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Enhancing Writing Skills In Esl Learners Through The Techniques Of Scaffolding

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Abstract

Tasks provide better opportunities for the learners by engaging them in meaningful language use. The technique of scaffolding offers support to the learners and provides inputs by breaking the complex tasks into comprehensible units. The learners process the information through the interaction with 'more knowledgeable others' and collaborate with peers during the accomplishment of the tasks. The present paper shares the research findings on 'Using Scaffolding as a Technique to Enhance ESL Learners' Language Proficiency at Tertiary Level: A Task-based Approach'. It presents the impact of scaffolding techniques in improving the writing skills of the learners.

Key Words: Scaffolding – ESL learners – Tertiary level – Writing skills – Collaborative Learning - TBLT.

1. Introduction

English has become a language of increasing opportunities for a better living in the world. It connects the individuals to the networks around the world and would enable them to improve their social and economic conditions. The level of competence and communicative use of English language as per the global standards is the predominant challenge that the country should address. The globally required English language proficiency standards for graduates are often around IELTS-6.5 or CEFR-C1 levels. But the students from India are rarely reaching to IELTS-5.5 or CEFR-B2 levels. It is a huge barrier for a large number of Indian graduates to pursue higher education abroad or to find employment in organized sectors. Even after learning English as a second language for more than a decade, our students are unable to acquire communicative competence in real life contexts. The researcher of this paper aims at finding a more effective classroom teaching methodology to enhance the learners English language proficiency at tertiary level. Though all four language skills are dealt with in this research, this paper presents a part of it that focuses on the impact of using scaffolding techniques to enhance the writing skills of the learners.

2. Theoretical Background

In the socio-cultural theory, the development of a new skill is handled through the notion of 'scaffolding'. In the usual sense, scaffolding is a temporary structure that is often put up in the

process of constructing a building. When each new bit is constructed, the scaffolding is removed or taken down. The use of scaffolding is temporary but it is essential for the construction of a building successfully. The term 'scaffolding' was first used in the educational sense by Wood, Bruner, and Ross in their examination of parent-child talk. They defined scaffolding as a "process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (1976:90). They identified the following features of scaffolding.

- Recruiting interest in the task
- Simplifying the task
- Maintaining pursuit of the goal
- Marking critical features and discrepancies between what has been produced and the ideal situation
- Controlling frustration during problem solving
- Demonstrating an idealized version of the act to be performed

These features characterise the effect of scaffolding on both cognitive demands of the task and the affective states of the person attempting the task. The assistance of peers and more knowledgeable others would help the learners for reaching higher levels of achievement.

Bruner described scaffolding in its metaphorical sense as "the steps taken to reduce the degree of freedom in carrying out some tasks so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill in the process of acquiring" (1978:19). Maybin, Mercer and Stierer viewed scaffolding in the classroom as portraying the "temporary but essential nature of the mentor's assistance in supporting the learners to carry out tasks successfully" (1992:186). Scaffolding is not another word for help, it is a special kind of help that assists learners to move towards learning new concepts, new skills and new levels of understanding. Pauline Gibbons defined scaffolding as "temporary assistance by which a teacher helps a learner know how to do something, so that the learner will later be able to complete a similar task alone" (2002:10).

Rod Ellis presented his views on scaffolding in the context of social interaction as "scaffolding is the dialogic process by which one speaker assists another in performing a function that he or she cannot perform alone" (2003:182). He elaborated that when the students have the opportunity to perform tasks with skilled teachers, their opportunities for learning are maximized. He also asserted that the construction of dialogic activity between peers will also provide equal level of scaffolding for the development of skills.

> Scaffolding supports the development of new skill espoused in socio-cultural theories – scaffolding is a dialogic process in which a learner assists another learner to create interest in the task, in pursuit of a goal specifying and simplifying the task. It includes sustenance of the involvement during problem solving and demonstrates the idealized performance of the task to be carried out. Thus, scaffolding engages the demand of cognition and effective states of the learner performing a task (2003:181).

The classroom environment, according to Krashen (1977), should make the learners work in low anxiety conditions and the teacher should provide the input in comprehensible portions just above their current ability. According to Vygotsky (1934), the task which is provided just above the actual ability of the learner would be challenging to him/her and it creates 'Zone of Proximal Development'.

