

## A Qualitative Study of Reciprocal Scaffolding Techniques on Iranian EFL Learners' Views via Language Management System (LMS)

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### Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to investigate the effect of reciprocal scaffolding techniques in EFL classes on Iranian EFL learners' views in a Language Management System (LMS) environment. In doing so, 32 pre-intermediate EFL students of a language institute in Kerman were selected based on a simple random sampling method. The data gathering tools included a homogeneity test and then related interviews. The participants received reciprocal-scaffolding techniques instruction in their online class via LMS. They practiced the teaching strategies which encouraged learners' independence in the LMS environment. At the end of the course, the participants were interviewed based on the data saturation technique. The results of the interview analyzed the positive and negative views of EFL learners toward the use of these strategies in the LMS context. Findings indicated that the usage of reciprocal teaching and scaffolding and their integration offered greater learning chances in terms of additional learning resources in the context of the LMS. The final stages of RT scaffolding were related to the students' independence and autonomy, so they could study the extra sources without getting help from the instructor. Totally, all factors resulted in high learners' satisfaction with the techniques. The study suggested some pedagogical implications for EFL teachers and learners in using reciprocal scaffolding techniques in the EFL context.

*Key Terms:* EFL Context; Language Management System (LMS); Qualitative Study; Reciprocal Scaffolding Techniques; View

### 1. Introduction

Learners and teachers of English can be given a variety of educational tools to create environments where they can interact and collaborate with

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one another without restrictions of time or space with the aid of developments in information and communication technologies. Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) referred to this new generation of students as "digital natives," and it is anticipated that they will embrace and use these new educational tools both inside and outside of the classroom. Reciprocal Teaching (RT) is a method of instruction where teachers and students alternate leading discussions over a common text, according to Palincsar and Klint (2002). Through the adaptive deployment of four comprehension strategies prediction, clarification, summary, and question generation these talks aim to create a shared understanding of the material. Hou (2015) characterized reciprocal teaching as follows: Students who can decode but have trouble understanding text have had their comprehension improved through the application of the reciprocal teaching technique.

Scaffolding teaching adapts to the learner's current learning state; when the students' skills are developed, the amount of scaffolding provided by the teacher is reduced, and if the text is challenging, more help and feedback are provided to the students in order to help them shape their understanding. Scaffolding gradually becomes internalized, which encourages the autonomous use of reading abilities (Daneshfar & Moharami, 2018). Scaffolding is a procedure whereby a teacher closely observes students' learning and intervenes to offer support when necessary; and a transient framework of support that teachers set up to help a student or a group of pupils achieve a task that they were unable to complete on their own (Chen, 2020). The transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the pupils is a key component of proleptic teaching. While reducing his or her role, the teacher discusses and exemplifies the problem-solving process before handing off responsibility to the students. A teacher who has high expectations and faith in their pupils' capacity to achieve them is known as a proleptic. No matter how intelligent or talented a student may be, the teacher makes the assumption that the pupil is capable and will eventually be able to do the assignment as an expert would. In contrast, training that follows a hierarchical stepwise structure conveys to the students that all they should be able to do is master one stage of development (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002).

Through monitoring reading comprehension, "RT seeks to advance knowledge of the content. Such comprehension entails a group of students working together to co-construct the meaning of a written text by utilizing the four reading strategies of questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting" (Tarchi & Pinto, 2016, p.3). The teacher's supervised instruction of the strategies in the classroom activates the model. The

teacher verbally demonstrates his thought processes to the pupils while reading a book and using the strategies. Students would then assume the role of the teacher and read aloud while expressing their thoughts. Understanding is still facilitated by the reciprocal roles of the students and teachers. Through conversation, dialogue, and thinking-aloud exercises, the model enables students and teachers to scaffold and generate meaning in a social situation (Oczkus, 2010).

