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## **Instructional Scaffolding and Learner Autonomy in EFL Writing: A Narrative Review of Impacts on Metacognitive Awareness and Writing Performance**

### **Abstract**

Instructional scaffolding, a structured form of pedagogical support calibrated to a learner's current proficiency and progressively withdrawn as competence increases, has been widely recognized as essential to fostering writing development and independence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. This narrative literature review synthesizes existing scholarship to examine how scaffolding affects three interconnected outcomes: learner autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and writing performance. Drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, dissertations, and research reports, the review employs thematic coding to identify recurrent patterns across the literature. Findings indicate that scaffolding promotes learner autonomy by enabling a deliberate shift of responsibility from instructor to student through guided practice and the gradual fading of support. The review further reveals that scaffolding strengthens metacognitive awareness by encouraging students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning processes. With respect to writing, process-oriented and genre-based scaffolding techniques yield measurable improvements in structural organization, lexical variety, syntactic complexity, and overall textual quality. However, the effectiveness of scaffolding is contingent upon several mediating factors, including student readiness, the precision with which support is delivered, teacher expertise, and contextual variables such as institutional culture and class size. The review concludes by identifying gaps in the literature and recommending future research into culturally responsive scaffolding practices, the integration of digital scaffolding tools, and the long-term sustainability of autonomy gains.

**Keywords:** *instructional scaffolding, learner autonomy, metacognitive awareness, writing performance, English as a Foreign Language, Zone of Proximal Development*

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## **EFL Writing-də tədris iskelesi və tələbə muxtariyyəti: metakognitiv şüur və yazı performansına təsirlərin hekayə icmalı**

### **Xülasə**

Öyrəninin hazırkı səriştəsinə uyğunlaşdırılan və səriştə artdıqca tədrisən geri götürülən pedaqoji dəstəyin strukturlaşdırılmış forması olan təlimat iskelesinin Xarici Dil (EFL) konteksti kimi ingilis dilində yazı inkişafını və müstəqilliyini inkişaf etdirmək üçün vacib olduğu geniş şəkildə qəbul edilmişdir. Bu povest ədəbiyyat icmalı iskelesinin bir-biri ilə əlaqəli üç nəticəyə necə təsir etdiyini araşdırmaq üçün mövcud təqaüdləri sintez edir: şagird muxtariyyəti, metakognitiv şüur və yazı performansı. Nəzərdən keçmiş jurnal məqalələri, kitablar, kitab fəsilləri, dissertasiyalar və tədqiqat hesabatlarına əsaslanaraq aparılan araşdırma ədəbiyyatda təkrarlanan nümunələri müəyyən etmək üçün tematik kodlaşdırmadan istifadə edir.

Tapıntılar göstərir ki, iskele idarəolunan təcrübə və dəstəyin tədricən azaldılması vasitəsilə məsuliyyətin qəsdən təlimatçıdan tələbəyə keçməsinə təmin etməklə, şagirdin muxtariyyətini təşviq edir. İcmal daha sonra göstərir ki, iskele tələbələri öz öyrənmə proseslərini planlaşdırmağa, izləməyə və qiymətləndirməyə təşviq etməklə metakognitiv şüurunu gücləndirir. Yazı ilə əlaqədar olaraq, proses yönümlü və janr əsaslı iskele üsulları struktur təşkilatı, leksik müxtəliflik, sintaktik mürəkkəbliyə və ümumi mətn keyfiyyətində ölçülə bilən təkmilləşdirmələr verir. Bununla belə, iskelenin effektivliyi bir neçə vasitəçi amildən, o cümlədən tələbə hazırlığından, dəstəyin çatdırılma dəqiqliyindən, müəllimin təcrübəsindən və institusional mədəniyyət və sinif ölçüsü kimi kontekstual dəyişənlərdən asılıdır. İcmal daha sonra göstərir ki, iskele tələbələri öz öyrənmə proseslərini planlaşdırmağa, izləməyə və qiymətləndirməyə təşviq etməklə metakognitiv şüurunu gücləndirir. Yazı ilə əlaqədar olaraq, proses yönümlü və janr əsaslı iskele üsulları struktur təşkilatı, leksik müxtəliflik, sintaktik mürəkkəbliyə və ümumi mətn keyfiyyətində ölçülə bilən təkmilləşdirmələr verir. Bununla belə, iskelenin effektivliyi bir neçə vasitəçi amildən, o cümlədən tələbə hazırlığından, dəstəyin çatdırılma dəqiqliyindən, müəllimin təcrübəsindən və institusional mədəniyyət və sinif ölçüsü kimi kontekstual dəyişənlərdən asılıdır.

