

Research paper

Comparing the Impact of Conceptual and Strategic Scaffolding on Paragraph Writing Proficiency among Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study examined the comparative effects of conceptual and strategic scaffolding on paragraph writing proficiency among Iranian EFL learners. A total of 40 intermediate-level female learners from a language institute in Hamedan, Iran were selected via the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and randomly assigned to two groups: one received conceptual scaffolding, and the other strategic scaffolding for paragraph writing. Over eight sessions, the conceptual scaffolding group focused on foundational writing principles such as topic sentences, coherence, and unity, while the strategic scaffolding group learned techniques like brainstorming, outlining, and revising. A pretest and posttest, scored using Jacob's (1981) rubric, assessed learners' writing proficiency. Both groups showed significant improvement, as indicated by the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test. However, the Mann-Whitney U test revealed that the strategic scaffolding group outperformed the conceptual scaffolding group in terms of writing gains. These findings suggest that while both scaffolding methods are effective, strategic scaffolding may lead to greater improvements in writing proficiency. The study has important implications for EFL instructors, learners, and curriculum developers.

Keywords: Conceptual Scaffolding, Iranian EFL Learners, Paragraph Writing, Strategic Scaffolding, Writing Proficiency

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Introduction

Among the four macro-skills in language learning—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—writing has been identified as a critical skill that requires focused attention and innovative instructional methods (Estavillo, 2024). Developing proficient writing skills is essential for both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, as it not only enhances their overall language competence but also contributes to their academic and professional success. Brown and Lee (2019) emphasize that writing is fundamental to language education, playing a crucial role in fostering students' communication and critical thinking abilities. Likewise, Williams (2022) asserts that effective writing is vital in education, enabling students to articulate their thoughts cohesively, demonstrate understanding, and engage in higher-order thinking.

Despite its significance, writing is often underemphasized in the Iranian EFL context (Ghanbari & Salari, 2022). Smith (2017) observes that the focus in language education tends to be on reading and grammar, overshadowing the development of writing skills. The neglect of writing instruction poses significant challenges for learners, impeding their ability to effectively express their ideas (Smith & Johnson, 2020). As a result, there is a pressing need for innovative approaches that place greater emphasis on writing as a means to enhance overall language proficiency and academic achievement. However, traditional methods of teaching writing, such as grammar-focused instruction and rote memorization, continue to dominate language education in many settings, including Iran. These approaches often fail to encourage creativity, critical thinking, and expressive writing skills (Jones & Smith, 2020).

At the core of writing instruction is the ability to construct well-structured paragraphs, a fundamental skill for effective communication and academic success (Smith & Brown, 2019).

Despite advancements in writing pedagogy, traditional approaches to teaching paragraph writing remain prevalent, potentially limiting students' ability to develop more diverse and sophisticated writing skills (Jones & Lee, 2021). The rise of sociocultural theory, which underscores the role of social and cultural contexts in learning, has prompted a shift towards more innovative, student-centered writing instruction (Smith, 2017). By incorporating sociocultural perspectives, educators can create dynamic, interactive learning environments that encourage students to develop writing skills in a contextually meaningful way.

Scaffolding, rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, is an instructional technique that provides learners with support and guidance as they develop their writing abilities. In EFL contexts, scaffolding can take various forms, including *conceptual scaffolding*, which helps students grasp essential writing concepts, and *strategic scaffolding*, which focuses on teaching specific writing techniques and strategies (Williams, 2015). However, little research has explored how these two forms of scaffolding impact EFL learners' paragraph writing in the Iranian educational context. This study seeks to address this gap by comparing the effects of conceptual and strategic scaffolding on the paragraph writing skills of Iranian EFL learners.

