

# Scaffolding strategy to enhance reading sub-skills among young-adult learners

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**Abstract:** The notion of scaffolding is widely used in education, where the real protagonist of the whole process is the learner. The teacher's role, then, becomes more of that of a facilitator. The main objective of the present study was to improve the reading sub-skills of second semester students at the Quevedo State Technical University. The methodology used was semi-structured interviews and expert judgments. The results indicated that it is important that the teacher be familiar with the students' competence and knowledge to know how to best help them, and what is most appropriate for their progress and pace of learning. To determine this, students should participate in different activities. In addition, it is essential that the university's language center promote ongoing training so that instructors can update their knowledge by taking professional training courses. Lastly, the approach of this research is purely qualitative since it is based on students' perceptions of which scaffolding strategies they believed were most useful to understand the readings.

**Keywords:** Scaffolding; foreign language; subskills; self-learning; reading.

## 1. Introduction

Reading provides learners with input in the target language, in this case English, which helps them to acquire it. Reading is the intricate operation in which readers must convert symbols into sounds and then into sentences and then into comprehensible ideas[1]. In Ecuador, a poor level of reading comprehension of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners has been detected due in part to different backgrounds the learners possess in terms of their learning process. The students' perspective is fundamental since many of them are not aware of the strategies that can help them to solve certain comprehension problems.[2]. Many of the problems that native Spanish speakers face when reading English texts are unfamiliar words due to limited vocabulary and poor understanding of how to extract main ideas from paragraphs. Another problem that arises is the way in which students resolve comprehension problems by immediately resorting to the use of a dictionary, unaware of other useful strategies such as guessing meaning from context or identifying parts of speech.



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A concern that arises from the globalized educational system lies in the quality of education as a consequence of the low level of reading comprehension in English among university students[3]. The reality of this level is presented in critical moments, often through exams that show teachers the difficulties students have comprehending written texts [4]. These include recognizing new information, generating connections between fundamental ideas from different sources, and applying conscious strategies aimed at taking advantage of reading for independent learning[4,5].

Scaffolding is a method that is widely used in education. It is based on Lev Vygotsky's constructivism and the notion of zone of proximal development, which deals with the distance between what the student can solve on his own and what he or she could do with the help or guidance of a teacher or other more qualified person, thus arriving at the student's level of potential development[6]. In 1976, the actual concept of scaffolding was born, thanks to Bruner and Wood. The fundamental assumption was that adult interventions in children's learning processes should maintain an inverse relationship with respect to the child's level of competence. Therefore, more competence means less help and vice versa[3,7].

As mentioned above, the real protagonist of the learning process is the learner. The teacher, therefore, is simply there to assist in this process. For this, the teacher has to know the learners well in terms of their knowledge, to know what kind of help to offer them, which is the most appropriate for their progress and learning pace[8]. In the case of an EFL class, then, students will be able to perform certain language tasks at first with the teacher's help, then after a while, students will be able to perform those activities on their own. The role of the teacher in scaffolding is that of a facilitator. In this regard, teachers should provide some type of cue to help students to learn and reach the goals of the class[6,9,10]. It is important to apply the scaffolding strategy because it involves students in the instructions and allows students to feel confident and capable of performing the activities while at the same time promoting self-learning. Lev Vygotsky's contributions to the development of scaffolding were fundamental. Through his novel idea about how the student learns, he was able to contribute to new methods that are applied today in many schools[3,10].

Within the context of EFL teaching, reading can present several challenges for students since they have to make sense of a series of letters and words to decipher the text and successfully comprehend it [11]. It has often been considered that the most important sub-skill within reading is the comprehension of the text. To reach this end, it is necessary to evaluate the reading experience throughout the whole process, that is to complete activities before reading (pre-reading), monitor comprehension while reading (during reading), and conclude with evaluation and/or synthesis exercises after reading (post-reading). Generally, these are the stages of the reading process that should be applied in reading tasks[12]. The main objective of the pre-reading activities is to activate students' prior knowledge and to find out what they know or do not know about the topic of the reading. At this point, different scaffolding strategies can be applied so that students can bring their previous knowledge to the class. Special consideration should be given to those strategies that allow students opportunities to do reflections such as predicting or inferring what the texts are going to be about. Predictions and inferences are known as cognitive processes. Learners need activities which allow them to more deeply analyze what they are doing like visualizing, activating schemata, and questioning, which is all guided by the professor [13].

