

# Research on English Teaching of Adult EFL Learners Based on the Scaffolding Theory

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**Abstract:** Tourism perception has always been the focus of scholars' research. This research takes tourism perception as the starting point, and builds a theoretical model of tourism perception, cultural identity, and cultural self-confidence on the basis of Zhou Yijun and Feng Gengyun's research on the mechanism of tourism promoting cultural self-confidence, and structural equation model verifies the relationship between tourism perception, cultural identity, and cultural self-confidence.

**Keywords:** English teaching, Adult EFL learners, Scaffolding theory, Scaffolds.

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## 1. Introduction

"Scaffolding instruction", a well-known teaching model, is rooted in constructivist theory and holds great significance in the field of foreign language teaching. Its theoretical and practical implications have attracted much attention, particularly in recent years, where numerous experts and scholars in China have actively delved into its application in foreign language instruction. However, there is a dearth of studies focusing on the utilization of scaffolding instruction theory in teaching English to adult EFL learners. This article seeks to explore the implementation of scaffolding theory in the English education of adult EFL learners. It specifically aims to analyze the optimal utilization of various scaffolds in the teaching process, with the ultimate goal of enhancing learners' interest and proficiency in English language learning.

## 2. The Scaffolding Theory

The scaffolding theory is an educational approach that originated from the field of cognitive development and was further developed by educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky. The theory is based on the concept of the "Zone of Proximal Development"(ZPD). Vygotsky (1964) believed that the "Zone of Proximal Development" refers to "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or collaboration with more capable peers."

[1] Essentially, the "Zone of Proximal Development" denotes the difference between a child's independent problem-solving skills (first level of development) and their potential problem-solving skills under the guidance of a teacher (second level of development).

Building upon Vygotsky's work, subsequent scholars such as Wood, Bruner and Mercer, further developed the theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development," leading to the formulation of the scaffolding theory [2][3]. The term "scaffolding", originally derived from the construction industry, was adopted by Bruner to vividly illustrate a teaching model [4]. In this model, the teacher plays a guiding role in the learning process, enabling learners to master, construct, and internalize the knowledge and skills they acquire, thereby engaging in higher-level cognitive activities. According to Bruner, the essence of scaffolding teaching lies

in utilizing the "Zone of Proximal Development" as a space for teacher intervention, providing support for learner learning, and fostering active and effective learning. Rather than passively adapting to learners' existing level of intellectual development, teaching should consistently be at the forefront of development, continuously guiding learners' intelligence from one level to the next, at a higher level.

The relationship between the "Zone of Proximal Development" and "scaffolding" is vividly illustrated in the scaffolding teaching model. The goal of scaffolding is to meet learners at their ability level and guide them to grow on step at a time [5]. This theory involves guiding learners through tasks that are slightly beyond their current abilities, allowing them to concentrate on manageable task elements and swiftly grasp the content. Within teaching activities, scaffolding plays a pivotal role in assisting learners as they navigate the "Zone of Proximal Development." This involves a combination of teacher guidance and collaborative efforts among peers, enabling learners to progress from their present level of development to their potential level. By fostering comprehensive language application and enhancing writing skills, scaffolding facilitates the cultivation of learners' abilities.

## 3. The Status of English Teaching of Adult EFL Learners

Adult learners, different from regular higher education learners, possess distinct characteristics and encounter unique challenges. Firstly, adult learners typically balance employment alongside their educational pursuits, and they tend to be older, typically ranging from 20 to 35 years of age. Consequently, they often face heightened challenges due to the influence of their native language, leading to a prevalent occurrence known as "language fossilization" that hampers English language acquisition.

Secondly, the majority of adult learners did not perform well in the national college entrance examination, resulting in their enrollment in vocational schools or junior colleges rather than undergraduate institutions. Currently, they engage in studies while simultaneously working, often through adult college entrance exams. In comparison to regular learners, they exhibit limited proficiency in English, possess weaker learning abilities, and have yet to develop effective study habits. Consequently, these factors contribute to their lack of

confidence in learning English and heightened anxiety surrounding the language-learning process.

Lastly, adult learners face time constraints that impede their English language acquisition. They typically juggle work commitments and familial responsibilities, leaving them with limited time and energy for learning. Balancing these obligations becomes crucial as they strive to utilize their remaining resources effectively.

