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Scaffolding strategic academic reading in online language learning

Abstract

The Europe 2020 agenda and its flagship programmes highlight the importance of developing key competences for Lifelong Learning at the Higher Education sector. Among the proposed guidelines are reading and digital skills. This paper presents the most important elements of designing an online course to teach reading strategies. Furthermore, this article discusses how the process of online scaffolding can facilitate more effective acquisition among learners of strategic academic reading skills. The description is based on research conducted at the Cracow Pedagogical University and the e-course was tailor-made for its students of spatial planning.

Keywords: scaffolding, strategic academic reading, online teaching, online course

Introduction

"The future of learning is digital" are the words with which Mark Warschauer (2007, p. 41) chooses to begin his article *The paradoxical future of digital learning.* This opening statement was regarded as a paradox in 2007, yet barely ten years later we now live in a world in which communication takes place 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In this Age of Knowledge, technology is omnipresent (Solomon & Schrum, 2007; Walker & White, 2013). Thomas L. Friedman (2005) takes this line of reasoning a stage further, presenting our world as 'flat', by which he means there are no barriers or obstacles. Consequently, today's graduates wishing to remain competitive in the global market should be equipped with a knowledge of core subjects, skills for the 21st century and be prepared for self-directed lifelong learning (Krajka, 2011; OECD, 2016; Asotska-Wierzba, 2016). Moreover, in such a digitalized and globalized world, the labour market's expectations of postgraduate students are very different from what they used to be (OECD, 2016). As Krajka (2007, p. 11) makes clear (quoting Cellary), "20 years of study and 40 years of work" is no longer applicable to today's labour market and "no longer sufficient for a person to survive."

The same view is presented by Kay (2010) or Binkley (2012), who also emphasize the importance of preparing postgraduates to be open to accepting

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the accelerating trend for job mobility. Aside from teaching core subjects, there are other skills that should be developed by the Higher Education (*henceforth* HE) sector (Kay, 2010; OECD, 2016). As a result, the Europe 2020 agenda and its flagship programmes are seeking to reduce the unemployment rate by highlighting how important it is for the HE sector to develop key competences for *Lifelong Learning*, which naturally include digital skills (European Commission, 2018). Additionally, the report shows that many young people have problems with reading and digital skills, which is especially concerning when it is considered that 90% of all jobs now require at least basic digital competence (European Commission, 2018). It is therefore hardly surprising that both PIRLS and PISA "view reading as an interactive, constructive process and emphasize the importance of students' ability to reflect on reading and to use reading for different purposes" (European Commission, 2018, p. 70). As the title of this paper implies, the purpose of the present article is to discuss how the process of online scaffolding can facilitate more effective acquisition among learners of strategic academic reading skills.

Teaching reading for academic purposes

As several researchers have noted (Jordan, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Mikulecky, 2011; Grabbe & Staller, 2011, 2014), it is expected that students attending university will encounter various challenging reading texts, such as scientific books, articles, reports, summaries, all of which may be cognitively abstract, structurally complex and conceptually dense (Koda, 2004; Chazal, 2014). Such reading should always be purposeful and goal-oriented (Koda, 2004). Moreover, students may read for different purposes or goals, for example:

- to obtain information (facts, data, etc.);
- to understand ideas or theories, etc.;
- to discover authors' viewpoints;
- to seek evidence for their own point of view (and to quote), all of which may be needed for writing their essays, etc. (Jordan, 2009, p. 143).

