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## **Supporting teachers in supporting learners**

### **Introduction**

One of the keys to using storybooks successfully with young children learning English as a foreign language is through effective classroom talk and social interaction, which supports children's learning from an initial, spontaneous response (often in their mother tongue) to increasing autonomy, creativity and competence in English. In this paper, it is argued that on pre- and in-service teacher education courses, the related concepts of the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky 1978) and "scaffolding" (Bruner, Wood, Ross 1976) provide a powerful framework for awareness-raising and skills-training which enable teachers to use storybooks confidently and effectively in class.

The use of storybooks in primary foreign language lessons is a recognised feature of good teaching practice in a wide range of contexts and this is discussed in numerous recent methodology and resource books for young learner teachers (e.g. Cameron 2001, Slattery & Willis 2001, Brewster, Ellis & Girard 2002, Ellis & Brewster 2002). When storybooks are chosen appropriately, attractive illustrations combined with meaningful content and relevant discourse structure have a strong socio-affective appeal and provide contexts with a powerful potential for acquiring and learning language in ways that are enjoyable and enduring. However, the potential of storybooks as a vehicle for developing a foreign language within a formal teaching context is by no means automatic and requires a great deal of sensitivity and a wide range of varied skills by the teacher in supporting language and learning in ways that are appropriate to the age and level of the learners.

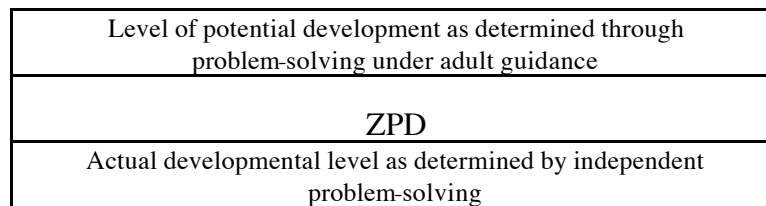
Although many primary teachers love the idea of using storybooks in English lessons, their own level of language competence may make them feel hesitant about interacting spontaneously with children during a story in English. In the case of primary teachers where their own language competence in English is not an issue, interaction with children during a story may often be random and intuitive, rather than aiming to build up comprehension and lead to productive outcomes in a systematic way. In both cases, there is a need for teachers to be aware of the features of interaction and the strategies they can use during storytelling which will generate children's learning, leading to increased independent and creative language use over time.

### **Vygotsky's theory of learning and the "zone of proximal development"**

Vygotsky's theory of learning (Vygotsky 1962, 1978) is discussed in detail in much child development and educational literature (see, for example, Meadows 1993, Light et al. 1995, Smith et al. 1998, Wood 1998, Lee 1999). In this paper, it is suggested that key aspects of the theory, and in particular the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), can also provide a useful entry point on primary foreign language teacher education courses in creating awareness and supporting teachers with the skills and strategies needed to use storybooks with young children in a pedagogically effective way.

For Vygotsky, children develop cognition and language as the result of social interaction with people who are more skilled and knowledgeable than themselves in carrying out activities which have specific goals. As a result of participation and interaction in 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 the language and cognition necessary to be able to perform a task and guides the child through relevant behaviour until he or she 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 their 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 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). On teacher education courses, it can be useful for teachers to see the ZPD in a visual way, as a space which needs to be crossed by each individual child in the context of whatever is being learnt (see below).



**Figure 1:**  
**Visual representation of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development**

If the level of challenge in classroom tasks is situated below the ZPD, children can already do them independently and so learning is not taken further. If the level of challenge is situated beyond the ZPD, then tasks are too difficult to attempt, even with help, and so learning cannot be taken further either. Vygotsky suggests that the only area in which learning does take place is in the space which constitutes the ZPD itself, with the socially constructed interaction between the teacher and child as collaborating partners, opening the way to new independence and competence.

In relation to using storybooks in foreign language lessons with young children, one example of a ZPD that might exist is the space between a child being able to understand, produce and use the language of a storybook without any help or support at all, and a storybook which is simply beyond the reach of the child at the moment without guidance and help from someone who is more knowledgeable or skilled. Through interaction in the ZPD during a storytelling lesson, the children's responses allow the teacher to provide guidance through linking the story to previous knowledge and experience and enabling the child to participate and learn in a meaningful way. The story itself provides a vehicle by which together the teacher and children create "states of inter-subjectivity" where the

"participants are jointly focused on the activity and its goals, and they draw each other's attention in a common direction" (van Lier 1996: 161).

