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A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY ON SCAFFOLDING EFL LEARNERS' ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines how scaffolding strategies improve the development of oral language skills, particularly speaking and listening, of Kurdish English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the current study uses a quasi-experimental design to compare and contrast the outcomes of two groups, a control and an experimental. While the control group received regular instruction, the experimental group was exposed to structured scaffolding-based instruction. Moreover, during a four-month experimental course, 86 students completed IELTS-based pre- and post-tests. The data collected from the tests of both groups were analyzed using a combination of descriptive statistics and Paired–Samples t test. The findings revealed that while both groups showed improvement, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in both speaking and listening post-tests. Based on this, the experimental group exhibited statistically significant improvement in speaking ($t(84) = 3.87$, $p < .001$) and listening ($t(84) = 3.45$, $p < .01$). As such, the findings also affirmed the effectiveness of scaffolding strategies in enhancing oral skills, when applied consistently through gradual release of support, collaborative interaction, and constructive feedback from the teacher. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how scaffolding supports EFL university students in developing their speaking and listening skill.

KEYWORD: Scaffolding, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Oral language skills, Zone of Proximal Development

1. INTRODUCTION

English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in the Kurdistan Region, Iraq (KR) as well as in the whole country, where daily communication usually occurs either in Kurdish or Arabic. Given this context, most of the students and citizens do not rely on English in their daily lives. However, Kurdistan Region of Iraq is now more involved in various international fields, such as politics, UN activities, health, education, and much more. English is also used as the main medium of instruction for university major levels such as engineering, medicine, politics, education, social studies, sciences, and computer majors (Rezaee et al., 2018). It has become the dominant language in these sectors, and proficiency in English is regarded as a valuable skill for academic and professional success, particularly in the modern era, where recent developments require applicants to have good communication skills. As a result, it is not surprising that oral skills (speaking and listening) in English have become essential skills for learners to master to succeed in today's world and secure a better future. It is often known that speaking and listening are essential skills for effective communication. Indeed, writing and reading are usually given more attention in traditional classrooms, while oral communication skills are crucial for social engagement, career preparedness, and academic performance in globalized situations. However, students in many EFL situations, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, struggle to enhance their speaking and listening skills because of a lack of exposure to the language, large class numbers, and exam-focused instruction (Ahmed, 2019; Koya & Khalid, 2022). Despite the fact that English is taught in the region from primary school through university, many graduates have poor spoken communication skills. This is mostly because teacher-centered approaches are still in use, learners' lack of engagement, and lack of emphasis on real-world, communicative activities. As a result, when speaking English, students frequently feel nervous, unmotivated, and insecure (Ahmed, 2019; Koya & Khalid, 2022).

In light of this challenge, scaffolding is viewed as one of the promising instructional approaches in supporting students' spoken language development, wherein peers or teachers provide structured support to help students and lead them toward autonomous learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding is considered one of the instructional teaching and learning tools that have been used and applied in the

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EFL setting. Richards and Schmidt (2002) define scaffolding as a temporary support provided by teachers to students to help them perform a task until they can do it on their own without any support. Thus, the students become gradually independent through teachers' guidance and support. This could include any kind of support that is offered by a more knowledgeable and skillful person, whether a teacher or another student, thus allowing students to participate and engage in complex tasks that eventually lead to their autonomy (Ediger, 2001).

The use of scaffolding strategies has been widely discussed and explored by teachers, researchers, and linguists in more recent years. Although scaffolding's application in speaking and listening skills is still poorly known, especially in Kurdistan's university-level EFL classrooms, it has been thoroughly studied in the teaching of reading and writing. Given these challenges, the goal of this research is to find out how the scaffolding approach and strategies can improve EFL students' oral communication skills (speaking and listening).
To achieve this aim**,** the following research questions have been set: (1) What is the impact of scaffolding strategies on university students' oral communication skills? (2) To what extent is a scaffolding-based approach effective? In light of the research aims and questions, this study examines whether scaffolding strategies significantly enhance university-level EFL students' speaking and listening skills. Moreover, the present study hypothesizes the following:

- H_1: The use of scaffolding leads to a statistically significant difference in speaking performance of experimental group over the control group.
- H_2: The use of scaffolding leads to a significant difference in the listening performance of the experimental group over the control group.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sociocultural Theory and The Zone of Proximal Development:

The foundation of scaffolding stems from the sociocultural theory of learning which was developed in the early 20th century by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. The sociocultural theory describes the role of social communication and culture in language development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky emphasizes the significance of facilitation and social interaction in understanding ways of communication among individuals through language usage. He believes that many factors, such as social and cultural factors, influence learners' cognitive development. Unlike other theories, Vygotsky's theory is not limited to specific factors such as internal processes or genetic factors. It rather focuses on the importance of cultural tools, social interaction, and historical context where people communicate through time and space (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000). The core notion of Vygotsky's theory is mediation. Based on his theory, humans have used symbols and tools such as language, writing, technology, or other cultural artifacts to enhance communication among their community members and with other communities throughout history (Vygotsky, 1978). As a result, Vygotsky's theory is built on the concept that language acquisition and social interaction are interconnected. To him, language reflects human thinking and mediates cognitive processes. He supports his claim by outlining that children learn language in communicative contexts where they interact with others in daily life (Mitchell & Myles, 2004), in contrast to behaviorist theory that considers language learning as a result of imitation and reinforcement. Moreover, sociocultural theory widely focuses on social and cultural interaction that mostly occurs with adults or peers who provide language models and scaffold their learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Masrul, 2023). According to this sociocultural theory, learners develop higher-order thinking skills through collaboration and interaction with more skillful and knowledgeable people (who could be peers or teachers) within what Vygotsky termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Furthermore, Vygotsky's notion of ZPD is fundamental in sociocultural theory. He defines the zone as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). The ZPD, as shown in figure (1) is not a physical place but a metaphor used to describe the process (Lantolf, 2000). This zone is conceptually visualized as a gap between what an individual can accomplish independently and what the person can do with support and guidance from other people (Lantolf, 2000). In a simpler way, learners engage with others around them, and when they are assisted by teachers in their learning, they learn and grow more efficiently. The ZPD is the orange space between a learner's potential and current development (Vygotsky, 1978), as shown in figure (1).