Johnson (2009, p. 7) highlights the findings of research undertaken by Bailey and Butler (2003), who concluded that "when a reading passage contains a high degree of language complexity and a high degree of academic language density, then the language is said to have a high degree of academic demand." Consequently, in order to cope with these loads, "students need a repertoire of reading strategies and plenty of conscious practice using strategies in meaningful combinations to achieve reading goals" (Grabe & Staller, 2014, p. 189). Various methods for distinguishing reading strategies have been proposed by Koda (2004), Jordan (2009), Johnson (2009), Farrell (2009), Grabbe and Staller (2011, 2014) and Mikulecky (2011). We have decided to make reference to the most recent of these models, the twenty-four reading strategies (shown in Table 1) introduced by Mikulecky (2011, p. 40):

Table 1. Reading strategies (Mikulecky, 2011, p. 40)

Automatic decoding	Being able to recognise a word at a glance.
Previewing and predicting	Giving a text a quick once-over to be able to guess what is to come.
Specifying purpose	Knowing why a text is being read.
Identifying genre	Knowing the nature of the text in order to predict its form and content.
Questioning	Asking questions about the text in an inner dialogue with the author.
Scanning	Looking through a text very rapidly for specific information.
Recognizing topics	Finding out what a text is about.
Classification of ideas into main topics and details	Categorising words and ideas on the basis of their relationships; distinguishing general and specific.
Locating topic sentences	Identifying the general statement in a paragraph.
Stating the main idea (or thesis)	Being able to state the main idea of a sentence, paragraph or passage. Knowing the author's general point about a topic.
Recognizing patterns of relationships	Identifying the relationships between ideas; recognizing the overall structure of a text.
Identifying and using signal words	Locating and employing words that signal the patterns of relationships between ideas. Being able to see connections between ideas by the use of words such as first, then, later.
Inferring the main idea	Using patterns and other clues to infer the author's main point about a topic.
Understanding pronouns	Recognizing and using pronouns, referents, and other lexical equivalents as clues to cohesion.
Guessing the word meaning from context	Using such clues as word parts, syntax, and relationship patterns to figure out the meaning of unknown words.
Skimming	Quickly getting the gist or overview of a passage or a book.
Paraphrasing	Restating the content of a text in the reader's own words in order to monitor comprehension.
Summarizing	Shortening material by retaining and restating main ideas and leaving out details.
Drawing conclusions	Putting together information from parts of a text and inducing new or additional ideas.
Drawing inferences and using evidence	Using evidence in a text to grasp facts or ideas that are unstated.
Visualising	Picturing or actually drawing a picture or diagram of what is described in a text.
Reading critically	Judging the accuracy of a passage with respect to what the reader already knows; distinguishing fact from opinion.
Reading faster	Reading fast enough to allow the brain to process the input as ideas rather than single words.
Adjusting reading rate according to materials and purpose	Being able to choose the speed and strategies needed for the level of comprehension desired by the reader.

Accomplished readers should be able to skilfully employ the strategies listed above if they are to understand academic texts and comprehend what they have read (Koda, 2004; Jordan, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Mikulecky, 2011). When faced with obstacles to comprehension, readers who are aware of strategic reading strategies automatically take immediate steps, "directing their attention to the appropriate

clues in anticipating, organizing and retaining text information" (Koda, 2004, p. 204). In order to make a reader aware of various reading strategies, the teacher should provide students with consistent, and most importantly, supportive reading opportunities.

A scaffolding approach to reading

The term 'scaffolding' is not new and has been attributed to Lev Vygotsky and his theory of Zone of Proximal Development (*henceforth* ZPD) (Zwiers, 2008). This theory has been part of the educational environment for so long that other theories or models rooted in Vygotski an perspectives have appeared (Buli, 2012). Before we start analysing the scaffolding reading process, we have decided to visualise the first strategic-reader training proposed by Grabe and Stoller (2011, pp. 146–147; 2014, p. 198) as shown in Figure 1 below.

