USE OF SCAFFOLDING TO OVERCOME SUBJECT-VERB ERRORS AMONG SECONDARY CLASS INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL STUDENTS

Tharuniah Subramaniam[*] and Srianthie Salgado

Department of English Language Teaching, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

This action research addresses one of the constantly noticeable and recurring writing-related errors, 'subject-verb agreement', among international school students in secondary classes. Although the international school students identified themselves as the 'first language users of English' and were exposed to English as their first language in classrooms, subject-verb agreement errors were detectable even among language learners with high proficiency. The recurring tendency of this error reflects the nature of 'fossilized errors' among most international school English learners, who carried forward subject-verb agreement errors for an extended period. Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights scaffolding as a predominantly supportive technique within ZPD. In this light, this mini-study initially used a pre-test to determine the current level of the students and then applied instructional scaffolding techniques such as guided practice, modelling and on-the-spot feedback as the intervention for three repeated cycles to detect which was the most effective instructional scaffolding technique to reduce subject-verb agreement errors. After this, the students were given a post-test to see their progress. This study's outcome revealed that the students could overcome subject-verb-related errors by using instructional scaffolding techniques. Notably, on-the-spot feedback was one of the most effective instructional scaffolding techniques. Semi-structured interviews further confirmed this outcome, as the students informed that they became more conscious of their repetitive subject-verb agreement-associated errors, notably through on-the-spot feedback. The result of this study is significant for language practitioners who belong to international school contexts and for teacher trainees experimenting with different teaching strategies.

Keywords: subject-verb agreement, international schools

[*]Corresponding Authors: stharuniah@gmail.com*,*

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Tharuniah Subramaniam[*] *and Srianthie Salgado*
Department of English Language Teaching, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Teaching grammar has always been and continues to be challenging for secondary school students from international backgrounds. The Cambridge Global English Language Coursebook by Barker and Mitchell demonstrates a practical approach where grammar components are embedded into the reading content. However, acquiring grammatical structures, particularly concerning subject-verb accuracy, remains an ongoing concern among secondary class students in their transitional period from primary school to Grade 6 classrooms. As a classroom practitioner, the researcher has noticed that most Cambridge international students have recurring writing-related errors in constructing meaningful subject-verb agreement in their sentence construction, notably in the international school context. The secondary class, international school students, carry these subject-verb agreement errors forward to their next grade. This reflected the nature of 'fossilized errors' (Ellis, 2016). The students often misunderstand, misuse and misapply the correct subject-verb agreement rules. The students do not use the proper grammar rules, and they not only produce grammatically incorrect sentences but also affect the semantically acceptable structures. Such semantically unclear structures create a sense of ambiguity and lack of clarity, notably in their structured writing tasks such as essays, summaries, analytical answers and other complex writing tasks. To overcome such errors initially, the teacher and the students should become aware of the nature of the error and identify whether it is a mistake or a recurring error (Ellis, 2016). In this light, this action research investigates how various scaffolding strategies, such as guided practice, modelling and on-the-spot feedback, affect the ability of the students to internalize and correctly use subject-verb agreement in their writing. Here, instructional scaffolding denotes "The tutor's task is to 'scaffold' the child's performance by breaking down the task into manageable parts and providing the support necessary for the child to learn each part." (Wood et al. 1976 p. 90). Reiser (as cited in Pea, 2004, p.433) claims that scaffolding is a process that will make the students resolve their needs to complete their language tasks and intrinsically motivate them towards task completion on their own. Vygotsky (1978) also claims that scaffolding can be applied until the learner performs the task successfully. In this light, this study reflects on the following research questions: 1) How does the implementation of scaffolding techniques, such as guided practice, modelling and on-the-spot feedback, impact the improvement of students' performance in subject-verb agreement tests compared to students who do not receive such interventions? 2) What are students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of scaffolding techniques in enhancing their metacognitive awareness and ability to self-correct errors in subject-verb agreement?

