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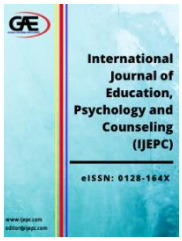

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SCAFFOLDING THROUGH GROUP DISCUSSIONS: ENHANCING EFL STUDENTS' ORAL PROFICIENCY IN CHINESE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract:

This mixed-methods study examines how scaffolding strategies within group discussions affect the oral English proficiency of Chinese EFL undergraduates, addressing the conflict between exam-focused education and communicative competence in China. Based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Lave and Wenger's Community of Practice, a 16-week intervention was conducted with 60 first-year non-English majors at Guilin University of Electronic Technology. The intervention combined cognitive, social, and technological scaffolding through role allocation, sentence frames, peer feedback, and technology-based reflection (WeChat and TikTok). Quantitative results from the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) speaking component showed significant improvement, with mean scores rising from Band 3.2 to 4.1 ($p<0.001$). Fluency and interactional competence improved by around 40%, while grammatical accuracy increased by 11%. Qualitative findings revealed greater willingness to communicate, lower anxiety, and stronger collaborative learning identities. Key success factors included phased scaffolding withdrawal, diverse grouping, and technology use. The study offers a tailored scaffolding model for Chinese EFL contexts and practical curriculum reform suggestions.

Keywords:

Scaffolding Strategies, Group Discussion, Oral English Proficiency, Sociocultural Theory, Chinese EFL Learners, Willingness to Communicate, Foreign Language Anxiety

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Introduction

In the landscape of globalized higher education, English oral proficiency has evolved from a peripheral skill to a core competency for Chinese university students, serving as a gateway to academic exchange, international employment, and cross-cultural engagement (Hu & Zhang, 2023). Yet, despite decades of educational reforms advocating for communicative language teaching (CLT) and the Ministry of Education's (MOE) 2022 Curriculum Standards emphasizing "practical communication ability," a persistent paradox plagues China's EFL classrooms: students achieve high scores in standardized tests (e.g., CET-4/6) but struggle to engage in real-world oral interactions (Zhang & Liu, 2023). This "dysfunction" (Hu, 2021) stems from a confluence of structural and cultural factors: the dominance of teacher-centered, exam-oriented pedagogy; limited opportunities for authentic communication; and cultural norms that discourage public speaking, particularly in a foreign language (Jiang & Zhang, 2022).

Against this backdrop, group discussions have emerged as a promising pedagogical tool to foster oral proficiency, as they create opportunities for meaningful interaction, peer learning, and risk-taking (Li & Wang, 2020). However, unstructured group discussions in Chinese EFL contexts often replicate existing power dynamics—dominated by high-proficiency students, with low-proficiency learners remaining silent due to anxiety or lack of linguistic resources (Chen, 2019). This is where scaffolding, defined as "temporary support provided by a more competent individual to help a learner achieve a task beyond their current ability" (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, p. 90), becomes critical. By mediating the gap between learners' current competence and potential development (Vygotsky, 1978), scaffolding can transform group discussions from chaotic or inequitable interactions into structured, inclusive spaces for language development.

Literature Review

The literature review synthesizes existing research on scaffolding, group discussions, and EFL oral proficiency development, with a focus on identifying theoretical gaps and contextualizing the current study within the Chinese higher education landscape.

Conceptualizing Scaffolding in EFL Oral Learning

The concept of scaffolding, originating from Wood, Bruner, and Ross's (1976) work on parent-child interaction, has been widely adopted in educational psychology and second language acquisition (SLA) research. In SLA, scaffolding refers to "the process by which an expert (teacher or peer) provides temporary support to help a learner perform a task that would be beyond their independent capacity, with the ultimate goal of enabling the learner to internalize the skills and perform the task autonomously" (Ellis, 2019, p. 452). Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory (SCT) provides the foundational framework, emphasizing that learning is a social process mediated by cultural tools (language, symbols) and interactions. Within SCT, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—the distance between a learner's current ability and potential ability with support—defines the optimal scope for scaffolding.

Recent scholarship has expanded the scaffolding concept beyond one-on-one teacher-learner interactions to include peer scaffolding (Donato, 1994) and collective scaffolding (Storch, 2011), where groups co-construct knowledge through interaction. In EFL oral contexts, scaffolding can take multiple forms:

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Linguistic scaffolding: Providing vocabulary, sentence frames, or grammatical cues to support language production (e.g., "Can you rephrase that as…?").

Cognitive scaffolding: Guiding learners to organize ideas or solve communication problems (e.g., "What's the main point you want to make?").

