Scaffolding Information of Learner's Dictionaries for L2 Writing: A User Perspective

YANG Na
Shanghai Dianji University, Shanghai, China
LI Yan, ZHENG Jie
Northwest University, Xi'an, China

As a major resource and tool of language learning, learner's dictionaries have provided sufficient information for L2 writing, which serves as a good guide of peer feedback. Hence, learner's dictionaries are an indispensable part of scaffolding in the L2 writing feedback system. However, the effects of dictionary use in L2 writing have long been ignored either in L2 writing pedagogy or in learner lexicography. By applying the concept of "scaffolding" to peer feedback as the theoretical framework, this study first clarifies three distinct types of scaffolding information presented in current English learner's dictionaries, and then makes an investigation into EFL learners' perception and practical use of scaffolding information in their English writing. Results show that most EFL learners have positive attitudes towards scaffolding information and its role in motivating effective feedback in English writing. But their practical use of such information is not satisfactory owing to their inadequate skills and knowledge of dictionary use. This reflects a high demand of a dictionary use course in universities, which will help to raise EFL learners' dictionary use efficiency as well as improve English teachers' lexicographical expertise in English writing pedagogy.

Keywords: scaffolding information, learner's dictionaries, peer feedback

Introduction

Providing effective feedback is quite essential in L2 writing pedagogy. So far there have been three general categories of feedback: teacher feedback, peer feedback, and online feedback (Zhou, 2013). Among them, peer feedback is quite controversial in assisting L2 writing. Although some scholars have found that peer feedback has a beneficial effect on writing improvement, encourages critical reasoning, and even leads to more learner autonomy (Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998; Berg, 1999; Rollinson, 2005; Rouhi & Azizian, 2013; Yu & Lee, 2014), it turns out to have limited use in L2 writing due to a number of factors (Leki, 1990; Carson & Nelson, 1996; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Zhang, 1995; Sengupta, 1998). According to Rouhi and Azizian (2013, p. 1350), these factors fall into four categories. They include limited L2 proficiency and inadequate mastery of rhetorical rules, too much attendance to surface errors, negative attitudes towards peer feedback, and different sociolinguistic norms of interaction and beliefs in writing evaluation (Leki, 1990; Nelson & Murphy,

YANG Na, Doctor of Philosophy, associate professor, School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Dianji University, Shanghai, China.
LI Yan, Master of Arts, lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Northwest University, Xi'an, China.
ZHENG Jie, Master of Arts, lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Northwest University, Xi'an, China.

1992; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1994; Tsui & Ng, 2000). Therefore, to fully demonstrate the efficacy of peer feedback, sufficient guidance from teachers and necessary outside resources are needed to motivate L2 learners (Chang, 2015). As an indispensable language learning tool, learner's dictionaries have provided abundant information for L2 writing, which serves as part of scaffolding in the L2 writing feedback system (Yu, 2013). However, owing to the long-time marginal role of dictionary use in pedagogical practice, the effects of learner's dictionary use as the medium of feedback have long been ignored either in L2 writing pedagogy or in learner lexicography.

This study, by applying the concept of "scaffolding" to peer feedback as the theoretical framework, intends to investigate into scaffolding information presented in English learner's dictionaries from users' perspective with a focus on their perception and practical use in English writing process. On the basis of the results, some suggestions are given on lexicographical practice so as to enhance the role of dictionary use in helping to facilitate peer feedback efficacy in English writing pedagogy. Hopefully the study will also provide evidence in support of designing a dictionary use course for EFL learners.

Literature Review

Scaffolding Theories

Scaffolding theories used in language pedagogy originated from the construction field, in which scaffolding serves as a crucial building aid. It was introduced into the teaching arena in 1976 with an emphasis on the belief that by positive guidance or collaboration, poor learners will receive assistance from teachers or good learners. This will, in turn, benefit their language learning to a large extent. By incorporating Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (1978, p. 86), scaffolding instruction is aimed at building a conceptual framework for learners so as to enhance their perception of certain language points. With such a scaffolding framework, complicated learning tasks could be disintegrated, and learning efficiency is very likely to be escalated accordingly (Wei, 2016).

