Scaffolding Strategies: Enhancing L2 Students' Participation in Discussions about Academic Texts

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Abstract

Widening participation in higher education (HE) in recent decades has brought new challenges for both teachers and students. One growing group of students are L2 students who often report a lack of confidence in expressing themselves verbally in academic settings. Systematically scaffolding students into developing not only written but also spoken academic discourse is therefore an increasingly important challenge. In Sweden, L2 students are offered a qualifying course in Swedish to enable them to meet HE entry requirements. This paper reports a study carried out on the academic writing module of this course. Course activities include writing a short paper and participating in a critical discussion of peer papers, from which our data was collected. The study has a socioculturally based framework which suggests that learning takes place through social interaction. The purpose is to identify scaffolding strategies by means of a qualitative, interactional analysis. The findings indicate that different types of strategies, such as open-ended, follow-up and multi-unit questions, can help students to deliver more substantial and elaborate answers. Other useful strategies are to create reflective spaces and to focus on students' identities as academic writers to achieve inclusive and empowering learning situations.

Introduction

The last two decades have seen a dramatic change in student groups in Sweden, due to an official agenda – as in many other countries – of widening participation in higher education (HE). This entails greater social, cultural and linguistic diversity, which has brought new challenges for teachers and students alike. One of these challenges concerns the need of students with Swedish as a second language (L2 students) for scaffolding into academic literacies regarding spoken as well as written discourse. Despite the fact that L2 students often report a lack of confidence when it comes to expressing themselves verbally in academic settings (cf. Robertson et al. 2000), most research on academic literacies has so far mainly concentrated on written discourse (Lillis and Scott 2007). This paper focuses on spoken academic discourse in peer discussions about students' academic texts and the scaffolding strategies employed by the teacher and students.

The present study is part of a larger project concerning L2 conversations in HE, with a focus on peer discussions at seminars about academic texts. The main purpose is to identify scaffolding strategies used at the seminars that may serve as tools in developing academic literacies. The study has a pedagogical aim of exploring how these could be used more systematically in instruction. The research question addressed in this article is: What

scaffolding strategies are more frequent during the seminars and seem to enhance students' participation in discussions about academic texts?

The *Preparatory Course in Swedish as a Foreign Language*, within which the present study has been carried out, is a full-time qualifying course for late arriving resident students who have completed their secondary education outside Sweden. The overall goal is to prepare students for academic studies and a passing grade makes students eligible for HE. One of the modules is concerned with written and spoken academic discourse, the learning activities being to write a short paper (in groups of 2–4 students) and also to participate actively in a critical discussion of peer papers. Our data was collected from the seminars at which those discussions took place.

Theoretical framework

In our study we apply a dialogical and sociocultural approach, based on Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and Vygotsky (1978), and draw on *interactional linguistics* (Firth and Wagner 1997, 2007, and Linell 1998) and the concepts of *academic literacies* (Lea and Street 1998, Lillis 2001, and Lillis and Scott 2007) and *scaffolding* (Bruner 1978, and Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976), especially regarding L2 students (Donato 1994, 2000, Weissberg 2006).

According to an interactional and sociocultural view, learning takes place through interaction and the focus should therefore be on the interaction between the participants. A dialogical approach emphasizes reciprocality, with each utterance related to the preceding and succeeding context (Bakhtin 1986: 92). Interactional linguistics thus has an ethnographic stance (deriving from research fields such as conversation analysis, CA; Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998) and a sociocultural, dialogical view of language learning and language use as social practices (Firth and Wagner 2007). In our study, we therefore focus on the participants and their interaction.

The language view mentioned above relates to an *academic literacies* approach (Lea and Street 1998, Lillis 2001, and Lillis and Scott 2007) that recognizes literacies as social practices. A practices approach to literacy considers the cultural and contextual components of different practices (Lea and Street 1998). The academic literacies approach also takes into account the social dimensions of power and identity, and writing is seen as a part of a more general academic meaning-making, where all academic communication, both written and spoken, is included. Gee (2012) makes a distinction between primary and secondary discourses, where secondary discourses are social practices used in different official institutions. He defines literacy as the 'Mastery of a secondary Discourse' (Gee 2012: 173). HE is a typical context where the mastery of secondary discourses is required in order to succeed. Ivanič (1998) claims that it is important to identify yourself as a member of the discourse community in order to develop academic literacies. In this paper we examine how the teacher focuses on the students' identities as academic writers.