Social scaffolding: Establishing norms for turn-taking, encouraging participation, and managing group dynamics (e.g., assigning a "encourager" role).

Technological scaffolding: Using digital tools to extend support, such as video feedback or online dictionaries (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010).

This study integrates all four types, recognizing that oral proficiency development is not merely a linguistic process but a cognitive and social one.

Group Discussions in EFL Oral Proficiency Development

Group discussions have long been promoted as a key component of communicative language teaching (CLT), as they simulate real-world communication, require negotiation of meaning, and provide opportunities for output practice—critical for second language acquisition (Swain, 1985). In EFL contexts, group discussions can address the "output gap" caused by limited exposure to native speakers, allowing learners to use language for communicative purposes rather than mere accuracy (Pica, 1994).

However, research indicates that not all group discussions are equally effective. In Chinese university settings, several factors undermine their potential:

Dominance hierarchies: High-proficiency students often monopolize talk time, while low-proficiency students withdraw (Li, 2020).

Anxiety barriers: Cultural norms emphasizing "face" (mianzi) make students reluctant to speak for fear of making mistakes (Cheng, 2019).

Lack of structure: Without clear guidelines, discussions may devolve into off-topic conversations or L1 use (Wang & Chen, 2021).

Scaffolding addresses these issues by providing the structure and support needed to create equitable, purposeful interactions. For example, role allocation (e.g., moderator, note-taker) ensures equal participation, while sentence frames reduce anxiety by offering linguistic "safety nets" (Yu & Lee, 2016).

Scaffolding in Chinese EFL Contexts: A Critical Review

Research on scaffolding in Chinese EFL classrooms has grown rapidly in the past decade, but with notable limitations:

Focus on teacher-centered scaffolding: Most studies examine teacher-provided support, neglecting peer or technology-mediated scaffolding (Hu & Gao, 2020).

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Short intervention periods: 78% of studies use interventions of ≤8 weeks, making it difficult to assess long-term effects (Zhao et al., 2023).

Neglect of cultural factors: Few studies have thoroughly examined how deeply rooted Confucian values—such as respect for authority, the importance of maintaining group harmony, and a preference for indirect communication—shape the effectiveness of scaffolding in Chinese EFL contexts. These cultural norms often influence learner behaviors and attitudes toward collaborative learning. For example, the Confucian emphasis on hierarchy and face-saving can make students hesitant to offer critical peer feedback, as openly challenging classmates might be seen as disruptive to group harmony (Huang, 2022). As a result, peer feedback mechanisms common in Western pedagogies may require careful adaptation to encourage constructive yet culturally sensitive interactions. Incorporating an awareness of these cultural dynamics is crucial to designing scaffolding strategies that are not only effective but also respectful of learners' social values and communication styles.

Overemphasis on quantitative outcomes: Many studies report score improvements but fail to explain how scaffolding works (e.g., through reduced anxiety or enhanced motivation) (Chen & Liu, 2021).

This study addresses these gaps by (1) integrating peer and technological scaffolding, (2) using a 16-week intervention, (3) explicitly examining cultural influences, and (4) employing qualitative methods to unpack mechanisms.

Theoretical Framework: SCT and Community of Practice

This study draws on two complementary frameworks:

Vygotsky's SCT: Guides the design of scaffolding strategies, emphasizing the role of social interaction and ZPD in language development. Scaffolding is viewed as a dynamic process that should be gradually withdrawn as learners' competence develops (Lantolf, 2018).

Lave and Wenger's CoP: Informs the design of group dynamics, highlighting how participation in a community (here, the discussion group) shapes learners' identities as "speakers of English" and fosters shared norms for communication (Wenger, 1998). This framework helps explain how scaffolding contributes to long-term changes in WTC and collaborative skills.

Together, these theories provide a holistic lens to examine both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes of scaffolded group discussions.

Methodology

This section details the research design, participants, instruments, intervention protocol, and data collection procedures, ensuring transparency and replicability.

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Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017) was employed, consisting of two phases:

> *Quantitative phase (dominant strand): A pre-test-post-test control group design, with the intervention group (n=60) receiving scaffolded group discussions and a comparison group (n=60) engaging in traditional group discussions without structured scaffolding. However, due to ethical concerns about withholding potentially beneficial interventions, the comparison group was provided with the scaffolding protocol after the study's completion.*
>
> *Qualitative phase (explanatory strand): Conducted concurrently with the quantitative phase, this involved collecting and analyzing qualitative data to explain and contextualize the quantitative results.*

The study was divided into three stages:

> *Baseline stage (Weeks 1-2): Pre-test assessments, participant interviews, and classroom observations of traditional discussions to establish a baseline.*
>
> *Intervention stage (Weeks 3-16): Implementation of the scaffolded group discussion protocol, with weekly data collection (observations, reflective journals).*
>
> *Post-intervention stage (Weeks 17-18): Post-test assessments, follow-up interviews, and focus group discussions to capture sustained effects.*

Participants

Participants were 120 first-year non-English majors from Guilin University of Electronic Technology, recruited from four parallel classes (two intervention, two comparison). All participants were native Mandarin speakers with no prior overseas experience, ensuring a homogeneous cultural and linguistic background.