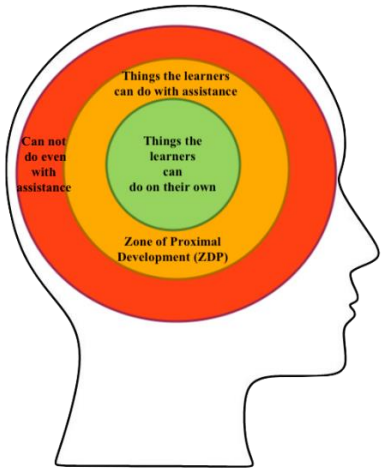

Figure 1: A Visual Representation of the The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (adopted from Gilbert et al., 2013).

In Vygotsky's theory of language learning, the notion of ZPD is an essential part. It explains the difference between what a student can accomplish on their own and what they can achieve with the help or direction of someone who is more fluent and knowledgeable (Lantolf, 2000). According to him, learning happens most efficiently in the ZPD zone, where learners strive to improve their initial level of competence with help from teachers or peers. It

also affirms that learners can learn more effectively when they have adequate support and guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). In the ZPD, learners engage in tasks and activities that are not restricted or limited to their initial level of competency. Such activities and tasks are challenging enough and invite learners to think outside of the box, and promote growth and critical thinking. Therefore, teachers' role is vital in identifying and scaffolding learning experiences and activities that challenge students in the ZPD zone. For this purpose, scaffolding is used by teachers, students, and educators to bridge the gap in the ZPD zone (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Scaffolding is an effective instrument in the ZPD where teachers or more knowledgeable peers provide support to students to finish their task on time (Wood et al., 1976; Mitchell &Myles, 2004). This support is offered in a number of ways, such as modelling, questioning, prompting, and giving feedback.

2.2 Foundations of Scaffolding:

Although Vygotsky has contributed to the foundation of scaffolding, he did not coin the term. In general, the work of Lev Vygotsky had a profound impact on other scholars and educators. His social theory of interaction was pivotal and instrumental in the conceptual framework of scaffolding. In the 1970s, the term scaffolding was presented by the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner. Wood et al. (1976) define scaffolding as "adult controlling those elements of the task that are essentially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence" (p. 90). Based on Vygotsky's ZPD theory, Wood et al. (1976) adapted the concept of scaffolding in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) context. To Wood et al. (1976), scaffolding refers to the support students received from peers or teachers in order to complete a given task that they would be unable to complete on their own. More specifically, Bruner uses the scaffolding concept when he describes giving informal instructions to young children and how it helps them learn (Wood et al.,1976, as cited in Daniels, 1994). Wood et al. (1976) studied language learning focused on the way teachers and more skilled individuals assist other students who require more support and language instructions. The scaffolding approach often focuses on one of the fundamental aspects of children's learning, which is commonly known as "guided by others" (Stone 1998, p. 351). The term "scaffolding" is often used in conjunction with nouns like help, support, guidance, and assistance (Stone 1998; Richards and Schmidtl, 2002). Likewise, Pressly (2002) describes scaffolding as follows: when a building is about to be constructed in its initial stages, it cannot stand on its own without supports. While the construction stage is completed, the support is removed to let it stand freely. In the same way, the teachers/adults or another student provide support and assistance to the extent that the other individual can complete the task at hand on their own during the course of time. However, the support that these students receive is gradually taken away as their language skills improve, much like the actual scaffolding that builders use in constructing buildings (Wood et al., 1976; Richards and Schmidtl, 2002; Pressly, 2002; Walqui, 2006; Sawyer, 2006). Over the years, the concept of scaffolding has broadened and crossed into other applied linguistics branches, such as education and second language acquisition. In the 1980s and 1990s, the scaffolding approach began to be applied in SLA contexts. Scholars, such as Nassaji and Swain (2000) and Gibbons (2003), used scaffolding to gain an understanding of how interaction works between teachers and second language learners in terms of comprehension and language output. Moreover, Gibbons (2003) emphasized the use of scaffolding in classroom settings as an effective means of promoting learning of both language and subject, stressing the need for teacher support and engagement in providing the linguistic input that students need to become competent. Furthermore, the ongoing development of sociocultural theory continues to focus on how interactions function among individuals.

2.3 Major Types of Scaffolding in Teacher-Students Interaction:

The majority of scholars, including Van de Pol (2012) and Rezaee et al. (2018), have explored different dimensions of scaffolding including asymmetrical and symmetrical interaction:

1. Asymmetrical scaffolding (expert scaffolding): asymmetrical scaffolding arises when there is a clear imbalance in knowledge or skills among individuals involved in the learning process. For example, when a more knowledgeable or skillful person or mentor provides support and guidance and gradually withdraws it as students become more independent and gain language proficiency.
2. Symmetrical scaffolding (peer scaffolding): On the other hand, symmetrical scaffolding emerged when the participants' knowledge or skills seem quite similar. Here, students work together and encourage one another, thus bringing up knowledge and skills from one another.