According to Lillis (2001: 158), the development of academic literacies can be achieved by actively scaffolding the student into these practices. *Scaffolding* is an often used concept in educational research, reflecting a Vygotskian view of learning and originally referring to the support given by a teacher or a more competent peer which enables learners to perform at a higher level than they would have been able to do on their own (Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976). Scaffolding has also come to include the way teachers organize their instruction in terms of different types of supportive structure and curriculum progression. However, Weissberg (2006) claims that the term could be criticized for having expanded and been appropriated rather too widely. There is a tendency to label almost any activity that enhances learning as scaffolding. For our purposes, we thus limit the notion to the verbal support, provided to the learner by the teacher or a more competent participant, which helps the learner to perform a new task (Donato 1994: 40, and Williams 2002: 85). Donato has defined scaffolding in verbal interaction with L2 students as:

…teachers shape the discussion toward a curricular goal, build or activate background knowledge in students, engage at times in direct instruction or modelling (sic!), and promote more complex language expressions by using questions to help students expand, elaborate and restate (Donato 2000: 34).

Our main focus is the verbal scaffolding offered by the teacher and other students in the discussions about academic texts. We therefore use Donato's definition, in order to identify scaffolding strategies that seem to enhance the students' participation in the discussions (thereby helping them to develop spoken academic discourse).

Data collection and method

The present study is based on data from two recorded seminars where the collaboratively written texts are discussed. All the students have read each other's papers, and they have also prepared questions individually and sent them to the teacher in advance so she can check that they are relevant and appropriate. During the discussions, each student is expected to participate by asking relevant questions about the other students' papers and defending their own paper. We found these seminars particularly pertinent for our purpose, as the students use spoken academic discourse in discussions on written academic texts. This type of institutional conversation (Heritage and Clayman 2010, Linell 1998: 240–241) is moderated quite strictly by the teacher, who also has the role of a gatekeeper (Erickson and Shultz 1982), since the students' verbal performance in the discussion is assessed along with the papers. After the seminars, the groups receive individual feedback from the teacher and rewrite their papers based on that feedback and on the seminar discussions.

The seminars were recorded in full, which generated approximately six hours of conversation, consisting of two different seminars in two groups, each led by the same teacher and comprising 12 students. The students and teacher were seated around a table, and a minidisc recorder was placed in the middle of the table. Simultaneously, the conversation was video recorded by one of the authors, who surveyed the seminar as an observer without intervening in the discussions. Participants gave their written consent to be recorded and all names in the data presented are pseudonyms.

A qualitative method was chosen to allow an analysis of the interaction at the seminars (Bryman and Burgess 1994). The recordings were transcribed in a rather broad transcription,[1] and analysed using an inductive method, i.e. a detailed, iterative analysis was undertaken whereby recurring patterns and structures were identified. This analysis on how theory is reflected in the data was used in order to identify the scaffolding strategies applied by the teacher and the other students. This means that we searched through the material several times to identify all sequences were verbal scaffolding was provided to identify recurring strategies. The focus was on the participants and what actually took place during the interaction (LeCompte and Preissle 1993, and Thomas 2006). In the next section, we will present and discuss some results from the analysis.

Results of the analysis

This section begins by reporting some main results that have emerged from the analysis. It will then go on to present representative examples of scaffolding strategies from the discussions.

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[1] Transcript notations: / = short pause, // = long pause, xxx = unintelligible speech, [within brackets] = overlapping speech, underlined = expressed with emphasis, ((comment)) = transcriber's comment, --- = omitted part, *within asterisks* = said laughingly

The following three recurring scaffolding strategies were selected from the data:

- Using questions as:

    o Open ended questions
    o Follow-up questions
    o Multi-unit questions

- Creating reflective spaces

- Promoting academic identity

These strategies will be examined and discussed below. The examples consist of a topic being introduced, elaborated and concluded. The purpose is to show how one of the students reaches an understanding through the scaffolding from the teacher and the fellow students. The examples will be discussed as they appear.

The transcripts are translated into English. The translations are not idiomatic, but aim to capture the interaction and its content, as well as some of the deviations from the target language. The latter was possible since English and Swedish, both being Germanic languages, have a fairly similar structure.