As to the effects of the application of scaffolding theories in language pedagogy, researchers, both home and abroad, have made many investigations in different contexts. For example, Cazden (1979) found that scaffolding instruction helped learners to achieve better cognitive development when applied to specific teaching activities. Richards (1996) testified that new linguistic structures were better acquired through incorporating scaffolding into language teaching. Zhang (2004) elaborated on the significance of scaffolding theory in high school English writing instruction. Bai (2007) explored the influence of scaffolding theory on English learners' listening and speaking in universities.

When it comes to the connection between scaffolding theories and writing pedagogy, there are two research findings which are worth mentioning. One is the L2 writing feedback model (Yu, 2013), which involves Subject, Object, Medium, Rules, Learning Community, Separation of Work, and Result concerning feedback. Among them, Media serve as necessary scaffolding because of their direct interaction with all the other six components. With dictionaries as a significant medium, their practical use will affect the effectiveness of feedback, especially peer feedback, to a large extent. The other is the detailed classification of three types of scaffolding in helping to facilitate effective peer feedback in L2 writing pedagogy by using English learner's dictionaries as an example (Wei, 2016). It has been justified by analyzing general dictionaries and specialized dictionaries that the scaffolding effects of learner's dictionaries are found in three aspects, i.e., language, structure, and content respectively. However, these two research findings are both based on theoretical analysis

without statistical evidence. Therefore, this study intends to investigate the availability and feasibility of scaffolding information in English learner's dictionaries. To achieve the goal, the scaffolding information presented in dictionary texts needs to be analyzed in depth first.

Classification of Scaffolding Information

Based on large-scale empirical studies, EFL learners usually have difficulty with the English language, content, and structure in composing an essay (Wang & Yu, 2008). In other words, inappropriate vocabulary use, lack of content, and poor organization are what EFL learners fail to excel in English writing. On the basis of Wei's elaboration of scaffolding effects of English learner's dictionaries, scaffolding information in English learner's dictionaries can be classified into three aspects as shown in Figure 1.
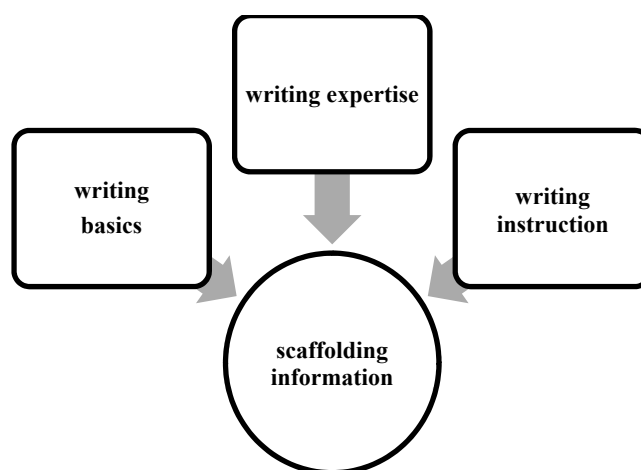

Figure 1. Classification of scaffolding information in learner's dictionaries.

First, Writing Basics (WB) refers to fundamental grammatical knowledge required in English writing for general purposes. It is the most essential information provided in learner's dictionaries, including "word classes", "tenses", "sentence structures", "collocations", "affixes", "common grammatical mistakes and errors", etc. Such information serves as good scaffolding for L2 learners to observe basic grammatical rules concerning language structure, which are thus too simple to be ignored by EFL learners. Both English-English dictionaries and English-Chinese dictionaries which are now commonly found in Chinese market have rich resources in this aspect.

