

# Scaffolding and dialogic teaching in high school English reading: a case study of *The Monarch's Journey* from a sociocultural perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the specific practice of integrating scaffolding strategy and dialogic teaching in high school English reading classes from a sociocultural perspective, taking *The Monarch's Journey* as a case study. The paper does not stop at a general discussion, but specifically illustrates how scaffolding teaching can improve the teaching effect. At the same time, it also analyzes the practical role of classroom dialogue in improving students' reading level, critical thinking and knowledge internalization. The findings of the case analysis reveal that reasonable arrangement of the implementation sequence of scaffolding instruction can effectively expand students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and dialogic practice promotes the joint construction of textual meaning. This study offers a more pragmatic way of dealing with common problems in the classroom, such as low reading motivation and superficial text understanding.

**Keywords:** scaffolding strategies; dialogic teaching; sociocultural theory; high school English instruction

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## 1 Introduction

This section first explains the necessity of high school English reading teaching, scaffolding strategies and dialogic methods, and then clarifies the basic research objectives of this study.

### 1.1 Research background

#### 1.1.1 The significance of English reading

English reading plays a prominent role in the development of students' core literacy, especially in the improvement of language competence, cultural awareness and learning capacity. As the basic section of high school English courses, reading occupies a very important position in teaching. However, the reality is that many front-line teachers encounter difficulties in the classroom: students lack the motivation to read, and their understanding of the text is generally superficial. Xing Xiaotang and Xu Guohui (2024) argue that this phenomenon is largely attributable to teachers' failure to construct an appropriate reading framework for students [1].

To achieve in-depth comprehension, students need to activate high-level cognition and engage in substantive interaction with reading materials. This process broadly includes three interrelated dimensions: identifying core concepts, analyzing connotations, and integrating new information into existing knowledge.

These cognitive steps are connected to each other and jointly promote the development of students' complex reading competency [2]. Cultivating such a high level of reading and writing literacy is inseparable from the clearly structured pedagogical support, which can fundamentally help students cope with the academic assessments and internalize what they have learned.

### 1.1.2 The importance of scaffolding construction

The word "scaffolding" originally comes from the construction industry, which refers to the support frame temporarily built during the construction process. In 1976, David Wood and others introduced this concept into the field of education for the first time [3]. Since then, on the basis of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, Wood and other researchers have defined scaffolding teaching as the process of learners gradually completing tasks, solving problems and developing cognitive abilities under the guidance of teachers, more capable peers or adults. Later, van de Pol et al. (2010) summarized three core characteristics of effective scaffolding, namely contingency, fading, and transfer of responsibility, which have also become important references for evaluating the maturity of a teaching scaffolding framework [4].

According to Vygotsky's theoretical framework, the scaffolding in education is actually a temporary system built by teachers to help learners tackle challenges beyond their current proficiency level. This kind of pedagogical support serves as a key element for learners to expand the ZPD. It helps foster students' problem-solving competence and promotes their cognitive development [1].

At present, the academic circles generally classify such support mechanisms into two distinct categories. One is adaptive scaffolding, characterized by responsiveness, which is dynamically generated in the real-time interaction between teachers, more capable peers and learners in real learning situations. The other is structured scaffolding, which consists of pre-designed teaching materials. Such materials are carefully planned in advance after analyzing the learning obstacles that may be encountered in a specific task area.

### 1.1.3 The importance of dialogic approaches

Dialogic interaction is no longer confined to the old routine of "teachers ask questions and students answer". It promotes two-way communication between teachers and students. Alexander (2008) summarized the principles of dialogic teaching into five dimensions: collectivity, reciprocity, support, accumulation and purpose [5]. It accurately summarizes the elements required for teacher-student interaction in teaching.

In this process of mutual intervention and perspective exchange, teachers and students deepen mutual understanding, and gradually construct a profound interpretation of the text [6]. Zhang Tinghui (2022) also made it clear that dialogue is a key teaching mechanism, which is conducive to the exchange of ideas, broadening cognitive horizons, helping students master learning strategies, ultimately improving the quality of education [7].

In the end, dialogue provides students with an effective way to expand their perspective through interaction with teachers and peers, and develop divergent thinking in the process of contact with the text.