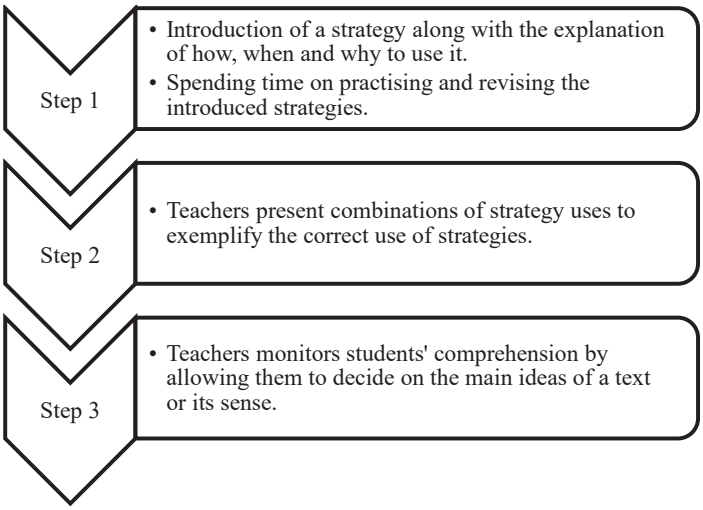


Figure 1. Strategic-reader training (author's elaboration based on Grabe & Stoller, 2011, pp. 146–147; 2014, p. 198)

The above-mentioned scheme overlaps with the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (presented in Figure 2) proposed by Pearson and Gallagher in 1983. This is the second model which we would like to describe, as it was based on ZPD theory.

The framework, as presented above in Figure 2, proposes three phases of development: "from a high-profile teaching phase, through an extended period of supported practice, to eventual independence with the student in charge" (Buehl, 2011, Kindle Location: 588).

In the first (modelling) phase, the teacher proposes an explicit instruction ("I Do, You Watch"), trying to visualise the process of thinking through a disciplinary lens, which is immensely important for students and, as Buehl notes, is "the most profound facet of this model" (Buehl, 2011, Kindle Location: 616). Notably, this kind

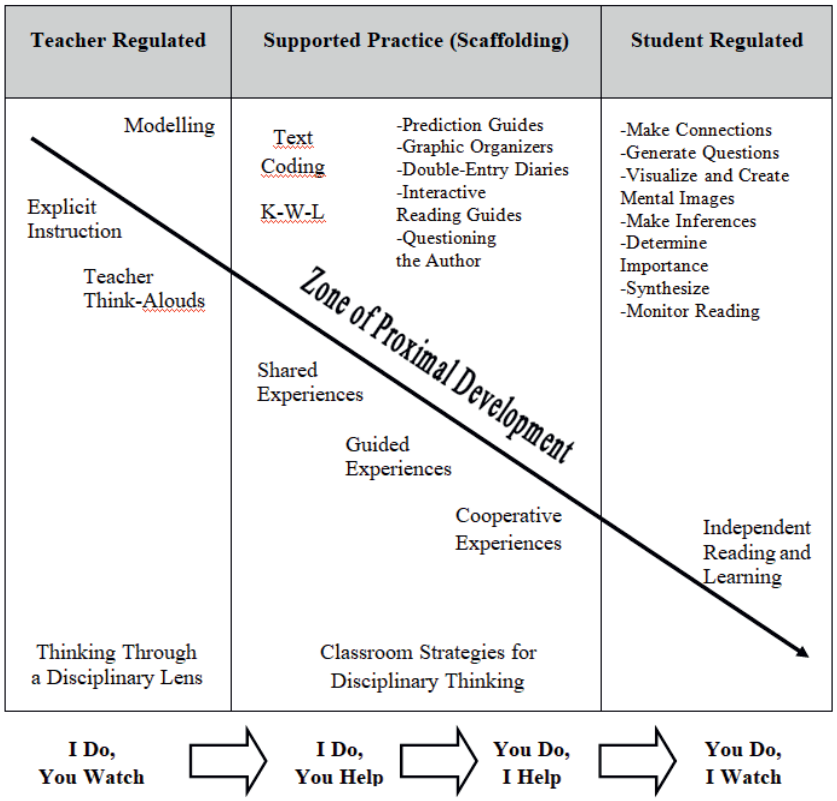


Figure 2. Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Buehl, 2011, Kindle Location: 616)

