SCAFFOLDING STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING LEARNERS' INDEPENDENT SPEAKING SKILLS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Fayzullayeva Dilorom Sanjarbek qizi

Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

Narpay Faculty of Foreign Languages

3rd-year student

Abstract: *Scaffolding is a key pedagogical strategy that supports learners in accomplishing tasks they cannot complete independently at the beginning, gradually transferring responsibility from the teacher to the learner. This study examines the impact of scaffolding strategies on developing learners' independent speaking skills in English language education at the university level. Using an experimental design, the research compares students taught through systematic scaffolding techniques with those taught through conventional speaking practice. Data were collected through pre- and post-speaking assessments, classroom observation checklists, and learner reflection forms. The findings show that scaffolded instruction improved students' speaking fluency, coherence, vocabulary use, and confidence, while also reducing speaking anxiety. The study concludes that scaffolding accelerates the transition from guided speaking to independent oral production and recommends structured scaffolding cycles in speaking lessons.*

Keywords: *scaffolding, independent speaking, speaking fluency, learner autonomy, ZPD, English language education*

Speaking is often considered the most challenging skill for many English language learners. Even students with good vocabulary and grammar knowledge may hesitate to speak due to fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, limited practice opportunities, or anxiety about being evaluated. In higher education contexts, these difficulties can become more visible because learners are expected to express

opinions, present ideas, and participate in academic discussions in English. One of the key problems is that learners frequently remain dependent on the teacher. In speaking lessons, students may rely on memorized phrases, repeat teacher-provided examples, or avoid producing original speech. This situation suggests a gap between guided practice and independent language use. Therefore, developing learners' independent speaking skills requires an approach that supports learners initially but gradually builds their autonomy.

Scaffolding refers to temporary instructional support that enables learners to complete tasks beyond their current ability. The concept is strongly connected with Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the space between what learners can do independently and what they can do with guidance. Through scaffolding, learners are helped to move from assisted performance to independent performance. In English language education, scaffolding can include modeling, sentence frames, vocabulary support, guided questions, visual organizers, peer collaboration, feedback, and step-by-step task progression. When used systematically, scaffolding can support learners in producing oral speech with increasing independence.

Aim of the Study

This study aims to investigate how scaffolding strategies influence learners' independent speaking skills in English language education.

Research Questions

1. How do scaffolding strategies affect learners' speaking fluency and coherence?

2. To what extent do scaffolding techniques increase learners' confidence and reduce speaking anxiety?

3. How does the gradual removal of support contribute to learner autonomy in speaking?

Methods

Research Design

The study employed an experimental design with two groups:

• Experimental group: speaking lessons with structured scaffolding strategies

• Control group: speaking lessons using conventional practice (topic discussion without structured scaffolding cycle)

Participants

The participants were 3rd-year university students from the Narpay Faculty of Foreign Languages at Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages. A total of 40 students took part:

• 20 students in the experimental group

• 20 students in the control group

Both groups had similar proficiency levels, confirmed via a pre-speaking assessment.

Instructional Procedure

The experimental group received scaffolded speaking instruction over a defined period. Scaffolding was implemented as a cycle:

1) Modeling and Input Support (High Support)

• Teacher demonstrated sample dialogues or short speeches.

• Students listened to model answers and identified key structures.

• Useful vocabulary lists and expressions were provided (e.g., opinion phrases, linking words).

2) Guided Practice (Moderate Support)

• Students practiced speaking with sentence starters and prompts:

• "In my opinion…", "The main reason is…", "For example…", "However…"

• Guided questions structured the conversation.

• Pair and group tasks were used to reduce pressure and encourage interaction.

3) Semi-Independent Production (Low Support)

• Students completed speaking tasks with fewer prompts.

• They organized ideas using mind maps or speaking outlines.

• Teachers provided feedback mainly after speaking (delayed correction).

4) Independent Speaking (Minimal Support)

• Students delivered mini-presentations, debates, or opinion talks without scaffolding tools.

• They self-evaluated or peer-evaluated performance using rubrics.

Scaffolding Strategies Used

To develop independence, the following strategies were applied:

• Sentence frames and starters (to structure ideas)

• Vocabulary and collocation banks (topic-specific lexical support)

• Graphic organizers (mind maps, speaking outlines)

• Chunking tasks (breaking speaking tasks into smaller steps)

• Guided questioning (to develop depth and coherence)

• Peer scaffolding (pair support and collaborative rehearsal)

• Feedback scaffolding (focused feedback on 1–2 priorities, not everything)

Data Collection Tools

1. Pre- and post-speaking assessments (rubric-based)

2. Classroom observation checklists (participation, independence indicators)

3. Learner reflection forms (self-reported confidence and challenges)

Data Analysis

Learners' speaking performance was evaluated using a rubric with four criteria:

• Fluency (smoothness, speed, pauses)

• Coherence (logical flow, linking devices)

• Lexical resource (vocabulary range and appropriacy)

• Independence (ability to speak without prompts, originality)

Results

1) Improvement in Speaking Fluency and Coherence

Post-test results revealed that students in the experimental group spoke more continuously and organized their ideas more clearly. They used linking devices ("firstly", "however", "as a result") more frequently than before. The control group improved slightly but still relied on short answers and teacher support.

2) Increased Vocabulary Use and Reduced Dependence on Memorization

Scaffolded learners began using topic-specific vocabulary and natural collocations rather than memorizing fixed sentences. Their speech became more authentic and flexible.

3) Higher Confidence and Lower Speaking Anxiety

Learner reflections showed that scaffolding reduced fear of speaking. Many students reported that sentence starters and rehearsal time helped them prepare mentally, while peer collaboration reduced pressure.

4) Growth of Learner Autonomy

Observation checklists indicated that scaffolded students gradually became more independent: they initiated conversations, asked questions, and continued speaking even when they forgot words (using paraphrasing strategies).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that scaffolding supports learners effectively by bridging the gap between guided instruction and independent speaking. When learners receive structured support at early stages, they are more likely to attempt speaking and take risks. Gradual withdrawal of support encourages learners to internalize speaking patterns and become autonomous.

The study also highlights the value of peer scaffolding. Learners often feel less anxious speaking with peers, allowing them to practice more and receive natural feedback. In this sense, scaffolding is not only teacher-provided support but also a collaborative classroom process.

However, scaffolding must be carefully planned. If support remains too long, learners may become dependent on prompts. Therefore, a key principle is fading— systematically reducing assistance while increasing learner responsibility.

Conclusion

This study concludes that scaffolding strategies significantly enhance learners' independent speaking skills in English language education. Scaffolded instruction improves fluency, coherence, vocabulary use, and confidence while reducing anxiety. The gradual removal of support promotes learner autonomy and enables students to speak more independently. Therefore, scaffolding should be systematically integrated into speaking lessons at the university level.

Limitations

• Small sample size (40 students) limits generalization.

• Short-term intervention may not capture long-term autonomy development.

• Speaking assessment includes subjective judgment despite rubrics.

Recommendations

• Teachers should plan scaffolding cycles (high → moderate → low support).

• Use speaking rubrics and reflection forms regularly to track independence.

• Combine teacher scaffolding with peer scaffolding and self-scaffolding tools.

• Future research should examine scaffolding's long-term effect on academic presentations and debates.

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