Nevertheless, adult learners possess their own unique advantages. They approach learning English with a clear purpose, often feeling the pressure from their professional commitments, necessitating a strong grasp of the language. Despite their age and potentially limited mechanical memory compared with school-aged learners, adults bring with them a wealth of work experience, accumulated life knowledge, and social exposure. These factors endow them with superior analytical, inductive, and long-term memory capabilities. Their aptitude for abstract thinking is heightened, enabling them to comprehend English expressions more effectively. Furthermore, adult learners exhibit a higher propensity to concentrate and maintain their dedication to learning over extended periods, as long as they remain motivated.

#### **4. The Application of Scaffolding Teaching Theory to English Language Teaching of Adult EFL Learners**

It is crucial for teachers to offer various types of learning scaffolds based on different teaching tasks and stages. Scaffolding aims to bridge the zone by providing the necessary assistance to help learners successfully complete tasks or solve problems that they cannot accomplish on their own. As a result, in the field of English language teaching of adult EFL learners, the role of the teacher has undergone a significant transformation. Instead of merely transmitting and imposing knowledge, teachers now serve as facilitators, guides, and promoters of learners' active engagement in constructing meaning. Therefore, the process of scaffolding instruction encompasses five stages, namely scaffolding, contextual introduction, independent exploration, collaborative learning, and evaluation of learning effectiveness. The step-by-step application of these stages is outlined in the following part.

##### **4.1. Scaffolds**

In order to facilitate learners' learning based on the current theme, the teacher should establish a conceptual framework that aligns with the "Zone of Proximal Development." This framework will help learners construct and internalize existing knowledge. Before introducing new content, the teacher should assess learners' prior knowledge and identify their strengths and areas of need, which will contribute to determining the appropriate level of support required. At the same time, the teacher should clearly communicate the learning objectives to the learners and demonstrate the desired skills or thought processes explicitly by using examples, models, and real-life situations to illustrate how to approach a task or solve a problem. In this way, the learners will be engaged in guided practice by providing step-by-step instructions, prompts, and cues. During the process, the teacher should monitor their progress and offer timely feedback to reinforce correct understanding and redirect misconceptions. This initial step enables learners to develop

a deeper understanding and perception of the nature and principles underlying the content they are studying. Moreover, it helps them establish meaningful connections between different concepts.

##### **4.2. Entering the Context**

Through various forms of prompts and scaffolding techniques, such as questions and brainstorming, learners can be guided into specific problem contexts. The teacher should create learning experiences that are relevant, authentic, and connected to real-world contexts, so as to help learners see the practical applications and significance of what they are learning, making it more meaningful and memorable. Scaffolding strategies should be employed to provide appropriate support and guidance as learners work on challenging tasks or concepts. The teacher should break down complex concepts into smaller, manageable chunks, and gradually release responsibility to learners as they gain proficiency. Also, the teacher should help learners connect what they have learned to new situations or contexts in order to encourage them to apply their knowledge and skills in different scenarios, make connections across disciplines, and transfer their learning to solve problems or make decisions in real-life situations. As learners progress within the actual context, their prior knowledge structure and relevant experiences gradually adapt to the new knowledge they are acquiring. This ongoing adaptation process enriches and develops their cognitive structure, allowing them to construct their own knowledge.

This process is crucial for learners because, as mentioned earlier, they may encounter a phenomenon known as "cognitive fossilization." This phenomenon can lead to misconceptions and illusions, where learners mistakenly perceive their errors as correct. Therefore, it is essential for the teacher to provide accurate guidance and correction. To enhance English language learning, teachers can create English learning contexts through the use of courseware, visual materials, online resources, and other available tools. These resources provide learners with a greater exposure to language information, helping them reduce anxiety and build confidence in their English learning journey. Gradually, this approach enables learners to overcome the influence of their native language and mitigate the risk of cognitive fossilization.