of thinking-process visualisation is rarely practiced at universities, where students are generally given reading assignments rather than reading instructions (Buehl, 2011). However, modelling is not enough in itself as students "need to work with academic languages in supported ways to acquire it effectively" (Zwiers, 2008, p. 48). During the second (scaffolding practice) phase, as Buehl underlines, the teacher assists learners and collaborates with them by giving them support and feedback. At this point, students still do not possess fully-developed learning independence, so the teacher provides them with 'literacy strategies'. This term is explained as "temporary instructional supports that guide students in their thinking as they strive to build their competency" (Buehl, 2011, Kindle Location: 630). The literature also contains another term – 'literacy scaffolds' – which are described by Peregoy and Boyle (2017, pp. 117–118) as "reading and writing activities that provide built-in teacher or peer assistance, permitting students to participate fully at a level that would not be possible without the assistance" (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017, pp. 117–118). Subsequently, this means that literacy scaffolds support our students, thus allowing them to comprehend a complex text at a level higher than learners' competence (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017). Zwiers (2008, p. 48) pays attention to the amount of support that should be provided, in his opinion "not too much and not too

little", an approach that is also termed a 'gradual release of responsibility'. Pearson and Gallagher (1983, p. 35) consider this phase as critical due to the practical benefits gained from the teacher gradually releasing responsibility for tasks to the students, a process that transforms an "I Do, You Help" instruction into a "You Do, I Help" situation in which learners gradually take on more responsibility and autonomy in their learning (Zwiers, 2008; Buehl, 2011).

The third phase of this model ("You Do, I Watch") is student-regulated, which strongly encourages independent learning (Buehl, 2011). In this phase, readers are confident enough to independently use the reading comprehension processes acquired in the previous phases while absorbing the benefits of the scaffolding provided by their teachers. At this point, teachers observe their learners, give them feedback and evaluate their application of the previously acquired reading comprehension processes (Buehl, 2011). The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model successfully shifts from teacher-centred, whole-group delivery and support to student-centred independent work (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Buehl, 2011). Initially, this model was structured for teaching reading skills (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). However, over time, this three-phase model has been adapted to teaching other skills (Rose, 2003). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model has been developed further by Fisher and Frey (2014, p. 3) into a four-phase model (the "You Do It Together" phase), with the additional, fourth element developing the concept of learning through collaboration. In the penultimate phase, "negotiating with peers, discussing ideas and information, and engaging in inquiry with others gives students the opportunity to use what they have learnt during focused and guided instruction" (Fisher & Frey, 2014, p. 7). Nevertheless, Farrell (2009, pp. 36–37) acknowledges that reading strategies should be explicitly taught, as research suggests that these strategies, when learned, influence learner comprehension and reading performance when it comes to academic texts. According to Chazal (2014), if undergraduates are to cope with academic reading loads and be able to identify *what* they are reading and understand *why* they are reading it, subject teachers should present them with certain academic reading strategies (Farrell, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Mikulecky, 2011; Chazal, 2014). Unfortunately, the teaching of such strategies has been neglected, as it is generally expected that learners come to HE institutions with micro- and macro-reading skills already internalized (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). In this situation, one effective solution could be to create a tailor-made online course within an online learning environment which would scaffold a repertoire of reading strategies automatically reinforcing learners' comprehension of complex academic texts.

Designing an online course to teach reading strategies

These online platforms do not always fulfil all the needs of faculties and the students that study there, but after conducting some research, we concluded that the drawbacks of some online platforms were not insurmountable, so we need not pose a serious obstacle to the creation of a tailor-made course designed to develop strategic academic reading. Therefore, we have decided to construct our own

e-course[2] for forty-four undergraduate students in their first and second years of studying spatial planning at Cracow Pedagogical University. The research lasted two semesters. The students received four e-lessons in their first semester and eight in their second. This difference in the number of lessons offered in the first and second semesters was dictated by the structure of the students' academic programme.

Firstly, we designed course content based on a needs analysis survey, various discipline-specific materials and interviews with subject teachers. This approach was inspired by the 'subject-specialist informant method' (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Dudley-Evans & St John, 2012).

