

USING SENTENCE STARTERS TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS ACROSS DIFFERENT PROFICIENCY LEVELS

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Abstract

This article explores the pedagogical potential of sentence starters as a scaffolding technique for developing students' communicative skills across different proficiency levels. Sentence starters are viewed as linguistic scaffolds that help learners initiate and sustain interaction, express ideas more coherently, and overcome hesitation during oral communication. The study examines how structured language prompts enhance students' confidence and fluency, particularly in mixed-ability EFL classrooms. Quantitative and qualitative data reveal that the use of sentence starters fosters learner engagement, supports discourse organization, and contributes to gradual improvement in communicative competence.

Keywords

sentence starters, scaffolding, communicative skills, speaking proficiency, EFL, differentiated instruction

INTRODUCTION

Developing students' communicative competence remains a central goal in English language education, yet classrooms often include learners with varying levels of proficiency. For lower-level students, initiating and sustaining oral communication can be challenging due to limited vocabulary and grammatical awareness. Conversely, higher-level learners may struggle with discourse organization or pragmatic appropriateness. Therefore, teachers seek scaffolding techniques that provide structured linguistic support adaptable to individual needs.

Sentence starters – predefined phrases or openings that help initiate ideas (e.g., “In my opinion...”, “I would like to add...”, “From my perspective...” – serve as effective linguistic scaffolds. They guide students in formulating responses and maintaining conversations, allowing them to focus on meaning rather than

linguistic form (Gibbons, 2002). Rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, this technique supports learners within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by offering temporary linguistic frameworks that are gradually internalized.

This study aims to investigate the impact of sentence starters on the development of students' communicative skills at different proficiency levels.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Scaffolding, as introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), involves providing temporary assistance that allows learners to accomplish tasks beyond their current ability. Linguistic scaffolding focuses on supporting language production by supplying vocabulary, structures, and discourse markers (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Within this framework, sentence starters play a crucial role by:

1. Providing linguistic frames that help students begin utterances confidently.
2. Reducing cognitive load, allowing learners to focus on content rather than form.
3. Encouraging interaction by equipping students with functional expressions for agreeing, disagreeing, clarifying, and elaborating.
4. Promoting self-regulation, as learners gradually internalize and adapt these patterns for spontaneous use.

Previous research (Walqui, 2006; Nation, 2013) emphasizes that sentence frames enhance communicative performance, particularly in mixed-ability groups. They are especially effective in fostering inclusion, as weaker students gain entry into conversation while stronger students refine language precision through model-based production.

Thus, sentence starters can be regarded as dynamic scaffolds that link linguistic form, communicative function, and cognitive engagement across proficiency levels.

METHODOLOGY

The study involved 48 undergraduate students from Fergana State University enrolled in a General English course. The participants were divided into two proficiency groups based on placement test results: Intermediate (B1) and Upper-Intermediate (B2). A quasi-experimental design was implemented over an eight-week period. Sentence starters were integrated into speaking lessons for the experimental group, while the control group continued following the regular communicative syllabus.

Data were collected through a combination of speaking tasks, tests, questionnaires, interviews, and observation logs. Both groups participated in role-

plays, debates, and discussions, which were evaluated using a rubric focusing on fluency, coherence, vocabulary range, and interaction. Pre- and post-tests were conducted to measure speaking performance, with all assessments recorded and rated by two independent evaluators to ensure reliability. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were administered to gather students' perceptions of sentence starters and their perceived usefulness in communication. Additionally, observation logs were maintained by the instructor to record instances of spontaneous sentence starter use and peer interaction patterns during lessons.

In the experimental group, each lesson began with the introduction of five to ten target sentence starters related to specific communicative functions such as giving opinions, expressing agreement or disagreement, and clarifying ideas. Students initially practiced these starters through guided mini-dialogues and subsequently applied them in authentic communicative tasks. Over the course of the intervention, the teacher gradually reduced the visibility of prompts to encourage students' independent use of sentence starters in spontaneous speech.

RESULTS

The statistical analysis of pre- and post-test speaking scores demonstrated a significant improvement in the performance of the experimental group compared to the control group. In particular, the experimental group showed notable gains across all assessed criteria: fluency increased by an average of 26%, coherence by 23%, interaction by 21%, and lexical richness by 18%. In contrast, the control group exhibited smaller gains, ranging between 10% and 12% across the same criteria. The differences between the two groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the integration of sentence starters had a measurable positive effect on students' speaking proficiency.

Qualitative data from classroom observations and interviews supported the quantitative results. Observations revealed more sustained interaction and balanced participation among students of varying proficiency levels in the experimental group. Lower-proficiency learners reported that the use of sentence starters helped them "find the right words" and "start talking without fear," while higher-level students highlighted improvements in the organization and clarity of their speech. Teachers also noted a decrease in long pauses and an increase in coherence and continuity during classroom discussions.

Students' reflections further indicated that sentence starters not only facilitated verbal expression but also contributed to the internalization of discourse markers and conversational structures. These elements were seen as essential for developing natural and confident communication in real-life contexts.

DISCUSSION

The results confirm that sentence starters function effectively as linguistic scaffolds for developing communicative competence across proficiency levels. By offering structured linguistic frames, they lower anxiety, provide organizational support, and enable learners to participate meaningfully in discourse.

The findings align with Vygotsky's principle of guided learning within the ZPD, where external scaffolds are internalized through repeated use (Vygotsky, 1978). The progressive removal of prompts reflected students' growing independence in managing interactions—echoing the gradual release model (Gibbons, 2015).

Sentence starters also supported differentiated instruction by accommodating mixed-ability groups: beginners benefited from formulaic expressions for participation, while advanced learners enhanced precision and fluency through extension of these structures.

Nevertheless, the study revealed challenges such as overreliance on fixed patterns and limited creativity in some cases, suggesting the need for balance between scaffolding and spontaneous speech practice.

CONCLUSION

Sentence starters represent a simple yet powerful scaffolding tool for enhancing students' communicative skills across proficiency levels. Their systematic use promotes fluency, coherence, and confidence, enabling learners to participate actively in classroom interactions. For teachers, sentence starters provide an adaptable framework for differentiation and inclusion.

Future research could explore the integration of digital sentence starter tools or multimodal scaffolding to further support speaking development in online and hybrid learning contexts.

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