

# The Role of Scaffolding in Enhancing ESL Learners' Academic Writing Skills

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**Abstract:** *Academic writing is a critical skill for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, yet many struggle with coherence, organisation, and grammatical accuracy. This study explores the role of scaffolding in enhancing ESL learners' academic writing proficiency. Scaffolding, which involves structured support through modelling, guided practice, and feedback, provides learners with the necessary tools to develop their writing independently. Using a quantitative approach, this study examines the impact of scaffolding techniques such as graphic organisers, sentence starters, and teacher-led feedback on students' writing performance. Findings suggest that scaffolding significantly improves learners' ability to structure arguments, use appropriate academic language, and reduce grammatical errors. Additionally, qualitative data indicate that students perceive scaffolding as a supportive strategy that boosts their confidence and engagement in writing tasks. The study concludes that implementing scaffolding in ESL writing instruction is essential for fostering academic writing skills, recommending a gradual release approach to enhance learner autonomy.*

**Keywords:** ESL writing, Scaffolding, Academic Writing, Language Learning, Writing Skills

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## 1. Introduction

Academic writing is a fundamental skill for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, yet it remains one of the most challenging aspects of language acquisition. Many ESL students struggle with organizing ideas, using appropriate academic language, and maintaining coherence and cohesion in their writing (Gánem-Gutiérrez & Harwood, 2020; Manan, 2021; Zare-ee & Hejazi, 2023). Scaffolding, an instructional approach based on Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), provides structured support to help learners gradually develop independence in writing. This structure encompasses a multifaceted approach, incorporating modeling techniques that demonstrate exemplary writing, providing guided practice opportunities for hands-on application, and offering targeted feedback to refine skills, all collectively empowering learners with the essential tools to construct well-articulated independence (Reiser et al., 2004).

Scaffolding in academic writing involves modeling, guided practice, structured feedback, and peer collaboration to enhance learners' writing competence. Research suggests that effective scaffolding enhances linguistic accuracy and structural organization while fostering critical thinking and confidence in writing (Lee, 2020; Razi & Pourshahbaz, 2021; Teng, 2023). However, the extent to which scaffolding techniques impact different aspects of academic

writing, particularly among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, requires further investigation.

This study aims to investigate the role of scaffolding in enhancing ESL learners' academic writing skills. Specifically, it examines how various scaffolding strategies contribute to improving critical aspects of writing, such as coherence, cohesion, grammatical accuracy, and overall writing proficiency. As academic writing is often one of the most challenging skills for ESL learners to master, understanding the impact of structured instructional support is essential. Scaffolding, when appropriately implemented, can serve as a bridge between learners' current abilities and the academic standards expected in higher education contexts. This study will explore learners' perceptions of instructional practices such as modeling, guided writing sessions, feedback mechanisms, and peer collaboration to determine how these techniques support the writing process.

In addition to identifying effective teaching methods, this research highlights how scaffolding influences learners' motivation, confidence, and autonomy in producing academic texts. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of scaffolding by analyzing insights from both local and international students enrolled in an English language program. By examining the experiences of these diverse participants, the research will elucidate how scaffolding operates across various linguistic contexts. Ultimately, the findings of this research will provide valuable implications for educators, curriculum designers, and language instructors who aim to enhance the academic writing outcomes of ESL learners through well-informed pedagogical approaches.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- 1) To identify the role of scaffolding in academic writing.
- 2) To examine how scaffolding strategies contribute to the improvement of students' academic writing skills.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) What is the role of scaffolding in supporting ESL learners' academic writing development?
- 2) How do scaffolding strategies influence the coherence and cohesion of ESL learners' academic writing?
- 3) In what ways does scaffolding contribute to improving grammatical accuracy in academic writing among ESL learners?
- 4) How does the implementation of scaffolding strategies impact the overall writing proficiency of ESL students?

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study focuses on a narrow range of scaffolding strategies that may overlook other effective methods that could influence ESL learners' writing development. A more comprehensive exploration of various scaffolding techniques, including digital tools, collaborative learning approaches, and differentiated instruction, could yield richer insights into their effectiveness. Additionally, the variability among instructors, such as differences in experience, teaching styles, and pedagogical approaches, could significantly impact the implementation and outcomes of these strategies (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2021). Neglecting to consider this variability may introduce confounding factors that could influence the outcomes, thereby making efforts to draw definitive conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the scaffolding strategies implemented (Nguyen & Gu, 2022; Teng, 2023).