The role of RT goes beyond its purely cognitive one as a strategy for increasing comprehension. Among different reading methods, Palincsar and Brown (2001) referred to the dual functions of the four strategies. When students are asked to write questions, this requires concentrating on the text's major ideas (cognitive technique) and determining their present level of understanding (metacognitive strategy). The same is true for the clarifying technique, which calls on children to engage their critical thinking, connect the paragraphs they have read, and draw connections to their prior knowledge. Students participate in the process of anticipating future content, making inferences, and testing those assumptions when they predict. Summarizing is regarded as a self-evaluation technique. It enables pupils to recall the most crucial parts of the reading and determine whether or not understanding is occurring. When pupils cannot properly identify what they have read, comprehension is not developing as it should, and corrective action is required (Zendler & Reile, 2018). In this sense, RT is turned on to promote comprehension and to keep track of whether understanding is occurring or not. These four techniques serve as metacognitive sensors to detect where comprehension was successful and where the applied method has failed once they have been internalized. Because they were seen as "comprehension stimulating and comprehension monitoring" techniques at the same time, these techniques were specially chosen to be taught (Alasmari, 2021).

The theoretical foundations of reciprocal teachings, such as the zone of proximal development, preoptic teaching, and scaffolding, place a greater emphasis on the construction of meaning in the dialogical process of interaction between the teacher and the learners than they do on the transmission of information. The researchers contend that, taking into account the theoretical underpinnings of reciprocal teaching, replacing reciprocal instruction with the transmission model in EFL environments, such as Iran, can dramatically improve students' L2 achievement problems. Considering the above discussion, the study tried to investigate the Iranian EFL learners' views through the following research questions:

1. What are the students' views toward reciprocal scaffolding teaching techniques?

2. What are the students' views toward the use of technology in online reciprocal scaffolding classes?

## **2. Literature Review**

The comparative effects of scaffolded and unscaffolded feedback on speaking anxiety and self-efficacy in EFL learners were examined by Zarei and Rezaoust (2020). A sample of 90 male intermediate English language learners from Tehran's Safir Language Institute made up the participants. Out of a total of 120 volunteers who underwent a routine PET exam, they were chosen. The participants were split into three groups, two of which were experimental and one control group. Prior to the ten sessions of treatment, they completed questionnaires on speaking self-efficacy and speaking anxiety. Scaffolded feedback, unscaffolded feedback, and no feedback were all used. They then completed the posttest questionnaires. The one-way ANCOVA method was used to examine the data that had been obtained. It was found that scaffolded feedback helped increase speaking self-efficacy while lowering speaking fear. In another related study, Suryani (2021) investigated the usefulness of a blended learning-based scaffolding technique supported by Google Classroom to enhance students' learning outcomes and self-efficacy. Three tools were used: a questionnaire to gauge students' attitudes toward the learning process, a test to gauge their learning results, and a questionnaire to gauge their sense of self-efficacy. Effect size analysis, n-gain analysis, and descriptive analysis methods were used to analyze the data. The outcomes demonstrated that the scaffolding technique based on blended learning and supported by Google Classroom was successful in enhancing students' learning outcomes with an n-gain and an impact size in the medium category. Self-efficacy levels for students in classes A, B, and C were 68 percent, 60 percent, and 59 percent, respectively. Based on the markers of students' improved learning outcomes, their high self-efficacy, and their enthusiastic answers, a conclusion was reached (84 percent).

In the Iranian context, Tajadini, Mahfoozi Fard, and Fatehi Rad (2021) aimed to inquire whether the integration of reciprocal and sheltered teaching approaches would influence students' performance in writing and find out if the approach could impress the learners' self-efficacy as well. To this end, the researchers selected 3 groups of pre-intermediate EFL students. 68 male and female participants in one experimental and two control groups established the subjects of the study. The experimental group worked on the integration of reciprocal and sheltered approaches in writing and self-efficacy. The results reveal the positive effect of integration of reciprocal and sheltered approaches on the writing

