over time to greater independence and more contingent types of discourse. Another area which may play an important role in scaffolding children's learning in a foreign language is the use of L1.

The role of L1 in scaffolding

As has often been pointed out (e.g. Halliwell 1992), young children bring with them to the classroom a range of knowledge, skills, experience and language which serve as a springboard into further learning. As part of the process of scaffolding, teachers need to make a link between the familiar and the new, and in the case of foreign language learning, a link between the language, which is the shared, habitual mode of communication among the children, and the language that is to be learnt. This process of scaffolding from the children's first or second language (depending on the composition of the class) to a foreign language in a formal classroom context is one which may also promote independent language use. It is, however, also recognised that

the strategy of scaffolding from the first or second language to the foreign language is not one that will necessarily be available to every teacher since it does depend on the teacher also understanding the children's language.

The extract below is taken from a storytelling session to the same group of four-year-old beginners as in the weather example above. In the previous lesson, the children were introduced to the main character of the story (a gorilla). They acted out a chant about the gorilla, talked about the gorilla's size and colour and completed and coloured a picture of the gorilla. In this extract, they are listening to the first part of the story (Read & Soberón, 2002) for the first time:

(Note: In this example, the text of the story is underlined and a translation of the children's interventions in Spanish is given in brackets)

- 1 T: Are you ready everyone? Listen, look and ssh!... Adri, Oscar, Naomi ... and then I'll begin. One day a big gorilla comes to the house ...
- 2 PP: *(laughter)* ¡Mira el gorila! (Look at the gorilla!)
- 3 P: ¡Qué guay! (How cool!)
- 4 P: Es muy grande! (He's very big!)
- 5 P: Es así de grande (He's big like this) *(showing how big the gorilla is)*
- 6 T: Yes, you're right! Very good. The gorilla's big and he's got a big ... *(pauses, points to gorilla's tummy)* t... t... t... Do you remember 'Big gorilla, big?' *(points to own tummy and mimes 'big')*
- 7 P: Sí. (Yes)
- 8 P: Y yo! (And me!)
- 9 T: Tell me then... Big...
- 10 T, PP: ... gorilla!
- 11 T: Big ..
- 12 T, PP: ... tummy!
- 13 PP: Yeah!
- 14 T: Yeah! *(laughs)* Very good! Stay back now... Adri, Antonio. Look, Jeni can't see. Cross your legs ... like David. Very good. That's it. Ssh. Listen now. The gorilla's big and he's got a big tummy! *(points to the pictures)*
- 15 P: *(with hand up)* Es que yo fui al zoo con mi papá y vi un gorila muy,

- muy, muy grande... (I went to the the zoo with my daddy and saw a very, very,very big gorilla)
- 16 T: Yes?! You saw a big gorilla in the zoo with your Daddy! How lovely!
- 17 P: Y yo también he visto un gorila. (And me, I've seen a gorilla too)
- 18 P: Y yo. (And me)
- 19 T: Yes?! You've seen a big gorilla too! That's great! Now ssh ... stay back Adri so everyone can see... that's it, good ... and let's listen to the story about the gorilla. One day a big gorilla comes to the house. Hello Children. (*deep voice, points to the gorilla*). Hello gorilla (*points to the children in the story*). Can you say hello to the gorilla? (*shows the book round*).
- 20 P: Hello gorilla
- 21 T: Very good.
- 22 P: Hello gorilla
- 23 T: Lovely.
- 24 P: Hello gorilla
- 25 T: Great.
- 26 P: ¡Hola gorila! (Hello gorilla!)
- 27 P: ¡Hola gordo! (Hello fatty!) (*general laughter*)
- 28 T: (*points to the children in the book again*) Hello gorilla. Is the gorilla happy? (*points to the gorilla's smile and mimes*)
- 29 PP: Sí. (Yes)
- 30 T: Yes. Say 'yes'.
- 31 PP: Yes.
- 32 T: Very good. Are the children happy? (*points to the children*)
- 33 PP: Yes.
- 34 T: Very good. Listen now (*in deep gorilla voice*) 'Mmm...Delicious food!' (*points to the pictures*) I'm hungry! (*mimes*). I'm hungry! (*repeats the mime*).
- 35 P: ¡El gorila quiere comer! (The gorilla wants to eat!)
- 36 P: ¡Tiene hambre! (He's hungry!)
- 37 T: Yes, very good. The gorilla's hungry... hungry. So what happens now, do you think? (*gesture and pause*) ¿Qué va a pasar ahora?
- 38 P: Va a comer todo, todo, todo ... así (He's going to eat everything, everything, everything ...like this)
(*pretends to eat*)

39 T: Yes, maybe ...

40 P: Y va a comer a los niños también... (And he's going to eat the children too...)

41 T: Oh, no. No, I don't think so. He's a nice gorilla (*smiles and pretends to stroke the gorilla*). Let's listen and find out... Ssh, now... let's listen and look (*turns over the page and continues telling the story*).