**Açar sözlər:** *tədris iskelesi, şagird muxtariyyəti, metakognitiv şüur, yazı performans, xarici dil kimi ingilis dili, Proksimal İnkişaf Zonası*

## Introduction

Within educational research, scaffolding is broadly acknowledged as a fundamental mediating process that facilitates effective learning. Grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and aligned with Piaget's (1976) constructivist principles, the concept underscores the dynamic relationship between instructional assistance and the gradual emergence of student independence (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Rogoff, 1990; Wood et al., 1976). The term *scaffolding* was originally coined by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) to characterize the interactive, temporary support that educators provide to help learners accomplish tasks that lie beyond their unassisted capabilities. In practice, scaffolding operates within what Vygotsky (1978) termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – the cognitive space between what a student can achieve independently and what becomes attainable through guided collaboration with a more knowledgeable other. By employing techniques such as modeling, targeted questioning, collaborative dialogue, and formative feedback, educators help students bridge this gap and progressively assume responsibility for their own learning (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Walqui, 2006).

The relevance of scaffolding is particularly pronounced in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, where writing represents both a primary measure of academic literacy and a persistent source of difficulty for learners (Graddol, 2006; Graham & Perin, 2007). Writing demands complex, higher-order cognitive processes – including evaluation, analysis, and synthesis – that are essential for intellectual development (Hyland, 2003). High levels of writing proficiency among EFL learners support broader linguistic progress by strengthening grammatical accuracy, expanding vocabulary range, and refining the structural organization of discourse (Byrne, 1979). Nevertheless, EFL students frequently encounter significant obstacles in writing, including unfamiliarity with rhetorical conventions, limited grammatical competence, and a constrained lexicon (Oeun & Heng, 2024a, 2025; Raoofi et al., 2014; Richards & Renandya, 2002). In the Cambodian educational context, for example, research has documented that high school students struggle to express personal perspectives coherently, maintain logical cohesion, and meet the demands of academic essay writing (Heng et al., 2020; Oeun & Heng, 2025; Seth et al., 2025). These challenges point to a clear need for structured pedagogical interventions that help learners close the gap between their present abilities and the proficiency levels required for academic success.

A substantial body of research has documented the multifaceted benefits of instructional scaffolding. Studies have shown that scaffolding increases student motivation and self-assurance (Lantolf et al., 2014), promotes deeper engagement and critical analysis through interactive feedback and collaborative discourse (Van de Pol et al., 2010), and supports the development of self-regulatory

habits by systematically providing and then withdrawing guidance (Reiser & Tabak, 2014). Belland (2017) has further argued that scaffolding helps learners internalize effective strategies and accept greater responsibility for their academic work, while specialized tools such as graphic organizers and checklists reduce cognitive load and facilitate skill acquisition in complex writing tasks (Belland, 2017; Em, 2022). Process-oriented and genre-specific scaffolding techniques have been shown to yield superior writing outcomes (Chairinkam & Yawiloeng, 2024; Ertugruloglu et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2024), and scaffolded interventions have been linked to improvements in academic achievement across complex domains including writing and problem-solving (Allagui, 2024; Ertugruloglu et al., 2023).

