



Scaffolding English and Academic Skills for Iraqi English as Additional Language (EAL) Learners

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Introduction

In Australia, many international students enter universities directly after showing evidence from international language tests of their competence to study through the medium of English. However, a significant number, over 28%, enter after completing English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) programs at either university language centres or private providers in Australia (Australian Education International, 2013). Although the primary focus of ELICOS centres is the enhancement of students' English language, they also emphasise academic skills. Various teaching methodologies are employed in the ELICOS sector varying from English for Academic Purposes to genre-based teaching (Dyson, 2016) and from text or task-based work to a focus on academic socialisation and collaborative talk (Barron & Zeegers, 2006; Newman, 2017). However, irrespective of the methodology or content, almost all ELICOS programs in Australia can be described as employing 'scaffolding'.

The term, scaffolding is key to the 20th century and beyond of Western student-centred pedagogies and was originally coined by Jerome Bruner (1966) who believed that content becomes accessible to learners when it is carefully organised and each step in the learning process is unpacked. In the Australian context, Vygotsky's (1978) application of scaffolding where learners are guided through the 'zone of proximal development' through learning in cooperation with a more experienced learner or teacher to learner autonomy is most commonly thought of in relation to scaffolding. Teachers employ a range of strategies including the use of graphics or visuals, modelling and/or cooperative learning to enhance student's English proficiency and academic skills, starting with highly structured and supported learning and then gradually removing the scaffold (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002, p. 85 as cited in Bradley & Bradley 2004). The focus in all these activities, as noted by Rodrigues and Hyde (2015 p. 3) is "sequential" and "explicit" teaching. Bradley (2004) notes that there are three different kinds of scaffolding that are especially effective for second language learning:

- (1) Simplifying the language: English as additional language teachers/lecturers can simplify the language by, for example, minimizing selections, using the present tense, and trying to avoid the use of idioms or jargon.
- (2) Requiring the students to complete missing sections of a written or oral text rather than generating or creating from scratch.

- (3) Using visuals: ESL teachers can show data and require their students to respond using graphic organizers, tables, charts, outlines, and graphs.

Authors such as Rivera (2010) and Cooper (2016) have further developed Bradley's third element by adding the use of gestures to that of visuals as a usual way to 'contextualize' content. Ertmer and Glazewski (2015) among others note that a combination of visuals and gestures is particularly useful for the teaching of vocabulary. Cooper (2016) also notes that a key element of scaffolding is 'bridging' through providing links to students' previous knowledge and experience – an element of scaffolding also highlighted in the Australian context by Majid and Stapa (2017). Lucero (2014) notes that one important aspect of that 'bridging' is to explicitly unpack students' first language skills so that they can understand and apply these to the additional language. Radford et al. (2015) suggest that a 'pause and ask questions' technique is useful in tapping into students' prior experience during the scaffolding process since, as noted by Radford, et al. (2015), all learners require time to process new ideas and information (Radford et al., 2015). Ertmer and Glazewski have even more structure to their questioning than Radford et al. (2015) using a 'pause, ask, pause and repeat' technique. Others like Cheng (2008) have focused on how modelling can be most effectively used. Cheng suggests that explicit explanation and then modelling of genre supports students' understanding of content, organization and disciplinary language and in turn assists them to generate the target genre.

Modelling and explicit instruction are especially important for EAL students since the development of academic discipline-specific language is crucial for student success in higher education. Every university discipline and sub-discipline has its unique and demanding technical vocabulary, which is challenging for all students irrespective of their language background. However, international students with English as an additional language are likely to find it even more challenging since they are at the same time learning a new language and participating in a new general and academic culture. The key to student success in this challenging environment is teachers who carefully prepare, and scaffold learning for students and build field knowledge and vocabulary to help students connect with the disciplinary texts (Rodrigues & Hyde, 2015) within an intentionally planned sequence of lessons (McDonald, 2012) and students who are active respondents in the scaffolding process.

Based on the literature above, an additional two elements can be added to Bradley's three elements described above:

- (4) Drawing on prior knowledge and skills: English as additional language teachers draw on students' prior linguistic, cultural and academic knowledge and explicitly link this to the new skills or content.
- (5) Modelling skills and genres: English as additional language teachers model oral or written tasks, reading and listening skills as well as various text-types and oral genres.