## 1.2 Research objectives

Through the case of *The Monarch's Journey*, this paper attempts to examine the specific design of scaffolding strategies and dialogic approaches in the classroom teaching and how these strategies and approaches promote the internalization of reading competence. The research mainly revolves around the following three aspects:

- (1) Illustrate the practical implementation of the scaffolding strategies and interactive dialogic mode in the real classroom settings;
- (2) Analyze the synergy of the two in improving reading comprehension, critical thinking and independent learning;
- (3) Sort out the practical insights that can address common problems such as students' low learning motivation and superficial text participation.

On this basis, this study offers more specific insights into the integration of social and cultural principles into reading teaching, which helps to narrow the gap between theoretical concepts and classroom practice.

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 How sociocultural theory informs reading pedagogy

From the sociocultural perspective, reading teaching is inherently a process of cooperative communication [8], and its connotation can be roughly grasped from three dimensions: constructive interaction between teachers and students, knowledge construction via organized group discourse, and meaningful interaction between readers and the context. Students integrate personal understanding on the basis of text analysis, and then form a new interpretation, thus continuously deepening their understanding of the text and the author.

#### 2.1.1 Emphasizing the creation of contexts

The real language environment is the foundation of all effective language learning, because it is in this real situation that learners realize the internalization of new knowledge. Since there are many contextual differences in high school textbooks, teachers need to design different situational learning environments around the key elements of each unit, and help students integrate into the language through simulations that fit the actual situation. This method can not only promote deeper language internalization and conceptual understanding, but also lay a solid foundation for subsequent relevant activities.

#### 2.1.2 Adopting interactive teaching approaches

Under the framework of sociocultural theory, effective teaching needs to coordinate the design of task-based activities with curriculum goals and students' reading preferences, thereby enhancing student participation as well as their reading and writing literacy. Interactive teaching is more inclined to guide students to analyze the context from multiple dimensions and understand the deep meaning, thus enhancing their reading ability.

#### 2.1.3 Cultivating collaborative competence

From the perspective of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, reading teaching should first focus on real collaboration, rather than superficial activities. This orientation helps to create a learning community in which members rely on one another. In such a community, participants generate consensus through interaction and mutual respect while retaining their own individuality, so as to advance the collective cognitive understanding. In practice, this approach is not only conducive to the achievement of cognitive goals and mastering linguistic rules, but also enables students to negotiate between different views, while keeping their own independent thinking.

#### 2.1.4 Establishing harmonious teacher-student relationships

Rooted in sociocultural theory, the current reading teaching tends to regard reading and writing literacy as a process of interactive generation, which develops gradually within the harmonious classroom. This environment builds a relatively democratic relationship between teachers and students. Students take the initiative to explore the meaning of the text with the help of support, and teachers adjust the teaching method in a timely manner with their own teaching wisdom.

## 3 Scaffolding strategies in English reading instruction

### 3.1 English reading instructional strategies based on multiple scaffolding approaches

This section combines a specific case to explain how the scaffolding strategy is implemented in high school English reading classes, so as to promote the improvement of students' reading ability and teaching quality. The selected text is excerpted from the *The Monarch's Journey* in Unit 5 of Volume 1 of the compulsory textbook published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. This text can better achieve the teaching goal in terms of content and logical structure.

In terms of content, the text depicts the migration process of black-veined golden butterflies in figurative language, interspersed with specific data, such as a flight distance of about 4,000 kilometers and a proportion of 90% to explain their

migration patterns and their difficulties. Finally, with the help of words such as "finally successfully arriving at the wintering ground", it mobilizes emotional resonance and highlights the tenacity of the butterfly population.

From a structural point of view, it is an expository text. The five paragraphs follow a relatively clear logical progression: first, it leads to the migration phenomenon, then specifically describes the migration of the black-veined golden butterfly, and then explores the mystery behind its amazing ability, and then analyzes the multiple survival threats they face. Finally, it falls on protective measures, and the whole is spread out along the progressive clues of "phenomenon--problem--cause". In addition, the proper use of cohesive means throughout the article also makes the logical flow of the text smoother.

### 3.1.1 Text background and reading context scaffolds

In the pre-reading stage, teachers can first introduce text-related background information or build a contextual reading bracket to mobilize students' enthusiasm for reading. Once students have this enthusiasm, they will not reject English reading, but will take the initiative to participate in reading activities.