2.4 Scaffolding Approach:

The scaffolding approach is a temporary support system provided by the teacher or peer to help a student accomplish a task just beyond their current ability within the ZPD. (Vygotsky, 1978). Building on the ZPD, the Gradual Release of Responsibility approach (GRR) is a structured instructional framework that transitions the learning process from teacher to student independence in four stages: (1) I Do, (2) We Do, (3) You Do Together, and (4) You Do Alone (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Moreover, many models and frameworks are proposed; however, all of them agreed upon two basic notions: (1) ZPD and (2) GRR. Therefore, the model opposed by Van de Pol et al. (2010), as presented in the figure below (2), shows how teachers modify and transfer the level of support to meet the needs of each learner who might be at a lower level. This approach is also known as contingency teaching. To ensure its successful implementation, the teacher must first use diagnostic tools to determine the student's prior competency level. This procedure, which is sometimes referred to as formative or dynamic assessment, entails determining the student's prior knowledge (Lajoie, 2005; Shepard, 2005; Gibbons, 2015). After diagnosing students' language skills, teachers can identify areas that require support by conducting an initial assessment or by making observations. After that, teachers can start scaffolding by planning effective scaffolding strategies

that correspond with students' readiness. Scaffolding starts with what students already know and are capable of doing, giving them just enough assistance to support them and move them forward with independence and confidence (Gibbons, 2015). Moreover, scaffolding is fading as the learner gains language proficiency. It is important to note that students' growth and readiness to take on greater responsibility for their education determine how quickly fading occurs (Lajoie, 2005). Students are given more authority over their learning as support fades and they are gradually given more responsibility (Garza, 2009). Through this process, students become more independent in the EFL learning process.

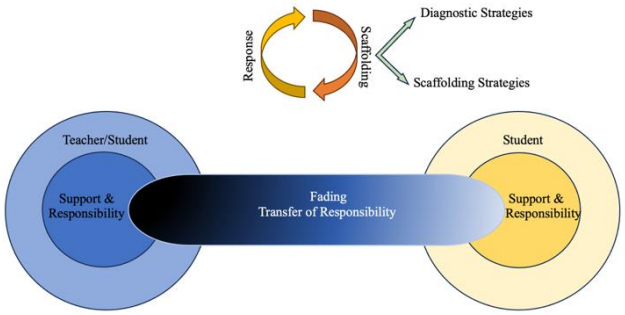

Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Scaffolding (adapted from Van de Pol et al., 2010, p.5)

2.5 Scaffolding Speaking Skills in the EFL Context:

Speaking is often regarded as one of the most challenging skills for EFL students, as it requires vocabulary retention, confidence in expression, and real-time language processing. When engaging in speaking tasks, learners are expected to be accurate, fast, fluent, and responsive at the same time. Learners may not have enough opportunity to practice speaking in engaging and practical ways in the EFL context. Speaking, according to Chaney (1998), is the process of creating and sharing meaning in a variety of circumstances using both verbal and nonverbal signals. Speaking is, however, often the most difficult part of learning a new language for students as opposed to reading, writing, or listening (Maniam & Vaithinathan, 2018). The challenge is caused by two key factors: Speaking first demands immediate responses, and unlike writing, speech cannot be altered once it has been spoken, as emphasized by Balley (in Nunan, 2003). Therefore, scaffolding is a helpful foundation while dealing with these challenges; it provides temporary support according to students' current ability levels. Teachers can help students move from hesitant speech towards more fluent and independent verbal communication by employing strategies that include modelling dialogues, offering sentence starters, employing visual cues, and promoting peer involvement. In addition to boosting students' self-esteem, scaffolding speaking exercises fosters a greater comprehension of language use in context.

2.6 Scaffolding Listening Skills in the EFL Context:

Speaking is developed through listening, especially in the EFL context, where language input is limited. Effective speaking not only depends on the ability to produce language, but also on the ability to understand language and comprehend what is being said to make an effective conversation. Scaffolding listening skills aids students in developing comprehension, identifying pronunciation patterns, and internalizing vocabulary and grammatical structures, thus resulting in more fluid spoken language. Students are better prepared to participate in meaningful spoken engagement when their listening skills are reinforced through strategies including pre-listening assignments, guided note-taking, and focused questioning. Consequently, listening should be viewed as a fundamental component of speaking ability rather than as a passive skill. Moreover, encouraging students to listen effectively requires good scaffolding techniques. Pre-listening activities, for instance, can include talking about important terms and ideas while students listen and watch a short narrative audio/video. This enables them to activate existing knowledge and get them ready for the material (Harmer, 2015). Giving students a visual organizer during the listening phase enables them to make notes on significant aspects, hence encouraging active engagement with the audio. Through peer interaction, pre- and post-listening tasks may assist in clearing up any ambiguities and improving comprehension (Swain, 2000). Pre-task vocabulary exposure improves understanding when doing tasks like listening to a weather report, and post-listening fill-in-the-blank worksheets reinforce important elements. Enabling students to listen to the information more than once will help improve comprehension because they will be paying attention to different details each time (Goh, 2017). By offering context and improving recall, the incorporation of visual aids, like pictures or charts, enhances the listening experience even more. Furthermore, establishing a more encouraging learning atmosphere in the classroom through group discussions and the modelling of efficient note-taking techniques can help students gain confidence and improve their listening skills.