performance of the subjects in the experimental group. Moreover, the selected procedures could lead to learners' self-efficacy development. Finally, the achievements of this study contributed to an understanding of the type of teaching approach which is most appropriate for pre-intermediate students. In a more recent study, the effects of motivational scaffolding, one of the most successful instructional techniques, on self-efficacy and academic achievement of field-dependent and field-independent English language learners were examined by Sohrabi et al., (2022). In the semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers that made up the qualitative portion, two groups of students participated as the experimental and control groups. Students' self-efficacy was assessed using the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire. Bandura's instruction was given in eight sessions as a treatment to boost self-efficacy. Content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data, while two-way multivariate analysis of variance was used to analyze the quantitative data. The findings demonstrated that interaction between students within a motivational scaffolding environment improved their self-efficacy and learning accomplishment, and that there was no significant difference between students in the aspects of field-dependent and field-independent learning.

Considering the literature, the researchers came to a conclusion that less study had investigated the role of reciprocal scaffolding strategies on EFL learners' attitudes in a context like Iran with pre-intermediate level learners. What adds novelty to the present study is the fact that the study of the effect of integrating reciprocal scaffolding strategies is unprecedented in English learning and teaching contexts. Therefore, this study was an attempt to fill this gap and contribute to the existing literature on the role of mediation or scaffolding in learning in English as a foreign language (EFL) context.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Research Design*

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of reciprocal scaffolding strategy (independent variable) and its impact on the EFL learners' view (dependent variables). To this end, qualitative research method was employed. The qualitative procedure includes an interview with EFL learners towards the mentioned method. Regarding the qualitative data, the views of the EFL students were the focus of the study and they were analyzed based on the details of qualitative data analysis and were reported in the form of the extracts that were elaborated on in the procedure section.

### *3.2. Participants*

The researcher purposefully selected the special subjects to act as the research sample since these learners had already studied English for several terms. Moreover, practicing the teaching strategies that encourage learners' independence in the LMS environment can assist the learners to become more independent language learners. The study was conducted twice-weekly teaching sessions in which the teaching principles and methodologies that supported the RT and scaffolding teaching methods in an LMS environment were applied. 32 EFL students at a language institute in Kerman, Iran, made up the sample which were selected based on simple random sampling method. They considered as pre-intermediate level learners based on the profiles of the learners in the institute. After running the Nelson Placement Test and computing the means and z score, they participated in the present study.

### *3.3. Instrument*

A semi-structured interview was the instrument utilized in the present study to examine the participants' views toward the employment of reciprocal scaffolding strategies in their language classes. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), a semi-structured interview is exploratory in character and has no set format. To put it another way, in order for the researchers to fully understand the scope of her study, they invited the students to discuss what had occurred in their class by expressing their views on the usage of scaffolding and reciprocal methods in the classroom. The participants were asked to reflect on their overall perception of the instruction, such as whether they liked the class and recommended it to others or not. They were also required to give reasons for their answers. The participants interviewed based on data saturation technique and the interviews were audio-recorded for the subsequent sections and the answers were transcribed by the researcher.

### *3.4. Material and Procedure*

The researcher had to follow clear and well-selected and known procedures that would support scaffolding and reciprocal strategies during the semester as the learners were exposed to LMS teaching and learning procedures. The teacher used and delivered recorded files, videos, voices, and so on. She grouped the learners via LMS and based on the alphabetic order of their names and used voice or written chats in the chat box. Also, she gave feedback, assisted the learners during activities, and interacted with the learners in the different groups through LMS. Learners could see their instructors through video, online discussions, live chat, in addition

to presentations and word files. Videoconference communication through LMS context facilitated interaction between students and their instructor. LMS was used as an environment for the learners and the classes were held in LMS context. LMS is a software application that automates the teaching-learning process. It was emerged directly from e-Learning and it massively grow in usage due to the emphasis on remote learning.