Despite this growing evidence base, the existing literature lacks a cohesive synthesis that integrates findings on scaffolding's effects on learner autonomy, metacognitive development, and writing performance within a single analytical framework. The present article addresses this gap by conducting a narrative literature review that draws upon secondary sources to examine three interrelated research questions: (a) How does instructional scaffolding foster learner autonomy in EFL contexts? (b) In what ways does scaffolding promote metacognitive awareness among EFL learners? (c) What is the impact of scaffolding on EFL writing performance? The paper is organized according to the Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion (IMRAD) structure. Following this introduction, the methods section describes the review design and analytical procedures. The results section presents findings organized around three thematic areas – autonomy, metacognition, and writing performance – and the discussion section interprets these findings in relation to existing theory and identifies implications for practice. The article concludes with recommendations for educators, policymakers, and future researchers.

### Research

*Research Design.* This study adopts a narrative literature review methodology, an approach well suited to delivering a comprehensive summary of existing scholarship while identifying patterns, established findings, and unresolved questions within a field (Snyder, 2019). Unlike systematic reviews, which apply rigid inclusion and exclusion criteria, narrative reviews prioritize breadth and interpretive flexibility, enabling the researcher to synthesize diverse sources into a coherent analytical narrative (Maier, 2013; Webster & Watson, 2002). This methodological choice was deliberate: the aim of the present study is not to quantify effect sizes or conduct meta-analytic comparisons but rather to provide a unified, thematically organized account of how scaffolding shapes learner autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and writing performance in EFL contexts.

*Source Selection.* Because the study employs a narrative rather than a systematic review framework, formal inclusion and exclusion criteria were not strictly imposed. Instead, the selection process was guided by the goal of assembling a broad, representative corpus of peer-reviewed articles, academic books, book chapters, research reports, and doctoral dissertations relevant to instructional scaffolding, learner autonomy, and EFL writing. No restrictions were placed on publication dates in order to accommodate foundational theoretical works alongside contemporary empirical studies, thereby ensuring a historically informed analysis. The distribution of source types included in the review is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Distribution of Sources by Type*

Source Type	Count	Percentage
Journal Articles	25	62.5%
Books	8	20.0%
Book Chapters	3	7.5%
Doctoral Dissertations	1	2.5%
Research Reports and Other Sources	3	7.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Analytical Procedure.* The selected documents were analyzed using thematic coding, a systematic qualitative procedure in which the researcher organizes, filters, and highlights salient features of the data to generate categories, themes, and concepts (Saldaña, 2009). All sources were read iteratively, and initial codes were recorded in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Through successive rounds of coding and comparison, the analysis yielded three overarching themes: (a) the fostering of learner autonomy, (b) the promotion of metacognitive awareness, and (c) the enhancement of writing performance. These themes structure the presentation of results in the following section.

*Results.* The thematic analysis of the reviewed literature produced findings organized around three principal themes. Each theme is presented below with reference to the supporting evidence identified across the corpus.

*The Conceptual Foundations of Scaffolding.* The reviewed literature converges on a consistent conceptualization of scaffolding as a temporary, structured form of instructional support designed to help learners accomplish tasks that exceed their current independent capabilities. Rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and first articulated by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), the concept foregrounds the role of guided interaction within the ZPD. Central to this framework is the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), which describes a calibrated process through which instructors first assess learner needs, deliver targeted assistance, and then systematically withdraw support as student competence increases (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Through this process, students are expected to develop greater self-regulation, personal agency, and proactive participation in their education. In the specific context of writing instruction, scaffolding has been associated with improvements in structural organization, logical coherence, lexical variety, and overall textual quality (Allagui, 2024; Chairinkam & Yawiloeng, 2024; Ertugruloglu et al., 2023; Fisher & Frey, 2014; Han, 2021; Hasan & Karim, 2019; Nguyen, 2024; Reiser & Tabak, 2014).