2.4 Previous Studies:

In recent years, a number of studies have explored and measured the effectiveness of scaffolding on students' communicative skills in the EFL context. These studies have demonstrated the value of scaffolding approaches while opening up doors for other researchers to adopt and apply some of the same strategies in various geographical areas. For instance, Al-Yami (2008) conducted an experimental study with 50 Saudi sixth-graders to assess scaffolded listening comprehension at the secondary level. The P-value ($P < .001$) indicated that the findings were statistically significant, implying that the scaffolded group's listening skills had significantly improved. The findings showed that scaffolding strategies have a positive effect on students' skills.

Likewise, Ahmadi Safa and Rozati (2017) examined the effects of various forms of scaffolding on the listening comprehension of 90 Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The researchers divided 90 participants into 3 groups (each group N=30). Three groups participated in the study: (1) with expert-peer scaffolding, (2) with co-equal peer scaffolding, and (3) without scaffolding. Over the course of 15 sessions, the first experimental group received assistance from expert peers, the second group received help from identical peers, and the control group received no scaffolding at all. According to the findings of One-way ANOVA and t-test, the expert-peer scaffolding group did noticeably better than the control group and the co-equal

peer group ($p < .001$). Furthermore, the co-equal group outperformed the control group in listening comprehension by a significant margin ($p < .001$), underscoring the benefits of peer-supported scaffolding at different skill levels. Overall, the study highlights the beneficial effects of scaffolding on the development of EFL listening skills.

The implementation of scaffolding in EFL in the university-level context, particularly in improving learners' communicative skills, has been investigated by other studies. In this regard, certain studies were carried out in a comparable setting and focused on several themes and aspects of scaffolding, such as the study conducted by Rezaee et al. (2018), which examined how scaffolding techniques affected EFL learners' use of language learning in an EFL interaction course of 15 weeks. One-hundred Iraqi university students participated in this study that compared two teaching methods: a scaffolding-based experimental group and a standard lecture-based control group. With a large effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.244$) and a statistically significant difference between groups in post-intervention strategy use ($F (6, 93) = 5.51$, $p < .001$), the overall Multivariate Anova showed that scaffolded instruction had a favorable influence on learners' skills and involvement. The results imply that scaffolding, which improves learners' use of (Language Learning Strategies) LLS and supports successful language learning, is more effective than teacher-centered techniques. Thus, in order to facilitate more efficient language learning, EFL teachers are urged to incorporate scaffolding techniques into their lesson plans. This is also consistent with the results obtained from Pourpornpong's (2019) study, which stated scaffolding techniques can significantly improve students' general communication skills. The primary objective of his study was to investigate how scaffolding strategies can help students in EFL classes become more proficient communicators. The data were collected from 38 students who were studying English in Thai Universities. The study showed that scaffolding techniques helped students communicate more effectively and enhanced the flow of their conversation patterns.

Moreover, some other studies have examined the impact of scaffolding on non-native English speakers from Asian or Middle Eastern countries. In this respect, Alwahibee's (2019) mixed- methods study analyzed the effect of scaffolding on EFL students' speaking skills from Saudi EFL university students. A total of 50 students participated in his study, divided into two groups: a control group ($N = 25$) and an experimental group ($N = 25$). The control group engaged in regular speaking practice for seven weeks, whereas the experimental group was given scaffolded speaking tasks. The experimental group scored $M = 52.36$ in the posttest, while the control group scored $M = 42.80$ ($t(48) = 10.65$, $p < .001$, with a very substantial effect size ($\eta^2 = .725$). Students expressed greater confidence and less hesitancy when speaking, and the experimental group also improved more from the pretest (+43.1%) than the control group (+16.1%). Likewise, Razaghi et al. (2019) examined the impact of scaffolding on the overall speaking abilities development of 120 EFL Iranian female university students. Their study explored the effect of cognitive scaffolding on students' speaking skills development. The results showed that the scaffolded groups performed significantly better than the control group in every speaking domain. The total speaking mean for the scaffolded group was $M = 21.21$, whereas the score of the control group was $M = 11.85$, with a very high effect ($\eta^2 = .91$, $p < .001$). The study also implied that cognitive scaffolding can effectively improve communication skills. Through the experiment, it was evident that teachers' use of the scaffolding method could effectively transform and improve the overall quality of learning in an EFL classroom setting. This study also found out that scaffolding enabled students to become more comfortable and confident learners and communicate in a wide range of context.