The learner will be able to complete the task with the help of a 'more knowledgeable other'. The 'more knowledgeable other' is his teacher or a peer. The teacher needs to play a

balanced role as a 'knowledgeable other' to share his knowledge to the learners and as a facilitator to maximize opportunities for learners to learn on their own by doing. Task-based Language Teaching replicates the real-world environment in the classroom in which learners interact with others, learn the language and be able to communicate with others in the outside world. The classroom procedures in TBLT helps the learners to acquire implicit knowledge and thus develop all the four language skills.

Judith A. Winn (1994) from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee presented the theoretical inputs for relating scaffolded instruction to fulfill Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development'. Her research revealed that the role of the teacher in scaffolded instruction is crucial for establishing collaborations in the learning and assigning the sub-goals of the tasks when the learners encounter a more complex task. She experienced that scaffolded teaching can be better managed with proper planning, presentation of tasks with clear roles, establishment of shared understanding in collaborations, involving all learners in dialogue structures and sustaining the interest and attention of the learners on tasks. Khaled Besher Albesher (2012) aimed at finding out the effectiveness of collaborative learning over individual learning in terms of learners' writing skills. The study revealed that the students involved in collaborative writing performed better in terms of development, coherence and organization but it did not help them much in structures and mechanics of writing. The attitudes of the learners were also found to have improved after participating in collaborative activities of writing.

3. Methodology

The researchers have conducted a quasi-experimental study on a sample of 120 students to find out the effectiveness of using scaffolding as a technique for enhancing learners' English language proficiency at tertiary level. These students are pursuing their first-year engineering course in the branch of Computer Science Engineering from a private deemed to be university.

These students are offered a special course to enhance their English language proficiency. The teacher-researchers have chosen two sections of 60 students each for this experimental study. The previous performance of these two groups of learners and their academic achievements are equal as the merit is randomly distributed to all sections. Hence one section is treated as controlled group and the other as experimental group. The researchers have administered a Pre-test to know their initial language proficiency levels. The test is conducted in all four language skills viz. Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. As the students appear for Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET) at the end of their course, a previous question paper of the same test is chosen for conducting the pre-test. The researchers have proceeded for the intervention in five phases for 12 weeks. There are two sessions per week and each session is for 90 minutes duration.

Galli more and Tharp (1990) have referred to the term 'scaffolding' as 'assisted learning' and suggested six ways of supporting the learners. They are

1. **Modelling:** The teacher may show a reading strategy to the learners by performing it in front of them.
2. **Instructing**: It does not mean just the teacher assigning the task. It is directing the learners' focus on to fulfilling a particular sub-task to begin a difficult task involving various level of accomplishment.

3. **Questioning**: The teacher invokes mental operations of the learners by asking some questions to draw their attention towards the key elements of the text to understand it better.
4. **Cognitive Structuring**: The teacher enables the learners to think and act in an organised way by making use of their background knowledge and relate it to the new conditions. This helps them in giving explanations or making predictions.
5. **Contingency Management:** The teacher has to sustain the enthusiasm, involvement and interest of the learners in the tasks by encouraging them with praise and rewards.
6. **Feedback:** The teacher gives feedback report by comparing the learners' performance to certain standard norms. The feedback may also include suggestions on the areas of improvement.

In the present study, the researcher has used several ways of scaffolding, called them techniques, to make the learning implicit and effective. Some of them are mentioned below.

- Tasks are analysed on the basis of their linguistic complexity, cognitive complexity and communicative pressure. Some of the tasks are broken down into smaller parts and presented to the learners in an increasing complexity. The teacher ensured that the task presented are within the learners' Zone of Proximal Development'.
- The teacher provides enough time for the learners to complete the task and creates a collaborative learning environment by assigning pair and group work in tasks.
- The teacher has explained the concepts with more examples and illustrations. He has used multiple ways to make sure that the learners understand the process of solving problems.
- Vocabulary or grammar structures are pre-taught when the learners are going to deal with grammatically or lexically complex tasks.
- The teacher gives a clear description about purpose, goals and sub-goals of learning activity that the learners are expected to reach.