#### A. Employing background scaffolds to arouse students' reading curiosity

Effective text participation first requires teachers to consciously build a cognitive bridge between learners and content. Multi-modal introductory skills are highly practical here. In the face of texts such as *The Monarch's Journey*, experienced teachers often activate students' prior cognitive schemas first, such as integrating the documentary clips from *Animal World* with guided discussion on animal migration to form a visual anchor, which not only makes the concepts in the text clear and visible, but also naturally arouses the thirst for knowledge. This type of preparatory support enables students slowly familiarize themselves with the background through these approaches.

When it comes to animal migration, the teacher then leads to the monarch butterfly, displays relevant images synchronously, and outlines their migration routes, so that students gain a deeper impression of knowledge during the learning process. Then, the teacher links the background knowledge with the reading materials and gives the following tasks:

Task 1: Read the text and match the main ideas with paragraphs.

Task 2: Choose where you are most likely to find the passage.

Task 3: List what you can do to protect the monarch butterfly.

With this set of background knowledge scaffolds, students are gradually familiar with the reading content on monarch butterfly migration, and their understanding has also deepened.

#### B. Applying situational scaffolds to enhance student interaction

In the pre-reading stage, teachers can also use some warm-up activities to build situational supports and choose those real-life scenes that match the students' own experience, which can stimulate students' reading initiative and allow them to carry out interactive discussions in specific contexts. For example, before introducing the migration of monarch butterflies, the teacher may ask: "Have you ever heard of the Spring Festival Travel Rush?" Comparing such a well-known large-scale population migration phenomenon with the migration of butterflies not only ignites students' reading interest, but also bridges the gap between students and scientific content that seems somewhat distant.

### 3.1.2 Appropriate language scaffolds

To be effective in English classes, we can't deviate from the basic law of language acquisition—we must enable students really get involved in meaningful communication. This means that it is necessary to create a real language environment and development space in teaching, and the appropriate language support plays a crucial role in it.

#### A. Providing appropriate sentence frames to facilitate background knowledge expression

A prominent problem in classroom teaching is that even if students' background knowledge is activated, most of them can only produce isolated words or phrase, and it is difficult to for them to express their ideas in complete English sentences. Take the question of "How the monarch butterfly recognizes the way" as an example. If the teacher provides a the sentence frame "The monarch butterfly is able to tell \_\_\_\_\_", such a structural framework is equivalent to providing students with both linguistic structure and cognitive support, so that they can organize coherent answers according to the text, such as "The monarch butterfly is able to tell the time of day" or "The monarch butterfly is able to tell direction from sunlight". This support technique does bridges the gap between students' fragmented existing knowledge and standard academic expressions.

#### B. Facilitating accurate text comprehension through paraphrasing support

To put it bluntly, the teacher paraphrases the complex text in more straightforward words, so that students can accurately grasp the original meaning. When students encounter the task of "distinguishing which type of discourse the text belongs to", teachers can directly present different genres and explain them clearly in the simplest words: narration is to tell a story, argumentation is to support a certain theory or point of view, and exposition is to explain concepts and provide information to deepen understanding—expressions should be concise, and complex technical terms should be simplified into plain language, so that students will no longer feel intimidated.

#### 3.1.3 Multi-sensory scaffolds

Multi-sensory teaching introduces the concept of embodied cognition into the classroom, and it integrates vision, hearing and physical movement. When students are tripped by the abstract expression of the text, this method is particularly useful. It consciously mobilizes multiple perceptions to reverse the passive decoding process into active meaning construction, and the learning motivation naturally follows.

#### A. Utilizing illustrations to activate reading anticipation

Text illustrations can quickly help students relate to the text theme, so that they can accurately predict the main content of the article, and their interest and expectations will follow. Before reading, the teacher first guides students to observe the illustrations closely and naturally introduces the theme of animal migration. Combined with the analysis of the title "The Monarch's Journey", students can guess that the article is mainly about the migration process of the monarch butterfly, which not only builds the relevant cognition in advance, but also mobilizes the motivation to read.