The ZPD thus provides a valuable conceptual framework for teachers to be able to situate the level of pedagogical challenge in storybooks in relation to the children they teach and the potential learning which can take place. In order to be within the ZPD, the storybook and related activities and tasks must need some degree of guidance, collaboration and support from the teacher in order to challenge the children and to stretch and extend their learning.

### **The metaphor of scaffolding**

Scaffolding is a metaphor used to describe this guidance, collaboration and support provided by the teacher to guide a child through the ZPD in order to reach new independence and learning. Like Vygotsky's theory and the ZPD, scaffolding is discussed in a wide range of educational and child development literature (cf. op. cit.). In a teacher education context, scaffolding is a powerful metaphor for encouraging teachers to reflect on the nature and degree of support that they give young children when using storybooks in English language lessons. As the metaphor implies, scaffolding is provisional and can be constructed, reinforced, dismantled piece by piece, or removed completely, as the child develops knowledge and skills and is increasingly able to act competently and independently.

Scaffolding is a concept that was originally developed by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) in the context of first language acquisition and parental tutoring of very young children in solving the problem of building a pyramid from wooden blocks. It refers to the particular kind of help, assistance and support that enables a child to do a task which they cannot quite yet 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: 60). The future orientation of scaffolding together with the principle of "handing over" to the child is important in defining scaffolding as a particular kind of flexible help, assistance or support. This 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: 87).

### **Scaffolding in storytelling to children**

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 people who are more skilled, 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. He sees pedagogical scaffolding as a multi-layered, or at least a three-stage, process which goes from "global to local" or "macro

to micro" (van Lier 1996: 198). On teacher education courses, an awareness of different levels of pedagogical scaffolding can provide teachers with a useful tool for planning how to make the most effective use of storybooks in class. Following van Lier's model of layers and levels of scaffolding, an example in a storytelling context with young children is as follows:

**1 Global level:** the aim of using a storybook 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.

**2 Activity level:** each time the children come back to the story, they participate in a sequence of planned activities which draw them into (re-)engaging with the story and increasingly using the language it contains through, for example, the use of materials such as picture cards, finger puppets, stick puppets, masks or headbands.

**3 Local, interactional level:** this involves the teacher in deciding from moment to moment when and how to prompt, help, encourage, praise, ask questions, 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".

### What counts as scaffolding?

This view of scaffolding as a multi-layered process raises a number of questions about what actually counts as scaffolding rather than other kinds of assistance or help. An appropriately selected storybook including, for example, relevant and motivating content, a repetitive narrative pattern and clear, attractive visuals provides in itself a focus for the creation of inter-subjective states and a potential scaffold to learning. Equally, the materials used in story-related activities and tasks, such as picture cards or puppets, may be designed and used in ways which inherently support children's learning.

Following Maybin, Mercer and Stierer (1992), however, 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 lesson using a storybook does not necessarily need to apply to a well-defined problem-solving activity (such 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.

Taking as an example the storybook *Where's my Mummy?* (Hawkins & Hawkins 1993) used with a group of four-year-old beginners in Spain, it could be proposed that a specific goal of the storytelling over time would be for children to be able to use some of the language of the story, for example to name the animals, ask "*Where's ...?*" and respond "*I don't know*", "*Ask ...*" or "*Here*". The evidence that they can do this successfully with the teacher's help would lie 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 game. It could also be seen, for example, in an exchange with the teacher in which a child spontaneously transfers language from the story to another context, thus demonstrating a new level of independence and choice in their learning and what they say.

### Features of effective scaffolding for using storybooks

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 using storybooks and related activities and tasks to teach a foreign language to young children. Additional proposed features of effective scaffolding that are also useful for teachers to be aware of when using storybooks with very young learners are i) using certain types of discourse exchanges in initial scaffolding ii) building on children's knowledge of their mother tongue (L1) and iii) the role of positive feedback and praise. Through encouraging teachers to record themselves using storybooks in lessons over time, awareness of the range of strategies and discourse techniques that can be used effectively to scaffold children's foreign language learning can be developed.