Theoretical Background

Writing instruction has been a priority within language education for a long time lasting from one generation to the next and has changed through a number of methodological approaches. One component of writing instruction that has developed through one theoretical framework is sociocultural theory which was developed by Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky viewed learning as a social act involving cultural contexts. For Vygotsky (1978), learning equally involves interaction with more competent others to co-construct knowledge. In this respect, we can understand scaffolding

(Protheroe, 2008)--to temporarily assist learners until they can do it by themselves--as a method of instruction. Because Vygotsky viewed learning as an inherently social process, he also developed the ZPD, which emphasized the importance of providing assistance to help learners learn to do, from what they can do independently, to what they can do with our assistance.

Scaffolding can be defined in several ways as it pertains to language learning. We will focus on two common examples of scaffolding: conceptual scaffolding and strategic scaffolding. Conceptual scaffolding is to assist individuals developing an understanding of fundamental ideas and principles in the writing process, for example, ideas of coherence, unity and structuring pedagogically. Conceptual scaffolding allows individuals to get a strong conceptual ground with the purpose of moving forward to perform more complex writing tasks (Bruner, 1986). Strategic scaffolding shifts the focus towards specific writing strategies i.e., brainstorming, outlining, and revising, with the goal to help individuals through the stages of writing process. According to Williams (2015), strategic scaffolding enables individuals to develop a concrete method for enhancing their writing performance, whereby the focus shifts to the "how" of writing rather than just the "what".

The research on cognitive psychology offers additional evidence of the potential positive effects scaffolding has in learning, implying learners benefit from supported learning with scaffolding rather than unsupported learning. Scaffolding has clearly demonstrated to give learning support/facilitating learner independence, which allows learners to internalize new strategies and use these strategies whenever they deem necessary. It can be seen as being in align with constructivism, which essentially involves that each learner constructs knowledge to use somewhere in all their experiences, as they develop knowledge through hands-on experiences &

reflection about those experiences. As such, scaffolding in writing instruction serves to bridge the gap between theory and practice, while developing writing proficiency and critical thinking.

Previous Studies

Many studies have investigated the effect of scaffolding on writing skills among language learners, especially in EFL and ESL contexts. Early research on scaffolding, like that of Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), emphasized the value of guided learning, which could be taking a learning situation and providing learners with support in ways that helped them learn in appearance or use to whatever extent they needed it. More recently, scaffolding has been applied to writing instruction with many studies looking at comparing the effects offered by different scaffolding practices.

Hyland and Hyland (2006) conducted a significant study examining teacher feedback as scaffolding in writing instruction, which concluded that effective feedback provides conceptual and strategic support. They posited that scaffolding feedback enables learners to be even more reflective – thus allowing better revision and improvement of their writing. Similarly, Swain and Lapkin (2002) studied collaborative dialogue during writing tasks, focused on documenting the role of interaction and scaffolding before learners could write more systematic and complex texts.

There are very few studies in the Iranian EFL context that have investigated the effects of scaffolding on writing proficiency. The most notable of these studies is Rezaei and Bahrami's (2019) study of Iranian EFL learners of English and their development of argumentative writing. They found that conceptual and strategic scaffolding did improve students' writing performance. However, they also reported that the most instrumental components of improvement were identified with the strategic scaffolding technique (focusing on specific writing strategies) - as the

study reported greater improvement in fluency of writing and organization of written work through a specific focus on the three dimensions of writing via strategic scaffolding. This aligns with Williams (2015) who found that strategic scaffolding helped learners with 'far more rapid improvement in their understanding and technique with respect to structuring and organizing writing'.

Several other studies have considered the potential pedagogical issues relating to scaffolding in writing. For example, Hammond and Gibbons (2005) proposed differentiating scaffolding because learners of different proficiency levels need to access different forms of support to improve their writing potential. They suggest that the efficacy of scaffolding is maximized when it is flexible and tailored around the needs of individual learners. The work of Poehner (2008) supports this idea by showing how dynamic assessment, a form of scaffolding, leads to greater levels of writing performance because it offers continuous and adaptive support throughout the process of writing.