Furthermore, other studies have shown that acquiring communicative skills in the context of learning a foreign language is very difficult. In this context, a positive and supportive learning environment plays an important role in EFL classrooms, while an unsupportive environment in classrooms demotivates students. This leads to a lack of confidence among students in terms of English-speaking skills. With reference to this, Azir's (2019) study used a quasi-experimental study to guide students through peer scaffolding in order to determine if the scaffolding approach in teaching could improve the speaking skills of EFL learners. For this reason, 156 second-semester students took part in scaffolded speaking exercises as part of their normal coursework in the study. Speaking tests, interviews, and classroom observations were used to collect data. According to the results, peer scaffolding greatly improved speaking skills. Students also gained confidence, more encouraging learning environments, and mutual support. Significant improvement in speaking relative to pre-intervention levels was confirmed by classroom assessments and qualitative feedback. Therefore, the study encourages EFL teachers to use scaffolding methods in teaching a second/foreign language. Azir's study further explains that through the use of scaffolding, the learning environment also becomes more positive and supportive for students, and in such settings, students feel motivated to help one another and deeply engage in speaking activities. Through the analysis of various studies, it is evident that scaffolding can enhance the EFL students' communication skills, and teachers can use this strategy to enhance their teaching materials and course overview to improve the overall learning outcome (Al-Yami 2008; Ahmadi Safa & Rozati 2017; Rezaee et al. 2018; Pourpornpong 2019; Alwahibee 2019; Azir 2019). Overall, previous studies have shown that scaffolding is effective in helping students develop comprehensive understanding and cognitive conversational abilities. However, the majority of these studies were conducted in contexts outside of Kurdish universities, focused primarily on reading and writing skills, relied on small sample sizes, or used non-experimental designs. In contrast, the present study employs a larger sample, a longitudinal experimental design, and specifically targets speaking and listening skills at the university level, addressing a significant gap in the current literature.

3. Method

The quantitative method was adapted to examine how scaffolding strategies improve students' oral performance,

particularly their speaking and listening skills. A control group and an experimental group were included in the quasi-experimental design in order to facilitate comparison and measure the experimental efficacy over the course of a semester. This approach has been used similarly in comparable studies on scaffolding in EFL contexts (e.g., Al-Yami 2008; Ahmadi Safa & Rozati 2017; Rezaee et al. 2018). The results obtained from the pre-test and post-test of both groups were significant since they provided insights and empirical results to investigate in depth the use of scaffolding strategies as an interactive teaching approach in the EFL university context. Finally, a combination of descriptive statistics and paired t-tests were used to generally compare the scores of pre-tests and post-tests of both groups in order to measure the efficiency of scaffolding and interpret the target data in a systematic way.

3.1. Participants of the Study:

The participants of this study were first-year EFL students (N = 84), aged 18–22, at the Department of English - College of Languages - University of Duhok. For the purpose of this study, the method known as purposeful sampling was utilized. According to Charles et al. (2015), purposeful sampling is adopted when participants are chosen and identified on the basis of their compliance with the norms and criteria of the study. A total of 86 students participated in the study during the academic year 2024–2025. These participants were divided into two groups:

- Experimental group (*N =46):* taught by using explicit scaffolding strategies.
- Control group (*N =44)* taught by using regular instructions without targeted scaffolding interventions.

All the students had similar level at language skills and were all enrolled in the same academic program. Both groups took a speaking and listening exam based on the IELTS framework before and after the intervention to measure their spoken language skills. Participants granted their written permission after being informed of the study's aims. The study complied with ethical guidelines, ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation.

3.2. Instruments of the Study:

This study utilized pre-tests and post-tests (see Appendices I–III.) adopted from (IELTS Academic, n.d; IELTS-UP, n.d.-b) to assess how well the scaffolding-based teaching improves students' oral skill Speaking based on four main criteria: (1) Fluency and coherence in speech (2) Lexical resources (3) Grammatical range and accuracy in speech and (4) Pronunciation. Whereas listening was assessed based on listening comprehension which included 40 questions, and speaking skills based on four major Criteria: fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and vocabulary. The IELTS rubric scale uses band scores from 1 (a non-user) to 9 (an expert user) to measure the candidates' language proficiency for both skills.

3.3 Scaffolding-based Teaching:

In this experimental study, there were two intact first-year EFL groups at Duhok University. The experimental group received scaffolding-based instruction in contrast to the control group, which received typical instruction without a specific scaffolding method. Over a 12-week period, both groups were exposed to the identical course content and learning goals. Nevertheless, the experimental group was treated according to interactive, scaffolded strategies, whereas the control group was treated based on teacher-centered and lecture-based sessions. The IELTS pre-test and post-test were administered in week one (the beginning of the course) and in week 12 (the end of the course). Informed consent and ethical approval from the department and students were obtained prior to the experiment implementation.

3.3.1 Instructional Sequencing:

The experiment precisely followed a structured instructional sequence based on the gradual release of responsibility (GRR) from the teachers to students. First, the teachers provided a high level of support through questioning, modelling, and guided practice in the early weeks (1-4). Second, students started to participate in cooperative activities like role-playing, pair work, and peer feedback sessions throughout Weeks 5–8. Finally, students had used previously modelled ways to complete tasks more independently as support was gradually withdrawn in weeks 9-12. In accordance with Gibbons' (2002) concept of scaffolding in EFL classrooms and Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD framework, this scaffolded progression sought to move students from dependent to independent learners

3.4 Validity and Reliability :

The validity and reliability of the research instrument have received a great deal of consideration in order to ensure accuracy, consistency, and reliability of the data collected for this study. The pre-test and post-test are based on the internationally recognized IELTS speaking and listening components, and were guaranteed construct and content validity. IELTS speaking and listening rubrics were used to score both tests. The rubric aligns well with established descriptors for communicative competence and academic English proficiency (Taylor & Falvey, 2007). To ensure the reliability of the pre-test and post-test scoring, three reliable teachers: the researcher and two university instructors specialized in English language teaching and linguistics, have rated and scored students' performance on listening and speaking tests.

Additionally, Cronbach's alpha test was used to measure the internal consistency of the pre-test when piloting the pre-test using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS®). Table (1) shows the value of the reliability of the research tools when piloted with 20 students.