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with each student while recording their voices for further analysis and presentation. They were questioned generally about the positive and the negative aspects of the strategy under study. The investigator converted the interview questions into Farsi in order to help the interviewees understand them better. The interviewees then provided their responses in Farsi, which were afterwards translated into English and presented as part of the study qualitative data. For estimating credibility of the interview questions, the researcher presented the information gathered from the interviewees and asked the learners to pay attention to each question and the answers were given to see whether there was any problem with or differences in the answers. For the aim of dependability, 20% of the results were re-checked by two of the researcher's colleagues who were familiar with the data analysis section and the results of the inter-rater reliability was reported to be .92. The results of interview were reported and the positive and negative points of the strategy under study were reported based on the attitudes of the learners to answer the research questions. The data of interview were offered qualitatively by reflecting the statements that were presented by the candidates. Recording the subjects' voices for later reference was an important step taken by the researcher. For the data analysis, the interviews were tape recorded, and were thematically analyzed and coded. As the next step and based on their themes, they were classified.

## **4. Results**

### *4.1. Positive Views towards the reciprocal scaffolding teaching techniques*

The first interview question focused on teachers' role, motivation development, feeling relaxed, and being independent concerning the use of reciprocal teaching strategy. Thus, the researcher asked "What was your feeling concerning the use of reciprocal teaching strategy in your English class?"

One of the interviewees said:

- 1. We were working together while being supported by the teacher and others, so I received a lot of helpful comments from her and*

*my classmates. As the groups were given instructions, I felt completely at ease.*

The response of another interviewee was:

- 2. The instructor created a welcoming environment for learning. Others in the group presented subjects that were extremely beneficial and applicable. I received a lot of tips and ideas from other members that were fascinating and helpful.*

The third learner said:

- 3. As the teacher explained the activities in class, I was quite inspired to participate. I used the group members or the teacher as resources if I needed them in the event of a problem.*

The fourth one expressed his idea as:

- 4. I was inspired to study more and share my thoughts with a group of students who were present in the groups by the usage of scaffolding tactics. They provided a lot of ideas and resources that I could use.*

Another learner talked about her sense of independence from the teacher and that she was aided by the use of scaffolding and reciprocal principles. In fact, the teacher was inactive while the entire class participated in speaking exercises and contributed suggestions.

- 5. Thus, she said: The application of the processes inspired me. I actively shared my opinions with others because I wanted to be seen as a contributing member. I could tell that my progress had been hampered by a lot of activities.*

Concerning autonomy and independence from teacher, three of the respondents said:

- 6. The knowledge the class taught me was useful. These resources gave me the ability to feel independent of my teacher, who had previously been my only source.*
- 7. By addressing concerns and debating the most crucial aspects, the group helped one another. Since the teacher did not exert too much control over the learning environment,*
- 8. I experienced no tension at all. I depended more on the resources that were at my disposal, like the group members, because I am highly sensitive to the teacher's presence and it irritates me. As a result, I felt no need for the teachers' assistance. I believe my independence has increased.*

The other interviewees expressed their idea on the class environment as:

- 9. The teaching environment was really motivating to me because I took part in a welcoming environment where everyone in the class helped each other to solve problems and worked together to*



*develop specific speaking topics.*

*10. It was motivating for me as well because I saw that everyone was involved in the group and strove to get their own shares.*

Based on the data of the interviews, most of the participants were satisfied with the role that was given to the teacher and as a result they felt independent of the teaching processes. Also, they claimed that they felt relaxed and felt comfortable when they were exposed to collaborative language learning via strategy-based instruction.

#### *4.2. Negative Views towards the reciprocal scaffolding teaching techniques*

Concerning the disadvantages of reciprocal scaffolding strategies, the researcher-interviewer asked: “What demerits do you think are associated with the use of reciprocal scaffolding strategies in EFL classes?”