Continuing with the reading process, the second step is monitoring while reading, and for that

implementing certain scaffolding strategies becomes fundamental. Here metacognition plays an essential role, as it provides a broad and deep understanding of the learning process. In short, metacognition is the process of thinking and reflecting at the same time. In this way, learners on their own become aware of what can be useful while reading as well as construct the meaning of the words. Self-questioning is a scaffolding strategy that is part of metacognition and can be employed in this case. Furthermore, students can search for specific pieces of information, which is known as scanning, or do a quick, superficial reading which is called skimming.[14].

There is a final stage in the reading process called post-reading, which is the follow-up activities, or the evaluation of the reading procedures done after the reading has been completed. With the aim of incorporating scaffolding strategies in this phase, different assessment tools can be constructed to evaluate the level of the learners' comprehension of the text. These activities include, but are not limited to: summarizing main ideas, using graphic organizers,, checking predictions that were established before the reading, and making inferences about what would happen next [15].

Considering that reading is an input skill that involves the comprehension of the texts, the main objective of the present study is to improve students' reading sub-skills. Furthermore, this research analyzes the main components of scaffolding strategies in EFL teaching, then determines which scaffolding strategies may improve reading sub-skills among students. Finally, we propose a short guide with several scaffolding strategies to improve reading.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1 Study area

The study was carried out at the Language Center of the State Technical University of Quevedo (UTEQ). UTEQ is a public Ecuadorian university located in the city of Quevedo, province of Los Ríos. The university has a language center which is highly committed to student training that is geared towards foreign language proficiency. This center is focused on improving the academic and professional profile of hundreds of students. Learning a foreign language is a transcendental tool in the development of university education, scientific and technological research, information, and communication. It is important to mention that it is mandatory to reach a B1 level on the Common European Framework of Reference to graduate from the different majors at the university.

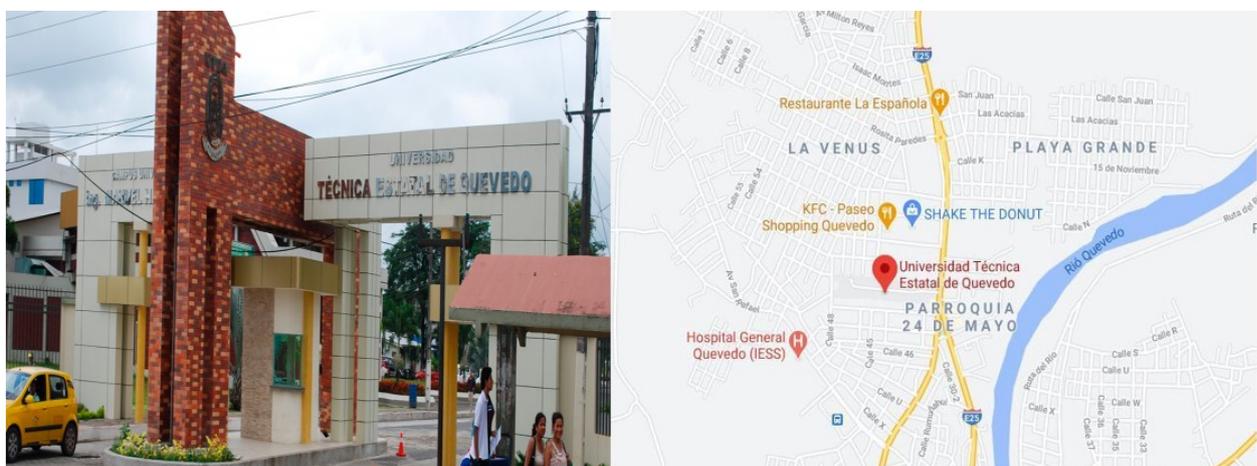


Figure 1. Quevedo State Technical University

## 2.2 Methodology

The methodology used in this research employed a set of techniques that responded to each objective. To better understand this study, the methodology was divided into four parts. First, to obtain information on scaffolding in foreign language teaching, a literature review was conducted in high-impact scientific databases. Second, to measure the progress of EFL learners, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Finally, a technique called expert judgment was used to determine and design a guide with scaffolding strategies for the development of reading sub-skills.

The development of the first section was carried out by means of a bibliographic review in different scientific databases of works published in the last 10 years, for which key search words were applied to filter the results (scaffolding + students + English). In the fields (title, key words and abstract), the search was complemented with repetitions applying combinations in Spanish and English (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Methodological process for the literature review.