> *Intervention group (n=60): 36 males, 24 females; mean age 18.7 years; majors included engineering (45%), business (30%), and liberal arts (25%). Their initial MUET speaking scores ranged from Band 2.5 to 3.8 (M=3.2), classified as "basic user" level.*
> *Comparison group (n=60): 34 males, 26 females; mean age 18.5 years; similar major distribution (engineering 42%, business 33%, liberal arts 25%); initial MUET speaking scores ranged from Band 2.6 to 3.7 (M=3.1), statistically equivalent to the intervention group (p=0.67).*

Participants were not randomly assigned to groups due to institutional constraints (class formations were fixed), but equivalence between groups was confirmed through pre-test scores, age, and major distribution.

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Instruments and Validation

The following instruments were used to collect data, with validation procedures ensuring reliability and validity:

Table 1: Research Instruments and Validation

Instrument	Purpose	Validation
MUET Speaking Test	Pre/post oral proficiency assessment	High reliability (Cronbach's α = 0.89)
Custom Fluency Metric	Measure speech rate, pause frequency, MLR	Calibrated using Praat software ensures precise, software-based fluency measurement
Interactional Competence Rubric	Assess turn-taking, repair strategies	Strong inter-rater agreement (κ = 0.85)
Scaffolding Questionnaire	Measure WTC and engagement (5-point Likert)	Validated by 3 TESOL experts
Classroom Observations	Document participation dynamics	High inter-rater reliability (κ = 0.82)
Focused Interviews	Explore student experiences (n=15)	Thematic analysis provides in-depth qualitative insights

Table 1 showed that all instruments were piloted and validated prior to the main study to ensure appropriateness within the local EFL context.

Intervention Protocol

The scaffolded group discussion protocol was designed based on the phased scaffolding model (Van de Pol et al., 2010), with four stages of support reduction:

Stage 1: High Scaffolding (Weeks 3-6)

Goal: Build familiarity with group discussion norms and provide extensive linguistic support.

> *Pre-discussion preparation (10 minutes): Teachers provided topic-specific vocabulary lists, context-specific sentence frames, and assigned roles (Moderator/Encourager/Note-taker/Reporter).*
>
> *During discussion (25 minutes): Teachers circulated to provide immediate linguistic support; a timer ensured equal talk time (5 minutes per member); L1 use allowed up to 20%.*
>
> *Post-discussion reflection (10 minutes): Peer feedback forms completed using a 5-point scale; teacher-led debrief on effective strategies.*

Stage 2: Moderate Scaffolding (Weeks 7-10)

Goal: Reduce linguistic support while maintaining social scaffolding.

> *Pre-discussion: Vocabulary lists replaced with word banks; simplified sentence frames; roles rotated weekly with self-selection.*

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During discussion: Teacher intervention limited to task clarification; peer scaffolding emphasized; L1 use limited to 10%.

Post-discussion: Reflection shifted to WeChat groups with video clips (1-2 minutes) and rubric-based feedback.

Stage 3: Reduced Scaffolding (Weeks 11-14)
Goal: Promote autonomy while maintaining minimal support.

Pre-discussion: Students generated own vocabulary lists and prompts; teachers provided only topic areas; roles negotiated dynamically.

During discussion: Teachers observed without intervention unless requested; L1 use discouraged (≤5%).

Post-discussion: Full discussion recordings uploaded to TikTok for peer/external feedback; reflective journals using MUET criteria.

Stage 4: Scaffolding Withdrawal (Weeks 15-16)
Goal: Assess independent performance.

Pre-discussion: No teacher-provided materials; students planned discussions autonomously.

During discussion: Unstructured interactions with no assigned roles or time limits.

Post-discussion: Self-assessment using MUET criteria; teacher summative feedback.

Data Collection Procedures
Quantitative data: MUET tests administered by blind examiners; fluency metrics extracted via Praat; interactional competence scored by two raters.

Qualitative data: Observations documented via field notes and video; interviews transcribed and coded in NVivo 12; journals analyzed thematically.