METHODOLOGY

This study is a combination of iterative research design and quasi-experimental design. This mixed method study is conducted at a leading private tuition class centre in Wijerama, a choice that holds significant value. This institution provides a diverse student population from various international schools from secondary classes, all following the Cambridge curriculum. The study aims to shed light on the effectiveness of scaffolding techniques in addressing subject-verb related errors among these secondary school students using the action research. The data collection methods of this study were meticulously designed to ensure the validity of the findings. This study consisted of three cycles and was conducted with three semi structured interviews with the students at the end of each cycle. A pre-test was conducted on

1st of December 2023.The first action research cycle took place on 30th of December 2023, followed by the second cycle on 30th of January 2024 and the third cycle on 29th of February 2024. The students were given a comprehensive pre-test including ten multiple choice and fill-in-the-blanks questions, ten sentence construction questions and an essay writing task, totalling 50 marks. The scores were then converted into percentages. The study's experimental group consists of ten students following the Cambridge Syllabus from their primary classes, selected through purposive sampling. The experimental group consisted of students who had obtained below 40 marks. They were exposed to instructional scaffolding techniques such as guided practice, modelling and on-the-spot feedback as the intervention plan. The same task sheet was given as a post-test at the end of each cycle. Along with pre-test and post-test, a significant aspect of this study is the use of semi-structured interviews. These interviews were held with five students, conducted in a one-on-one setting to allow the students to express their thoughts and experiences freely. The depth of the study is enhanced by these interviews, which were conducted to support the findings obtained with the students' writing tasks and to triangulate the collected data. These methods will ensure the validity and reliability of the study. Here, instructional scaffolding denotes "The tutor's task is to 'scaffold' the child's performance by breaking down the task into manageable parts and providing the support necessary for the child to learn each part" (Wood et al., 1976 p. 90). Based on this insight, the researcher applied the scaffolding techniques for an hour weekly throughout the three months. After three months, the students were given a post-test to see their progress. Furthermore, the action research was supported by semi-structured interviews with five selected participants based on convenience sampling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
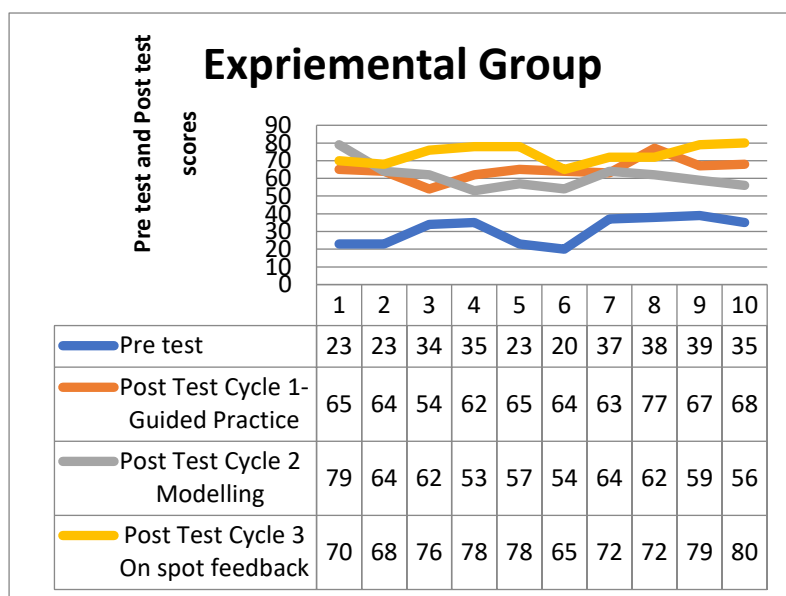The following tables and figures indicate the pre-test and post-test scores of the two groups.

Figure 01: Performance of the experimental group

Pre-test average	30.7
Post-test cycle 1- Guided practice	64.9
Post-test cycle 2- Modelling	61.0
Post test cycle 3- On-the-spot feedback	73.8

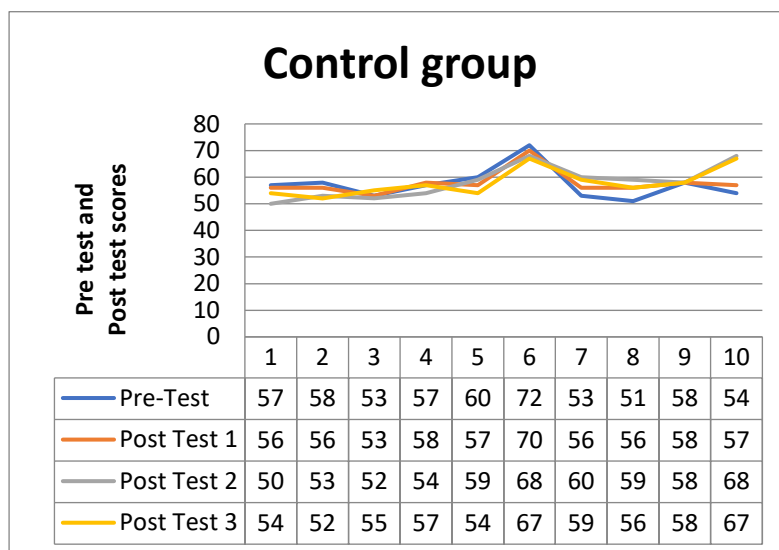Table 02: Average scores of the experimental group

