

Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning Teaching Second Language learners in the Mainstream Classroom

**Pauline Gibbons
Heinemann USA, 2002**

The long awaited follow-up to *Learning to Learn in a Second Language* has been published. *Learning to Learn*¹ has been a seminal text for many of us, providing a well written, positive blueprint for how to go about teaching children who do not speak English in our English speaking classes.

What I wanted was a book like the other book and yet more. I wanted teachers, both mainstream and EAL specialists to be able to pick it up and experience the clear common sense of Gibbons's writing. I wanted to extend my thinking, to be challenged by the new work. I think Gibbons has managed to give us both of these. I also wanted the new book to be more easily available in this country. We have yet to see whether this will be the case.

The new book is written with the same clarity and confidence of the previous text. Pauline Gibbons has never lost sight of the interaction between the teacher and the child in the learning process.

As Jim Cummins says in his introduction, "... Pauline Gibbons's book emerges as an eloquent reaffirmation of the central role that teachers play in creating classroom contexts that foster their student's academic, linguistic and personal growth".

In these days of standardised tests and prescriptive teaching practices, she has held her line that a pupil's role as an active participant in her own learning is fundamental. She gives us examples that show how pupils can learn through talking through their work, whilst the teacher provides scaffolded support. The examples she uses are fascinating, at first reading they present just ordinary interaction - but for me - this is the interesting bit. Gibbons manages to highlight this form of teaching in such a way that we recognise it and are empowered by it, instead of feeling inadequate, we see ourselves doing the same thing, so often in our careers.

The book begins with a personal account. Juliana states, "I can say what I want but not for school work and strangers".² This contextualises our learning immediately, the idea that Juliana has been in school for 6 years and can identify her language issues and

¹ Heinemann, 1993

² English language learner quoted in McKay et al, *The Bilingual Interface Project* in Gibbons, P. *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, USA

articulate them, and yet and yet does not have the skills to overcome them is shocking enough to get my attention immediately.

Gibbons goes on and gives us a clear theoretical framework, drawing on the work of Michael Halliday and other systemic functional linguists. Theirs is the theory that language is part of everything we do, and we operate in and through language in two contexts. The first is the context of culture in which speakers from the same culture share an understanding of that culture, the assumptions and understandings and are therefore able to operate within these. The context of situation, the notion that we use language differently depending on the situation in which we find ourselves is the second context considered.

Gibbons establishes our context; we understand how she places work that follows. She focuses on the development of scaffolding as a tool for teachers to use to support children to learn skills and how to apply them through the work they do and therefore to become independent learners. There is a strong focus in the book on making meaning explicit.

The following chapters cover a range of practical classroom based areas of language development, and here is Gibbons's area of real skill. She has a sound understanding of classroom practice, and has provided us with chapters we can read, understand and apply, even within the dictated curriculum and strategy led environments in which many of us work. She begins from a conviction that the curriculum provides the most appropriate and effective place for pupils to learn English, that within the work we do in our classrooms all necessary experiences, skills and teaching occur to support the English language learner. The chapters cover speaking and listening, reading and writing and suggestions as to how to develop an integrated approach for developing these skills using the whole curriculum.

The book focuses on the use of common teaching practices and the skills of the teachers to support their children's progress and development, how scaffolding appropriately used provides a path to independence that otherwise wouldn't have been achieved.

Gibbons reminds us about genre based skills, she advocates separating the content from the genre, teaching the content and teaching the rules of the genre explicitly. She identifies and provides workable solutions to the problem of pupils needing to learn the 'what' whilst still struggling with the 'how'. - to integrate the actual teaching of English with the content areas demanded by the National curriculum

Within the strong focus on the integrated curriculum, there is an understanding of our schools and the top down pressures that are placed on the teachers and

children who work in them. The book addresses these issues clearly and confidently. It is an affirmation of good teaching, it concedes nothing, it calls us to remember what we know and respectfully infuses us with the confidence to continue to work in the ways we know are right for the children we teach.

Gibbons contends that assessment is central to good teaching, that we need to know what the child knows in order to provide them with appropriate support. The book contains a number of interesting examples of sheets designed to assess children's learning, and whilst the task assessment (p127) may be more than most classteachers can manage in their classes of 30, the value of the work is beyond doubt. Also in the book is a very useful Framework for the Integration of Language and Content, (p130). It clearly lays out the relationship between the language needs and the language demands of the topic and how to plan effectively for them.

Support is provided by an additional reading list at the end of each chapter.

This book is inspirational, it works in addition to and alongside Learning to Learn and shows that our belief that Pauline Gibbons' new book would be worth waiting for was well founded.

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