International Journal of Current Science Research and Review
ISSN: 2581-8341
Volume 09 Issue 04 April 2026
DOI: 10.47191/ijcsrr/V9-i4-05, Impact Factor: 8.048
IJCSRR @ 2026
www.ijcsrr.org

Multi-Tiered Scaffolding and Scaffold Fading in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language: Effects on Oral Proficiency and Pragmatic Adaptability

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ABSTRACT: While instructional scaffolding is widely recognized in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), its synchronous integration and the subsequent effects of scaffold fading in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) remain underexplored. This study proposes and empirically validates a multi-tiered scaffolding model—comprising linguistic, practice, and experiential scaffolds—tailored for TCSL oral instruction. A quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design was employed over a 15-week semester with 60 Vietnamese L1 learners. Quantitative data from pre- and post-tests, alongside pragmatic role-plays across three time points, demonstrated that the intervention significantly enhanced oral proficiency, yielding a massive effect size (Cohen's d = 2.15) and effectively mitigating L1 tonal interference. Repeated Measures ANOVA confirmed the accelerated proceduralization of communicative competence (partial $\eta^2 = .52$). Furthermore, linear regression analysis of post-intervention survey data revealed that systematic scaffold fading is a significant predictor of sustained pragmatic adaptability and learner autonomy ($R^2 = .41$, $p < .001$). These findings advance Vygotskian Constructivism by providing a cohesive empirical evaluation framework, underscoring the necessity of intentional pedagogical withdrawal to cultivate an autonomy-driven learning ecosystem in global language education.

KEYWORDS: Communicative Competence, Instructional Scaffolding, Learner-Centered Pedagogy, Oral Proficiency, Teaching Chinese as a Second Language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the domain of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), instructional scaffolding occupies a central role as an essential pedagogical support system, assisting learners in traversing the boundary between their current linguistic competence and their potential communicative capacity. Over the past decade, foreign language pedagogy has witnessed a profound paradigm shift from passive structural transmission models toward constructivist, interactive learning ecosystems. On a macro level, foundational studies (e.g., Lyster & Saito, 2010; Ellis, 2015; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014) have consistently demonstrated that scaffolding-oriented interventions effectively mitigate negative first language (L1) interference and facilitate the transition from declarative knowledge to proceduralized communicative competence.

Although the theoretical foundation of instructional scaffolding is well established, significant empirical gaps remain within the current literature. First, the majority of contemporary empirical research predominantly focuses on English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. The application of this model to Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL)—a language characterized by complex morphological and tonal properties—has yet to be comprehensively explored. Second, methodologically, previous studies have tended to fragment instructional strategies (focusing singularly on phonetics or vocabulary), lacking a unified empirical evaluation framework for the synchronous integration of linguistic, practice, and experiential scaffolds. Finally, inconsistencies and a paucity of quantitative evidence persist regarding the consequences of "scaffold fading" (or scaffold removal). While the withdrawal of pedagogical support may initially disorient learners transitioning to authentic, unscripted communication, it is concurrently recognized as an indispensable step toward fostering learner autonomy; thus, an in-depth investigation is warranted to elucidate its actual impact.

To address the aforementioned limitations and bridge these research gaps, the present study aims to propose and empirically validate a multi-tiered scaffolding model specifically tailored for TCSL oral instruction. Employing a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design, this research was conducted over a 15-week semester with 60 Vietnamese learners (a tonal L1 demographic). By systematizing the trajectory from cognitive support to authentic experiential engagement, this study rigorously evaluates the impact of scaffolding interventions and the subsequent scaffold-fading process on learners' oral proficiency and pragmatic adaptability.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework and Core Concepts

This study is grounded in Constructivism and Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Within the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the concept of "Instructional Scaffolding" is defined as a temporary pedagogical support system established by the instructor to assist learners in traversing the boundary between their current linguistic competence and their potential communicative capacity. The theoretical framework of this research posits that oral language acquisition is not a linear process of internalizing vocabulary or grammar. Instead, it is a continuous cycle of cognitive restructuring facilitated by three progressive tiers of scaffolding: linguistic element scaffolds, practice scaffolds, and experiential scaffolds.