There is a void in the literature on the comparative effects of conceptual and strategic scaffolding on paragraph writing, especially among Iranian EFL learners, despite the progress that has been made. The literature shows that both types of scaffolding have a positive influence on improving writing skills, but few studies formally compared the differential impacts of the two types of scaffolding on specific components of writing (e.g., coherence, organization, and fluency). Even fewer studies specifically examined conceptual and strategic scaffolding on EFL learners' writing ability from perspectives of component based measures. This study aims to address that gap in the literature on conceptual and strategic scaffolding effects on paragraph writing proficiency of Iranian EFL learners.

For the purpose of this study, the following questions were developed:

1. Does the use of conceptual scaffolding have any statistically significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing proficiency?
2. Does the use of strategic scaffolding have any statistically significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing proficiency?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference in the effect of conceptual scaffolding versus strategic scaffolding on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing?

With regard to the above questions, the following hypotheses were proposed:

1. The use of conceptual scaffolding does not have any statistically significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing proficiency.
2. The use of strategic scaffolding does not have any statistically significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing proficiency.
3. There is no statistically significant difference in the effect of conceptual scaffolding versus strategic scaffolding on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing.

Methodology

Participants

Using convenience sampling, 60 intermediate-level female EFL learners from a language institute in Hamedan, Iran, were initially selected. All participants, native Persian speakers aged 18 to 25, took the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) to ensure homogeneity. Based on the results, 40 learners scoring within one standard deviation of the mean were chosen as the final sample. The participants were randomly divided into two groups of 20. One group received conceptual scaffolding focused on paragraph writing concepts, while the other received strategic scaffolding

emphasizing writing strategies. Both groups attended eight instructional sessions, receiving feedback tailored to their respective scaffolding approach.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study included the proficiency test of OPT, writing pre-test and post-test to assess the paragraph writing proficiency of the learners which are explained below:

Oxford Placement Test

The Oxford Placement Test (OPT), comprising 60 items assessing grammar, vocabulary, and reading skills, was used to evaluate participants' English proficiency. It served as a screening tool to ensure that all selected participants were at an intermediate level and to confirm group homogeneity before the study.

Writing Pretest and Posttest

To measure participants' paragraph writing skills before and after the intervention, a Writing Pretest and Posttest were administered. Each test required participants to write paragraphs on assigned topics within a specified time. The Pretest established baseline proficiency, while the Posttest measured the effects of conceptual and strategic scaffolding. Both tests were evaluated by two independent raters using Jacob's (1981) Five-Component Rubric, which assesses writing based on Content, Organization, Style, Mechanics, and Presentation. Jacob's rubric, known for its reliability and validity (Brown & Lee, 2018; Nguyen & Wang, 2020), has been widely used in writing assessment, with confirmed reliability indices such as Cronbach's Alpha and Test-Retest Reliability. The inter-rater reliability of the tests was calculated in a pilot study involving 20

participants, ensuring consistent and objective scoring. As can be seen in Table 1. below, there was a high agreement, based on Landis and Koch's (1977) classification, between the two raters of the research: $R = 0.81$.

Table 1.

The Inter-Rater Reliability for the Two Raters

Title	Raters	Participants	R
Writing proficiency	2	20	0.81

Procedure

The study followed a systematic procedure, beginning with the selection of 60 female EFL learners from a language institute in Hamedan. After administering the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), 40 homogeneous intermediate learners were selected based on their scores. These participants were then randomly divided into two groups of 20: one receiving instruction through conceptual scaffolding and the other through strategic scaffolding. Each group participated in eight sessions focused on paragraph writing. The conceptual scaffolding group emphasized understanding the structural elements of paragraphs, such as topic sentences, coherence, and unity, through discussions and analysis of sample paragraphs. This approach aimed to deepen comprehension of the writing process, helping students internalize and apply principles independently. The strategic scaffolding group, on the other hand, received instruction in specific writing strategies, including brainstorming, outlining, and revising. This group focused on practical, step-by-step guidance to improve procedural knowledge and enhance writing performance. Both groups used materials tailored to their instructional approach: theoretical readings and model paragraphs for the conceptual group, and strategy guides and worksheets for the strategic group. Peer review sessions were also incorporated to reinforce learning and develop evaluative skills. A Writing Pretest was administered before the treatment, and a Posttest after the

eight sessions, both scored using Jacob's (1981) rubric to assess the impact of the interventions on paragraph writing proficiency.