Table (1): Pre-test Reliability Test

Research tools		Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Pre-test	Listening	0.776	40
	Speaking	0.732	4

3.5. Data Collection Procedures:

Firstly, the pre-test was administered to the experimental and control groups from 9th to 13th Feb 2025. The administration of the listening test took one day. However,

the speaking test took four days, and it was run by three examiners who divided the groups to evaluate and record students' responses in a convenient manner. This test, which was administered in person under standardized conditions, assessed students' initial speaking and listening skills using IELTS-based benchmarks. Firstly, three qualified examiners separately scored each of the participants. Secondly, the experimental stage began in week 1 (16th February) and continued until week 12 (18th May 2025), during which the experimental group received scaffold-based teaching. Thirdly, the post-test, which used parallel content to ensure fairness and comparability, was completed by all students between 19th and 27th May 2025, directly after the experiment. The post-test had the same format and rubrics as the pre-test.

3.6 Quantitative Data Analysis:

Quantitative data were obtained from the IELTS-based speaking and listening pre-test and post-test. A number of statistical tests were conducted to answer the research questions and test the research hypothesis(es):

1. Descriptive statistics was used to show the mean, standard deviations and summarize the overall performance of all participants.
2. Paired Sample T-Test was used to compare the overall performance of both groups and show if the experimental group scores were statistically significant.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion of Results

The results obtained from both pre-tests and post-tests in listening and speaking skills were analyzed using Excel sheet and SPSS software. Both groups had similar average scores before the experiment. However, after the experiment, the findings of the experimental group show a higher mean score in both skills, as indicated in Table (2). For instance, in the listening test, the control group's mean score M = 5.057 (SD = 0.39), while the mean score in the post-test of the experimental group is M = 5.543 (SD = 0. .457). Similarly, in the speaking post-test the mean score of the control group is M = 4.96 (SD = 0. .4092), whereas the experimental group achieved a mean score of M = 5.337 (SD = 0.4574) in the speaking post-test.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Listening and Speaking Pre-test and Posttest Scores

	1 = Control, 2 = Experimental	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Pre Test Listening	Control Group	4.932	.3826	42
	Experimental Group	4.880	.3828	42
Post Test Listening	Control Group	5.057	.3920	42
	Experimental Group	5.543	.4574	44
Pre Test Speaking	Control Group	4.739	.4637	42
	Experimental Group	4.533	.4643	44
Post Test Speaking	Control Group	4.966	.4092	42
	Experimental Group	5.337	.3505	44

The descriptive statistics show that both groups started with almost similar mean scores in speaking and listening tests. After the teaching experiment, the experimental group showed higher mean scores as seen in shown in Table (2). The results of this study support the notion that structured support, such as modelling, guided questioning, and peer cooperation, can enhance listening and speaking skills in EFL settings. The results are consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) theory that learning is socially affected and that language development is more successful when scaffolded within ZPD. Furthermore, these descriptive analyses are consistent with previous empirical studies. For instance, after completing scaffolded tasks, university-level EFL students had better post-test mean scores in speaking and listening (Safa & Rozati, 2017; Rezaee et al., 2018; Pourpornpong, 2019; Alwahibee, 2019; Azir, 2019). This suggests that students benefit when learning progressively moves from instructor support to learner independence, especially for challenging skills like listening and speaking.

4.1 Results and Discussion of Paired Samples T-Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Significance	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Pair 1	pretest listening posttest listening	-.1250	.3907	.0589	-.2438	-.0062	-2.122	43	.020	.040
Pair 2	pretest speaking posttest speaking	-.2273	.3135	.0473	-.3226	-.1319	-4.808	43	<.001	<.001

Table 3: Paired Samples T-Test Results for Experimental Group

	Paired Differences					t	df	Significance	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p

Pair 1	pretest listening posttest listening	-.6630	.4090	.0603	-.7845	-.5416	-10.995	45	<.001	<.001
Pair 2	pretest speaking posttest speaking	-.8043	.3870	.0571	-.9193	-.6894	-14.097	45	<.001	<.001

Paired-samples T-test was used to compare the post-test mean scores between both groups: control and experimental. Tables (3) and (4) show the findings of the study. The paired samples t-test was used to indicate whether there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores in both listening and speaking for the experimental group. The results indicate (see Tables 2 and 3) a statistically significant improvement in listening scores from pre-test (M = 4.880) to post-test (M = 5.543), $p < .001$. The mean difference was −0.663 (SD = 0.409), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from −0.785 to −0.541. Likewise, there was a statistically significant improvement in speaking scores, $p < .001$. The mean difference was −0.804 (SD = 0.387), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from −0.919 to −0.689. These findings show that the scaffolding -based teaching strategies improved listening and speaking skills of the participants in the experimental group.

On the other hand, the paired samples t-test was also used to examine whether there was a significant difference between pre- and post-test mean scores of the control group. As shown in Table (4), the difference in

listening mean scores between the pre-test and post-test was statistically significant, as the p-value reached 0.040. The mean difference was −0.125 (SD = 0.391), with a 95% confidence interval from −0.244 to −0.006. Also, a significant improvement was found in speaking scores, $P < .001$. The mean difference was −0.273 (SD = 0.314), and the 95% confidence interval ranged from −0.323 to −0.132. Although both skills showed statistically significant improvement, the changes were

smaller compared to those observed in the experimental group, as shown in Table (4). The results of the paired samples t-test further validate the study hypothesis (H1 and H2).