Subject	Key words	Period	Scientific Databases
Scaffolding strategy in teaching reading sub-skills among English as a foreign language learners.	(scaffolding + students + English)	2012-2022	14 [16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28,29]

The second procedure consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews, i.e., open-ended questions directed to second semester students at UTEQ. Prior to conducting the interviews, students were provided with a diagnostic reading (Figure 1), taking into account their A2 level.



### **Reading comprehension**

**This reading is part of the research paper entitled: Scaffolding strategy to improve reading subskills among young adult learners.**

***Benefits of speaking English, both personal and professional.***

English is the language of international communication, commerce and finance. English opens an international line of communication. Do you speak English? This is the question that almost all students and professionals are currently facing when looking for a job.

The main advantages of speaking English are:

Studying abroad, this has many advantages, but how does it relate to speaking English? When we talk about undergraduate and graduate degrees abroad, we sometimes tend to think of American and British universities and colleges, however, even though speaking English does open doors, you can also get opportunities at schools in other non-English speaking countries or regions.

It strengthens your brain, this is difficult to understand until you experience it for yourself, but by mastering another language, your brain works differently. Studies have shown that the bilingual brain is able to concentrate better, learn more easily and multitask.

It helps you to empathize, learning a language is learning about another culture. This is another of the most outstanding advantages of knowing English because it helps understanding, acceptance and respect for the diversity of the world.

To the extent that we empathize with other people who are not like us and, better yet, understand them, we can work together to overcome the problems that afflict us all.

**Figure 2.** Complementary reading to measure student progress.

After the students finished reading, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each of them, considered the sample of the study. Eight questions were elaborated (Table 2) that helped to determine the students' progress in terms of reading according to their A2 level of English through an auto-evaluation.

**Table 2.** Questions established to measure student progress. The interview was conducted in the participant's mother tongue Spanish to avoid any misunderstanding.

Participants	Questions
UTEQ 2nd semester students	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.- Did you understand what the reading was saying? Explain briefly.</li> <li>2.- How difficult was the reading for you and why?</li> <li>3.- What is your motivation for learning English?</li> <li>4.- Do you think that you should apply some strategy to better understand English?</li> <li>5.- Do you feel that you can improve in order to have better autonomous learning?</li> <li>6.- What techniques used by your teacher do you think help you or make it easier for you to improve your comprehension in reading?</li> <li>7.- Do you feel you are ready to read a text fluently? Justify your answer</li> <li>8.- Do you think that the technique used by the teacher is sufficient to learn English? Why?</li> </ol>

Finally, in the third and fourth sections, we determined which scaffolding strategies improve reading sub-skills among young adult students and designed a guide with scaffolding strategies for the development of reading sub-skills. For this purpose, a technique called expert judgment was used, which consisted of forming a technical working group (Table 3), made up of academics and professionals with experience in issues related to the teaching of a foreign language. With the results obtained in the previous steps, this technical committee was able to determine and design a guide with improvement strategies for UTEQ students.

**Table 3.** Experts selected to develop the strategies.

Name	Profession	Relationship with the area
Martha Carrillo	Master's Degree in English Studies	EFL Professor
Kerly Cabezas	Master's Degree in English Pedagogy as Foreign Language	EFL Professor
Janine Matts	Master's Degree in Applied Linguistics	EFL Professor/Researcher
Andrés Ordóñez	Bachelor Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language	EFL Professor/Researcher

### 3. Results

Below are the results obtained from the study. First, the scaffolding strategy information obtained from scientific papers is discussed and presented in the literature review. Second, the progress of English language learners in reading is presented. Finally, it is determined which scaffolding strategies are effective in improving students' reading sub-skills, and a short guide with these strategies is provided.

### 3.1. Scaffolding strategy

Current pedagogical trends in foreign language (FL) teaching and learning show that there have been changes in the concept of learning and knowledge construction in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, and epistemology[16]. In particular, the imprint left by pedagogical constructivism on the interpretation of the learning process and the processes of action in the classroom is noteworthy. The conception of knowledge as a process of construction rather than transmission has certainly had a resurgence in the procedural-methodological field and has produced notable changes in the approach to EFL teaching[17]. Constructivist trends in pedagogy and applied linguistics perceive foreign language learning as a process of constructing a new linguistic system in the target language. Learners are believed to construct their language on the basis of prior experience, building and processing new experiences resulting from exposure to the language, interactions with peers, and scaffolding provided by the teacher[18,19].

