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Emotional Scaffolding in Adult Language Learning: Examples from Courses for University Administrative and Technical Staff

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Abstract

Emotional scaffolding refers to the support provided by teachers that explicitly recognizes and responds to learners' emotional needs while pursuing educational goals. Although the concept has received increasing attention in educational research, its application within adult language learning contexts remains underexplored. This paper presents a reflective practice study based on two English language courses offered to administrative and technical staff at the University of Pisa. The courses, delivered at B1 and B2 levels respectively, involved adult learners participating in institutional professional development programmes. Drawing on the concepts of emotional scaffolding, reflective practice, willingness to communicate, learner motivation, and the affective filter hypothesis, the paper examines how different forms of emotional support emerged in response to distinct learner profiles and classroom dynamics. The analysis shows that emotional scaffolding contributed to the development of trust, learner well-being, and participation, while also creating conditions favourable to language learning. Particular attention is given to the role of teacher responsiveness, learner agency, reflective dialogue, and the strategic use of the learners' first language. The findings suggest that emotional scaffolding should be considered a central component of language education for adult learners, especially in workplace-based and lifelong learning contexts where learners often bring complex professional identities, anxieties, and expectations into the classroom.

Keywords: *Emotional scaffolding, Adult language learning, Lifelong learning, Learner motivation, Language awareness*

1. Introduction

Adult language learning is a complex process influenced not only by cognitive and linguistic factors but also by emotional and interpersonal dimensions. Learners bring previous educational experiences, beliefs about language learning, professional identities, and personal expectations into the classroom. These elements shape participation, motivation, confidence, and ultimately learning outcomes.

The concept of emotional scaffolding, introduced by Meyer and Turner [1], highlights the importance of supporting learners emotionally while they engage in challenging educational tasks. Emotional scaffolding extends the notion of instructional scaffolding by recognizing that learning is not solely a cognitive activity. It acknowledges that emotions influence engagement, persistence, risk-taking, and communication.

This paper explores emotional scaffolding within two English language courses designed for university administrative and technical staff. The discussion is based on reflective teaching practice and examines how the teacher adapted classroom approaches to respond to the needs of two distinct learner groups. One course was offered at the B1 level and the other at the B2 level. Although the courses shared similar organizational characteristics, the learner profiles, challenges, and emotional needs differed substantially.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how emotional scaffolding can support adult language learning through the creation of classroom environments characterized by trust, learner well-being, and meaningful participation. The discussion further considers the relationship between emotional scaffolding, willingness to communicate, motivation, and language awareness. Drawing on teacher reflection and classroom observation, the paper presents teacher-reported findings regarding learner engagement, participation, and confidence. It also considers the teacher's role as an active pedagogical variable whose responsive decisions and interpersonal practices may contribute to distinctive learning experiences and outcomes within adult language education.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Emotional Scaffolding

Meyer and Turner [1] define emotional scaffolding as the support provided by teachers through interactions that recognize and respond to learners' emotional experiences while facilitating learning. Emotional scaffolding involves creating learning environments where learners feel secure enough to take risks, make mistakes, and actively participate.
Trust plays a central role in emotional scaffolding. When learners perceive the classroom as a safe environment, they are more likely to engage in communication, collaborate with peers, and persist in difficult tasks. Emotional support is therefore not separate from learning but rather a condition that facilitates learning.

2.2 Reflective Practice and Emergent Teaching

The perspective adopted in this paper is informed by reflective practice [2] and teacher development frameworks [3]. Within these traditions, teachers generate professional knowledge through systematic reflection on classroom experiences and critical examination of pedagogical decisions. Reflective accounts do not seek statistical generalization but aim to provide situated insights capable of informing future practice and professional learning. Furthermore, reflective practice emphasizes the systematic examination of teaching experiences in order to understand classroom events and improve professional decision-making.
Within this approach, teaching is viewed as an adaptive process rather than the implementation of predetermined procedures. The concept of emergent teaching recognizes that learning opportunities arise from interactions, learner contributions, and unexpected classroom developments. Consequently, teachers continuously adjust their actions in response to the evolving context and learner needs [4]. Thus, the teacher is not external to the educational environment but is an active participant whose assumptions, experiences, and interpretations influence classroom processes.

2.3 Motivation, Willingness to Communicate, and the Affective Filter

Emotional scaffolding is closely connected to learner motivation. Dörnyei [5] argues that motivation plays a crucial role in second language acquisition and influences both persistence and achievement.
Similarly, willingness to communicate (WTC) has been identified as a significant factor affecting language use [6]. Learners may possess linguistic competence but refrain from speaking if anxiety, lack of confidence, or fear of making mistakes become barriers to communication.
Krashen's affective filter hypothesis [7] suggests that anxiety and negative emotions can impede language acquisition. High levels of stress may prevent learners from effectively processing linguistic input, whereas supportive learning environments contribute to lower affective barriers.
Together, these perspectives provide a theoretical foundation for understanding emotional scaffolding as a mechanism that supports communication, motivation, and language development.