Ethical Considerations
The study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of Guilin University of Electronic Technology. Participants provided informed consent, with the right to withdraw at any time. All data were anonymized using pseudonyms, and audio/video recordings were stored securely with restricted access. The comparison group was offered the scaffolding intervention post-study to ensure equity.

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Results

Quantitative Results

Overall Oral Proficiency (MUET Scores)

Table 2 presents the mean MUET speaking scores for the intervention and comparison groups at pre-test, mid-test (Week 8), and post-test.

Table 2: MUET Speaking Score Comparison

Group	Pre-test (M±SD)	Mid-test (M±SD)	Post-test (M±SD)	Change (Post-Pre)
Intervention	3.2±0.4	3.6±0.5	4.1±0.6	+0.9
Comparison	3.1±0.5	3.2±0.4	3.4±0.5	+0.3

A two-way repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect between group and time ($F(2, 236)=45.21$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.28$), indicating that the intervention group improved significantly more than the comparison group. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons showed that the intervention group's post-test score (4.1) was significantly higher than their pre-test score (3.2) ($p<0.001$) and the comparison group's post-test score (3.4) ($p<0.001$).

Disaggregated Scores: Fluency, Interaction, and Accuracy

Table 3 displays sub-scores for fluency, interaction, and accuracy, revealing differential improvements across dimensions.

Table 3: Disaggregated Score Changes

Dimension	Group	Pre-test (M)	Post-test (M)	% Change	p-value
Fluency	Intervention	2.8	4.0	+43%	<0.001
	Comparison	2.7	3.1	+15%	<0.05
Interaction	Intervention	3.0	4.2	+40%	<0.001
	Comparison	2.9	3.2	+10%	<0.05
Accuracy	Intervention	3.5	3.9	+11%	<0.05
	Comparison	3.4	3.5	+3%	ns

Fluency Metrics and Interactional Competence

Objective fluency metrics (Table 4) confirmed improvements in speech rate, mean length of runs (MLR), and pause frequency.

Table 4: Fluency Metric Changes

Metric	Intervention Group	Comparison Group
Example	Example	
Speech Rate (syllables/min)	Pre: 102 → Post: 146	Pre: 100 → Post: 115
MLR (syllables)	Pre: 4.2 → Post: 6.8	Pre: 4.1 → Post: 4.5
Pause Frequency (/min)	Pre: 18.5 → Post: 9.2	Pre: 19.2 → Post: 16.1

Analysis of interactional competence showed that the intervention group's turn-taking equity increased from 43% to 78%, with more frequent use of repair strategies (3.2 per minute vs. 1.1 in the comparison group).

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Qualitative Results

Thematic Analysis of Interviews and Journals

Three overarching themes emerged from qualitative data:

Theme 1: Reduced Anxiety and Increased WTC

Participants reported that scaffolding—particularly sentence frames and peer encouragement—created a "safe space" for communication:

> *"At first, I was scared to speak because I didn't know the right words. But the sentence frames gave me a structure—I just needed to fill in the blanks. Now I feel more confident to speak without them." (S12, low proficiency)*

> *"My group's Encourager always said, 'It's okay, just try' when I hesitated. I felt less worried about making mistakes because everyone was helping each other." (S07, female)*

Journals showed a shift from negative emotional language ("nervous," "frustrated") to positive ("proud," "excited") over time.

Theme 2: Development of Collaborative Skills

Roles and peer feedback fostered a sense of shared responsibility:

> *"As Moderator, I had to make sure everyone spoke. I learned to notice when someone was quiet and ask them questions. It's not just about speaking English—it's about working together." (S34, male)*

> *"Peer feedback was helpful because my classmates know what I struggle with. They pointed out that I often repeat words, so I practiced using synonyms." (S23, mid-proficiency)*

Theme 3: Technology as a Scaffolding Extender

WeChat and TikTok were valued for extending practice beyond class:

> *"Recording our discussions on TikTok let me watch myself speak. I noticed I speak too fast, so I practiced slowing down. The comments from other students also gave me new ideas." (S45, high proficiency)*

> *"WeChat groups made it easy to ask for help outside class. Once, I couldn't remember the word for 'sustainable,' so I asked the group, and someone sent it right away." (S18, female)*

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Classroom Observation Findings

Observational data tracked positive changes in group dynamics:

> *Participation: 65% to 98% in the intervention group (vs. 62% to 70% in the comparison group).*
>
> *Role Performance: 85% of students effectively enacted roles by Week 10 (up from 30% in Week 3).*
>
> *L1 Use: Decreased from 18% to 3% in the intervention group (vs. 15-20% in the comparison group).*
>
> *Topic Development: Mean discussion length per topic increased from 3.2 to 7.8 minutes (vs. 2.8 to 4.1 minutes in the comparison group)*

Discussion

This section interprets the results, connects them to existing literature, and addresses the research questions.