Iraqi students studying in Australia, like many students from an EAL background, experience significant challenges in building their field and disciplinary knowledge and vocabulary while acquiring communicative competence in English. English has played a prominent role in Iraq from 1920 until the present day. The major language of international communication for the Republic of Iraq is English, and the growth of international business and the presence of multi-national forces in Iraq, mean a knowledge of English has become the passport to a better-paid job. English as a foreign language is taught to children from year 3 onwards and is an important subject at the secondary school level where students learn English for four to five 45-minute periods a week (Iraqi Ministry of Education, 2018). At the university level, English is viewed as essential for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies in most Science, Technology Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM) disciplines where some subjects are even taught through the medium of English, (Al Hamdany & Picard, 2013). However, there are still various pedagogical and practical challenges such as an absence of English native speakers to communicate with (Al Hamdany & Picard, 2014) and outdated teacher-centered teaching methods (Alseady, 2017). Ali's

(2012) study showed that while grammatical structures were scaffolded to a certain extent, scaffolding of context and register was lacking. According to Jasim (2012), this along with a lack of practice in writing resulted in poor disciplinary writing skills in Iraqi learners in Iraq particularly when studying abroad. A lack of exposure and effective teaching methods is of course exacerbated when the student has had an interrupted education such as the case of Iraqi refugees living in Australia.

In 2016, Sydney University launched a collaboration with nine other New South Wales universities: Western Sydney University, University of New South Wales, University of Technology Sydney, University of Newcastle, Macquarie University, Australian Catholic University, University of New England, University of Wollongong and Charles Sturt University. The project aimed to provide higher education opportunities for Iraqi refugees through the provision of fee and living expenses scholarships to students on humanitarian visas. One of the prerequisites of the scholarships was that the respondents needed to pass pre-enrolment English language courses (The University of Sydney, 2016) at the various accredited ELICOS centers. Al Hamdany and Picard's research in 2014 revealed that Iraqi students were exposed to specific student-centered teaching methods and a range of text types appropriate to their studies during a Pre-Preparatory English Course and that this assisted them in developing general academic skills along with preparing them for discipline-specific study. However, to date, no one has looked explicitly at Iraqi students' experiences in Australia of pedagogies, and of scaffolding in particular.

This research aims to explore Iraqi refugee students' experiences of scaffolding in ELICOS learning centres and the effectiveness of the method for this cohort.

Objectives of the Research

In order to achieve this aim, this study has the following specific objectives:

- (1) To identify the English and academic skills learning needs of Iraqi EAL learners studying ELICOS at Australian universities.
- (2) To determine the effectiveness of various scaffolding techniques for Iraqi EAL learners studying ELICOS at Australian universities.

Research Methodology

As previously noted, a questionnaire was developed to identify the needs of Iraqi students studying ELICOS as well as their perceptions of scaffolding techniques used in ELICOS classrooms in Australia. The survey consisted of 12 questions in four sections: demographic questions, questions on their beliefs and experiences around proficiency and communication in English in the Australian context, questions on their perceptions of scaffolding in the Australian ELICOS context, and the remaining questions on their perceptions of specific pedagogies. The survey was first piloted with two students to ensure understanding before being released to the entire cohort. The survey was created and distributed through an online SurveyMonkey. A web link for this survey was sent to the cohort via emails and social media (Facebook). Purposive sampling was used since the researcher is also from an Iraqi background and knew the students through his social networks. Twenty Iraqi ELICOS students from different Australian universities were surveyed. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics.

Data Analysis

Demographic Data

As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, the cohort was relatively homogenous with 18 out of 20 respondents (94%) being in the 18 to 35 years of age category and the majority of these (16) being 25 to 35 years of age. Only one respondent was over 35 and none younger than 18. One respondent did not complete this question. Interestingly, when compared with other studies of a similar cohort (e.g. Al Hamdany & Picard, 2013), there were more female respondents than males (60% and 40% respectively). However, there was no significant difference in the data from the other questions between male and female respondents and between older and younger respondents.