Figure 01: Performance of control group

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pre-Test	57	58	53	57	60	72	53	51	58	54
Post Test 1	56	56	53	58	57	70	56	56	58	57
Post Test 2	50	53	52	54	59	68	60	59	58	68
Post Test 3	54	52	55	57	54	67	59	56	58	67

Pre-test average	57.3
Post-test 1	57.7
Post-test 2	58.1
Post-test 3	57.9

Table 02: Average scores of control group

Based on the findings, it is visible that the students exposed to instructional scaffolding techniques such as guided practice, modelling and on-the-spot feedback affected their ability to perform better in the subject-verb agreement-related errors. Figure 01 reflects the performance of the experimental group. The outcomes from the pre-cycle phase indicated an average student score of 30.7 based on the pre-test administered on 1st of December 2024. After the completion of the pre-test, the students were exposed to a different intervention at an interval of one month period. Figure 01 reflects the performance of the experimental group. It is noticeable that this performance on subject-verb agreement tests has significantly improved proportionately to the pre-test scores. Notably, an average score of 73.8 indicated that cycle 03 intervention of using on-the-spot feedback was one of the most successful teaching strategies to overcome subject-verb errors among the secondary students. During the semi-structured interviews, Student 01 said, "Miss, when you give feedback, I am more aware of my repeated mistakes. So, whenever I write an answer, I recall your repeated comment." This comment clearly shows that the on-the-spot feedback was one of the most effective scaffolding techniques that made the students more conscious of their errors. Furthermore, in his comment, Student 01 claims that "I can recall the repeated comment," which portrays that the constant use of on-the-spot feedback provides the students to retain what they have learnt. On-the-spot feedback reflects on the Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Vygotsky highlights scaffolding as a predominantly supportive technique within ZPD. One of the practical features of scaffolding is bridging the gap between the known and unknown. "The weaving of new information into existing mental structures' (Tharp & Gallimore as cited in Yildiz,Yunus & Celik, Bunyamin, 2020, p. 151). The scaffolding technique was a temporary structure that strongly supported the students in completing their language tasks until they overcame their errors and produced meaningful subject-verb agreement structures. "Scaffolding provides a temporary structure or support to assist a learner in a task and can be gradually reduced and eventually removed once the learner can carry out the performance on his or her own" (Pea, 2004, p.443). Student 02 said, "I can overcome my mistakes and think before I write an answer." This supports Student 01's comment on conscious learning. The students can self-reflect, learn and apply the new knowledge. The scaffolding technique helps them enhance their metacognitive awareness,

making the students become conscious and make conscious decisions concerning their learning process. Flavell (1976) points out that "metacognition refers to one's knowledge concerning one's cognitive processes and products, or anything related to them; e.g., the learning-relevant properties of information or data" (p.232). Student 02's comment, "Ms., I can see myself improving. I always love to learn complex grammar portions, and the clues help me to learn more," is a testament to the enthusiasm of the student for learning. Despite the challenges of complex grammar, the scaffolding technique has enabled Student 02 to grasp even the most intricate grammatical structures. This echoes the findings of Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) (Van de Pol et al., 2023, p.144) who argue that with the right support, students can overcome even the most complex learning tasks. The positive responses from the semi-structured interview participants further reinforce this. In this light, the experimental group that was exposed to the scaffolding technique as their intervention performed better in their post-test in comparison to the pre-test. These students became more conscious of their errors, notably those that are fossilized in nature. Furthermore, the students also enjoyed the learning process. In a nutshell, the scaffolding technique benefited the lower proficiency students in overcoming their subject-verb errors to a greater extent than the control group, which was not exposed to the intervention programme. In contrast, if we observe the control group of students, we cannot observe any drastic growth. To highlight, three students dropped down in their scores, and one of the student's post-test scores remained unchanged.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the scaffolding technique benefited the students with lower proficiency in overcoming their subject-verb errors to a greater extent in the experimental group than in the control group which did not receive the intervention. Notably, on-the-spot feedback was one of the most effective interventions for addressing subject-verb errors. Students with a lower understanding of subject-verb agreement became more aware of their errors, particularly fossilized in nature, while applying modelling and on-the-spot feedback. Additionally, the students were also motivated to learn grammar, making the scaffolding technique a practical language teaching technique for secondary school students.

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