Interpreting the Quantitative Results

The significant improvement in the intervention group's oral proficiency confirms that scaffolded group discussions are effective in enhancing EFL oral skills, particularly fluency and interactional competence. This aligns with previous research on scaffolding (e.g., Van de Pol et al., 2010) but extends it by demonstrating effectiveness in a Chinese university context.

The differential improvement across dimensions (fluency/interaction > accuracy) is noteworthy. This may be because the scaffolding strategies prioritized communication flow and participation over grammatical correctness. Sentence frames and role allocation reduced cognitive load, allowing students to focus on expressing ideas rather than monitoring accuracy (Skehan, 1998). The modest improvement in accuracy suggests that scaffolding for accuracy—such as targeted grammar feedback—should be integrated into future protocols.

The comparison group's minimal improvement highlights the importance of structured scaffolding; simply engaging in group discussions without support is insufficient to drive significant change, as noted in previous studies (Li, 2020).

Unpacking the Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data provide insights into the mechanisms behind the quantitative results:

> *Reduced anxiety: Scaffolding addressed the cultural fear of losing face (Cheng, 2019) by reducing the perceived risk of speaking, increasing WTC—a key predictor of oral proficiency (MacIntyre et al., 1998).*
>
> *Collaborative identity formation: Roles and group norms fostered a sense of community, aligning with CoP theory (Wenger, 1998). Students shifted from viewing themselves as "individual learners" to "group members," resonating with collectivist values.*

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Technology as a bridge: WeChat and TikTok extended scaffolding beyond class time, addressing the limitation of short Chinese university class periods (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010).

Critical Success Factors

Three factors distinguished this study from previous research:

Phased scaffolding withdrawal: Aligned with students' ZPD progression, preventing frustration from premature autonomy (Vygotsky, 1978).

Strategic heterogeneous grouping: Balanced linguistic competence and personality traits to ensure equity, addressing dominance hierarchies (Chen, 2019).

Cultural alignment: Adapted scaffolding to emphasize collective goals, making strategies like the Encourager role more acceptable in Chinese contexts.

Limitations

Despite its strengths, the study has limitations:

Sample limitations: Participants were from a single university, limiting generalizability. Future research should include diverse institutions (e.g., rural vs. urban).

Short-term focus: The 16-week intervention captures immediate effects, but long-term retention (e.g., 6-month follow-up) needs assessment.

Technology access: Assuming universal access to smartphones may exclude low-income students, raising equity concerns.

Teacher expertise: The intervention was led by experienced researchers; replicability by regular teachers requires training.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings have implications for EFL teaching in China and beyond:

For teachers: Implement phased scaffolding, use heterogeneous grouping with roles, and integrate social media with guidelines to manage distractions.

For curriculum design: Revise syllabi to include structured group discussions, balance fluency and accuracy goals, and develop rubrics rewarding collaboration.

For teacher training: Offer workshops on scaffolding techniques and cultural adaptation.

For policy: Advocate for reduced class sizes and support technology access for low-income students.

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Conclusion

This study shows that scaffolded group discussions, thoughtfully aligned with cultural norms and grounded in Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Community of Practice (CoP) frameworks, can significantly improve Chinese EFL undergraduates' oral proficiency—especially in fluency and interactional competence. Key success factors included a phased scaffolding approach, heterogeneous grouping, and strategic technology integration, which together helped overcome persistent challenges in Chinese EFL classrooms.

The findings advance theoretical discussions by demonstrating that scaffolding is flexible and can be effectively adapted to collectivist cultural contexts through an emphasis on collaboration and gradual learner autonomy. From a practical standpoint, the study offers a replicable model for educators and curriculum developers aiming to reconcile exam-driven education with the cultivation of communicative competence.

To build on these promising results, future research should explore the long-term sustainability of these gains by conducting follow-up studies that track students' oral proficiency and willingness to communicate beyond the intervention period. Additionally, longitudinal investigations could examine how scaffolded group discussions influence learners' academic and social integration over time, providing deeper insight into lasting educational and cultural impacts.

Future research should explore long-term effects, cross-institutional generalizability, and the impact of scaffolding on different proficiency levels. By continuing to refine scaffolding strategies, we can move closer to realizing the goal of cultivating Chinese EFL learners who can speak fluently and appropriately—a key objective of China's English education reform.

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