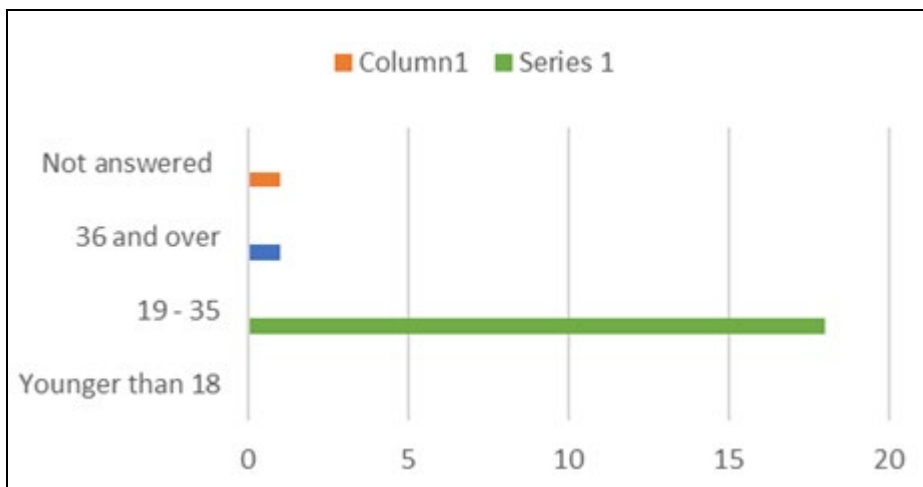


Figure 1. Age group.

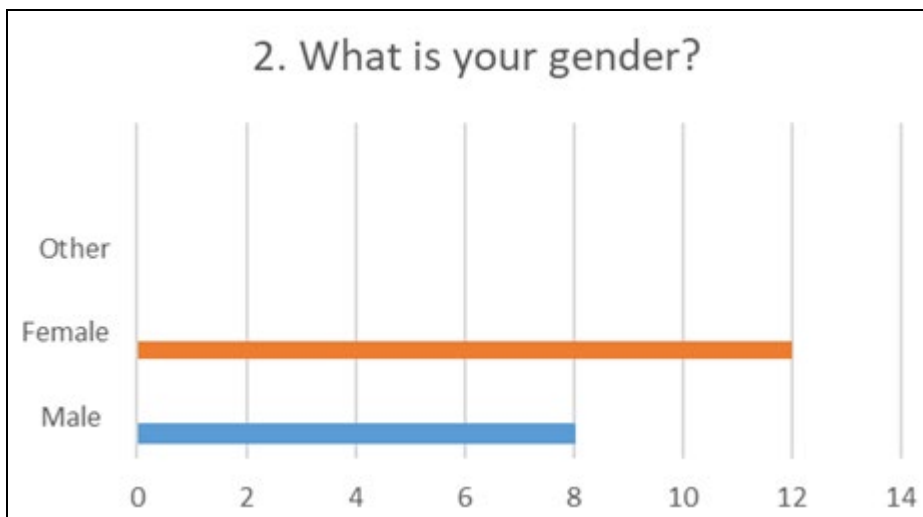


Figure 2. Gender.

Communication Needs

The second section of the questionnaire aimed to determine the needs of the Iraqi ELICOS learners. The questions consisted of statements with which the respondents agreed or disagreed. These focused on whether they required support/scaffolding in communicating in the classroom with their teachers,

communicating outside of the class and in their oral and written academic communication. As revealed in Figures 3 and 4, despite studying English in high school and having lived in Australia for between one to three years, the majority of respondents (85%) strongly agreed or agreed that they needed further support in breaching the communication gap with their English teachers. Very few (5% and 10% respectively) were neutral or disagreed with this statement. A significant number (9 respondents) admitted to struggling to understanding communication outside of the classroom with an additional two respondents strongly agreeing with this statement. However, 31.58% of respondents were neutral on this topic and two disagreed. This suggests that perhaps academic communication is more challenging than everyday communication and requires additional scaffolding. Interestingly, in the final question in this section, although 70% of respondents believed that communicative competence in English was important for disciplinary studies, a significant percentage (30%) were neutral on this topic. This suggests that these students felt that scaffolding in disciplinary English might be as valuable as or more so than a focus on general communicative competence in English. This is an argument held by many who support English for Specific Academic Purposes or English for Specific Professional Purposes classes rather than General English or English for Academic Purposes.