##### **4.3. Independent Exploring**

Ensure learners have sufficient time for reflection and thinking. Adult learners may face initial challenges due to their limited foundation in English, so teachers should be patient with them. Considering learners' current language proficiency, application skills, and cognitive patterns, teachers should provide individual support to help learners enhance their self-learning management skills. During this stage, the teacher should raise open-ended questions that encourage critical thinking and reflection, and also prompt learners to make connections, analyze information, and justify their reasoning. The learners are encouraged to take the initiative and explore their potential for learning English within the provided framework. The teacher should guide them to effectively utilize online resources, increase language input, and assimilate new knowledge using their existing knowledge and experiences, thus establishing a foundation for their future learning goals. Gradually the teacher reduces the level of support as learners gain competence, allowing them to take on more independent problem-solving and

decision-making tasks.

#### 4.4. Collaborative Learning

The teacher should create collaborative learning environments, by classroom group discussions and online interactions, where learners can work in pairs or small groups. Teachers should actively engage in Q&A sessions and pose heuristic questions to provide real-time support to learners during group discussions.

Notably, scaffolding can come not only from teachers but also from peers, who can assist each other. Peer interaction should be encouraged and more opportunities should be provided for learners to support and learn from one another which encourages collaboration, ensures active participation, and allows learners to scaffold their learning together. The more knowledgeable learner can act as a tutor, providing explanations, answering questions, and guiding the less knowledgeable learner through the learning process. The teacher also can use the think-pair-share strategy, where learners individually think about a question or problem, then pair up with a classmate to discuss their thoughts, and finally share their ideas with the whole class. This strategy encourages active participation, critical thinking, and peer interaction.

The mutual influence among learners has a significant impact. Occasionally, teachers can intentionally provide ambiguous learning task requirements to encourage active learner participation and foster increased discussion. This collaborative learning process allows individual learners to have more autonomy in constructing their knowledge and access a wealth of language materials. Within these activities, learners place importance on their reputation among peers, motivating them to take learning seriously, achieve a sense of accomplishment, and develop an interest in English. Moreover, they can learn from their peers' strengths, avoid similar mistakes, adopt multiple perspectives in problem-solving, and gradually develop critical and creative thinking skills, fostering a habit of self-learning.

#### 4.5. Evaluation of Learning Effectiveness

The evaluation of learning effectiveness includes self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and teacher evaluation. Teacher evaluation plays a crucial role throughout the learning process and provides valuable guidance for learners' English learning, so the teacher should clearly communicate the criteria and standards by which learner work will be evaluated. These criteria should be transparent and understandable for both teachers and learners. Rubrics or scoring guides can help provide specific criteria and descriptors for each level of performance.

Through classroom discussions or online interactions, teachers can assess learners' current learning status, identify areas for improvement, and offer timely and insightful feedback on their performance which helps them understand their strengths and areas for improvement. Feedback should be specific, actionable, and focused on the learning objectives. Balance praise and encouragement with suggestions for growth and development. Consider using a variety of

feedback methods, such as written comments, verbal feedback, or audio/video recordings, which enhances their interest, allows them to experience the joy of progress and success, and promotes cognitive development. Each evaluation stage contributes to learners' knowledge construction and growth. The teacher can also implement peer feedback activities where learners provide constructive feedback to their peers' work. This helps learners develop communication skills, analytical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Encourage learners to reflect on their own learning and provide self-assessment as well.

### 5. Conclusion

The scaffolding teaching theory perceives learning as a process where learners assimilate knowledge. When it comes to teaching English to adults, the scaffolding teaching theory serves as a guiding principle. It revolves around placing learners at the core, fully leveraging their initiative and creativity, and placing emphasis on developing their practical language application skills and autonomous learning abilities. The teacher assumes the roles of organizer, guide, and facilitator throughout the teaching process, offering various forms of support to learners at each stage. In the teaching, the teacher should select scaffolding strategies that are appropriate for the specific learning objectives, the learners' abilities, and the context in which they are teaching, and modify these strategies as necessary to meet the unique needs of your learners. This approach promotes the internalization of knowledge and encourages active construction of the meaning behind the learned material. As time progresses, English learning establishes a positive feedback loop, enhancing learners' interest and motivation to learn the language while simultaneously improving their ability to apply it in real-world situations.

Manuscript should include a conclusion. In this section, summarize what was described in your paper. Future directions may also be included in this section. Authors are strongly encouraged not to reference multiple figures or tables in the conclusion; these should be referenced in the body of the paper.

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