



Reviewed Work:

Teachers' Voices 8: Explicitly Supporting Reading and Writing in the Classroom. (2005). Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce. Sydney, Australia: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research. <http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/publications/home.htm> Pp. 77. ISBN: 1741381037 (DVD ISBN 1741381045). Price: \$20.00 (DVD \$28.00)

Reviewed by:
Zafreen Jaffery
Portland State University

Six months ago when I started action research to address issues dealing with reading in my foreign language class, I had a clear idea about my research question and research methodology. Consequently, data collection seemed to happen quite easily. However, the problems started to arise during the course of the research when I realized that my research question was too broad and general and had to be narrowed down. I also encountered problems while I was reporting the research as I had collected too much information. I realized that my research question had to be redefined. Moreover, I could not find a way of presenting the results clearly and lucidly while maintaining the focus of the research question at the same time. My research question focused on what teaching strategies can facilitate reading and lead towards greater learner autonomy in a class of multilevel students. Therefore, I used the methods of analyzing teacher and learner strategies.

I consulted several books, as there is a lot of material available on action research, but had little success in finding solutions for my problems. Finally, I had the good fortune of coming across the book, *Teachers' Voices 8: Explicitly Supporting Reading and Writing in the Classroom*. While reading this book, I was able to identify strategies to assist and support students explicitly in developing their reading and writing.

The book is the eighth in a series that reports on classroom-based projects conducted by teachers in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) using an action research approach. Each book in the series begins with an overview of the project and the theoretical ideas underpinning action research, as well as a review of the literature relevant to the focus of the research. In this case, the focus is on reading, writing and literacy development in adult ESL classrooms using the notion of scaffolding as a basis for planning and integrating explicit support

for learning processes. The main difference between this volume and others in the series is that it is accompanied by a DVD, showing the teachers undertaking the classroom teaching on which their research was based.

The book has a plethora of extremely relevant information which helped me sail successfully through my arduous research journey. In particular the third chapter in the book, "Understanding Action Research", by Anne Burns proved to be helpful. This chapter highlights issues that need to be specifically addressed while conducting action research. For aspiring teachers who are novices in the field of action research and want to find answers to issues as they occur in their classroom, this chapter will prove to be worthy of their reading. Even experienced researchers can enjoy reading it because of the clear and coherent way in which it provides valuable insights into various aspects of action research. It offers immediate and quick answers, and valuable suggestions for those involved with action research or who want to find more about it like teachers, researchers, and teacher educators. Besides answering the most fundamental questions about action research, it justifies the validity of the qualitative research methodology commonly used in action research. It offers simple and to-the-point steps in writing the final report and the research reports by five teacher researchers give good examples of how research is conducted and represented by following those steps. The chapter does not shed light on issues such as how to deal with unexpected situations, how to modify and redefine research question if the need arises. However, the first person accounts by the teachers, presented later in the book, show readers in what ways they could use flexible approaches while doing the research and changed plans according to the needs of the students.

The book is divided into three sections. Section One is aptly entitled "Theoretical Ideas". It is further divided into two chapters: "Explicitly Supporting Learning: An Overview by Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce" and "What is Scaffolding?" by Jennifer Hammond and Pauline Gibbons. The second section of the book focuses on "Understanding Action Research", as already outlined above, and the third section covers the first person accounts of five teachers in adult ESL classrooms. Each chapter concludes with a detailed list of references; useful websites are also given throughout the book.

Chapter 1, by Burns and de Silva Joyce, is a commentary on how the project started and the relevance of the material presented in the book for individual professional development, professional development in sessions and teacher education.

The second chapter, written by Jennifer Hammond and Pauline Gibbons, defines scaffolding – a term that is synonymous with teacher intervention and support in student learning. It provides an in-depth analysis of the term by explaining the scope and range of scaffolding in various educational settings. While drawing examples from everyday life, Hammond and Gibbons state that parental tutoring in the language development of young children is also referred to as scaffolding. So scaffolding becomes a phenomenon which has paramount significance early in a child's language development. In the classroom context it refers to the use of teacher assistance and intervention to enable learners towards greater independence. The chapter sheds light on the theoretical underpinnings of scaffolding whose framework lies within the Vygotskian (1978) notion of the "Zone of Proximal Development". This chapter also acts as a literature review where scaffolding is explained with the help of definitions, and its significance in educational

contexts and macro and micro focuses and range are discussed. The theoretical explanation of how scaffolding is related to Vygotskian concepts is clearly articulated. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the collaborative nature of scaffolding and how it is jointly constructed by the teacher with the learner.