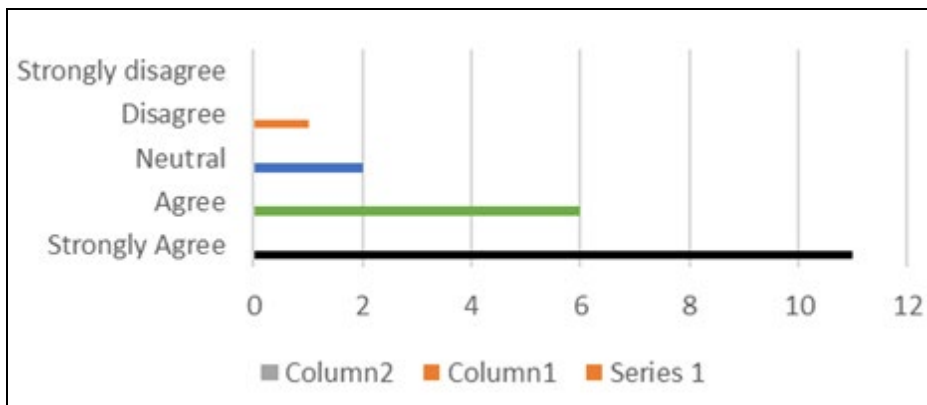


Figure 3. I need support in breaching the communications gap when communicating with my ELICOS teachers.

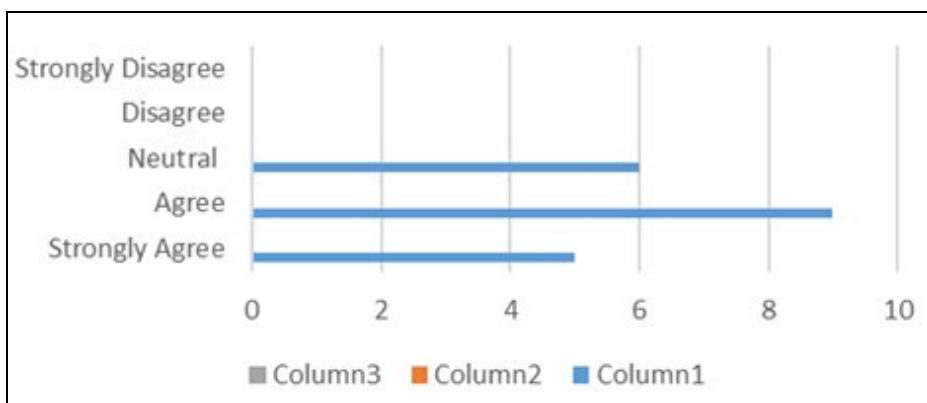


Figure 4. I believe English communicative competence has a significant impact on disciplinary academic writing and oral presentation.

Perceptions of Scaffolding in the Australian Context

The third section of the questionnaire focused on the respondents’ perceptions of scaffolding in the Australian ELICOS context. Although the majority of the respondents (70%) agreed that the scaffolding techniques used in Australian ELICOS centres was successful, it is interesting to note that only one

respondent strongly agreed with this statement. In addition, a significant percentage (25%) were neutral. Therefore, it is clear that although none of the respondents were negative about the scaffolding they experienced, perhaps there is further work needed to further refine scaffolding techniques and make them relevant to individual learners. The respondents were more ambivalent regarding the differences between the scaffolding they had experienced in the past, versus those in ELICOS centres in Australia. The majority strongly agreed or agreed that the scaffolding was different to what they had previously experienced. However, 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement and another 20% were ambivalent regarding the statement. This suggests that we cannot assume that students did not experience scaffolding in their previous education experiences in Iraq or that it was necessarily different to that used in Australia. Although different (and perhaps more teacher-centred teaching) teaching methods are more common in the Iraqi context as suggested by the responses of the majority of the respondents and the literature, there are still a significant number of respondents who have had similar experiences in both contexts suggesting that pedagogies are not static in either context. The respondents reported a variety of scaffolding techniques used in their Australian ELICOS classrooms.