Second, Writing Expertise (WE) involves the professional knowledge to assist English writing. It touches upon "registers" (e.g., word choice for different themes), "styles" (e.g., formal and informal), "genres" (e.g., writing for general purposes, writing for academic purposes, and writing for practical use), and "writing strategies" (e.g., cohesion, logic, and transition). Unlike WB, WE focuses on content, which is aimed at introducing some central concepts which L2 learners need to master before, during, and after the writing process. With such information, they will understand the nature of English writing holistically, learn about how to cope with content properly, and become professional writers. Unfortunately, WE is now only available in English-English dictionaries such as *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English* (OALD, 2010), *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE, 2009), *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English* (CALD, 2013), *Collins English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (COBUILD, 2012), *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (MEDAL, 2005), *Meriam-Webster Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English* (MWALD, 2008). To achieve different goals in dictionary compilation, each one has its own

features in textual design. Therefore, EFL learners need to know about their features before making a choice to help with their offering of peer feedback.

Compared with the previous two categories, Writing Instruction (WI) offers workable guidance and suggestions in coping with potential problems that L2 learners might encounter in their writing. It covers the design of the overall textual structure, steps in general writing procedure, guidance on varied writing genres, and draft revision. It is mainly used to familiarize L2 learners with the writing process and improve their writing efficiency eventually. As WI is quite a new design feature in dictionary texts, even among the Big Five monolingual English dictionaries, only two, i.e., OALD and CALD, have made this innovative attempt, let alone English-Chinese dictionaries.

Methodology

To investigate users' perception and use of scaffolding information in English learner's dictionaries, the study made a survey among EFL learners by using an online questionnaire. Details are given as follows.

Participants

Participants in the investigation are undergraduate students from more than 20 universities in China. Among them, 32.6% are male, and 67.4% are female. 20.3% are in the first year, 51.7% in the second year, 18.3% in the third year, and 9.7% in the fourth year. Furthermore, 26.2% are English majors, while 73.8% are non-English majors. They fall into three groups in terms of their English proficiency: advanced learners (AL, 31.4%), intermediate learners (IL, 44%), and poor learners (PL, 24.6%)[1]. Generally the distribution of participants concerning gender, age, major, and English proficiency is reasonable.

Procedure

A questionnaire was designed by using a professional online model, and then distributed on the Internet[2]. More than 700 questionnaires were collected, in which 629 turned out to be effective. After some fundamental calculation done online, further detailed data analysis was made to help in-depth discussion that followed. For the sake of clearer demonstration of the results, percentages were used to explain the data collected for each question item under investigation.

Questionnaire

The self-designed questionnaire used for the survey is composed of 13 items, which are grouped into four sections. They are learners' perception of scaffolding information (Q1 to Q5), learners' practical use of scaffolding information (Q6 to Q9), learners' needs of scaffolding information (Q10 to Q12), and learners' viewpoints of scaffolding information presentation (Q13). All of them are multiple-choice questions except Q13 which invites participants to write down their opinions voluntarily.

Results & Discussion

Learners' Perception of Scaffolding Information

Q1-Q5 are designed to investigate learners' perception of the effects of scaffolding information presented

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[1] The criteria of participants' English proficiency are their performance in TEM 4 (Test of English Majors, Band 4) and CET 4 (College English Test, Band 4) respectively. English majors with TEM 4 above 71 are considered AL, those between 61-70 are IL, and those below 60 are PL. Non-English majors with CET 4 above 498 belong to AL, those between 425-497 are IL, and those below 424 are PL.

[2] The website is www.sojump.com for reference.

in learner's dictionaries as an aid for English writing. Results show that 77.78% believe in the positive role that learner's dictionaries play in assisting writing, and 70.27% consider it necessary for dictionaries to include a special writing section like "Writing Tutor" in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* to improve their writing as shown in Table 1. This proves that incorporating dictionary use into English writing is well accepted by EFL learners (Harvey & Yuill, 1997). To be specific, WB is the most popular scaffolding information with the highest percentage (93.58%), followed by WE (85.92%) and WI (84.82%) respectively. It reflects EFL learners' heavy reliance on grammar or language accuracy in English writing, and their relatively less attention to content and structure in composing an English essay.