Cultural context is another critical aspect that may not have been adequately considered in this study. The cultural backgrounds of ESL learners can influence their learning styles, motivation, and attitudes toward writing (Lee & Schallert, 2022). Understanding these cultural factors is essential for interpreting the findings and ensuring that scaffolding strategies are culturally responsive and relevant to the learners' needs. Furthermore, the criteria used to assess writing skills may have been subjective or limited in scope, potentially failing to capture various aspects of writing, such as coherence, cohesion, and grammatical accuracy. A more nuanced assessment approach would provide a clearer understanding of how scaffolding impacts overall writing proficiency.

Lastly, external influences, such as personal circumstances language exposure outside the classroom and access to additional resources could confound the results and limit the ability to draw definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of scaffolding strategies (Gass & Selinker, 2021; Wang & Hsieh, 2022). Additionally, external factors, such as the availability of resources and the nature of instructional strategies, play a crucial role in shaping ESL learners' language development (Spada & Lightbown, 2020). Addressing these external factors is crucial for a holistic understanding of ESL learners' writing development. By acknowledging these limitations, future research can be better designed to address these gaps, leading to more robust and generalizable conclusions regarding the impact of scaffolding on ESL learners' academic writing development.

## **2. Literature Review**

The concept of scaffolding has long been recognized as an essential instructional approach in educational contexts. Bliss and Askew (1996) focused on scaffolding as one of the tools that help learners advance within their zone of proximal development, which dynamically adjusts as learners advance through various competence levels. Also, Bodrova and Leong (1998) pointed out the Vygotskian sociocultural theory of scaffolding, stressing its importance in early literacy acquisition. Palincsar (1998) added to this description by defining scaffolding as the adjustable support an instructor provides to a learner aligned to addressing changing demands during the learning process. Together, these studies substantiate the claim of the relevance of scaffolding in language learning, especially concerning tasks that involve higher-order thinking skills such as academic writing.

Previous research has emphasized the vital role of scaffolding in supporting ESL learners' academic writing development. Through the provision of clear instructions and structured tasks, scaffolding has been shown to reduce learners' writing anxiety and facilitate a smoother transition from brainstorming to drafting stages (Hammond, 2001; Gibbons, 2002). Effective scaffolding strategies, such as modelling where instructors provide examples of writing, peer collaboration, instructor feedback, and recursive revision practices, have been widely recognized for their positive impact on students' writing capabilities (Vygotsky, 1978; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Grammar-focused feedback from instructors has emerged as a critical element in enhancing learners' grammatical awareness and accuracy, enabling them to develop more precise and academic language use over time. Importantly, studies suggest that the implementation of scaffolding not only supports learners in completing specific tasks but also contributes to sustained improvements in overall writing proficiency, as students internalize strategies and gradually become more independent writers (Rodgers, 2022; Xi, Lantolf, 2021).

### 3. Methodology

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design to explore and interpret students' lived experiences and perceptions regarding the use of scaffolding strategies in academic writing. A phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate as it focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences within a specific context, in this case, the context of academic writing support in an ESL learning environment. The study aimed to capture the essence of learners' interactions with scaffolding techniques and how these interactions shaped their writing development.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, which enabled the researcher to maintain a consistent structure across interviews while allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on personal experiences and perceptions. This methodological choice was instrumental in obtaining rich, detailed narratives that could reveal both common themes and individual variations. The open-ended nature of the interviews encouraged students to reflect deeply on their learning processes, their responses to instructional support, and the challenges they faced in developing academic writing skills. At the same time, the use of standardized core questions ensured comparability across participants and allowed systematic thematic analysis.

Each interview was conducted in a one-on-one setting, fostering a safe and comfortable environment for participants to speak openly. The sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate transcription and reliability of data. The data collected through this process served as the foundation for identifying recurring patterns and meaningful insights into how scaffolding strategies influenced the academic writing development of both local and international ESL learners.

#### Sampling

A purposive sampling method was used to select ten participants enrolled in an Intensive English Language Program at UNITAR. The sample was equally divided between five local students and five international students, representing both first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) English speakers. This demographic distinction aimed to capture a broader range of experiences navigating academic writing within a higher education context.

The interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting to foster a comfortable environment for participants to express their views freely. Each session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate transcription and data integrity. The interview guide included questions related to participants' understanding of scaffolding, their exposure to different scaffolding techniques (such as modeling, peer feedback, and teacher guidance), and the perceived impact of these techniques on their writing development.