Scaffolding is one of the aspects related to the contemporary field of foreign language teaching that should be better understood and valued by those involved in the teaching-learning process, so that it can be effectively integrated into the construction of activities and the use of language in communication[20]. The notion of scaffolding is based on a metaphor. Scaffolding consists of a temporary structure provided by teachers or more qualified peers, accompanying students in their learning. The construction of new learning is eliminated when students are able to function independently[21]. Thus, the learner, based on prior knowledge and supported by the accompaniment or help provided, can gradually move towards successive adjacent developmental zones. Scaffolding provides different levels of support and learning structures that are inserted in the web of conversations and didactic actions created in the classroom, so it is an integral part of the future social work required to build knowledge[18,22]. The temporary nature of scaffolding is due to the gradual reduction of tutorial intervention by teachers, i.e., teachers gradually relinquish control as students accumulate experience and knowledge[23].

There are many benefits of scaffolding on the cognitive development opportunities afforded to beginner students. Through guided practice and with teacher support, students can actively and effectively engage in problem solving, task completion, and achievement of goals that would be beyond their capabilities without the help they receive[24]. Scaffolding facilitates the recognition of needs, clarifies the objective of the activity, resolves doubts, provides clues and tools to perform tasks, and guides the development of cognitive skills and metacognition and strategies that enable more effective learning[25]. Additionally, scaffolding makes the reframing of strategies by the teacher possible, provides constant feedback, and helps the student to effectively coordinate different resources and skills for the execution of tasks and activities[26].

Research in the context of reading development indicates that most of the frameworks that teachers provide in reading activities include direct task support, providing additional information and clarifying information, and students acquire and model strategies for comprehension[27]. Scaffolding requires greater student involvement, visualizing comprehension tracking and use of their own strategies, and identifying effective strategies and accomplishments, i.e., super-conscious scaffolding. Questions aimed at inferring information are also an appropriate way to scaffold reading and develop autonomy as readers[26,28]. On the other hand, it is suggested that in scaffolding reading skills, teachers guide reorganization and coping strategies, which include confronting, recognizing, and naming problems, as well as finding possible alternatives for individuals[29]. For example, in cases where students have difficulty extracting information from a text through individual silent reading, a change in strategy is guided by reframing, which may include working collaboratively, reading aloud, using dictionaries, guided reading, interpreting or developing diagrams and graphic organizers. In

this way, other types of intelligence and skills of the student are used to complete tasks that were initially impossible.

### 3.2. Student progress

Reading is a formidable tool for learning English. It promotes vocabulary expansion, reinforces spelling and grammar, helps learn the correct pronunciation of sounds (in the case of reading aloud), and allows young readers to unleash their imagination. In short, reading is a superb ally for learning a new language and improving communication skills. Conducting diagnostic reading and asking open-ended questions yielded data about the progress of EFL students in terms of their reading skills. There are currently a total of 250 students enrolled in the second semester at UTEQ, whose ages range from 19 to 22 years old and their English proficiency level is A2. For the purpose of the present research, just one course of 25 students was considered. The students were provided with eight sessions of reading comprehension with several scaffolding strategies. Once the scheduled sessions based on scaffolding strategies to improve reading comprehension were completed, the students were provided with a diagnostic reading and interviewed subsequently.

Analyzing the answers to the interview questions, which were coded in a specialized software, it became apparent which are the different attitudes, qualities, interests and strengths of the second semester students at UTEQ. Regarding understanding of the diagnostic reading, half of the students said that they understood the text and that it was easy to understand what the reading referred to, while the remaining participants read but did not understand part of the content. This group of students added that they did not participate in extracurricular activities in English since being a university student demands a lot of time. At the A2 level, learners should understand longer and more complex transitional texts, expository texts as well. They also should comprehend high frequency vocabulary in passages about topics such as personal information, travelling, and recipes.

Many students recognized that they have applied metacognitive strategies such as asking themselves questions or doing self-reflections, yet at the same time they are quite aware that they could improve their English language learning. As they mentioned in their own words, that they are adults and are responsible for their own learning, but the guidance of the professor is always needed. Few students believe that they are able to read a text in English fluently out loud. Most of them attribute this to an insufficient vocabulary and a lack of knowledge of pronunciation when they face unfamiliar words because they make unexpected pauses which disrupts their fluency.