3.1 Scaffolding for Writing Tasks

The writing component of pre-test has three parts. The task in part one requires the learners to use rewording to restructure the second sentence which should mean exactly like the first sentence. The second part is guided e-mail writing which should fulfil the three language functions suggested in the task. The third part is a creative writing task in which the learners are expected to write a longer composition on a given lead.

- **Writing Task 1:** The learners should use basic punctuations and conventions in writing. They have to rewrite the sentences by using correct spellings, collocations, structures, connectives etc.
  - **Scaffolding:** Ls are asked to identify the punctuation marks in the given small text. T asks a few questions about the use of punctuations and word affixes. Ls discuss the answers in pairs and then as a class. Ls are asked to use necessary punctuations and change the word forms in a given text. The individual work is verified in pairs and groups. The learners will be able to see the response of the other students of the class and know more about it.
- **Writing Task 2:** The learners are expected to write a clear short message in about 35 to 45 words. It should communicate the three key points given in the task and they should be related to the context provided.

- **Scaffolding:** T shows three possible answers to the task and asks the Ls to find the most suitable one to the task. T seeks Ls explanation about their choice. By using the concept checking questions, T draws the attention of the learners towards each sub-goals of the task. Ls are made to identify the context and three key functional points in the task. T introduces more functions and seek suitable expressions or phrases from them. Ls are given the analytical scale for evaluation of e-mail writing and are asked to justify the given marks for two scripts of their peers. Ls discuss the reasons for giving the marks. Ls have got more opportunities to read, evaluate and discuss the responses of peers.

- **Writing Task 3:** The learners have to write a reply letter to a friend in about 100 words. The learners must show a full range of their language ability in using vocabulary, expressions, tenses organisation etc.

- **Scaffolding:** This is a complex writing task and the Ls need to achieve a series of sub-goals to accomplish the whole task. T asks a few concept checking questions to make the learners clear about the requirements of the task. T gives a task and two model responses to verify in pairs the merits and mistakes of the responses. Ls are asked to improve an incomplete and erroneous response. Ls are also introduced to reordering sub-task to familiarize organization and discourse. Ls evaluate the peer's responses by using the analytical scale and discuss the performance and decisions. T gives feedback on all four aspects of analytical scale.

- **Writing Task 4:** The learners should write a story or a narrative by connecting it to the given title or first sentence. The learners need to use their creativity as well as their previous knowledge.

- **Scaffolding:** This is another complex writing task involving many sub-goals to achieve. T asks a few questions to brainstorm the ideas of narrating an event or incident either factual or imaginary. Similar to task-3 of writing, Ls are given a few sub-tasks to make them familiar with the task requirement. T suggests Ls that they should use tense consistently and adjectives appropriately in the narrations. Peer evaluation and feedback is given as per rubrics.

- **Writing Task 5:** The learner needs to fill the gap in the second sentence so that it means the same as the first sentence. The task demands grammatical knowledge of rewording a sentence within acceptable structures.

- **Scaffolding:** T brainstorms the Ls about the related vocabulary to the term written on board. The term may be about sports, fitness, food etc. T elicits some sentences from Ls about what they like about it. T makes comparison of two different structures which convey the same meaning. T reminds Ls about paraphrasing and assigns the task. T models a few structures normally used for paraphrasing sentences. Ls' attention is drawn towards meaning, spelling, grammar in the responses. Ls participate in pair work, group work and whole class discussion.

4. Writing Skills Data Analysis

The responses of the writing component are descriptive in nature. Hence the evaluation of the responses should be manual and precise. The researcher awarded the marks for each of the writing task as per the evaluation procedure of the Cambridge English Language Assessment mark scheme for B1 Preliminary English Test.