3. Context and Course Description

The discussion is based on two English language courses delivered to administrative and technical staff members at a large Italian university. Both courses formed part of the institution's continuing professional development programme.
The courses shared several characteristics:

- 40 hours of instruction over five months;
- one two-hour lesson per week;
- approximately twenty participants per class;
- communicative language teaching orientation;
- no fixed syllabus;
- workplace-based learning context;
- attendance requirements linked to institutional training initiatives.

Participants included both permanent and temporary university staff. Although the courses had similar structures and objectives, significant differences emerged in learner profiles, experiences, and classroom dynamics.
These differences required distinct forms of emotional scaffolding and pedagogical intervention.

4. The B1 Course: Anxiety, Vulnerability, and Participation

The B1 group was characterized by considerable diversity in language learning backgrounds and perceived competence. Although learners demonstrated strong motivation, participants rarely used English in their professional roles.

One notable feature of the group was the presence of relatively high anxiety levels. Participants frequently expressed concerns about speaking in English, making mistakes, or being judged by peers. These anxieties appeared linked to previous educational experiences and long periods without formal language study.

The classroom atmosphere was energetic and highly interactive. Learners frequently used their first language, engaged in informal conversations, and often relied on imitation strategies when performing language tasks. While these behaviours occasionally created a noisy environment, they also revealed a strong desire for social connection and mutual support.

Recognizing these characteristics, emotional scaffolding became a central aspect of teaching practice. Several strategies were implemented:

Individual Questionnaires

At the beginning of the course, learners completed questionnaires exploring motivations, goals, and previous language learning experiences. These instruments provided valuable insight into learner expectations and concerns.

Individual Check-ins

Regular informal conversations with the teacher allowed learners to discuss progress, difficulties, and emotional responses to learning activities. Such interactions helped normalize challenges and strengthen trust.

Explicit Discussion of Learning Processes

Considerable class time was devoted to discussing language learning strategies, anxiety management, and realistic expectations. Rather than focusing exclusively on language content, attention was also directed by the teacher towards understanding the learning process itself.

Transparency of Teaching Practices

Activities and instructional decisions were explained openly. This transparency reduced uncertainty and encouraged learners to understand the rationale behind classroom tasks.

Playfulness and Enjoyment

Games and collaborative activities were frequently incorporated into the lessons. These activities reduced tension and created opportunities for low-risk communication.

Strategic Use of the First Language

The use of Italian served important emotional and reflective functions. Learners were able to express concerns, discuss strategies, and reflect on learning experiences with greater depth and precision. Rather than being viewed as an obstacle, the first language functioned as a resource supporting emotional security, metacognitive awareness, and greater awareness of language learning processes.

Collectively, these interventions appeared to contribute to increased confidence, participation, and willingness to communicate, as observed by the teacher throughout the course.

5. The B2 Course: Challenging Confidence and Expertise

The B2 group presented a markedly different profile. Participants generally possessed stronger language backgrounds and were more likely to use English in professional contexts.

Unlike the B1 group, anxiety was less visible. Learners were highly motivated, active, and confident communicators. However, a different challenge emerged: substantial discrepancies between fluency and accuracy.

Participants demonstrated considerable communicative competence and extensive collective knowledge. At times, fluency appeared to mask persistent grammatical or lexical inaccuracies. Consequently, emotional scaffolding was not primarily concerned with reducing anxiety but with helping learners accept new challenges and move beyond established comfort zones.

Strategies included:

Slowing Down Communication

Learners were encouraged to focus more carefully on language accuracy rather than prioritizing speed and fluency. This required a shift in habits and expectations.

Valuing Existing Expertise

Participants' professional knowledge and experiences were actively incorporated into classroom activities. The recognition of existing competence reinforced learner confidence while supporting further development.

Diversification of Homework Tasks

Homework assignments were varied to address differing learning preferences and professional needs.

Raising Expectations

Learners were challenged through more demanding tasks, including activities involving artificial intelligence tools and independent language exploration. These tasks aimed to encourage greater autonomy and intellectual engagement.

Sharing Institutional Knowledge

Participants frequently contributed examples and experiences from their professional contexts. Such exchanges reinforced the perception of the classroom as a collaborative learning community rather than a teacher-centred environment.

In this context, emotional scaffolding involved helping learners embrace ongoing development despite already possessing advanced communicative abilities.

6. Teacher-Reported Outcomes

As this study is based on reflective teaching practice rather than formal empirical data collection, the outcomes presented here derive from systematic classroom observations, learner interactions, informal feedback, and ongoing reflective notes maintained by the teacher throughout the courses.

Across both groups, increased participation was observed over time. In the B1 class, learners appeared progressively more willing to engage in pair and group discussions, volunteer contributions, and communicate in English despite recurring linguistic difficulties. Informal comments suggested that many participants experienced greater confidence and reduced anxiety compared with the beginning of the course.