Motivation on the part of the teacher is important, a motivated student is academically productive, and students stated that the strategies used by teachers to teach English are not 100% effective, they believe that more dynamic activities could be implemented in classes to encourage learning a new language. Although most of them understood the diagnostic reading, it is important to mention that not everyone has the same pace of learning, so different tests should be done to know the level of knowledge they have or any disability that may have gone undetected.

### 3.3. Identification of scaffolding strategies

Scaffolding is a tool that enables learners to reach their developmental potential in order to progress in their learning. For scaffolding to be carried out effectively and for it to truly support EFL learning, there are a number of guidelines to keep in mind. If any one of them is not present, scaffolding may not yield the expected results. First, the student must be involved in the activity, that is to say, it is essential that he/she make personal contributions. To this end, the activity must be adapted to their level. Second, adaptation and challenge are important. Although the activity must be appropriate for the level of the learner, it must also provide a challenge to allow the learner to progress and not stagnate. Third, the development of structured learning means that the activities or

tasks must be organized in a way that encourages natural development and progress. Finally, the intervention of the teacher or the person who guides the scaffolding, must be that of a collaborator, guiding the student throughout the learning process. This must be carried out through an interaction where communication is fluid.

The strategies that the teacher can use to scaffold foreign language learning encompass a wide array of interventions, ranging from repetition, simplification of the target language, modeling, and guided practice, to portfolio use, Socratic questioning, reciprocal teaching, and cooperative learning. The use of cooperative comprehension can be effective as a reciprocal teaching strategy for scaffolding LE reading. When we talk about methodology in language teaching, we must consider that in today's age the learner must have substantial experience, that is, he must learn from his experiences. Today's world demands diverse knowledge based on multicultural backgrounds and many ideas, which is why educational trends must meet the cultural needs of a globalized society.

English is a widely used language in many countries of the world. However, in certain countries such as Ecuador, the study of this language does not meet internationally acceptable standards. Therefore, it is crucial to apply scaffolding techniques for the improvement of reading sub-skills in English students at UTEQ. It is important to conduct diagnostic tests prior to teaching the classes, i.e., an oral or written lesson in which the students' level can be measured. Another effective strategy is to give students enough time to process the information; they need time to make sense of and verbally articulate their learning. Front-loading, or pre-feeding, is a strategy that is not widely used by teachers. Many teachers send students to read complex texts and there the students get caught up in the vocabulary and lose interest. It is recommended that the teacher introduce the vocabulary terms in pictures and in context with things they know, related to their interests, and provide time to discuss the words.

*Pause, ask, pause, review* is another strategy for checking comprehension as students read a difficult text or learn a new concept. This is how it is implemented: a new idea is shared, a pause is made giving time for the student to think and a strategic question is asked, then another pause is made. Applying a four-stroke strategy can be a good idea. This strategy incorporates prediction, keyword connections, close reading, and summarizing. Prediction consists of presenting a text with illustrations and students must predict what the topic will be about. The connections with key words is to perform a superficial reading of the text to find known words and relate them to a possible topic. In close reading, students read each paragraph carefully and try to get the main idea. Subsequently, students must express the general idea of the text in their own words.

Finally, metacognitive strategies allow students to manage their learning process by reflecting on, planning, organizing, and monitoring their tasks and progress. Proficient EFL readers who use these strategies frequently show that they seek to control their learning and, in doing so, along with other factors, leads them to succeed [12]. Combining individual reading with reading stories aloud ensures daily motivation to make time for stories in English while nurturing curiosity about the new language and a desire to understand and speak it.

### 3.4. Guide with scaffolding strategies

Guides with strategies in higher education have gained increasing significance and functionality; they are a learning resource that optimizes the development of the teaching-learning process due to their relevance by allowing the student's autonomy and cognitive independence. In the previous section, by means of the technique called expert judgment, the main scaffolding strategies to be applied in the language center of the UTEQ were determined, which were used in this section to create the guide (Table 4 & 5).