#### B. Embedding relevant videos to deepen thematic understanding

In reading teaching, intentionally embedding videos related to the theme is an effective cognitive support, enabling students to establish a vivid image of text concepts in their minds. After reading articles such as the migration pattern of the monarch butterfly, selecting a short and concise video often serves three functions simultaneously: making abstract language information concrete and perceptible, connecting the text content and students' prior knowledge, and then leading students to language output activities.

## **4 Dialogic approaches**

### 4.1 Teacher-student discourse strategies

In the learning process, students' self-study ability is limited after all, and the guidance and support of teachers are indispensable. Dialogue is the most routine form of teacher-student interaction in the classroom [7]. To translate the educational value of dialogue into practical teaching, teachers need not only to create favorable opportunities but also to master proper teaching skills.

#### 4.1.1 Optimizing classroom atmosphere

Classroom teaching is essentially a combination of teachers' instruction with students' learning. Dialogic teaching

takes this step further, engaging students in reading activities from many aspects, and deepening their text comprehension. To achieve this, teachers attach importance to the correlation between the reading effectiveness and the classroom atmosphere, and optimize the atmosphere from multiple angles, so that students are more willing to take the initiative to participate [6].

#### 4.1.2 Establishing harmonious teacher-student relationships

This kind of relationship plays a great role in promoting reading ability. When the classroom atmosphere becomes relaxed, students will take the initiative to absorb knowledge and raise more in-depth questions. Teachers ought to abandon that kind of monologue-style lecture and figure out students' prior knowledge and psychological state in order to establish an effective dialogue platform. To give a specific example, when teaching the text *The Journey of the Monarch*, teachers can first share their own experience, introduce the phrase "move from A to B" to lead into the topic of travel, and then ask: "Do you have any travel experience?" This warm-up not only grasps the theme of the text, but also shortens the psychological distance between teachers and students, paving the way for the subsequent in-depth academic dialogue.

#### 4.2 Creating contexts to facilitate dialogic teaching

Life-related situations play a prominent role in promoting classroom dialogue. In the reading of *The Monarch's Journey*, the teacher may guide students with the instruction: "Please describe what impressed you most about the monarch butterfly in three sentences," and encourage students to integrate the content of the text with their own feelings. The scaffolds and situations here can help dispel the fear of making mistakes when speaking.

##### 4.2.1 Teacher-student dialogue to activate thinking

In the reading class, both teachers and students occupy a core position. Traditional practices often marginalize students, and the results are not good. Consistent with the spirit of the new course standard, the substantive dialogue enables students to conduct in-depth reading.

Well-designed questions serve as the driving force behind substantive dialogue. For instance, teachers may raise the question: "Assuming you were an ecological protection official, how would you protect the monarch butterfly?" This puts students in the position of decision-makers and prompts them to analyze problems from multiple dimensions such as government, individuals and ideological levels.

##### 4.3 Peer dialogue to expand cognitive boundaries

In senior high school English reading instruction, reading ultimately remains an individual cognitive activity. However, common difficulties among students such as superficial comprehension and one-sided thinking, will hinder the improvement of their reading ability. For this reason, promoting the dialogue between peers and allowing students to explore more solutions can significantly enhance students' analytical ability and deepen and broaden their critical thinking. Take the activity of "looking at pictures to make predictions" as an example. Even if students view the same set of pictures, the interpretation will naturally be different due to different personal perspectives. Teachers can first arrange a short period for independent thinking, and then organize group discussions to encourage everyone to put out different opinions and further their thinking by learning from others' perspectives. Guiding questions such as "What are they?" and "What are they doing?" serve as a practical starting point to help students build an analytical framework.

## 5 Conclusion

Under the framework of sociocultural teaching, the implementation of the scaffolding and dialogic teaching modes is intended to create suitable conditions for reading. The scaffolding system begins with activating students' prior knowledge, extends all the way to the design of specific language scaffolding, and ultimately aims at authentic language application. Dialogic teaching lays more emphasis on fostering a harmonious classroom atmosphere—an atmosphere that provides a

platform for teachers and students to exchange ideas and leads to in-depth comprehension. Meanwhile, contextual settings and students' personal experience can be integrated into the process of meaning construction.

Generally speaking, from the sociocultural perspective, both scaffolding strategies and dialogic strategies interact synergistically to help high school English learners gradually enhance their reading competence.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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