Secondly, we designed an online course according to universal design principles (Palloff & Pratt, 2013; Vai & Sosulski, 2011). The design process was guided by various design components described by Palloff and Pratt (2013, Kindle Location: 1890). These included:

- equitable use – the design was appealing to all users;
- flexibility in use – the design accommodated a range of preferences;
- simplicity and intuitiveness – the construction of the course allowed users with all levels of IT experience, language skills, or levels of concentration to use the course with ease;
- simply worded information – which included any necessary notifications;
- tolerance for error – which minimized the potential for accidental or unintended actions.

Thirdly, the students were introduced to twelve e-lessons, during which they were taught some reading strategies provided by Mikulecky (2011, p. 40), as described in Table 1 above. In an online environment, it is not possible to conduct a traditional lesson, but this was not one of our research aims. Our main objective was to help our learners with complex academic reading tasks and teach them how to read strategically according to the principles of strategic-reader training (Figure 1) and the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Figure 2) mentioned above. This explains why we decided to follow the essential components of a course design created by Vai and Sosulski (2011, Kindle Location: 1687–1705) together with suggestions of how to create a sense of presence proposed by Lehman and Conceição (2010):

- the materials were inviting and attractively presented – the theory prepared by the teacher (in the teacher-regulated phase) clearly explained how, when and why they could be used. We also used a variety of different modes (e.g. audio, video, text, charts, diagrams, images) in order to capture users' interest, understanding and imagination;
- the materials encouraged learners to complete practical exercises and work with these actively rather than passively (in the supported practice phase). The lessons were divided into pre-, during- and post-reading phases so that there

[2] The online course was authored by Yuliya Asotska-Wierzba, who constructed it for the purposes of her PhD thesis. Access to the online platform is currently blocked because the research has already finished and the author is planning to publish the data analysis, findings and outcomes in her PhD thesis.

is the gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the learner (Walker & White 2013);
- the materials were authentic and meaningful for students' specializations and professional needs. When a strategy was taught, learners could see the relationship between what they were doing in the online course and its real-world application. This made the material meaningful and motivating. Moreover, all the introduced strategies were supported with concrete examples so that learners could perceive the thinking processes involved;
- some of the tasks that were prepared favoured collaborative learning, which helped learners to develop different viewpoints, deep analysis techniques and critical thinking;
- time was allowed for reflection. Students were given an opportunity for self-observation and reflection, which is important in the student-regulated phase. This helped them to make connections and inferences and realize where they were in the course, and how they were progressing. Apart from this, students had an opportunity to autonomously work on additional (non-obligatory) materials;
- finally, the online course materials were responsive to all learning styles so that every learner could find his/her favourite strategy for comprehension and learning.

Given the plethora of elements that could potentially be offered in a well-constructed technologically-enhanced learning environment, we can see that there are no limits and anything could be taught, either synchronously or asynchronously.

Conclusion

As was noted at the beginning of this article, "the future of learning is digital." Information and communication technology is continuously changing and transforming HE. At this point, we would like to cite Arnó-Macià (2014, p. 22), who highlights the importance of developing multiple competences in our students because they are then equipped to "face the demands of academic and professional communication in a globalized knowledge society where technology plays a key role." This highly innovative learning tool, if used competently, will provide an effective alternative to traditional classes. This article shows that despite there being no face-to-face classes in this type of course, the learning process can still be student-centred and it is still possible to provide learners with guidance and solid practice on strategic academic reading. Technological advances, globalization, internalization process and European university reforms are compelling academic staff to consider the benefits of technology for the design of courses developing strategic academic reading. As this article begins with Mark Warschauer's (2007, p. 48) statement, we would also like to finish the article by quoting him "New technologies do not replace the need for strong human mentorship, but, indeed, amplify the role of such mentorship." This means that teachers should be centrally involved, not only actively instructing their learners but also mentoring them throughout the learning process. As Sturm et al. (2009, p. 380) comment, "teachers need to see themselves

as *connectors* not only between students and the learning content but also with their peers. They also need to become *content creators* using Web 2.0 tools, *collaborators* in the sense of learning alongside their students, and *coaches* modelling skills students need as well as motivating them to take responsibility and ownership for their own performance".

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