### An example from the classroom

The extract below is taken from a lesson using the storybook *Where's my Mummy?* (Hawkins & Hawkins, op. cit.) with a group of four-year-old beginners in Spain. It forms the basis of the discussion which follows on effective scaffolding techniques. The children had previously been introduced to some of the animals in the story (dog, cat, hen, rabbit). In the lesson prior to this extract, they were introduced to the main character of the story (a duck). They sang a counting song about ducks, played a counting game, and completed a collaborative colour dictation of a picture of ducks. In the extract which follows, the children are listening to the first part of the story for the first time:

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

- 1 T: Look carefully now. What's the story about? (*T flashes book cover*)
- 2 PP: (*Several children call out*) Duck!
- 3 T: Do you think it's about a duck too, Javier?
- 4 P: Yes.
- 5 T: What about you, Elena?
- 6 P: Yes.
- 7 T: Yes?! Everyone thinks it's about a duck! Let's see if you're right!

- 8 PP: (*Children call out together*) Yes! / Sí (Yes) / Duck! / ¡Es un pato! (It's a duck) / Quack-quack.
- 9 T: (*laughs*) Yes, very good. It's a duck. And the duck goes ...
- 10 PP: Quack-quack, quack-quack, quack-quack ...
- 11 T: (*laughs*) Okay, little ducks. Very good. Ssh now! What colour's the duck?
- 12 PP: Yellow!
- 13 T: Yes, very good. He's a lovely yellow duck. And is he big or little? (*mimes*)
- 14 P: Little.
- 15 P: ¡Es muy pequeño! (He's very little.)
- 16 P: Es un bebé! (He's a baby.)
- 17 T: Yes, very good. You're right. He's very little. He's a baby duck.
- 18 P: Sí - porqué mira - aquí hay el huevo. (Yes - because look - here's the egg)
- 19 T: Yes. You're quite right. Here's the egg. The little duck has just come out of the egg. And where's the little duck's Mummy? Is Mummy here?
- 20 PP: No!
- 21 P: ¡Pobre patito! (Poor little duck!)
- 22 T: Yes, poor baby duck. His Mummy isn't here. And baby duck wants his Mummy. (*mimes*) Where's my Mummy? Where's my Mummy? Is baby duck's Mummy here, do you think? (*using gesture to indicate the next page in the book but without turning it over yet*).
- 23 PP: (*Children call out together*) No! / Yes! / No!
- 24 T: Let's see who's right! (*turns the page*) Hello Mummy. (*All the PP laugh*)
- 25 P: ¡Es un perro! (It's a dog!)
- 26 P: ¡Este no es su madre! (This isn't his mother!)
- 27 P: ¡El patito es muy tonto! (The little duck is very silly!)
- 28 P: ¡Es un perro, no es un pato! (It's a dog not a duck!)
- 29 T: Uh-uh. I see. Very good. So this isn't baby duck's Mummy?
- 30 PP: No!
- 31 T: Is it a duck?
- 32 PP: No!
- 33 T: No, you're right. It isn't a duck. What is it? Can you remember?
- 34 P: ¡Es un perrito! (It's a little dog.)
- 35 T: Yes, it's a d ... d ... d...
- 36 P: Dog!
- 37 T: Yes. Great! Dog. It's a dog. Can you say dog? (*PP join in saying 'dog'*). Dog. So It's a Mummy dog and a baby d ...
- 38 PP: Dog!
- 39 T: Lovely! And is the Mummy dog baby duck's Mummy?
- 40 P: No!
- 41 P: Sí pero a lo mejor el perrito quiere un amigo y el pato queda con el perro y el perro es la mamá. (Yes, but perhaps the little dog wants a friend and the duck stays with the dog and the dog is the Mummy).
- 42 T: Yes, that's a lovely idea. Maybe baby dog wants a friend and baby duck stays with Mummy dog and baby dog. Let's have a look and find out.

### Using certain types of discourse exchanges in initial scaffolding

In the lesson extract above, there are a number of examples of exchanges such as in lines 11-13: T: *What colour's the duck?* PP: *Yellow!* T: *Yes, very good.* These kinds of exchanges, usually known as Initiation, Response, Feedback (IRF), are the kind of interaction 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. The drawbacks of such exchanges 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 cf. 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 using storybooks 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 using storybooks, IRF-type exchanges, if prepared and used judiciously by teachers as a strategic bridging device, may play an important scaffolding role in developing children's language, leading over time to longer responses, greater independence and more varied types of discourse.