4.1 Pre-test

Table-1: Students' Performance in Writing Skills Pre-test

Writing: Pre-test	Experimental Group		Control Group	
Scores (CEFR Levels)	No. of Learners	%	No. of Learners	%
80-99 (Pre-A1)	29	48	29	48
100-119 (A1)	18	30	16	27
120-139 (A2)	8	13	13	22
140-159 (B1)	5	8	2	3
160-170 (B2)	-	-	-	-

It is astonishing that a large number of learners at the tertiary level have shown a very low performance in writing skills. There are 29 learners each from experimental and control groups scored between 80 and 89 and found themselves at 'Pre-A1'level. Another 18 learners from experimental group and 16 from control group have got the score between 100 and 119. They are just at A1 level. Another 8 learners from experimental and 13 from control group are at A2 level with the score of 120-139. There are five learners only from experimental group and 2 learners from control group have shown B1 level language proficiency in the writing skill performance. The following figure presents a detailed view of the writing performance in pre-test in percentages.

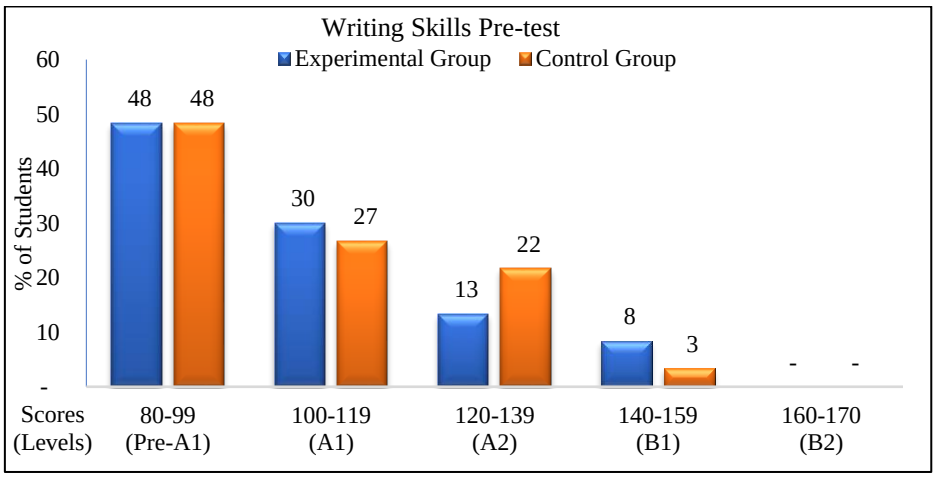

Figure-1: Students' Performance in Writing Skills Pre-test

The bars showing the writing skills performance of the learners in pre-test are high at Pre-A1 level. There are 48 percent learners each form both the groups at that level. It means that nearly half of the learners in both the groups have shown below beginner's level English language proficiency as per CEFR scales. Another 30 percent learners from experimental group and 27 percent learners from control group have scored at A1 level. There are 13 percent and 22 percent learners from experimental and control groups respectively who have got A2 level and a minimal of 8 percent from experimental and 3 percent from control groups scored between 140 and 159 to reach B1 level. There is no learner in any group at B2 level proficiency in writing skills.

4.2 Post-test

The researcher has employed several scaffolding techniques to introduce the mechanics of writing, use of various functional expressions, peer check lists and feedback for improving writing skills of the learners during the intervention. A post-test has been conducted and performance is assessed similar to the pre-test. The major observations of the performance of the experimental and control group learners in the writing post-test are shown in table-2.

Table-2: Students' Performance in Writing Skills Post-test

Writing: Post-test	Experimental Group		Control Group	
Scores (CEFR Levels)	No. of Learners	%	No. of Learners	%
80-99 (Pre-A1)	-	-	1	2
100-119 (A1)	1	2	10	17
120-139 (A2)	10	17	23	38
140-159 (B1)	46	77	26	43
160-170 (B2)	3	5	-	-

The improvement in the learners' performance of writing skills is conspicuous in post-test results. The large number of learners found at 'Pre-A1' level in pre-test have mostly progressed to A2 and B1 levels. There is only one learner at Pre-A1 level in the control group. One learner from experimental group is at A1 level where as control group has 10 learners in it. Majority of the learners, 46 from experimental and 26 from control group, have got the scores between 140 and 159 and are at B1 level. There are 10 learners and 23 learners from experimental and control groups respectively who performed at A2 level. Three learneres from experimental group have performed remarkably and scored between 160 and 170 which is the B2 level of CEFR.