*Scaffolding and Learner Autonomy.* Learner autonomy, broadly defined as the capacity of students to direct their own educational journeys by setting goals, selecting appropriate strategies, monitoring their progress, and evaluating outcomes (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991), emerged as a central theme in the literature. The reviewed studies consistently indicate that scaffolding fosters autonomy through a structured process of guided practice followed by the incremental fading of instructional support.

Several mechanisms underlie this relationship. First, scaffolding operates within the ZPD by providing learners with the expert guidance necessary to accomplish tasks they cannot yet manage alone, while simultaneously building the competence that will enable future independent performance (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976). As educators progressively reduce their level of intervention, the responsibility for goal setting, progress monitoring, and outcome evaluation shifts toward the student (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Reiser & Tabak, 2014). Han (2021) observed that scaffolding can transform students from passive recipients of information into active knowledge seekers, refining their abilities to plan, monitor, and assess their own progress. Aldosari and Alsager (2023) similarly found that structured peer engagement and mentored collaboration help learners internalize core strategies and gradually assume accountability for content mastery.

Second, the deliberate phasing out of scaffolding is instrumental in developing autonomous problem-solving capabilities. Belland (2017) emphasized that the systematic reduction of instructional support encourages learners to take ownership of their academic challenges. In EFL contexts specifically, Awadelkarim (2021) argued that scaffolding is central to building both linguistic competence and learner self-sufficiency, while Aldosari and Alsager (2023) described scaffolding as a bridge toward educational autonomy in which collaborative efforts help students internalize methodologies and assume increasing control over their learning. However, the literature also identifies a significant caveat: scaffolding may fail to promote autonomy if educators are insufficiently trained in its application. Ertugruloglu et al. (2023) highlighted that a lack of specialized pedagogical training often prevents teachers from delivering the responsive, adaptive support necessary for students to achieve genuine independence.

*Scaffolding and Metacognitive Awareness.* The second major theme concerns the role of scaffolding in promoting metacognitive awareness – that is, students’ capacity to reflect on, monitor, and regulate their own cognitive processes. The literature identifies scaffolding as a catalyst for metacognitive development through several pathways.

By decomposing complex tasks into manageable components and providing structured guidance, scaffolding helps students recognize their personal accountability for knowledge construction (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978; Walqui, 2006; Wood et al., 1976). Kim et al. (2019) identified appropriate scaffolding as critical for offering optimal challenges within problem-based learning environments, finding that metacognitive support – particularly that which encourages planning and reflection – sharpened student awareness and enhanced their capacity to manage academic responsibilities. Similarly, through the use of inquiry, feedback, and the progressive reduction of teacher intervention, students acquire the skills necessary to evaluate arguments, substantiate claims, and arrive at evidence-based conclusions (Hogan & Pressley, 1997; Van de Pol et al., 2010; Vygotsky, 1978).

Scaffolding also strengthens self-efficacy, which functions as both a product and a driver of metacognitive engagement. Belland (2017) observed that organized instructional direction combined with strategy modeling, accompanied by a progressive transfer of responsibility, reinforces learners’ confidence in their own capacities. Allagui (2024) reported that scaffolded interventions in argumentative writing tasks significantly improved student confidence and enabled autonomous use of external sources. Within EFL environments, Awadelkarim (2021) found that scaffolding encourages both competence and independence, making learners more conscious of their active role in knowledge construction. Taken together, the evidence suggests that metacognitive scaffolding – encompassing planning, monitoring, and reflective evaluation – reinforces self-efficacy by promoting strategic thinking and autonomous problem-solving (Kim et al., 2019; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

*Scaffolding and Writing Performance.* The third theme addresses the direct impact of scaffolding on writing quality, with the literature providing converging evidence that both genre-based and process-oriented scaffolding techniques produce measurable improvements in student writing.