Modelling, simplifying the language, and drawing on prior knowledge and experience were the most commonly reported scaffolding techniques with all students reporting that they had experienced these techniques in their ELICOS classrooms. Using visuals and graphs to elicit information was also strongly reported by the respondents with 90% of the respondents reporting that they had experienced this technique in their ELICOS classrooms. There were varying responses to the technique of encouraging students to complete a partially complete essay or texts with 35% responding that they had experienced the use of this scaffolding technique. However, 20% had not experienced the scaffolding technique and the largest percentage 45% did not know. This is significant since it suggests that either the use of this technique is not clearly articulated to students or less frequently used in ELICOS classes.

The respondents' rating of the various scaffolding techniques matches their evaluation of whether they were used or not. However, there were some significant differences. For example, the use of simplified language became the most valued technique with 95% of respondents valuing this technique as highly effective and only 5% ranking it as effective. Modelling also received a higher rating with 80% of respondents rating it highly. However, although a reasonable number of respondents reported their teachers using visuals and drawing on prior experience only 10% and 50% respectively reported these techniques as effective. This is surprising since all respondents reported that their teachers drew on their prior knowledge and experience. Perhaps this is because Australian ELICOS teachers lack the knowledge of the students' prior knowledge or experience and fail to understand the richness of the students' experiences. As with the previous statement, the effective use of completion techniques was rarely reported and half of the respondents reported that the technique was only somewhat effective with a significant percentage (40%) reporting it as somewhat effective. No respondents reported the technique as highly effective.

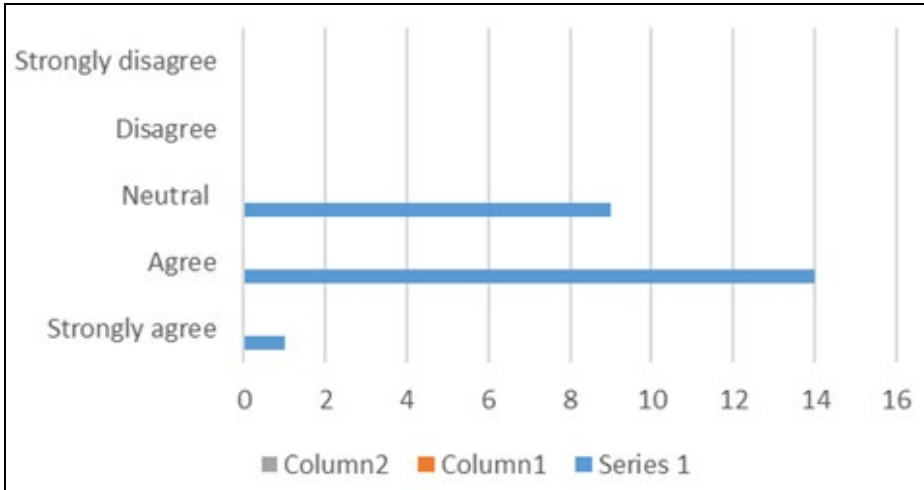


Figure 5. I believe that the scaffolding techniques used in Australian ELICOS centres are effective.

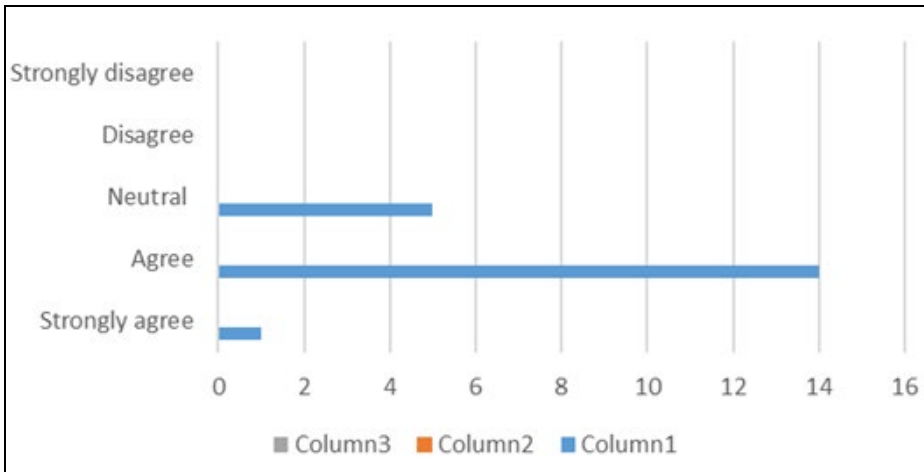


Figure 6. I believe that the scaffolding strategies or methods applied in Australian universities are different from those I have previously experienced.