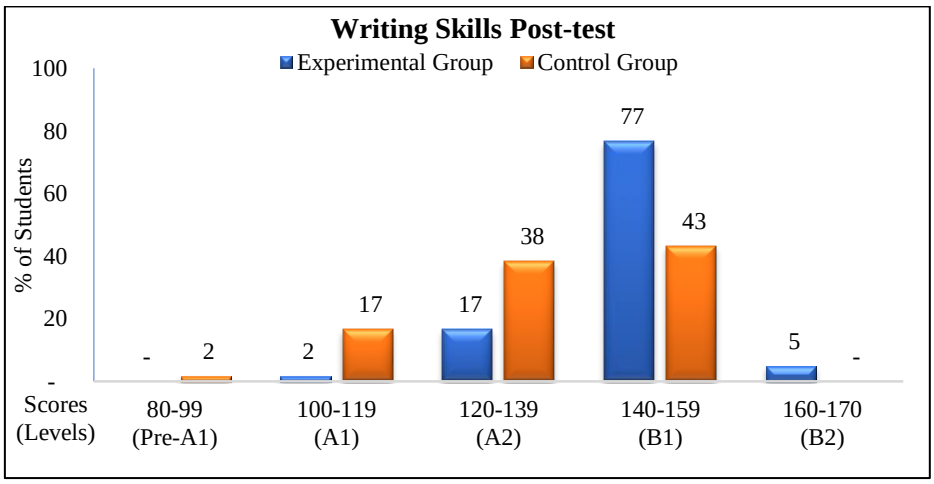

Figure-2: Students' Performance in Writing Skills Post-test

The bar showing the experimental group learners' performance in writing skill is high at B1 level with 77 percent of students who have scored between 140 and 159. Even 43 percent of the control group learners are at the same level. There are 17 percent learners from experimental group and 38 percent from control group at A2 level by scoring between 120 and 139. The numbers at Pre-A1 are minimal and only 2 percent from experimental and 17 percent form

control group learners exhibited A1 level proficiency. It is important to note that 5 percent learners from experimental group reached to B2 level in writing skills.

4.3 Paired Samples t-Test

The paired sample two-tailed t-test analysis finds the difference between the performance of the learners of experimental and control groups in both pre-test and post-tests. When the difference is measured at 95% confidence level, the P value at less than 0.05 ($P \leq 0.05$) is considered to be valid. Table 3 shows the statistical significance of the scores between the experimental and the control groups in both pre- and post-tests.

Table-3: Statistics of Paired Sample t-test on Writing Skills

Writing: Paired Samples t-Test		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			P
Pre-test	EG & CG	0.085	34.851	4.4993	-8.9181	9.0881	0.019	59	0.985
Post-test	EG & CG	12.167	19.047	2.459	7.246	17.087	4.948	59	0 *
* The Value of P is < 0.05. Hence, the difference is significant.									

The paired sample t-test about the performance of learners in the pre-test has got a P value 0.985 ($P = 0.985$). This value is greater than 0.05 ($P > 0.05$). It means that there is no significant difference between the performance of learners from experimental group and that of the control group at 5% level in pre-test. This reveals that both experimental and control group learners performed more or less equally in the writing skills of the pre-test. The P value for the paired sample of the post test is 0 which is less than 0.05 ($P < 0.05$). It means that there is a significant difference between the performance of the experimental group learners in the writing skills of the post-test and that of the control group learners. It implies that experimental group learners performed significantly better than control group learners in the writing skills of the post-test.

Writing is an advanced communication skill and it requires the learners to use a clear thought, knowledge of language structures and precision. The data presented in writing skills reveal that the learners are not confident or reluctant to respond to the writing tasks initially in the pre-test. But the systematic step-by-step process followed in the scaffolding techniques for improving writing skills has made the learners feel confident about writing meaningfully and precisely.

4.4 Mapping the results with CEFR Levels

In the present research, the language proficiency of the learners is related to proficiency levels of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which is the renowned scale of language assessment in the world. Hence the researcher tried to map the results of pre- and post-tests to

CEFR levels. The following table and figures show the learners' proficiency level in the pre-test and their progress in the post-test.