In the B2 class, progress was evident in learners' increased attention to language accuracy and in their willingness to engage with more demanding tasks. Participants demonstrated growing readiness to experiment with unfamiliar digital tools, reflect critically on their language use, and assume greater responsibility for autonomous learning.

Although these observations cannot be considered objective measures of learning outcomes, they provide valuable insights into how emotional scaffolding may contribute to learner engagement, persistence, and communicative participation within adult language education contexts.

7. Discussion

The experiences described above suggest that emotional scaffolding is not a fixed set of techniques but a responsive process shaped by learner needs and contextual factors.

In the B1 course, emotional scaffolding focused primarily on reducing anxiety and increasing willingness to communicate. The creation of a supportive atmosphere encouraged learners to take risks and engage more actively in language use. These outcomes align with research on willingness to communicate [6] and support the view that emotional security facilitates language learning.

In the B2 course, emotional scaffolding served a different function. Rather than alleviating fear, it challenged learners to extend existing capabilities and refine areas of weakness. Support consisted not only of reassurance but also of creating productive discomfort and maintaining high expectations.

Across both contexts, trust emerged as a fundamental condition for learning. Trust allowed learners to share difficulties, experiment with language, accept feedback, and participate meaningfully in classroom activities.

Another significant finding concerns learner agency. As learners became more comfortable within the classroom environment, they increasingly assumed responsibility for their learning. It can be argued that opportunities for reflection, discussion, and shared decision-making contributed to a stronger sense of ownership.

The role of collective knowledge also deserves attention. Adult learners possess substantial personal and professional experiences. Emotional scaffolding involves recognizing and valuing this knowledge. Learning therefore becomes a collaborative process in which expertise is distributed across the group rather than concentrated exclusively in the teacher.

Finally, the targeted use of learners' first language proved beneficial. Allowing strategic use of L1 facilitated reflection, emotional expression, and discussion of learning strategies. From a language

awareness perspective [8], such practices support the development of greater learner autonomy and metacognitive understanding.

8. Practical Implications

Several practical recommendations also emerged from this teacher-led reflective analysis.
First, physical learning environments matter. Classroom acoustics, noise levels, and overall comfort can have a significant impact on learner well-being and participation.
Second, workplace relationships and institutional contexts should be acknowledged. Adult learners do not enter classrooms as isolated individuals but as members of complex professional communities.
Third, informal interaction opportunities, including extended breaks and social exchanges, contribute to relationship-building and community development.
Fourth, explicit reflection on language learning strategies should be incorporated into course design. Such discussions help learners better understand their own learning processes.
Fifth, flexibility in pacing and activity selection is essential. Emotional scaffolding requires responsiveness rather than rigid adherence to predetermined plans.
Finally, assessment practices should reflect the learning experiences offered during the course and support continued development rather than merely measure achievement.

9. Conclusions

This paper has explored the role of emotional scaffolding in adult language learning through examples drawn from two English language courses for university administrative and technical staff.
The teacher observations reported in this article illustrate how emotional scaffolding can foster trust, learner well-being, motivation, and participation. Although the specific forms of teacher-driven support differed across the B1 and B2 groups, in both cases emotional responsiveness contributed to more effective learning environments.
The findings also highlight the importance of reflective teaching and emergent practice. Emotional scaffolding cannot be reduced to a standardized methodology. Rather, it depends on teachers' capacity to observe, interpret, and respond to the evolving needs of learners.
As with all reflective practice studies, the findings should be interpreted within the particular context in which they emerged. Although the discussion draws on teacher reflection, classroom observations, learner questionnaires, and informal learner feedback, it does not incorporate formal interviews, systematic qualitative analysis, or independent measures of language development. Consequently, the observations should be regarded as context-specific insights rather than broadly generalisable findings.
In addition, the outcomes reported here are inevitably shaped by the particular characteristics, beliefs, experiences, and interpersonal practices of the teacher. Indeed, from a reflective practice perspective, the teacher is not merely a source of potential bias but an active participant in the construction of educational experience [2]. Similarly, ecological and sociocultural approaches to language learning view the classroom as a dynamic learning ecology in which teachers and learners jointly shape opportunities for participation, agency, and development [8, 9]. The findings therefore reflect a unique interaction among learners, institutional context, and teacher practice that may not be directly replicable in other settings, yet they offer insights into how emotional scaffolding may operate in authentic adult language learning environments. Future research could combine reflective inquiry with more systematic qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the effects of emotional scaffolding across a wider range of contexts.
In adult and workplace-based language education, where learners bring diverse experiences and identities into the classroom, emotional scaffolding should be viewed as a central pedagogical competence. By attending to emotional as well as linguistic dimensions of learning, teachers can create conditions in which communication, personal growth, and language development become mutually reinforcing processes.

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