Moreover, the effect size appears small in comparison to the experimental group. While the change is statistically significant in the control group, it is not educationally or practically significant. The experimental group's speaking and listening scores significantly improved, according to the paired-sample t-tests, which supported the findings of Ahmadi Safa and Rozati (2017) and Rezaee et al. (2018) regarding the effectiveness of scaffolding in the EFL context. The paired-samples t-tests revealed that the experimental group's improvements in speaking and listening skills were statistically significant, supporting the first and second research questions and validating the study hypothesis (H1 & H2). These findings indicated that scaffolding strategies such as modelling, supervised practice, and gradual responsibility release were beneficial in promoting language development. In line with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the improvement highlights the role of structured support in the ZPD. Additionally, the findings are also consistent with those of Al-Yami (2008) and Ahmadi Safa & Rozati (2017), who found that scaffolding improves the oral communication skills of EFL learners.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this quasi-experimental study was to investigate the effectiveness and impact of scaffolding strategies on the university EFL first-year students' speaking and listening skills. A total of 86 students participated in the experiment and were divided into two groups: (1) an experimental group and (2) a control group. The study utilized a pre-test and post-test based on IELTS to measure the effectiveness of the scaffolding-based experiment over one academic semester. Based on the results, the improvement in the students' oral communication skills was statistically significant when a scaffolding-based approach was employed. Based on quantitative statistics, the experimental group outperformed in speaking and listening tests and achieved a higher mean average than those of the control group.

Furthermore, the results demonstrate that when scaffolding strategies are used carefully and frequently, they can greatly improve EFL learners' communication skills. Additionally, the study has highlighted the fact that teaching through the scaffolding-based approach in higher education can bring about a plethora of advantages, though instructors may encounter certain difficulties when putting scaffolding strategies into practice. Moreover. This study is expected to contribute to the theoretical knowledge and practical implementation of scaffolding in EFL contexts.

6. Recommendations

On the basis of the preceding conclusions, the following recommendations have been forwarded:

1. To effectively train teachers and educators, ongoing professional development should be planned for educators to efficiently use scaffolding strategies. This is an essential part to improve instructional quality and support student learning in the EFL contexts.

2. To design an effective curriculum, scaffolding techniques should be included in the speaking and listening courses for EFL students. Based on the findings of this research and the literature review, scaffolding strategies were proven to be effective in the EFL context as they are developed around student-centered teaching, employed by most of teachers in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq..

3. Assessment is another important component of the curriculum; therefore, assessment (formative and summative) should align with scaffolding objectives to be more effective. (E.g., IELTS-based tests can be used to monitor students' development and direct training).

7. Pedagogical Implications

1. When teaching speaking and listening in the EFL context, teachers should use scaffolding as it promotes active learning and encourages students' autonomy, hence resulting in skills improvement.

2. Teachers should undergo training on scaffolding principles and how to use it efficiently to

guarantee instructional quality and support student learning for long-term planning.

3. Cooperative and collaborative activities should be incorporated into the classrooms. Collaboration is the core of scaffolding and its strategies are more effective when teachers collaborate with each other, self-reflect, and also promote collaboration among their students in the actual classroom settings.

4. To monitor and improve scaffolding procedures, teachers should modify scaffolding so as to accommodate students who are less confident or proficient and to employ varied instructions based on students' needs and interests.

7. Suggestions for Further Studies

- A longitudinal study on the role of scaffolding approach and strategies in enhancing EFL students' oral skills.
- Investigating the role of peer scaffolding in enhancing EFL students' confidence and engagement.
- Investigating teacher-student roles and interaction when employing the scaffolding model.
- Investigating scaffolding strategies in Online EFL Speaking and Listening settings.
- A comparative study on the use of scaffolding in public and private universities in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq.

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دراسة شبه تجريبية حول استخدام الدعم التدريجي لتطوير المهارات الشفوية في اللغة الإنجليزية لغير الناطقين بها

الملخص:
تتناول هذه الدراسة الدعم التدريجي (Scaffolding) ودوره في تحسين وتنمية مهارات اللغة الشفوية، لا سيما مهارتي التحدث والاستماع، لدى الطلاب الذين يتعلمون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في جامعات إقليم كردستان. بناءً على النظرية الاجتماعية الثقافية لعالم النفس فيغو تسكي (Vygotsky)ومفهوم منطقة التنمية القريبة (ZPD)، تستخدم هذه الدراسة تصميمًا شبه تجريبي لمقارنة وتباين النتائج بين المجموعة الضابطة التي تلقت تعليمات منتظمة والمجموعة التجريبية التي تعرضت لاستراتيجيات الدعم التدريجي. خلال الفصل الدراسي، الذي استمر أربعة أشهر، أُجريت اختبارات قبلية وبعدية قائمة على نظام الايلتس (IELTS) على ٨٦ طالبًا وطالبة في المرحلة الأولى في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية. تم تحليل البيانات التي جُمعت من اختبارات المجموعتين باستخدام مزيج من الإحصاءات الوصفية واختبارات "ت" t- (paired samples tests). أظهرت النتائج أن كلتا المجموعتين أظهرتا تحسنًا، بيد أن المجموعة التجريبية تفوقت بشكل ملحوظ على المجموعة الضابطة في كل من اختبارات التحدث والاستماع البعدية مقارنة بالاختبارات القبلية. كما اظهرت النتائج تفوقا ملحوظا للمجموعة التجريبية في مهارتا التحدث t) (84) = 3.87, p <.001)والاستماع .(t (84) = 3.45, p <.01). كما بينت نتائج الدراسة فعالية استراتيجيات الدعم التدريجي في تعزيز المهارات الشفهية، عند تطبيقها باستمرار من خلال التخفيف التدريجي للدعم، والتفاعل التعاوني، والتغذية الراجعة البناءة من قبل التدريسيين. تختتم الدراسة باقتراح ضرورة إدماج استراتيجيات الدعم التدريجي ضمن أساليب التدريس في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على المستوى الجامعي، وتوصي بإجراء بحوث إضافية حول تأثيرها طويل الامد على المهارات المختلفة.
الكلمات المفتاحية: الدعم التدريجي، الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، مهارات اللغة الشفوية، منطقة النمو التنمية (ZPD)