Table-4: Consolidated Result Test-wise

	Pre-test				Post-test			
CEFR Scores	**Exp**	**%**	**Control**	**%**	**Exp**	**%**	**Control**	**%**
80-99(Pre-A1)	29	48	29	48	-	-	1	2
100-119 (A1)	18	30	16	27	1	2	10	17
120-139 (A2)	8	13	13	22	10	17	23	38
140-159 (B1)	5	8	2	3	46	77	26	43
160-170 (B2)	-	-	-	-	3	5	-	-

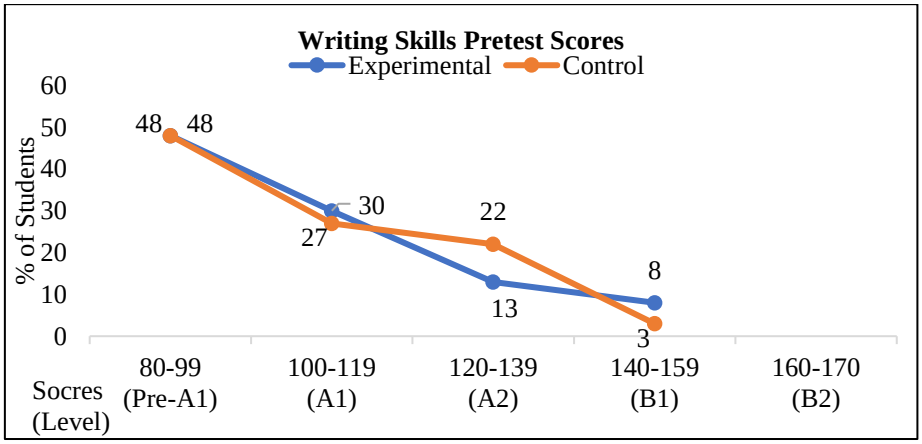

Figure-3: Writing Skills Performance in Pre-test

The line graph representing the results of writing skills pre-test shows that the range of performance of both experimental and control groups is very close. The learners who have shown Pre-A1 level (80-99) performance are equal in both experimental (48%) and control groups (48%). In the next A1 level (100-119), there are slightly more experimental group learners (30%) than control group learners (27%). And, in the Basic User – A2 level (120-139), the control group learners (22%) are more than the experimental group learners (13%). There are 3% learners from control group and 8 % learners from experimental group have shown the performance at Independent User – B1 level (140-159). But no learner from both the groups has shown B2 level ability. This mapping of the learners' pre-test scores to the CEFR levels reveals that the learners from both the groups have performed more or less equally in the writing skills pre-test.