Genre-based scaffolding assists students in navigating specific textual structures, thereby refining the organization, logical flow, and linguistic precision of their work. Nguyen (2024) found that scaffolded, genre-based instruction significantly improved both student independence and the overall quality of their writing. Chairinkam and Yawiloeng (2024) similarly reported that the systematic application of genre-specific scaffolding facilitated students’ critical engagement and supported their ongoing development as writers. Process-oriented scaffolding, which prioritizes stages such as drafting, peer evaluation, and revision, improves writing proficiency by encouraging deliberate planning and structured reflection (Ertugruloglu et al., 2023). Spycher (2021) observed that students who received scaffolded instruction outperformed their peers in lexical variety, syntactic complexity, and comprehensive textual quality.

In environments characterized by limited English exposure, such as secondary schools in Cambodia, scaffolding has proven particularly effective in helping students incrementally internalize genre-specific conventions and the conventions of academic discourse (Cai, 2014; Em, 2022; Negretti & McGrath, 2018). Customized scaffolding tools, including checklists and graphic organizers, serve as vital aids that reduce cognitive load and facilitate the mastery of essential writing skills (Belland, 2017). Furthermore, collaborative scaffolding enables peer-assisted learning, allowing students to internalize new strategies and assume greater accountability for their written output (Aldosari & Alsager, 2023). Allagui (2024) additionally noted that targeted interventions – including the use of model texts and structured peer interactions – bolster learner self-efficacy while refining both linguistic accuracy and structural coherence. Piamsai (2020) demonstrated that scaffolding techniques are particularly effective at enhancing the academic writing competencies of less proficient learners, suggesting that the benefits of scaffolding may be most pronounced among those who face the greatest challenges.

*Discussion.* The findings of this narrative review indicate that instructional scaffolding exerts a substantive influence on learner autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and writing performance in EFL settings. This discussion interprets the results in relation to established theoretical frameworks, identifies the conditions under which scaffolding is most effective, and considers the practical implications of the findings.

*Theoretical Coherence and the ZPD.* The evidence assembled in this review is broadly consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Across the reviewed studies, the transition from expert-guided performance to independent mastery follows the trajectory predicted by ZPD theory: learners who receive appropriately calibrated support within their developmental zone progressively internalize the strategies modeled by their instructors and ultimately apply them autonomously. This pattern was evident in studies of autonomy development (Aldosari & Alsager, 2023; Han, 2021), metacognitive growth (Kim et al., 2019), and writing improvement (Chairinkam & Yawiloeng, 2024; Nguyen, 2024). The consistency of this pattern across multiple outcome domains reinforces the theoretical robustness of scaffolding as an instructional principle.

*Mediating Factors and Conditions of Effectiveness.* While the overall direction of the evidence is positive, the review also reveals that the effectiveness of scaffolding is not uniform. Several mediating factors shape the degree to which scaffolding translates into genuine learner autonomy and improved performance. Student readiness is a precondition: scaffolding that targets tasks far beyond or below a learner's current ZPD is unlikely to produce optimal results. The precision with which support is delivered matters as well; scaffolding must be responsive and adaptive, calibrated to the evolving needs of the learner rather than applied in a rigid, formulaic manner (Belland, 2017; Fisher & Frey, 2014). Teacher expertise emerges as a particularly critical variable. Ertugruloglu et al. (2023) emphasized that educators who lack specialized training in scaffolding techniques may be unable to provide the responsive support necessary for fostering independence. This finding carries significant implications for teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development. Contextual factors – including institutional culture, curricular constraints, class size, and the prevalence of high-stakes testing – further modulate the feasibility and impact of scaffolded instruction. In educational systems where traditional, teacher-centered methods prevail, the integration of scaffolding may require systemic shifts in pedagogical orientation (Chea & Kuon, 2024).