The use of the word 'prognosis'

The examples are taken from a discussion about a paper on immigration in Sweden, written by Yokiko, Ramtin and Sofia.

Example 1: Prognosis

01 **Adnan**   I need explanation for prognosis / you have / in eh your paper /
02   p- prognosis / so called / but / what is it / it needs / eh
03   a little explanation / if you can
04 **Yokiko**   you mean our opinion about / eh the future
05 **Adnan**   exactly
06 **Yokiko**   yes
07 **Adnan**   and the second question is about / eh / this prognosis /
08   is it you who come to this prognosis / or /
09   is it from other sources or something
10 **Yokiko**   it's our own prognosis // or? ((turns towards Ramtin))
11 **Adnan**   how?
12 **Ramtin**   umm / it's [pers-
13 **Adnan**   [how can you- / that's opinion not prognosis
14 **Ramtin**   eeeeeh //
15 **Teacher**   speculation?
16 **Ramtin**   yes it's [speculation
17 **Adnan**   [opinion / not prognosis
18 **Teacher**   speculation
19 **Ramtin**   prognosis / eh even at the highest level cannot be /
20   evidence based / it's prognosis that one- / eh yes /
21   it's speculation / one speculates about the future /
22   then one cannot say that prognosis / it's a personal opinion /
23   or evidence based / because / ehh it- / it's a bit complicated /
24   it's a bit of a mixture / and we have agreed together
25   that / the sources / that we've used / say that this will happen
26   in the future I mean that / our resources have shown that
27   [such things will happen in the future / but /
28 **Adnan**   [so there are sources
29 **Ramtin**   it- it was just us who decided //

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30   I mean that we didn't use any <u>books</u> or sources-
31 **Adnan**   um
32 **Ramtin**   to- / to refer to them / the resources / or / to our sources
33   we used our own o- opinions / <u>based</u> on / our studies
34 **Adnan**   um um
35 **Teacher**   um /um / Anna ((turns to another student for another question))

In Example 1, Adnan asks for an explanation of the word 'prognosis' (1–3) and Yokiko requests a clarification, while at the same time confirming that it is their own *opinion about the future* (4). However, the answer does not seem to satisfy Adnan entirely, as he continues to question their use of the word by posing follow-up questions: *is it you who come to this prognosis* (8) and a more open-ended question *how can you-* (13). This elicits a more elaborate answer from Ramtin, in which he seems to reject the criticism by explaining how they have arrived at their prognosis (19–27). The teacher does not engage in the discussion except to offer an alternative to the word: *speculation* (15). But she does not elaborate on the subject, nor does she offer an explanation, even though the students do not seem to have fully understood the concept or to have reached agreement on whether it is appropriate to use it in this context. Instead, the teacher moves on to another topic, turning to another student for a new question and leaving the matter unresolved.

However, the word 'prognosis' seems to puzzle the other students, since the question arises again, 8 minutes further on in the discussion (see Example 2).

Example 2: Prognosis again

01 **Joe** yes my question concerns / <u>prognosis</u> too and /
02   maybe it's a / small detail / I noticed that eh /
03   you said / that prog- eh <u>prognosis</u> is from- /
04   the <u>statistics</u> imply something / so I am /
05   a little interested in / those sta- / statistics
06 **Yokiko**   uhu
07 **Joe** are they from an authority or from / some / um /other eeh / association
08   or- / can you ex- / can you explain a bit about the statistics /
09   this / thank you
10 **Ramtin**   okay
11 **Yokiko**   you- you mean our prognosis is based on statistics or not
12 **Joe** yes
13 **Yokiko**   okay
14 **Joe** it's because / I / mean it's the first sentence that / eeh
15   the statistics imply that / bla bla bla bla /
16   so I am a little interested in that
17 **Ramtin**   uhu
18 **Teacher**   um //
19 **Sofia**   um //
20 **Joe** if it's a prog- <u>prognosis</u> [and eh-
21 **Teacher**   [you wrote / the statistics <u>imply</u>
22 **Yokiko**   yes
23 **Sofia**   I can answer your question / since we / eh
24   didn't really <u>analyse</u> / so exactly about statistics
25   or we did no calculation to show that- / but we have noticed that /
26   the <u>number</u> of people has decreased lately / --- so when we / eh combine 27   / eh the statistics / that is in a general way /
28   and then immigration policy / we can speculate that / um /
29   it will not have such a dramatic increase on immigration
30   but sorry we didn't do any exact / [calculation]
31 **Joe**   [uhu yes of course no]
32 **Sofia**   since we bel- / we think that we don't have so / eh
33   advanced knowledge of statistical / eh
34   [analysis so- eeeh((laughs))