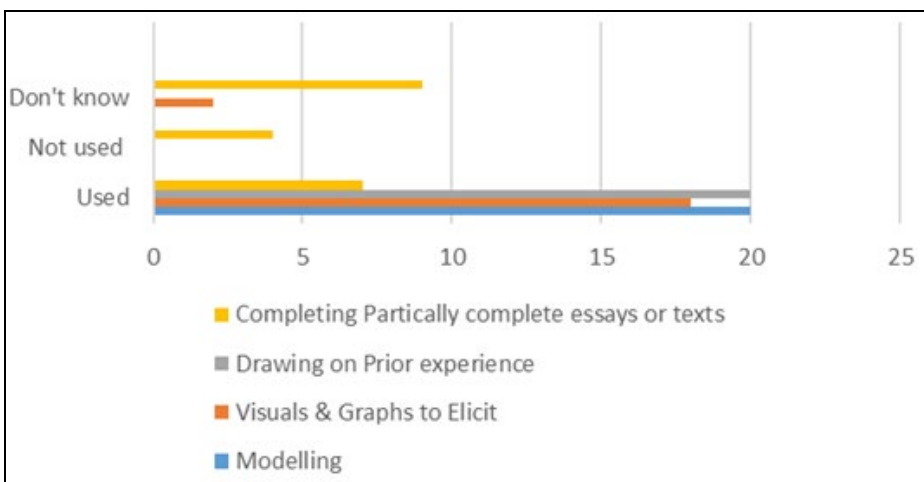


Figure 7. My teacher uses the following scaffolding techniques in the English classroom.

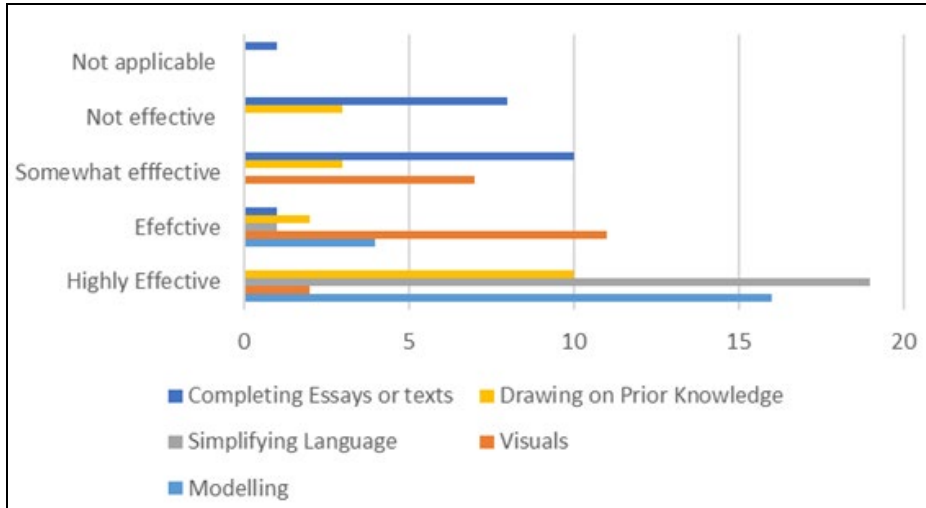


Figure 8. Rate the effectiveness of the following scaffolding techniques in helping you learn academic English.

Preferred Pedagogy

Scaffolding techniques are often embedded in specific pedagogies and task types. Therefore, the respondents were asked about their perception of the effectiveness of three key pedagogies: task-based and genre-based tasks (usually associated with more student-focused pedagogies) and grammar-based pedagogies (usually associated with a more teacher-focused pedagogy). As expected, the students ranked the task-based and genre-based pedagogies more highly than the grammar-based pedagogy with 85%, and 50% respectively with only one respondent rating the grammar-based pedagogies as effective. However, interestingly, task-based pedagogies were far higher ranked than genre-based (half of the respondents ranked genre-based pedagogies as somewhat effective or not effective) suggesting perhaps that a focus on text is too esoteric for students who want a strong discipline and practical focus.