*Interconnections Among Autonomy, Metacognition, and Writing.* A notable finding of this review is the degree to which the three outcome domains – autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and writing performance – are mutually reinforcing. Scaffolding that promotes metacognitive skills such as planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation simultaneously builds the self-regulatory capacity that underlies learner autonomy (Benson, 2011; Little, 1991). In turn, greater autonomy enables students to engage more deeply with the writing process, applying internalized strategies to new tasks without ongoing external support. The emotional dimension identified in the literature (Allagui, 2024) – specifically, the enhancement of self-efficacy and confidence through scaffolded instruction – serves as a connective mechanism: students who believe in their own capacity are more likely to exercise autonomous judgment and persist through the demands of complex writing tasks. This interconnectedness suggests that scaffolding interventions designed to target one domain are likely to produce beneficial effects across the others, an insight with important implications for instructional design.

*Practical Implications.* The findings of this review carry several practical implications for educators and educational policymakers. First, teachers should intentionally embed scaffolding techniques including – modeling, guided practice, structured feedback, and the gradual release of responsibility – into their daily instruction. Particular emphasis should be placed on metacognitive scaffolds that explicitly teach students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, as these skills are foundational to both autonomy and writing development. Second, writing-specific scaffolds such as process-oriented drafting sequences, peer collaboration activities, and individual conferencing should be integrated into writing curricula to support both the confidence and the technical proficiency of

student writers. Third, national educational frameworks and institutional curricula should incorporate reflective exercises that promote self-regulation alongside structured, tiered writing phases. Fourth, professional development initiatives within schools and teacher education programs should equip educators with the competencies necessary to calibrate scaffolding in accordance with student readiness and to fade support at appropriate intervals.

*Limitations.* This review is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a narrative rather than a systematic review, the study did not apply formal inclusion and exclusion criteria, which introduces the possibility of selection bias. Second, the reliance on secondary sources means that the findings are mediated by the interpretations of the original researchers; no primary data were collected. Third, the absence of meta-analytic quantification limits the ability to draw conclusions about the magnitude of scaffolding's effects. Fourth, the reviewed literature is drawn predominantly from Cambodian and Southeast Asian EFL contexts, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings.

*Directions for Future Research.* Several avenues for future inquiry emerge from this review. First, longitudinal studies are needed to investigate whether the autonomy gains fostered by scaffolding are sustained over time or diminish once instructional support is fully withdrawn. Second, research should examine the efficacy of various teacher-training models in preparing educators to implement scaffolding effectively. Third, the development and empirical evaluation of culturally responsive scaffolding frameworks – designed to accommodate the linguistic, cultural, and institutional contexts of diverse learner populations – represent an important priority. Fourth, future studies might explore how digital tools and online platforms can be integrated into scaffolding methodologies to enhance student engagement in technology-mediated learning environments. Fifth, comparative analyses across different geographical regions and institutional types would provide insight into context-specific strategies for promoting learner independence. Finally, investigating the intersection of scaffolding, student motivation, and self-regulated learning could clarify the most effective approaches for sustaining long-term writing growth.

## Conclusion

This narrative literature review has examined the influence of instructional scaffolding on learner autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and writing performance in EFL contexts. The synthesis of the reviewed literature indicates that scaffolding, when implemented with appropriate calibration, promotes a structured and effective transition from instructor-guided performance to student independence. The evidence supports the conclusion that scaffolding strengthens metacognitive skills by encouraging learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own cognitive processes, and that both genre-based and process-oriented scaffolding techniques produce demonstrable improvements in writing quality. However, the effectiveness of scaffolding is contingent upon a range of mediating factors, including student readiness, the adaptiveness of instructional delivery, teacher expertise, and the broader institutional and cultural context. The review underscores the interconnected nature of the three outcome domains: autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and writing performance are mutually reinforcing, and interventions targeting one area are likely to yield benefits in the others. Moving forward, research that investigates the long-term durability of scaffolding effects, the design of culturally responsive scaffolding practices, and the integration of digital scaffolding tools will be essential to advancing both theory and practice in this field.

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