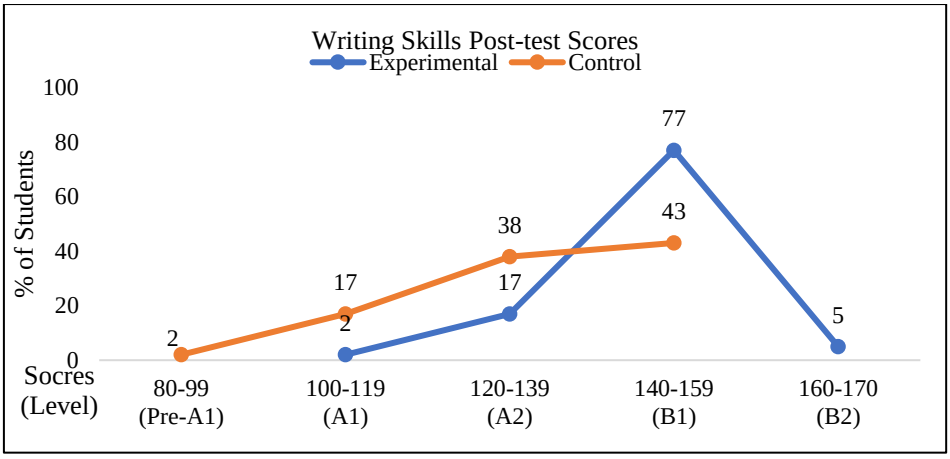

Figure-4: Writing Skills Performance in Post-test

The lines in the Figure-4 present the performance of learners from two different groups in the post-test. In the pre-test, 48 percent learners from control group have shown the performance at Pre-A1 level, where as in the post-test, there are only 2 percent learners at that range. Similarly, 27 percent learners at A1 level from the same group in pre-test have come down to 17 percent in post-test. 22 percent learners at A2 level in pre-test have been improved to 38 percent in post-test. There is only 3 percent representation for the learners of the control group at B1 level in the pre-test and it is increased to43 percent in post-test. The improvement in the control group learners is encouraging but the majority of learners in this group could not reach B1 level.

The line showing the performance of experimental group learners has moved one level ahead of control group line. In the pre-test, there are 48 percent learners from experimental group who performed at Pre-A1 level but there is no one at that level in post-test. while 30 percent at A1 level is also reduced to 2 percent. It means that 75 percent learner have shown a drastic improvement in post-test. Their performance moved two levels ahead. Meanwhile 13 percent performers at A2 level in pre-test has increased to 17 percent in the post-test from the experimental group. Only 8 percent representation of learners from the experimental group at B1 level in the pre-test has improved to 77 percent in the post-test. Moreover, 5 percent learners form experimental group have also excelled in their performance and reached to CEFR-B2 level. This result clearly reveals the fact that the experimental group learners have performed better than the control group learners. It implies that the researchers' use of scaffolding techniques to enhance the experimental group learners' language proficiency had a positive impact and has shown significant improvement in learners' performance.

5. Findings

The learners have performed relatively low in the writing tasks of the pre-test. During the intervention, the researchers have used several forms of scaffolding to make the learners get rid of their fear of writing. Though writing is an individual performance, the researchers have made it collaborative as much as possible. Breaking the task into smaller units, focus on one aspect at a time, practice on basic mechanics, seeking help from more knowledgeable others, peer correction and peer feedback, working on improvement of own and others work and several such scaffolding techniques are used in the intervention.The analysis of the writing skills data has

confirmed that there is a huge improvement in the learner's performance from pre-test to post-test and the experimental group learners have performed better than the control group learners.

- In the scaffolded instruction, the learners initially hesitated to talk to the teacher and to the peers. The mutually supporting environment created in the classroom made the learners get rid of the fear quickly. It was very encouraging to observe that in the second week of instruction, the learners formed into pairs by themselves as per previous arrangement and were ready for activity before the teacher's arrival.
- The learners have enjoyed working on writing tasks as they could see the ideas and responses of others in peer correction and they could offer and receive feedback. This has helped them to come across different expressions to convey the messages.
- Learners' use of evaluation rubrics in the correction of peers' writing responses has made them familiar with the analytical scales of evaluation and thus they incorporate those elements in their responses.
- The scaffolding techniques like peer evaluation of writing responses, teacher and peer feedback on errors and the use of analytical scales for evaluation might have improved the written performance of the learners.

The finding of this study would help the teachers of English to compare their classroom conditions to the conditions described in this study. The teachers of primary, secondary and tertiary levels of study need to shoulder the responsibility of improving the quality of our learners.The findings of this study give more insights to understand several classroom procedures to involve the learners in doing the tasks. As mentioned earlier in the intrinsic motivation towards improving the quality of an individual would lead to finding suitable ideas to rely on. The learners should overcome their shyness, inhibitions, learning gaps and make language learning a social activity. They should collaborate and take part in the interactions with their teachers and peers with a mutual understanding and work for better learning.

6 Conclusions

The study has revealed that 'scaffolding' techniques enable the learners to understand the process of learning a second language. The learners will be able to follow a systematic procedure for moving from simple to complex parts of the tasks. The teacher's support and guidance in the initial stages of accomplishing the tasks help the learners to expand their zones of proximal development. The practice of simplifying the tasks into smaller parts with sub goals makes the learners familiar with task requirements.The teacher can provide comprehensible inputs to the learners to accomplish the whole task at ease. The sense of success in achieving sub goals of the task motivates the learners to approach more complex tasks. If once the learners and their learning are scaffolded, they would take the responsibility of acquiring the knowledge independently.

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