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# A classroom observation tool for scaffolding reading comprehension

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ABSTRACT

An important goal of educational research is to find out which teaching practices are effective in promoting students' learning. In order to assess these practices, adequate observation instruments are needed. Existing observation schemes for language teaching are not suitable to gauge which teaching strategies scaffold EFL reading comprehension in particular and language learning in general. Therefore, we developed a new instrument: the English Reading Comprehension Observation Protocol. The focus of the instrument is on the role of the EFL teacher who helps students to move from *learning to read* to *reading to learn* in English. We conducted a generalizability study in order to establish the instrument's reliability. Twenty lessons taught by five experienced teachers were recorded and observed by five experienced teacher educators. The results of the generalizability study, in which we disentangled sources of variance, show that a large proportion of the variance can be attributed to differences between the teachers. This shows that the instrument has a high reliability and can help teachers identify their strengths and room for development. The instrument takes the form of a checklist and is easy to use for professional development purposes.



## 1. Introduction

In a rapidly changing and globalized world in which large amounts of written information need to be processed and understood, reading to learn in English is a crucial skill when preparing teenagers to work, study and live in diverse contexts (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; OECD, 2016; Walqui & Van Lier, 2010), More than 25 years ago, Snow, Met, and Genesee (1989) proposed a conceptual framework for integrating language and content teaching in second and foreign language classrooms. They made a plea for language teachers to incorporate “meaningful and important content that has evident language-related value in the rest of the curriculum” (p. 213). This comprises using English to learn about content outside the domain of language and goes beyond learning to use English in communicative situations (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Lightbrown, 2014).

The role of the EFL teacher in a content-based approach or a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) program is to help students improve their English reading comprehension skills, not only to learn the language but more so to help the learner understand and evaluate the meaning of a text (Juan-Garau & Jacob, 2015). According to Coyle et al. (2010) and

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Gibbons (2002) reading comprehension involves: building on existing knowledge, learning the target language, learning through the target language, learning about the target language, and integrating meaning into new contexts. Many teachers in the Netherlands and elsewhere lack the skills and instruments to assess the individual critical literacy levels of students (OECD, 2016). Instructed language learning can assist foreign language acquisition in general and developing the complex competence of reading comprehension in particular (Grabe, 2009; Long & Doughty, 2009).

In order to better understand how instructed language learning takes shape in authentic classrooms, observational studies are needed. Classroom observations provide rich empirical data about what is going on in classrooms and can give us more information about the role of the EFL teacher in the process of developing skilled and critical second language readers. The English Reading Comprehension Observation (ERCOP) instrument we are presenting in this paper attempts to observe and quantify the support an EFL teacher gives their students.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Strategies for scaffolding reading comprehension

In order to be able to support a whole class with calibrated and adaptive support, we contend that teachers need a range of strategies, which they can use consistently and flexibly in their EFL teaching. The concept of scaffolding forms the underlying theoretical basis for the observation instrument. Therefore, we will first define the concept of scaffolding.

Giving learners calibrated and appropriate support is often referred to as scaffolding. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) explored the concept in tutorial one-to-one interactions and introduced the term scaffolding. In their analysis of the tutoring process they speak about six “scaffolding functions”: recruitment of interest, reduction in degrees of freedom, direction maintenance, marking critical features, frustration control, and demonstration. Nuttall (2005) indicates that scaffolding is something some teachers do intuitively, but that “other teachers have to learn how to do it” (p.36).

In this paper, scaffolding is defined as the temporary and contingent teacher support that helps learners to comprehend a text, to carry out a reading comprehension task and to produce meaningful output in a second or foreign language. (Gibbons, 2002; Walqui & Van Lier, 2010; Wood et al., 1976).

Reasons for using scaffolding strategies in EFL reading lessons include supporting metacognitive activities, cognitive activities, student affect, and fostering engagement. Although scaffolding is interactive in nature and dependent on the teaching context, common elements in existing research can be pinpointed (Van Geert & Steenbeek, 2005; Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010).

The first element is the use of diagnostic strategies and contingent support (i.e. support that is adjusted to the current and prospective level of a student's learning). Walqui and Van Lier (2010) call this kind of foreshadowing “proleptic interactions” (p.24).

The second element of scaffolding is fading: withdrawing support when appropriate. According to Nuttall (2005), this entails “never doing anything [for your learners that] they are capable of doing for themselves with a little support” (p.36). She also proposes that teachers, who often have limited time available for individual students, use the steps individual students take as opportunities for everyone to learn. This can be done in oral interaction through dialogic teaching, but not in a classroom dominated by a transmission-style of teaching.

The third common element in scaffolding research is transfer of responsibility from teacher to learner in the learning process (Foley, 1994; Van de Pol et al., 2010). This should be understood in terms of ensuring that students understand their own learning and enabling students to take charge of this process in order to become independent and successful readers (Nuttall, 2005).

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) identified the following “means of assisting performance” strategies (scaffolding means): modeling, contingency management, feeding back, instructing, questioning, and cognitive structuring. Based on Tharp and Gallimore and Wood et al. (1976), Van de Pol et al. (2010) created a framework for analysis of scaffolding strategies with five scaffolding intentions and six scaffolding means. Their framework distinguishes scaffolding goals or intentions and scaffolding means. Intentions for scaffolding indicate underlying reasons for scaffolding (i.e. why) and focus on what aspect of learning is scaffolded (metacognitive, cognitive or affective processes), scaffolding means, on the other hand, focus on how learning is being scaffolded.

Reasons for using scaffolding strategies (scaffolding intentions) cannot be inferred from observational data, but teaching strategies (scaffolding means) can be operationalized in an observation tool for reading comprehension.

### 2.2. Strategies for scaffolding reading comprehension

Even though research into second language acquisition asserts that exposure to meaningful input is essential for language learning, comprehensible input alone is not enough. Input should not be simplified and impoverished, but elaborate and rich (Long & Doughty, 2009). We will first focus on the role of the teacher in fostering reading comprehension development.

There is ample evidence that instruction is most effective if it combines attention to form and meaning (rather than a focus on one of them) (Norris & Ortega, 2000, 2006; Spada & Tomita, 2010). The teacher can facilitate language development, but only if the learner is willing to make a cognitive contribution to the acquisition process (Long & Doughty, 2009; Lyster, 2007). Engaged and active students are more likely to make a cognitive contribution. Many studies of teaching reading