The learners, therefore, criticized some of the teaching processes and they thought they had to be altered for better. These criticisms fall within the following categories. The criticisms revolved around poor corrective feedback, lack of help from others, lack of speaking opportunity, and ignoring listening. One of the interviewees said:

*11. The teacher was not available when needed. In some cases, the teacher did not provide us with direct and explicit corrective feedback while it seemed that the provision of corrective feedback would provide me with a correct and helpful pattern of use.*

Another respondent said:

*12. In most cases, peer feedback was not effective because the learners lacked the essential ability and competence to assist and support each other. Unfortunately, this imbalance led to much misunderstanding among the learners.*

Concerning the speaking opportunity, one of the learners said:

*13. The opportunity to speak was not provided for all the learners. There were always some outspoken learners who were more willing than others to express their ideas. I guess teachers need to create a balance among learners in terms of turn taking and speaking opportunities.*

Some of the learners were not satisfied with the listening practice in class. One of them said:

*14. Our class is supposed to be a conversation class focusing on oral skills of speaking and listening. However, lack of listening practice was noticeable and, in some cases, totally ignored.*

Regarding negative views of the EFL learners, they referred to the lack of help from teacher and learners. Most of them criticized about the

corrective feedback that did not provide by the teacher completely. In their views, the class activities were monitored by them and the teacher was almost passive.

#### *4.3. Positive Attitudes towards the Use of Technology in Reciprocal Scaffolding Class*

Regarding LMS and the use of technology, the interviewer asked: “What is your opinion concerning the use of technology in reciprocal scaffolded EFL class?”

One of the respondents said:

*15. The use of technology was inspiring to me. Learning through LMS was interesting and supported me become familiar with the new learning ideas. I felt self-dependent more than the beginning of the term.*

Another learner added:

*16. The use of LMS for learning English was new and wonderful experience. It gave us lots of opportunities to collaborate and exchange ideas and feedback.*

The third interviewee believed:

*17. There is not any time and place limitation in teaching and learning through LMS. The class was helpful because I didn't have to wait for specified time or place to start my language practice. In fact, I could participate at any time/ anywhere, overcome my problems and worked on indifferent forms of activities.*

#### *4.4. Negative Attitudes towards the Use of Technology in Reciprocal Scaffolding Class*

Respondents were also asked about the demerits of using LMS and technology. Some of them asserted:

*18. we needed fast internet access in order to use LMS effectively and properly, unfortunately fast internet was not accessible for us.*

One of them believed:

*19. Communication through LMS was not useful and practical.*

Two of them asserted that:

*20. Learners and teachers need to be familiarized with the use of online environment, but LMS seemed not to be very user-friendly.*

The interview data supported the beneficial effects of reciprocal and scaffolding teaching methodologies in the advancement of language classes. A majority of the learners preferred RT associated with scaffolding instructional strategies in language skill development and their active participation in all different activities. In their views, the

interview's praise for the program was evidence of the beneficial effects of both the collaboration-scaffolding and RT training in the LMS context.

## **5. Discussions**

Regarding the interview results, the majority of students were unambiguously in favor of the premise that these teaching techniques were efficient enough to meet their needs while also enhancing their pace and depth of learning. They could learn more quickly because they were more at ease and self-assured. The established teaching context that the teacher used and practiced was the cause. Moreover, a crucial factor in their success was the use of reciprocal-scaffolding teaching techniques. Even though the participants encountered some difficulties using the LMS, their accomplishments exceeded all expectations. The learners faced a serious issue since, in a few rare instances, they needed to ask their teachers for assistance in order to get answers to some of their inquiries.

Additionally, the results of the interview showed some of the issues that occurred during the instruction processes in the LMS setting. The majority of the comments were directed at the educational environment, as the students were not given the proper feedback from their peers and teachers. If the teacher wants the students to improve more quickly, they must be helped to receive the necessary feedback for fixing their mistakes. Lack of the necessary interaction for any speaking class was another flaw in the LMS teaching environment. The learners demand the same kind of active engagement that is necessary between peers and their teacher. In reality, as the interviewees reported, the LMS is unable to give the learners the necessary interaction. Based on the results, it was determined that scaffolded instruction's provision of a supportive learning environment is one of its key advantages. Students are able to ask questions, offer comments, and assist their peers in learning new content in a scaffolded and RT learning environment. When students use scaffolding and RT in the classroom, they shift from being the predominant content expert to more of a mentor and knowledge facilitator. Students are encouraged to participate more actively in their own learning through this kind of instruction. Students share the burden of instructing and learning through scaffolding that pushes them past their present levels of proficiency and understanding. They receive self-monitoring and self-reliant activities from RT. Students are able to take control of the learning experience through this interaction. When students notice they are not making progress on a certain area of a task or are unable to understand a certain idea, RT and scaffolding are needed. Although scaffolding is frequently