The different types of discourse used by adults in scaffolding young children's learning have sometimes been referred to "distancing strategies" (Sigel 1982, quoted in Berk and Winsler 1995). Three levels of "distancing strategies" have been identified with *low-level distancing* referring to what is visibly present in the immediate environment (as, for example, in IRF exchanges such as "What colour's the duck?"), *medium-level distancing* referring to the way different things visibly present in the immediate environment relate to each other (as, for example, in "Is the dog baby duck's Mummy?") and *high-level distancing* which encourages children to hypothesise and go beyond what is present in the immediate environment (as, for example, if the teacher asks "What will baby duck do if he doesn't find his Mummy?") An awareness of the appropriacy of different questions and strategies to use when telling a story the first time or on subsequent occasions, as well as the cognitive and language demands these make on children, can be instrumental in helping teachers to scaffold children's learning effectively.

### **Building on children's knowledge of L1**

Another area which may play an important role in scaffolding young children's initial understanding and learning when using storybooks in foreign language lessons is the use of L1. As has often been pointed out (e.g. Halliwell 1992, Moon 2000), 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 be aware of ways of making a link between the familiar and the new, in this case between the language, which is the shared, habitual mode of communication among the children, and the language which is being learnt. This process of scaffolding from the children's first or second language (depending on the cultural diversity within the group) 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.

As can be seen from the lesson extract using the story *Where's my Mummy?*, the use of the children's first or second language (in this case, Spanish) plays a number of contributory roles. When they hear the story for the first time the children use Spanish to:

- respond in personal, divergent ways to the story (as in lines 16 and 26)
- relate the content of the story to their own personal experience (as in line 21)
- express their sense of humour (as in lines 10 and 27)
- show they understand what is happening in the story (as in lines 25-28)
- predict what is going to happen in the story (as in line 23)
- use their imagination to hypothesise and go beyond the story (as in line 41)
- show empathy (as in line 21)
- display their knowledge of the world (as in line 18).



The teacher, who understands and shares the children's first language:

- accepts their interventions as an integral part of the session (she does not insist on English only, although she herself does not use Spanish).
- responds to the children's meaning (as in line 19)
- encourages the children to predict and construct the story collaboratively (as in lines 22 and 39)
- repeats, re-casts or expands their contributions (as in line 42)
- uses their contributions to check and confirm that comprehension is taking place (as in line 29)
- gives a lot of positive feedback and praise (as in lines 9, 11, 17, 29, 33, 37, 39, 42).

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. Other techniques, such as the use of more open questions and different interactional patterns or "distancing strategies", 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 storytelling 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. As children become increasingly familiar with the story through repeated tellings and participation in related activities, they no longer need to respond in L1 and are increasingly able to talk about, re-tell, act out the story and relate it to their own lives in English. However, it is nevertheless the shared knowledge, understanding and "inter-subjectivity" initially facilitated by the contributory role of L1 in the storytelling that leads the children to this new learning.

### **The use of positive feedback and praise**

A key feature throughout the whole scaffolding process in using storybooks with young children is the teacher's use of positive feedback and praise. This can be seen in the numerous examples of praise in the lesson extract above using *Where's my Mummy?* It has also been mentioned previously in relation to the benefits to positive self-esteem in the third turn of IRF exchanges. With very young children, it is possible that praise not only encourages effort, involvement and participation, but may also have a positive effect on future independent functioning too. An example of this is shown in a study carried out by Diaz et al (1991) and reported in Berk & Winsler (1995: 32) in which fifty-one mothers and their 3-year-old children were video-ed working on classification and story sequencing tasks. The mothers were instructed to teach the children the tasks so that the next time they would be able to do it on their own. The researchers found that the more the mothers praised their children for competent performance when they were doing the tasks together,

the better the children performed when they subsequently did the tasks again on their own.

The creation of a warm environment for learning with an encouraging and responsive adult seems to prompt children to engage willingly with tasks and to challenge themselves to further learning. It is therefore suggested here that on teacher education courses it is important to develop teachers' awareness that their own use of language to praise children's efforts and progression towards greater understanding and competence during storybook lessons may also be a vital component in effective scaffolding.

### Conclusion

The above discussion shows how the related concepts of the ZPD and scaffolding can provide an invaluable framework on teacher education courses for supporting teachers in planning and implementing practical ways to develop young children's oral proficiency in English through the use of storybooks. By raising teachers' awareness of the importance of classroom interaction and suggesting ways to systematically support young children's learning during storytelling, teachers not only enhance the quality of their everyday practice in the short, medium and long term but also build up their own confidence and pleasure in using storybooks in class.

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