As for different learners' perceptions to scaffolding information, it has been found that generally there are more SI supporters with the rise of English proficiency as shown in Table 1. In other words, the better English they have, the more important they think scaffolding information is in assisting English writing, and the higher expectancy they have in the innovative design of such information design in learner's dictionaries. This finding is consistent with the previous study (e.g., Liu, 2010). But the highest percentage of Q1, Q2, Q4, and Q5 all rests with IL, not AL. The possible reason for this phenomenon might be the fact that with strong self-learning skills, AL does not have to rely so much on dictionaries for good writing as PL and IL do. As Liu (2011, p. 121) proposed, EFL learners with different English proficiency require different dictionary use guidance to improve their English writing. It also demonstrates that the target users of scaffolding information in learner's dictionaries must be those whose English is at or below intermediate level. This finding is quite meaningful from a lexicographical perspective, especially for the innovation of English-Chinese dictionary compilation.

Table 1

Contrast of Learners' Perceptions of Scaffolding Information

Group	Q1: Usefulness of SI	Q2: Special writing section	Q3: WB	Q4: WE	Q5: WI
PL	75.16%	69.43%	91.72%	78.34%	76.43%
IL	77.94%	70.82%	93.59%	89.32%	88.26%
AL	77.47%	68.78%	94.45%	83.74%	83.39%
Total	77.78%	70.27%	93.58%	85.92%	84.82%

Notes. *SI: scaffolding information, WB: writing basics, WE: writing expertise, WI: writing instruction.

Learners' Practical Use of Scaffolding Information

Q6-Q9 are designed to investigate learners' practical use of scaffolding information, i.e., special writing sections available in the four English-English dictionaries—OALD, COBUILD, CALD, and MEDAL. Generally speaking, SI's overall use is rather unsatisfactory as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Learner's Use of Special Writing Sections in Learner's Dictionaries

Group	Q6: OALD	Q7: COBUILD	Q8: CALD	Q9: MEDAL
PL	15.92%	7.64%	5.1%	3.82%
IL	20.28%	10.32%	8.19%	4.98%
AL	24.14%	13.03%	9.21%	7.11%
Total	18.6%	9.86%	7%	4.45%

First, EFL learners are not so familiar with the specially designed writing sections which provide abundant SI. Among the four learner's dictionaries, participants' familiarity of "Oxford Writing Tutor" in OALD enjoys

the highest percentage (18.6%), followed by "Brief Writer's Handbook" in COBUILD (9.86%), "Focus on Writing" in CALD (7%), and "Improving Your Writing Skills" in MEDAL (4.45%). Consequently, it is very likely that SI conveyed in learner's dictionaries cannot be widely used. This result can be attributed to the arrival time of these dictionaries at the Chinese market, their sales, and their reputations among EFL learners. In this case, English teachers are responsible to introduce the new textual design of these dictionaries to EFL learners so as to make better use of SI in writing pedagogy (Wu, 2007; Yang & Wei, 2016).

With regard to different learners' actual use of the special writing sections, it has been found that AL reported the highest use frequency among all the four English dictionaries under investigation than IL and PL as shown in Table 2. This indicated the positive correlation between English proficiency and SI's practical use as found in. Of course, more statistical evidence is needed to confirm this hunch in the follow-up large-scale empirical study.

Learners' Needs of Scaffolding Information

Q10-Q12 are designed to investigate learners' needs of scaffolding information in helping with their English writing, each of which has a different focus. Participants are required to report their needs in their English writing among the 23 items of WB in Q10, nine items of WE in Q11, and nine items of WI in Q12.

As shown in Table 3, the first five highly demanded items of WB are "English spelling" (77.74%), "tenses" (75.04%), "phrasal verbs" (67.73%), "word classes" (66.14%), and "lexical collocations" (65.5%). The first five items of WE with the highest percentage are "diction" (87.92%), "writing for general purposes" (80.44%), "writing strategies" (75.99%), "writing for practical use" (75.36%), and "thesis writing" (75.03%). The first five items of WI which are needed most are "instruction on writing for practical use" (82.03%), "instruction on textual structure" (81.24%), "instruction on thesis writing" (79.81%), "instruction on writing for general purposes" (78.22%), and "instruction on writing procedure" (75.04%).