done between the teacher and one student, it can also be done successfully for an entire class online or in a face-to-face setting.

Findings are supported by Sabbara (2017), who discussed how reciprocal teaching techniques can help students become more effective communicators, foster critical thinking, give them a chance to work independently, and have higher levels of participation, understanding, and enjoyment after the intervention. Additionally, the results are consistent with Taka's study (2020), which found that teaching Indonesian EFL high school pupils reading using the reciprocal teaching technique was beneficial. However, the results disagree with those of other RT-related studies. For instance, Badakhshan et al. (2021), who conducted a study comparable to this one in Iran, used RT as their primary teaching strategy. However, they employed RT to enhance the reading comprehension skills of EFL students. They employed a mixed-method approach, just like this study, and adopted a quasi-experimental design with a pretest, treatment, and posttest paradigm. The findings showed that, in terms of reading comprehension, the RT group did somewhat better than the control group. The levels of the students in the two studies as well as the kinds of dependent variables could be to blame for the variations in the results.

The study has some implications for instructors, students, managers, practitioners, and textbook writers who are busy instructing students in LMS. The study has also implications for EFL teachers that can use RT teaching together with scaffolding principles in their classes as a supplement to their courses. Teachers can teach almost any classroom activity easily through this strategy. They can use RT teaching together with scaffolding principles (the principles such as help; support; breaking down; chunking down; structure; and independence (Hmelo-Silver, 2006)) to introduce and develop any topic or activity related to their teaching. Language students should be made aware that effective language learning requires a larger toolkit of methods and approaches that are used more frequently. Students who are more conscious of their own learning processes may progress to more successful language learning. More importantly, language teachers should promote students' knowledge of the advantages and usefulness of accessing outside sources and collaboration in LMS as they try their best to do so in order to encourage EFL learners to do so.

## **6. Conclusion**

The objective of the current study was to investigate the effectiveness of using RT strategies integrated with scaffolding strategies in the language class. More specifically, it aimed at investigating the EFL

learners' views on the use of the given teaching procedures and the way they felt about it. The information obtained through the students' interviews demonstrated that the usage of RT and scaffolding and their integration offered greater learning chances in terms of additional learning resources and sources in the context of the LMS. The EFL learners stated that the LMS context created a setting for uploading extra sources and they helped the learners to study more related materials in their free time. They also believed that RT scaffolding LMS context resulted in an improvement in group work. Moreover, the final stages of RT scaffolding were related to the students' independence and autonomy, so they could study the extra sources without getting help from the instructor. All of these factors resulted in high satisfaction with the strategy.

Any study naturally experiences some sort of limitations. The first limitation is that not all learners have the required access to the web, neither in the institute nor out of the institute and at their home. Next, providing all learners with the required facilities of having access to the web was an important challenge for the researcher. Since teaching in this study happened in a virtual environment, and the learners were taught online, the teacher had very poor control over the learners' participation in the class activities and this could impact their language learning. More importantly, the study was implemented just through interviews to seek the attitudes of the learners on teaching procedures. It would be much more practical if observation could be used for this purpose, then the subjects' behavior could be observed indirectly which is an indication of their real linguistic performance. When observing any change in the learners' linguistic and psychological behavior, it could be more productive if the researcher could base their data on longitudinal studies since changes in peoples' behaviors happen across time rather than happening in a short time span. Thus, longitudinal studies are strongly suggested to be done.

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