As can be seen in this extract, the use of the children's first or second language (in this case, Spanish) plays a number of contributory roles. The children use Spanish to i) respond in personal, divergent ways to the story (as in 3-5) ii) relate the content of the story to their own personal experience (as in 15) iii) express their sense of humour (as in 27) iv) show they understand what's happening in the story (as 35, 36) v) predict what's going to happen in the story (as in 38) vi) use their imagination to hypothesise and go beyond the story (as in 40). The teacher, who understands and shares the children's first language i) accepts their interventions as an integral part of the session (ie she does not insist on English only) ii) responds to the children's meaning (as in 16) iii) repeats, re-casts or expands their contributions (as in 6, 16) iv) uses their contributions to check and confirm that comprehension is taking place (as in 37) v) gives a lot of positive feedback and praise (as in e.g. 6, 14, 21). The teacher uses Spanish herself once (in 37) to ask a question. She accompanies asking the question in English with a look of puzzlement and a gesture of holding out her arms. As she repeats the question in Spanish, she reduces her voice to a stage whisper (something which cannot be conveyed in the tapescript), so that it comes across almost as a verbal aside or in parenthesis, in contrast to the main language of the lesson. This combining of asking the question with an exaggerated gesture, and the Spanish aside, is an example of scaffolding the children's initial understanding of the question. This local scaffolding can then be dismantled in the future as appropriate, when the same question is used again for different stories, first by dropping the Spanish aside and then the accompanying gesture.

At the global level, the aim of the story telling is that over a series of lessons, possibly as many as eight or ten, the children will come back to the story three or four times, and that, during this time, their initial receptive understanding of the story will be scaffolded in order to enable them to act out and join in re-telling the story, and to personalise and transfer some of the key language to the context of their own lives and world.

At the activity level, every time the children come back to the story, they participate in different ways which draw them into (re-)engaging with the story and increasingly using the language it contains, in this case through the use of, for example, picture cards, stick puppets and gorilla headbands.

At the local, interactional level, the nature and extent of the scaffolding changes each time the children come back to the story. The use of L1 and IRF exchanges, which are an integral part of the initial storytelling event in the extract above, are no longer needed as scaffolding to the same extent in second or subsequent tellings, and other techniques, such as the use of more open questions and different interactional patterns, which encourage children to join in telling the story, interpret the story and relate it to their own lives, come into play instead. Children's use of their first (or second) language in the initial story telling event provides an important scaffold from the familiar to the new. It allows the children to express individual personal responses, relate the story to their own lives, enjoy humour, predict, guess and imagine, in a way that would not be available to them if they used English alone and, together with the teacher, they jointly construct their understanding of what the story is about. The scaffolding in subsequent lessons evolves and moves on, guiding the children through their individual ZPDs, to internalising more of the language and using it in a more independent way. The shared knowledge, understanding and 'intersubjectivity' initially facilitated by the role of L1 in the storytelling leads the children to new learning.

Implications and the way forward

The discussion above uses the related concepts of the ZPD and scaffolding to begin to explore how these might provide a framework for developing procedures and strategies for improving children's oral proficiency in a foreign language from a young age and over the long term. There are two main implications for current practice and for future research which arise from this:

1 On teacher education courses, it is vital to raise teachers' awareness of the potential impact on learning of discourse strategies they use with children at different ages and stages of learning. The related concepts of the ZPD and scaffolding provide an invaluable theoretical framework which can help teachers to situate and understand their

professional role in children's learning and enhance their practice. Although the area of teacher support for children is addressed in helpful detail in a number of methodology books for young learner teachers (e.g. Brewster et al (2002), Cameron (2001), Moon (2000), Slattery & Willis (2001)), it is suggested here that explicitly surfacing and discussing the two related concepts of the ZPD and scaffolding, and their application to everyday practice, on pre- or early in-service teacher education courses, may have a significant impact, firstly in improving teachers' practical classroom skills in developing children's oral proficiency, and in particular their interactional skills, with greater efficacy during the primary years and, secondly, in enhancing teachers' own self-awareness and professional development over the long term.

2 As mentioned earlier, the concept of scaffolding is difficult to pin down when it is applied to a learning context which is different from the one in which it was originally developed. As the examples given earlier suggest, there is a need for further research into what constitutes effective scaffolding for young children learning English as a foreign language and how this evolves as they get older and become more proficient in the language. An example of one way forward would be to take the original six features of effective scaffolding identified by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) outlined earlier and to see whether and in what ways they may be applied in the context of learning a foreign language (see e.g. Simon Smith's (2003) account of a training session using video on this). A second way would be to hypothesise additional features, such as those that have been suggested here, e.g. building on children's knowledge of their first language and/or using closed discourse exchanges, such as IRF, to lead to more contingent classroom talk, and test out the evidence and impact of these in a range of different classrooms with different age groups and levels of proficiency.

Although the scope of this paper has necessarily been limited, it is recognised that scaffolding in children's foreign language learning takes place not just at the level of choice of discourse techniques and strategies by the teacher working with the whole class towards particular learning goals. It is also an intrinsic part of the whole way in which tasks are planned, designed, set up and organised (Maybin, Mercer and Stierer, 1992) as well as the ways in which these build on previous learning experiences and are related to purposes and learning goals (Ellis, 2004, this volume). Similarly, it is recognised, although also beyond the scope of this paper, that scaffolding may be

provided not just by the teacher but also by peers, who may be more, less or equally capable (see e.g. van Lier (1996), Donato (1998), Gibbon (2002)), and that these are also all areas that would also benefit from further research and investigation in the context of children learning a foreign language.

In conclusion, the related concepts of the ZPD and scaffolding provide teachers of foreign languages to children with a framework for understanding important processes in children's learning, enhancing their self-awareness and professional development and improving their everyday classroom practice and the quality of children's learning over the short, medium and long term. As van Lier says 'Even though it does not show up in lesson plans or syllabuses, ...local or interactional scaffolding may well be the driving force behind good pedagogy, the hallmark of a good teacher.' (van Lier 1996, p.199). If this is the case, then we cannot afford *not* to either undertake further research to establish what this might involve in teaching foreign languages to children, or include it as a key component on the teacher education courses that are offered.

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