The chapters in the third section written by the teacher researchers, provide illustrations of the theoretical ideas in practice. Scaffolding or teacher support can be provided in the form of developing teaching materials, preparing lesson plans, making contingency plans as the lesson is in progress, sequencing tasks and activities, motivating students, and customizing support to suit individual learners' needs.

The teacher researchers inform the reader about the demographic profiles of their classroom, the background of their learners, their nationalities and gender. They deal with a broad range of linguistically diverse students who have different levels of English language proficiency. Most language teachers can relate to this type of situation, which helps to ensure that readers who are teachers can find something applicable and relevant to their own classrooms.

I will focus on two of the studies in the book, one from the point of view of the written chapter and one from the point of view of the activities shown on the DVD, that deal with the issue of how instructional materials are used to support learning.

The chapter, "Creating Teaching Materials that Support Learning", by Pornsawan Brawn, addresses the issue of whether to use teacher-created or commercial reading materials. She shows how she adapted published resources to suit the needs of the learners in her class. She also addresses the issue of pacing the presentation of the reading materials, which is of interest to many language teachers with multilevel classes who face the challenge of creating a pace which is not too slow for advanced beginners or too fast for beginners. While reflecting on their teaching processes, teachers often realize that certain approaches need to be amended, or tasks and activities altered, according to the demands of the situation. Pornsawan Brawn notes that she found that she needed to reduce her speed to suit some students, but realized that other students were not learning at the most effective pace.

On the DVD, Elizabeth Buchanan, the author of "Reading in a Preliminary English Class", conducts a lesson that initially seems predominantly teacher-centered. As the students are beginners with no literacy in first language, there is a lot of repetition and the pace is slow. As Buchanan increasingly scaffolds the activities, the class later involves more cooperative learning and group activities where the teacher uses a lot of interesting techniques. Students are also shown working independently at this early stage through the provision of visual cues and index cards. Her chapter in the book also describes how she makes use of the instructional materials and aids to facilitate student learning.

The video taped classroom scenes are inspiring and suggestive. The glimpse of the actual classrooms makes the teachers' accounts very real, life-like and practical. Suddenly readers are not just dealing with dry accounts of teachers' struggles in the classroom, but they are on virtual tour of actual classrooms that are full of life and show purposeful, meaningful activities that will provide a host of ideas to any creative teacher.

Throughout the book, reflection points for teacher development are also interspersed at appropriate places. They not only make readers think about the theoretical terms under discussion but compel them to think beyond their current level of understanding. Some reflection points simply invite the reader to think about what they have already done as part of their teaching practices and others are suggestive about practical activities that could be done about the issue under discussion. The reflection points which suggest that readers discuss the issues with a colleague are worthwhile as this kind of interaction can lead to more fruitful, productive and meaningful ideas. At a time when teachers may feel overwhelmed by the notion of action research, these research reports make it appear simple, worthwhile and easy to carry out. Teachers' accounts further strengthen the view that the rewards of this seemingly daunting task are numerous.

It is a pleasure reading a book that illustrates familiar situations and identifies issues that we teachers face in class. It establishes the significance of scaffolding for reading and writing in ESL classrooms with the help of action research. Scaffolding requires a lot of hard work on the part of the teacher in the preparation of materials, preparation of content and sequencing require prior planning and the book offers a lot of support for teachers in this regard. But scaffolding or providing teacher support to learners is not only about provision of materials, provision of resources, and giving feedback and responses. It is also about making changes in the teaching plan wherever they are necessary and as the need arises. The book is promoted as a professional development package, and it is a claim that I find accurate.

Reference

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

About the Reviewer

Zafreen Jaffery earned an M.A. in English Literature and an M.A. in English Language Teaching from Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore, Pakistan. Currently she is pursuing her doctoral degree in Educational Leadership from Portland State University, Oregon. Her area of specialization is Curriculum and Instruction. e-mail: zafreenj@pdx.edu