Table 3

Learner's Needs of Scaffolding Information

Rank	Q10: WB	Q11: WE	Q12: WI
1	English spelling 77.74%	Diction 87.92%	Writing for practical use 82.03%
2	Tenses 75.04%	Writing for general purposes 80.44%	Textual structure 81.24%
3	Phrasal verbs 67.73%	Writing strategies 75.99%	Thesis writing 79.81%
4	Word classes 66.14%	Writing for practical use 75.36%	Writing for general purposes 78.22%
5	Lexical collocations 65.5%	Thesis writing 75.03%	Writing procedure 75.04%

Comparatively, WE and WI receive higher percentage than WB. As the current SI presentation of learner's dictionaries shows, these two types of SI are not as common as WB does; more innovations in WE and WI are required to meet learners' needs. In this case, the pedagogical effects of learner's dictionaries will be brought into full play in English writing.

Learners' Viewpoints of Scaffolding Information Presentation

Q13 invites EFL learners' viewpoints concerning scaffolding information presentation in learner's dictionaries as well as dictionary use in English writing on a voluntary basis. Altogether 66 participants'

viewpoints have been collected. Among them, 35 participants (53.03%) show positive attitudes towards the effects of dictionary use in English writing. They believe that SI presentation in English-English dictionaries is "highly practical", "extremely important", and "very good", hoping that this innovation could be applied to English-Chinese dictionaries as well.

From their perspective, SI is useful in the following aspects: "helping to raise accuracy in expression", "enriching vocabulary", "guiding learners through different stages in the whole writing process systematically and scientifically", "helping to tackle problems we encounter in writing", and "improving our writing skills to a large extent". Obviously, the feedback covers all the three types of SI, i.e., WB, WE, and WI. They also recommend adding some new items of SI such as "well-written English sentences", "notes to the writing section of TEM/CET", "frequently used phrases", "writing samples", and so on. These opinions reflect EFL learners' high demands of SI, and some of them really deserve attention from lexicographers and English teachers.

25 participants (37.88%) express doubts about the effects of SI in English writing. They think that writing depends more on self-practice and teachers' guidance than dictionary use, and that more dictionary use will result in learners' dependency, thus interfering with writing improvement. Two participants (3.03%) state that "the rules and formulas provided in dictionaries will deprive EFL learners of their creativity in writing". One participant (1.52%) expresses clear opposition to the relation between dictionary use and English writing because "dictionaries are designed for consulting words", and "if detailed scaffolding information is provided in dictionaries, what are writing manuals used for?" Another three participants (4.5%) are unclear about SI's role in English writing. It is clear that some viewpoints reflect learners' lack of understanding concerning learner's dictionaries and their effectiveness in English writing. Therefore, a dictionary course design is quite necessary to familiarize EFL learners with effective dictionary use in English writing (Wan & Ling, 2005; Wu, 2007).

Conclusion

Scaffolding information in current learner's dictionaries falls into three types: WB, WE, and WI. Their role in motivating effective feedback in English writing has gained wide acceptance among EFL learners.

Results of the survey show that the higher English proficiency EFL learners have, the more important they consider SI is in assisting English writing, and the higher expectancy they tend to possess in SI presentation in learner's dictionaries. However, the overall use frequency of SI is rather low due to EFL learners' lack of dictionary skills and knowledge. Comparatively, the demands of WE and WI are higher than that of WB, which calls for more lexicographical innovations in these two aspects in both English-English dictionaries and English-Chinese dictionaries. As for EFL learners' viewpoints of scaffolding information presentation, most are positive, but still quite a number of learners are in need of professional knowledge of learner's dictionaries. This requires the systematic and scientific design of a dictionary use course in universities (Wan & Ling, 2005; Wu, 2007; Chen, 2007; 2008; Wei, 2016). That will not only help EFL learners to raise their dictionary use efficiency, but also improve English teachers' lexicographical expertise in English writing pedagogy.

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