**Table 4.** Guidelines for implementing scaffolding to improve in English reading.

Scaffolding strategy	What does it consist of?
<i>Conduct activities that involve the student in the activity.</i>	Students should make individual contributions. To do this, the activity should be adjusted to their level.
<i>Set challenges for the learner</i>	While the activity should be adapted to the level of the learner, it should also provide a point of challenge to allow the learner to progress and not stagnate.
<i>Develop structured learning</i>	Activities or tasks should be organized in a way that allows for natural growth and progression.
<i>Intervene during each case study</i>	The teacher must act as a collaborator, guiding the student throughout the learning process, this must be done through interaction, making communication flow smoothly.
<i>Generate a compressive environment</i>	It is important that the student feel comfortable at the moment of participating in a reading, for that reason it is necessary to create bonds of friendship and understanding among the whole team, developing activities of personal presentation.
<i>Conduct diagnostic tests to measure the level of the students.</i>	A spoken or written lesson is taken where the student's level can be measured.
<i>Allow sufficient time</i>	Give students enough time to process the information, take time for students to understand their learning and articulate it verbally.

**Table 5.** Activities based on scaffolding to improve in English reading.

<i>"Front-loading"</i>	They should present vocabulary terms visually and in context with things they know, relevant to their interests, and take the time to discuss the words.
<i>Pause, ask, pause, review</i>	A pause is taken to allow students time to think and a strategic question is asked, then another pause is taken.
<i>Four times</i>	It involves the use of predictions, keyword matching, reading details and summaries. Prediction involves presenting a text with illustrations and having students predict what the topic will be about. Keyword connectors scan the text for familiar words and connect them to a possible topic. In proximal reading, students read each passage carefully and try to grasp the main idea. Then, students have to express in their own words the general idea of the text.
<i>Metacognitive</i>	They allow the learner to manage their learning process, reflect, plan, organize and track their tasks and progress. The fact that all successful students have high levels of use of these strategies indicates that they are seeking to take control of their learning and, in doing so, among other factors, succeed. Combining personal reading with reading stories aloud provides daily motivation to spend time with stories in English and, at the same time, can foster curiosity about the new language and a desire to understand and speak it.

#### 4. Conclusion

Pedagogical scaffolding provides temporary structures to support learning and finds its justification in the mediating role of the teacher as conceived by current pedagogical currents. The concept of scaffolding was adopted and used in conjunction with Vygotsky's work, also known as support dialogues, assisted performance, tutorial scaffolding, or assisted scaffolding. Scaffolding facilitates the recognition of needs, clarifies the objective of the activity, clears up doubts, provides clues and tools to perform tasks and guides the development of cognitive skills, metacognition, and strategies that enable more effective learning.

A fundamental tool to learn English is reading, because it builds vocabulary and contributes to improving spelling and grammar. With the help of the teacher, students can perfect pronunciation. Definitely, reading is a great means by which to learn a new language and better communication skills. It is important to help in the reading development of the second semester students of UTEQ, Fluency is not only an essential aspect of reading, but also one of the most difficult things for an A2 learner. Learning difficulties arise because not everyone learns at the same learning pace, so different types of problems arise when learning.

It is important that students participate in different activities, which means that students must make individual contributions. To do this, activities should be adapted to their level. Adaptation and challenge are important, and while the activity should be appropriate to the level of the learner, it should also provide a challenge so that the child progresses and does not stagnate. Structured learning development means that activities or tasks should be organized in a way that allows for natural growth and progression. The instructor should act as a collaborator, guiding the student throughout the learning process, this should be done through interaction so that communication develops smoothly.

Good pedagogical practices allow students to develop in an environment conducive to learning, where they feel comfortable and understood. These elements are essential in the development of language skills, since it is important that learners feel motivated. The described pedagogical practice is complemented by the action of the institutional organization at the school and faculty level. Therefore, UTEQ's language center should promote ongoing training for instructors to update their knowledge by conducting professional training courses that allow for the renewal of knowledge regarding methodological strategies and techniques. In addition, courses on topics of common interest, such as teaching students with special educational needs (if any), professional ethics, among others, should be carried out.

The limitations of the present study lie in the type of research carried out, since in qualitative research the reliability and validity may be compromised by the lack of statistical data to be able to generalize the data obtained. Another influencing factor is the population taken as a sample, since the participants were only 25 second semester students and the data collection instrument which is based on obtaining their perceptions as well as the execution time in which eight online class sessions were scheduled based on the scaffolding strategy with a duration of two hours each. A disadvantage of the classes was that the whole class could not be monitored because of time management and the researchers cannot be completely sure that all students performed all the activities without asking for help from their peers. It is suggested for possible future studies on the use of scaffolding strategies to deepen the benefits of scaffolding, as well as to choose a quantitative approach to measure students' progress in statistical terms, to take into account the students' learning pace, and to differentiate between cognitive and metacognitive scaffolding strategies.

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