35 **Joe** [eh no that's no problem I- / when I read it I wonder / since /
36   making a prognosis is from- / <u>maybe</u> / <u>I</u> think / is from the statistics
37   so I'm a little curious if it's from / central statistics or
38   other authorities that published numbers or / material maybe
39 **Yokiko**   um <u>no</u>
40 **Adnan**   but eh / sorry / <u>prognosis</u> I think that- / when you do
41   research for example / and you come to the prognosis //
42   and this so- //
43 **Teacher**   like I said before prognosis is something I have <u>never</u>
44   seen in a paper except for *this one* ((she laughs))
45 **Adnan**   yes okay
46 **Sofia**   so it's right that we're *criticized or-*
47 **Teacher**   yes and it's- go ahead it's <u>very good</u> / I think
48 **Yokiko**   so you can also *call it imagination*
49   ((everybody laughs))
50 **Teacher**   <u>no</u> but what they said was that- and what <u>I</u> also said is
51   that you are <u>speculating</u> / but you- / it's based on /
52   what you've already presented / yes
53 **Sofia**   but if it's better to / change prognosis to speculation
54 **Teacher**   yes or- or [concl- or final remarks or something
55 **Sofia**   [or our own opinions
56 **Teacher**   and then you can say-/ you can explicitly <u>say</u>
57   that you will / speculate
58 **Sofia**   um [yes]
59 **Teacher**   [we] we would- / now we would like to <u>speculate</u>
60   about the future
61 **Sofia**   yes

This time the question is raised by another student, Joe (1–9). After a request for clarification (11), Joe provides several elaborations and follow-up questions, explaining that he is interested in the statistics on which their prognosis is based (15–16, 20). This is a type of multi-unit question which can be a typical resource in L2 conversations since it allows time for reflection (Hatch 1978, Long 1984). But he does not get an immediate answer, and at first the topic seems to peter out (17–19). However, this time the teacher encourages further elaboration of it by pointing out that they have written in their paper that *the statistics imply* (21). Now Sofia gives a more developed answer in which she tries to defend their use of 'prognosis' by pointing out that the statistics they used consisted in the decreasing number of immigrants (23–30), but she explains (apologetically) that they have not employed any statistical analysis (32–34). Adnan, who initially raised the question, joins the discussion again (40–42). This time the teacher intervenes, emphasizing that she has never seen this use of 'prognosis' in a paper before (43–44), which Sofia interprets as meaning that the teacher agrees with the criticism: *so it's right that we're criticized or-* (46). The teacher justifies the criticism (47) but at the same time she encourages the discussion: *go ahead it's very good* (46). This encouragement develops the discussion and creates space for reflection. Then the teacher explains that what the students really did in the paper was to speculate (50–52), which makes Sofia explicitly ask if it is better to change 'prognosis' to 'speculation' (53). This time the teacher offers an explicit model of how they could express themselves instead: *now we would like to speculate about the future* (59–60).

At this point in the discussion, in Example 3, the teacher opens up the possibility that the word 'prognosis' might be used in other disciplines (1–2).

Example 3: More prognosis

01 **Teacher**   I don't mean that it's *unique / but really
02   within humanities and linguistics* [I don't recognize-
03 **Adnan**   [no it's just that <u>they</u> also
04   think about / this thing / the prognosis

