

Chapter 4

User Experience and Behavior Concerning Digital Scaffolding During EFL Speaking Practice: A Mixed–Method Study in a German 9th Grade EFL Classroom

Svea Carolyn Wucherpfennig

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4111-5417>

Leuphana University, Lüneburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

This exploratory mixed-method study investigates the scaffolding mechanisms incorporated into ChatClass, an educational chatbot application primarily designed to offer speaking tasks to users, in a German 9th-grade English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom setting. Addressing the growing importance of speaking skills in language education, and the opportunities technological advances can offer regarding individual-suitable scaffolds during speaking exercises, this study employs a theoretical look at scaffolding, and speaking in the EFL classroom. Based on a three-month classroom intervention, the research involves 18 students, utilizing triangulated data from questionnaires, classroom observations, and language tests to better comprehend students' needs regarding scaffolding options during digitally enhanced practice phases in class.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a highly complex competence, but essential to language learning. It requires a combination of various skills, knowledge, and processes that, depending on the context, result in culturally and socially relevant, appropriate, and comprehensible speech output (Burns, 2017). In order to become competent speakers of the target language English as a foreign language (EFL) learners need numerous opportunities and safe spaces to practice their skills (Ellis, 2008; Goh & Burns, 2012; Nation & Newton, 2008; Nunan, 2001). While practicing, it is important that learners receive individually suitable support through personalized scaffolding, which positively impacts the students' overall speaking competence (Gilead, 2018; Hue Nguyen, 2013; Pitura & Chang, 2023; Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). Scaffolding is rooted in the sociocultural theory. Vygotskian (1986) notes that through the right support at the right time, learners are enabled to achieve more than they would have been able to do alone. Based on this understanding, scaffolding can positively affect learning and the development of students' language skills (cf. e.g. Ahmadi Safa & Rozati, 2017; Al-Yami, 2008; Garcia & Asencion, 2001; Hue Nguyen, 2013; Huggings & Edwards, 2011; Nassaji & Swain, Padmadewi & Artini, 2018; 2000; Rahimi & Tahmasebi, 2011; Xu et al., 2005), making it an essential pedagogical approach in the EFL classroom. With digital media becoming increasingly more important and offering new methodological chances (Muckenheimer et al., 2023; Rymarczyk, 2016), practicing speaking in this environment offers new possibilities as well, although very few studies focus on speaking in this context (Schmidt, 2022; Tommerdahl et al., 2022). Taking scaffolding into consideration, "despite the enormous potential of technology to scaffold the development of L2 speaking, this area has received very little attention" (Pitura & Chang, 2023, p.8).

The call for studies concentrating on the development of speaking skills through digital media is evident and thereby particularly focusing on scaffolding targets an even greater research gap. These issues are addressed in the present study. An app primarily designed to offer speaking opportunities and tasks to its users, while providing scaffolding and feedback, was chosen and implemented in two German 9th-grade EFL classrooms. In an exploratory mixed-method study design, light is shed on how scaffolding is implemented in the app, at how learners behave when offered different scaffolding options in the app, and furthermore, at how the participants experience and perceive these scaffolding options. After an analysis of the provided scaffolding in the app based on the literature review, the use of the incorporated scaffolding is explored from multiple angles. The results of 18 students are analyzed and discussed. Starting with a theoretical look at speaking, practicing, and scaffolding in the language-learning classroom and in the context of digital media,

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