Results and Discussion

Answering the First Research Question

The first research question examined whether the use of conceptual scaffolding had a statistically significant effect on the paragraph writing proficiency of Iranian EFL learners. As the normality of the data distribution was not confirmed, a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was conducted to compare the pretest and posttest scores. Table 2. below shows the descriptive statistics.

Table 2

The Descriptive Statistics for the Pretest/Posttest of the Writing Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Conceptual_Pre	20	40.00	50.00	45.15	2.39
Conceptual_Post	20	43.00	55.00	47.45	3.26
Valid N (listwise)	20				

The descriptive analysis, presented in Table 2, showed an increase in the mean posttest score (M = 47.45) compared to the pretest score (M = 45.15), indicating an improvement in writing proficiency. The inferential test results in Table 3 below further supported this finding, with the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test showing a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores ($Z = -3.08$, $p < .05$).

Table 3

Result of the Wilcoxon-Singed Rank Test for the Writing Scores

	Conceptual_Post - Conceptual_Pre
Z	-3.084 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.002

Thus, the first null hypothesis was rejected, confirming that conceptual scaffolding had a significant positive impact on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing skills.

Answering the Second Research Question

The second research question aimed to determine whether strategic scaffolding had a statistically significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing proficiency. As the normality of the data distribution was not confirmed, a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was conducted to compare the pretest and posttest scores. Table 4. below shows the descriptive statistics.

Table 4.
The Descriptive Statistics for the Pretest/Posttest of the Writing Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Strategic_Pre	20	40.00	50.00	44.30	2.73
Strategic_Post	20	45.00	75.00	58.55	8.49
Valid N (listwise)	20				

As shown in Table 4, the descriptive statistics reveal that the mean posttest score (M = 58.55) was higher than the mean pretest score (M = 44.30), indicating an improvement in writing proficiency after the treatment. The results of the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, as seen in Table 5. below confirmed a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores (Z = -3.73, $p < .05$).

Table 5
Result of the Wilcoxon-Singed Rank Test for the Writing Scores

	Strategic_Post - Strategic_Pre
Z	-3.732 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Thus, the second null hypothesis was rejected, demonstrating that strategic scaffolding significantly improved paragraph writing proficiency among Iranian EFL learners.

Answering the Third Research Question

The third research question sought to compare the effects of conceptual scaffolding versus strategic scaffolding on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing proficiency. The following table shows the descriptive statistics of the pretests and posttests of the conceptual and strategic groups. As shown in Table 6 below, the mean scores for the pretest and posttest of the conceptual group were $M = 45.15$ and $M = 47.45$, respectively, while the mean scores for the strategic group were $M = 44.30$ and $M = 58.55$, respectively. This indicates a greater improvement in the strategic group compared to the conceptual group.

Table 6
The Descriptive Statistics for the Pretests and Posttests Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Conceptual_Pre	20	40.00	50.00	45.15	2.39022
Conceptual_Post	20	43.00	55.00	47.45	3.26827
Strategic_Pre	20	40.00	50.00	44.30	2.73573
Strategic_Post	20	45.00	75.00	58.55	8.49443
Valid N (listwise)	20				

Applying the Kolmogoro-Smirnov test of normality and showing that the data are not normally distributed ($P < .05$), the ANCOVA could not be used, and gain score comparison should be used instead. The gain score comparison, which is the difference between the posttest and the pretest, was taken into account. The descriptive statistics of the gain score of the two groups is shown below. The mean and standard deviation of the conceptual and the strategic groups are 2.30, 2.67 and 14.25, 8.27, respectively.