ڤەکولینەکا ئەزمونی ل سەر کارئینانا پالپشتیا فیربوونێ بۆ پیشڤەبرنا توانایێن دەڤوکی ێن قوتابیێن زمانی ئینگلیزی د خوینن وەکی زمانەکێ بیانی

کورتی:
ئەڤ ڤەکولینە پالپشتیا فیربوونێ (Scaffolding) وستراتیژیێن وێ تاقی دکەت ژبو باشترلێ کرنا توانایێن زمانێ ئینگلیزی وب تایبەتی توانایێن دەڤوکی وەک ئاخفتن وگوهلێبوون. ئارمانجا سەرەکی یا ڤی ڤەکولینێ ئەوەیە کو رولێ ستراتیژیێن پالپشتیا فیربوونێ لسەر پیشڤەبرنا توانایێن دەڤوکی ێن قوتابیێن زمانێ ئینگلیزی بێن کو ڤی زمانی وەک زمانێکی بیانی (EFL) ل زانکۆیێن هەرێما کوردستانێ دخوینێن دیار دکەت. ئەڤ ڤەکولینە هاتیە رێکخستن لسەر بنەما وژێدەرا بێن تیوریا کۆمەڵایەتی یاکو ژلایێ پسپۆرێ دەروونناسی ڤیگۆتسکی (Vygotsky) ڤە هاتیە دامەزراندن، وهەروەسا ب تایبەت د چارچوڤێ تێوریا فێرکردنێ د ناوچا گەشەکرنێ دا ZPD . ب ڤێ شێوەی، ئەڤ ڤەکولینە دیزاینا نیڤ ئەزمونی بکاردئینیت بۆ بەراوردکرن و ژێکجودا کرنا ئەنجامێن د ناڤبەرا هەردوو گرووپێن کۆنترۆڵی بێن کو پەروەردەیا خو یا ئاسایی یان یا جاران وەرگرتیە و گرووپێ ژێر تاقیکرنێ کو ب شێوەیەکێ تایبەت ستراتیژیێن پالپشتیا فیربوونێ لسەر هاتنە جێ بەجێکرن. ژبوڤێ چەندێ، هەلسەنگاندنێن پێش وەخت وپاش وەخت کو ل سەر بنەمایێ سیستەمێIELTS ، بو ٨٦ قوتابیان ل قوناغا ئێکێ ل پشکا زمانێ ئینگلیزی د ماوێ چوار هەیڤان دا هاتنە ئەنجامدان. هەردیسان بو تاقیکرن وشلوڤەکرنا داتایان ئامارێین ڕوون وتێستێن ستاندە وەکی تێستا(paired t-tests) هاتینە بکارئینان. د ڤی چارچوڤەیدا، ئەنجامێین ئە ڤێ ڤەکولینی دیارکر کو توانایێن دەڤوکی بێن هەردوو گرووپ پیشڤە چووینە، بەلی پا ئەنجامێین گرووپێ ژێر تاقیکرنێ ب شێوەیەکی بەرچاڤ ژ گرووپێ کۆنترۆل پێش دچێت د هەلسەنگاندنێن پاش وەخت دا. ئەڤ جیاوازیە شێوەیەکێ ئاماری پشتگیر دبیت، هەر وەکی یا دیار دهەردو توانایان دا، ئاخفت(t (84) = 3.87, p <.001) و گوهلێبون (t (84) =3.45, p<.01)، هەروەسا دەرئەنجامێن ڤێ تاقیکرنێ وەسا دانە دیارکرن کو پالپشتیا فێربوونێ کاریگەر ترە ل دەمێ ب شێوەیەکێ بەردەوام وشێوازەکێ ڕوگرام کری دهێتە جێ بەجێکرن ولسەر بنەمایێن رەنگڤەدان وهاریکاریێ دناڤبەرا قوتابی وماموستای دا د پروسێسا فێربوونێ دا. ب شێوەیەکێ گشتی ئەڤ ڤەکولینە پێشنیار وگرنگیێ ب رولی و ستراتیژیێن پالپشتیا فێربوونێ دکەت کو بهێنە پێشنیار کرن و جێ بەجێکرن دناڤ سیستەمێ خواندنا بلند بو وان قوتابیان بێن کو ب زمانەکێ بیانی دخوینێن وەکو زمانێ ئینگلیزی. هەروەسا ئەڤ ڤەکولینە پێشنیار دکەت کو ئەڤ پەیرەوە بهێتە ئەنجام دان لسەر توانایێن دی ژی بێن زمانی دا د چارچوڤەیەکێ درێژخایەندا.
پەیڤێن سەرەکی: پالپشتیا فێربوونێ، زمانێ ئینگلیزی وەکو زمانەکێ بیانی، توانایێن زمانێ دەڤوکی، ناوچا گەشەکرنێ (ZPD).