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05 Ramtin      um
06 Adnan       so it's good that you think also and read about     the prognosis /
07             about how you can do it
08 Teacher     um
09 Sofia       yes / our purpose in having prognosis is that we think /
10             that there are many papers on immigration policy / that are about their
11             opinions / when we write this paper we want to / eeh /
12             add our own opinions that make it a bit special
13 Yokiko      yes
14 Adnan       great paper
15 Joe  yes
16             ((everybody laughs))
17 Ramtin      maybe it's- / the actual word prognosis
18             wasn't so clear to use here
19 Sofia       yes
20 Adnan       yes
21 Ramtin      it should be changed / [to something better
22 Teacher                            [um to something
23 Adnan       explanation
24 Teacher     explain / what you're really doing
25             so that it's evident to the reader
26 Ramtin      [yes exactly]
27 Sofia       [yes that's right]
28 Teacher     so you won't get this kind of question
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Adnan, meanwhile, explicitly orients to the scaffolding function of the discussion (3–4, 6–7), by explaining that his reason for bringing the topic up is to encourage the writers of the paper to reflect on how the word prognosis could be used. And finally Ramtin, who previously defended their use of the word and has been silent ever since Joe raised the topic again (see Example 2), shows that he has now changed his position: *maybe the actual word prognosis wasn't so clear to use here* (17–18). Once again, the teacher engages in the discussion, taking the opportunity to explain why things are done: *explain what you're really doing so that it's evident to the reader* (24–25).

In the three examples above the advantages with these group discussions become clearly evident. Together with the teacher, the other students have scaffolded Ramtin (and probably also other students) into a wider understanding that he might not have reached if they had not persisted in their criticism. This insight might not have been reached if the teacher had not created reflective spaces for the dialogues to develop and for the students to participate in mutual meaning-making, which possibly gave them a greater and deeper understanding than one-to-one feedback from the teacher would have provided.

In addition, by focusing on the students' future identities as academic writers: *so you won't get this kind of question* (28), the teacher acknowledges the students as future members of the academic discourse community. This strategy might be particularly helpful for students who do not yet identify themselves as members of the academy. According to an academic literacies approach, identity is an important factor in the development of academic social practices (Ivanič 1998, Lea and Street 1998, Lillis 2001, and Lillis and Scott 2007). Focus on identity might therefore also serve as a scaffolding strategy.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate scaffolding strategies employed by the teacher and the other students which enhanced the students' participation in discussions about academic texts. According to a dialogical and sociocultural view, the employment of such strategies is crucial since the teacher has a dual role, sharing responsibility for how the interactions with the students develop while also assessing the performance to which she has contributed.

In our analysis we have shown how different types of questions can help students to deliver more elaborate and substantial answers. This was particularly evident with open-ended, follow-up and multi-unit questions to a topic already introduced, which encouraged the students to develop the topic further and collaboratively reach a better understanding that may not have been possible in a one-to-one conversation between the teacher and an individual student. This questioning scaffolding strategy, employed by the teacher and the peer students, may also serve as a model for the other students, enhancing their participation and success in discussions of academic texts, and as a tool for developing academic literacies.

Another useful strategy is the creation by the teacher of spaces for reflection and dialogue, which are especially helpful for L2 students as well as other non-traditional students. Burke points out how important it is to create such spaces, 'where students are able collectively to decode the practices of writing, so that it is no longer mysterious and unknown to those who have not had access to the forms of literacy most privileged in academic spaces' (2008: 208). We believe that discussions of the kind explored in this study provide an opportunity to deconstruct different aspects of the social practices of academic writing and speech, and make their functions and demands more explicit. The spaces created by the teacher, where she enables and encourages the students to discuss, elaborate and demystify certain aspect of these practices, serve as such a resource. By getting the students to prepare their questions in advance, she allows a reflective space in which they can formulate questions more relevant to a discussion of the papers (cf. Coffin and Hewings 2005). This pedagogical practice may seem rather time-consuming, but we argue that it is worth it: in this way, an inclusive and empowering learning situation is created.

Yet another scaffolding strategy employed by the teacher is to focus on the students' future identities as academic writers. Identity is an important factor in the development of academic literacies (Ivanič 1998, Lea and Street 1998, Lillis 2001, and Lillis and Scott 2007). By encouraging their identities as academic writers, the teacher includes the students in the academic discourse community, which also contributes to an inclusive and empowering education. The same effect may be achieved by the fact that feedback in the discussions is provided by the students, who are thus recognized as members of the academic discourse community and allowed to develop their meta-awareness of the written and spoken academic discourse.

To conclude, we have exemplified and discussed scaffolding strategies that enhance the students' participation in the discussions. However, we are aware of the limitations inherent in a small-scale study like this, and therefore suggest further research on spoken academic discourse in connection with academic writing. Further research will entail retrospective interviews in order to confirm the interpretations of the analysis. Another interesting aspect is how the feedback from the seminars is implemented in the revised student texts, which also will be studied. Data from other student groups with other teachers could also verify the findings.

Acknowledgement

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