Table 7
Descriptive Statistics for the Gain Scores of the Conceptual and Strategic Groups

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gain_Conceptual	20	0.00	10.00	2.30	2.67
Gain_Strategic	20	0.00	32.00	14.25	8.27
Valid N (listwise)	20				

To further investigate the difference between the two groups, a Mann-Whitney U test, as shown in Table 8 below, was conducted.

Table 8

The Result of the Mann-Whitney U T-Test for the Comparison of the Conceptual and Strategic Groups

	Gains
Mann-Whitney U	37.000
Z	-4.455
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Based on Table 8 above, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups ($U = 37, p < .05$). Therefore, the researcher safely rejects the null hypothesis, meaning that there was a statistically significant difference in the effect of conceptual scaffolding versus strategic scaffolding on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing in favor of the strategic group.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of conceptual and strategic scaffolding on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing proficiency. The findings are interpreted in light of relevant theories and compared with previous research.

The first research question investigated the effect of conceptual scaffolding on writing proficiency. Results showed significant improvement in posttest scores, suggesting that conceptual scaffolding enhanced learners' ability to internalize and apply paragraph-writing principles. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes the role of guided support in facilitating learning. Studies by Brown et al. (1989) and Hogan & Pressley (1997) similarly found that conceptual scaffolding improved students' writing structure and organization. However, contrasting studies, such as De La Paz & Graham (2002), observed

non-significant effects of conceptual scaffolding on writing quality, highlighting the need for further exploration of its impact.

The second research question examined the impact of strategic scaffolding on writing proficiency. The results demonstrated a significant positive effect, supporting Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory, which posits that strategy-based instruction reduces cognitive demands, enhancing learning outcomes. This finding is consistent with Graham & Perin (2007) and Harris et al. (2002), who found that strategic scaffolding improved students' writing performance. However, Bereiter & Scardamalia (1987) and Newell (1998) noted that strategic scaffolding alone was insufficient to produce significant gains without complementary conceptual support, providing a nuanced perspective.

The third research question explored whether there was a statistically significant difference between the effects of conceptual and strategic scaffolding. Results indicated that strategic scaffolding had a greater impact on writing proficiency. This finding aligns with Piaget's (1954) Constructivist Learning Theory, which underscores the value of active learning and practical application. Schunk & Zimmerman (1994) and Pressley et al. (1992) also reported that strategic scaffolding was more effective in improving writing performance. However, Bransford et al. (2000) and Kuhn (2007) found that conceptual scaffolding was more effective for promoting deep understanding and higher-order thinking, suggesting differing outcomes based on instructional goals.

Conclusion and Implications

This study explored the comparative effects of conceptual and strategic scaffolding on Iranian EFL learners' paragraph writing proficiency. The findings highlight important pedagogical insights, offering implications for EFL instruction.

The results demonstrated that both conceptual and strategic scaffolding significantly improved learners' writing proficiency. However, strategic scaffolding had a more pronounced effect. These findings suggest that while conceptual scaffolding aids in understanding writing principles, strategic scaffolding provides the necessary techniques for applying those principles more effectively in practice.

This study contributes to the ongoing discussion in language education by underscoring the need for integrating both conceptual understanding and strategic guidance to maximize learners' writing outcomes. The findings suggest that EFL educators should consider employing strategic scaffolding as a more effective approach, though the integration of both methods could yield comprehensive improvements in writing proficiency.

Furthermore, the findings of this study have several implications for language teachers, learners, and material developers. For language teachers, the results highlight the importance of integrating both conceptual and strategic scaffolding in instruction. Teachers should balance theoretical understanding with practical writing strategies to address diverse learner needs, using formative assessments and feedback to monitor progress. Additionally, fostering a collaborative learning environment through peer reviews and self-assessment can help learners refine their writing.

For material developers, instructional resources should incorporate both scaffolding techniques, using tools like graphic organizers, writing prompts, and rubrics to enhance learners' understanding and writing proficiency.

Overall, the study underscores the value of a dual approach to scaffolding, combining conceptual depth with strategic application to maximize EFL learners' writing outcomes.

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