#### Data Collection

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing the researcher to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. This method provided a structured yet flexible approach to interpreting participants' narratives and facilitated the comparison of experiences between local and international students. Through this process, the study aimed to uncover how scaffolding is perceived and experienced across diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in an academic setting.

## 4. Findings

The analysis of interview responses revealed two key findings. Scaffolding was fundamental to the academic writing development of students. It was notable to participants that support in the form of precise instructions, guided brainstorming sessions, and the division of complex processes into simpler sub-processes improved their anxiety and enhanced their ability to start writing. In addition, some specific strategies of scaffolding were very important in enhancing students' writing capabilities. These strategies involved the modeling of teaching, students working together, feedback, and revising the text in several stages. Participants acknowledged that these strategies enabled them to organize their ideas, employ appropriate academic language, and coherently articulate sophisticated ideas. The findings of this study, in general, underscore the fact that scaffolding serves not merely as a support system but as a framework that profoundly enhances student's writing skills and facilitates the development of academic writing proficiency.

### T1: Role of Scaffolding in Supporting ESL Learners' Academic Writing Development

During the interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions about their general experiences and perceptions of academic writing and the support they received from instructors or peers. Questions such as "*Can you describe how your instructor supported you when writing academic essays?*" or "*What kind of help made writing easier for you?*" prompted students to discuss the nature and impact of scaffolding. Their narratives revealed that scaffolding, especially **through clear instructions and structured tasks, reduced their writing anxiety and helped them transition from brainstorming to drafting more effectively.**

### T2: Scaffolding Strategies Influence Writing Capabilities

To capture specific strategies, interview questions focused on how students were guided through different stages of the writing process. Students were asked, "*Were there any techniques or classroom activities that helped you organize or improve your writing?*" or "*Can you recall a time when an example or peer discussion helped you write better?*" Responses highlighted **strategies like modeling (teachers providing examples), peer collaboration, instructor feedback, and recursive revision practices.** These accounts were consistently referenced as instrumental in developing clarity, structure, and idea progression in their academic writing.

### T4: Scaffolding Contributes to Improving Grammatical Accuracy

To explore linguistic development, questions included: "*Did any classroom activity help you use better grammar in your writing?*" and "*How did your teacher or classmates correct or guide you when you made grammatical mistakes?*" Participants cited guided correction sessions, one-on-one conferencing, and **grammar-focused feedback from instructors as crucial scaffolding tools that enhanced their grammatical awareness and accuracy.** Some also mentioned how repeated revisions helped them internalize grammatical patterns more effectively.

### T5: Implementation of Scaffolding Strategies Impacts Overall Writing Proficiency

This broader theme emerged from cumulative responses regarding students' writing improvement over time. Students were asked reflective questions such as "*Do you feel your academic writing has improved since joining this program?*" and "*What kind of support made a difference in your progress?*" Participants discussed how the consistent use of scaffolding strategies combined with feedback, revision, and collaborative learning led to better organization, vocabulary usage, and logical argumentation. **Their reflections indicated that**



**scaffolding not only supported immediate tasks but had a long-term impact on their writing development.**

## 5. Conclusion

This research emphasizes the significance of scaffolding in the development of students' writing skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Scaffolding, based on literature, is one of the most effective teaching strategies that aids learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a model proposed by Vygotsky (1978), by offering the appropriate level of guidance and support needed now. Such support lessons over time as learners acquire more skills and are able to function independently. The outcome of this specific research, which involved local and international students from interviews, confirms that scaffolding is a particularly powerful asset for helping ESL students cope with the intricacies of academic writing.

Participants repeatedly pointed out important scaffolding strategies such as modeling, in which instructors showed students how to do academic writing; guided practice, where learners were active participants with structured scaffolds during the drafting process; teaching and peer-provided constructive feedback; and collaborative tasks, which fostered the sharing of ideas and collaborative development. These approaches helped learners to master the structural and linguistic features of academic writing while simultaneously cultivating self-efficacy, self-dependence, and enhanced confidence in their capabilities. Also, interviews revealed that well-planned scaffolding strategies were especially effective in multicultural and multilingual classroom settings where students often have different levels of English proficiency and educational background.

When embedded in the instruction and used methodically, these scaffolding strategies help close the gaps in student skills and academic requirements set by institutions of higher learning. It highlights the need for purposeful teaching that plans and designs instruction based on the learners' developmental levels. For further study, it is suggested that more attention be given to peer scaffolding and the use of digital tools and platforms like artificial intelligence writing aids and collaborative online editing spaces to enhance the effectiveness of scaffolding in developing academic writing skills within an ESL framework.

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