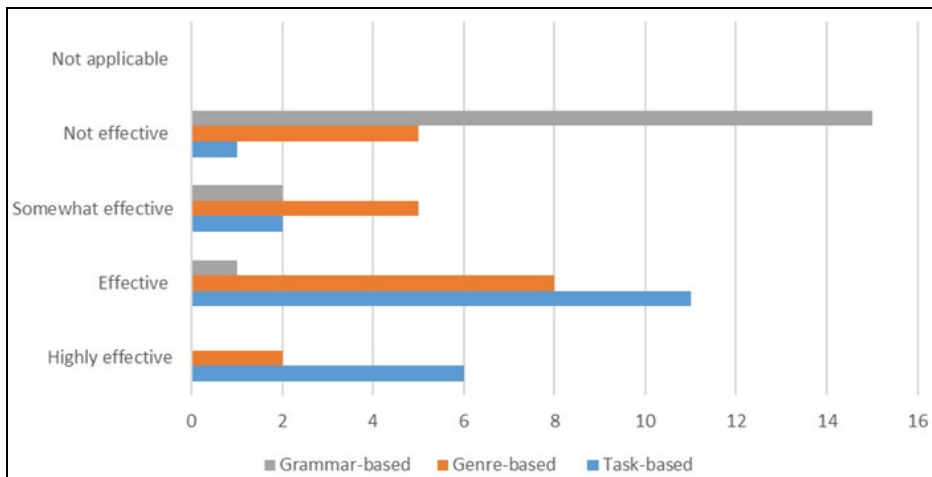


Figure 9. Task-based learning is an effective approach for learning academic English.

Discussion

In order to obtain rich data that will help to identify the English and academic skills learning needs of EAL Iraqi learners studying ELICOS at Australian universities, and to determine the effectiveness of various scaffolding techniques for EAL Iraqi learners studying ELICOS at Australian universities, the

questionnaires were divided into (1) demographic questions, (2) questions on their beliefs and experiences around proficiency and communication in English in the Australian context, and (3) questions on their perceptions of scaffolding in the Australian ELICOS context

The result showed that the scaffolding techniques used in Australian ELICOS centres were viewed as useful by the participants. This is in line with what is mentioned in the international literature (e.g., Barron & Zeegers, 2006; Dyson, 2016; Newman, 2017). However, further study is needed to refine the scaffolding techniques used in ELICOS in order to help to make these techniques relevant to each specific cohort.

The data also revealed that this cohort face an English communication gap despite some of them having studied English at high school and having lived in Australia for between one to three years and the use of scaffolding techniques in the ELICOS centres. This suggests that perhaps academic communication is more challenging than everyday communication and requires additional scaffolding. Which means that further support is needed in order to breach the said communication gap with their English teachers. One method of doing this outlined in the literature is presented by McDonald (2012) who stated that teachers need to intentionally plan the sequence of lessons. More specifically, the EAL teacher needs to simplify the language, for example, minimizing selections, using the present tense, and trying to avoid the use of idioms or jargon. The current study showed that different ELICOS students preferred scaffolding techniques. Simplifying language and modelling as scaffolding techniques were explicitly preferred by the participants that would potentially help to meet their academic skills and learning needs.

As the scaffolding techniques are imbedded in different pedagogies, the current study showed that the task-based and genre-based pedagogies were more highly preferred than the grammar-based pedagogy. However, interestingly, task-based pedagogies were far higher ranked than genre-based ones. The study revealed that this pedagogy is really effective to teach EAL students. This is in line with what has been noted in the literature where Dyson (2016) stated that text or task-based work enhances academic socialisation and collaborative talk (Barron & Zeegers, 2006; Newman, 2017).

Conclusion

To conclude, this study found that scaffolding techniques are effective for English and academic learning needs of EAL Iraqi learners studying ELICOS at Australian Universities. The participants sampled in this study agreed about the importance of scaffolding. Modelling, simplifying the language, drawing on prior knowledge and experience, using visuals and graphs to elicit information were the most commonly reported scaffolding techniques. However, the participants still encountered communication challenges and outside the classroom due to the communication gap with their English teachers, the teachers' lack of knowledge of the students' prior knowledge or experience, and the fact that certain techniques may not be clearly articulated to students or less frequently used in ELICOS classes. Additional research needs to be conducted to determine how well EAL teachers use the various scaffolding techniques to minimise or perhaps eliminate these challenges.

The Author

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