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Fostering learner independence through heuristic scaffolding: A valuable role for teaching assistants

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ABSTRACT

Teaching assistants currently play a key pedagogical role in supporting learners with special educational needs. Their practice is primarily oral, involving verbal differentiation of teacher talk or printed materials. In order to help students think for themselves, this paper argues that their practice should be informed by heuristic scaffolding. A substantial dataset from three teaching assistant projects was scrutinised for examples of heuristics. Using conversation analysis, the paper shows how assistance is negotiated and adjusted over a sequence of discourse. Four patterns of heuristic scaffolding are shown: heuristic modelling represents the highest level of support; heuristic questioning and prompting are jointly negotiated with the student. Self-scaffolding by students shows them taking responsibility for their own learning strategies. Implications for the school system are explored.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

One of the most profound changes in UK schools over the past 15 years or so has been the huge and unprecedented increase in support staff in schools. The number of full-time equivalent Teaching Assistants (TAs) in mainstream schools in England has more than trebled since 1997 to about 190,000 (DfE, 2012). At the time of writing (winter 2013), taken together, TAs (or teachers' aides or paraprofessionals) comprise 24% of the mainstream school workforce in England, Wales and Scotland. The rise in TAs is part of a general increase in education paraprofessionals with similar roles worldwide. Wide use of support staff has been reported in schools in Australia, Italy, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Iceland, Ireland, Malta, South Africa, as well as the USA (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007). TAs, therefore, appear to be a growing part of the school workforce in many countries, although this has been most pronounced in the UK.

One of the major policy developments to impact on the role of TAs in the UK was the National Workload agreement signed by the government and most teaching unions in 2003. The agreement led to a number of tasks previously seen as being the preserve of teachers become permissible for TAs, including planning and preparing lessons, delivering lessons, assessing, recording and reporting. This could be with individuals, groups or whole classes (DfES, 2003). The National Agreement was

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signed with great care taken by the government, under pressure from teaching unions, to protect the professional role and identity of teachers in the face of the potential impact of role creep. However, the role of TAs was given less attention in these negotiations. The nebulous terms used in the Agreement, such as 'supporting', 'supervising', undertaking 'specified work under the guidance of a teacher' (DfES, 2003) – as distinct from 'teaching' – were ill-defined and do not stand conceptual scrutiny, nor do they accord with observations of what actually takes place in classrooms (Blatchford, Russell, & Webster, 2012). Yet the Agreement represented a fundamental shift in the role of the TA and raises serious issues about whether TAs should engage in traditional teacher roles.

The extent to which TAs play a key role in teaching and learning is revealed through findings from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project – the first and largest longitudinal study to analyse the impact of TAs on teachers, teaching and pupil learning, behaviour and academic progress in everyday school settings. Results from the DISS project found that TAs spent over half their six hour working day in a direct pedagogical, instructional role, supporting and interacting with pupils (3.8 h), and this far outweighed time spent supporting the teacher and curriculum (1.4 h) or performing other tasks (0.9 h) (Blatchford et al., 2012).

Observations collected as part of the DISS project revealed that TAs routinely provide support to lower-attaining pupils and those with special educational needs (SEN) in one-to-one and group contexts. Furthermore, it was found that such pupils are nine times more likely to have sustained (e.g., lasting longer than 10 s) interactions with TAs than with teachers, and are six times more likely to be actively involved (i.e., beginning, responding to or sustaining) in an interaction with TAs than with teachers.

On the basis of these results, Blatchford et al. (2012) concluded that there had been a drift towards TAs becoming, in effect, the primary educators of lower-attaining pupils and those with SEN. Teachers like this arrangement because they can then teach the rest of the class, in the knowledge that the children in most need get more individual attention. Yet, the more support pupils get from TAs, the less they get from teachers.

Worryingly, this arrangement comes at a cost to the academic attainment of vulnerable pupils. The DISS project's analysis of the effects of TA support on the progress of 8200 pupils, across seven year groups in primary and secondary schools, found that those who received the most support from TAs consistently made less progress than similar pupils who received less TA support, even after controlling for factors like prior attainment and level of special educational needs (SEN) (Blatchford et al., 2012).

1.2. Pedagogical role of the TA

Following the DISS project, it has been suggested that there needs to be a debate about the appropriate pedagogical role of TAs (Webster et al., 2010). Despite the UK coalition government's drive to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers via the Pupil Premium funding, and the plan to give parents of pupils with a statement of SEN control over their child's SEN budget, TAs are largely absent from the discussions about policy and practice.

The likelihood, however, is that TAs will continue to be pivotal to how schools meet the needs of children with SEN (The Sutton Trust, 2012). As a consequence, important questions are raised: (i) what is effective TA support for children with SEN; (ii) how can support be delivered by staff who do not have the professional qualifications and experience of teachers?; and (iii) how can teachers, as managers of TAs, prepare them for a pedagogical role?

In terms of TAs' practice in the classroom, successful outcomes are associated with certain pre-conditions: tasks are delegated by the teacher and specific training is given in instruction as well as in behaviour management (Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadasy, 2007). In reality, the TAs' role is primarily oral, conducted on a moment-by-moment basis (Radford, Blatchford, & Webster, 2011) and often involves verbal differentiation of teacher talk or printed material (Blatchford et al., 2012). Whilst TAs are ideally placed to provide optimum, contingent support for the learner, all too often, their interactions with pupils tend to focus on task completion rather than developing understanding (Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou, & Bassett, 2010). TAs do not know how to make the best use of the extended, more frequent interactions they have with pupils and this could have longer-term implications for creating passive learners (Radford et al., 2011).

In this paper we argue that, in order to deliver effective support, TAs' pedagogical practice should be informed by relevant theories of teaching and learning. Such theories should underpin not only how TAs design their turns (the repertoire of strategies that they use), but also how they adapt support for the learner over a sequence of discourse. Given TAs' extensive opportunities for individualised support, our candidate theory is scaffolding.

1.3. Scaffolding

TAs who were interviewed as part of the DISS project often described their role as providing scaffolding for pupil learning; however, this conceptualisation of scaffolding is ill-defined and at variance with how we apply the term in this paper. Scaffolding has its origins in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky. The theory proposes that, through social interaction with others at the intermental level, young children develop higher mental functions such as thinking and reasoning (Vygotsky, 1981). To be effective, such social exchanges must lie within children's 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD), that is, the distance between what they can accomplish on their own as opposed to what they can do with the help of more capable others, such as parents (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD was developed further and taken from parent–child interaction and applied to educational contexts.