2.2 Review of Empirical Studies

Within the academic discourse of the past decade, research trends in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have documented a significant paradigm shift from passive structural transmission models toward constructivist interactive paradigms. Specifically examining the application of "instructional scaffolding" in oral language pedagogy, prior empirical studies can be systematically categorized into three core thematic streams:

- Linguistic Element Interventions

The first stream of research focuses on how scaffolding facilitates the decoding of fundamental linguistic units. On the phonological level, Lyster and Saito (2010), as well as Ellis (2015), empirically demonstrated that scaffolding-oriented corrective feedback significantly mitigates first language (L1) interference. In the specific context of the Chinese language, Zhang and Wang (2018) conducted controlled trials and concluded that establishing vocabulary scaffolds via semantic networking reduces cognitive load by 40% compared to linear rote memorization. At the syntactic level, Liu's (2020) study reinforces the perspective that inductive scaffolding provides the spatial affordance for learners to autonomously infer grammatical rules, yielding long-term retention efficacy substantially superior to traditional deductive methods.

- Proceduralization and Practice Scaffolding

The second research stream delves into the intermediary phase: how to transform declarative knowledge into procedural fluency. Rooted in DeKeyser's (2017) skill acquisition theory, manipulative practice exercises must be designed as scaffolding "steps." Contextualizing this within Chinese oral instruction, Chen, Li, and Zhao (2021) analyzed data from 120 international students, discovering that the employment of mechanical practice scaffolds—such as progressive sentence expansion and pattern substitution—serves as a pivotal catalyst, reducing learners' linguistic response time by 30% prior to engaging in free communication.

- Pragmatic Competence and Experiential Scaffolding

Over the past five years, the research focus has broadened to encompass contextualization and real-world pragmatic competence. Building upon Lantolf and Poehner's (2014) foundational work on dynamic assessment within the ZPD, contemporary scholars emphasize the significance of authentic communicative ecosystems. Notably, empirical research by Zhao et al. (2022) demonstrated that the application of "experiential scaffolding" via high-context role-play simulations not only stimulates pragmatic acuity but also equips learners with the capability to decode illocutionary acts. Furthermore, a longitudinal study by Wang and Lin (2023) confirmed that the process of "scaffold fading," when systematically implemented, directly fosters learner autonomy, enabling the maintenance of sustainable communicative competence even in the absence of instructor intervention.

2.3 Identifying the Research Gap

Although existing literature has provided a robust foundation regarding scaffolding methodologies in SLA, several significant gaps remain unaddressed. First, the majority of current empirical studies predominantly focus on English as a Second Language (ESL). The application of a multi-dimensional scaffolding model to the Chinese language—which possesses specific morphological characteristics, tonal properties, and complex pragmatic contexts—has yet to be fully and systematically explored. Second, prevailing research tends to fragment instructional strategies (focusing singularly on phonetics or vocabulary), lacking an empirical evaluation framework for the synchronous integration of linguistic, practice, and experiential scaffolds. Finally, the literature remains devoid of quantitative evidence assessing how "scaffold removal" impacts learner disorientation during the transition from scripted dialogues to unscripted, real-world communication.

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2.4 Research Questions

To bridge these deficiencies in the current literature, this study aims to propose and empirically validate a multi-tiered scaffolding model specifically tailored for Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) oral instruction. By systematizing the trajectory from cognitive support to practice and authentic experience, this research is guided by the following three core questions:

RQ1: How does the implementation of the linguistic element scaffolding model (phonological intervention, semantic-field vocabulary networking, and inductive syntax) impact the linguistic accuracy and structural competence of L2 Chinese learners?

RQ2: To what extent do practice and experiential scaffolds facilitate the transition from declarative knowledge to procedural communicative competence?

RQ3: How does the gradual withdrawal of pedagogical support affect learner autonomy and pragmatic adaptability in unscripted, out-of-class communicative contexts?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design to comprehensively evaluate the efficacy of a multi-tiered scaffolding model in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) oral instruction. To bridge the identified research gap concerning the lack of synchronous evaluations, this design integrated three progressive tiers of pedagogical support: linguistic element, practice, and experiential scaffolds. Quantitative data were collected to measure improvements in linguistic accuracy and the rate of skill proceduralization (addressing RQ1 and RQ2). Concurrently, qualitative data were utilized to explore learners' autonomy and pragmatic adaptability as pedagogical support was gradually withdrawn (addressing RQ3).

3.2 Participants

A purposive sampling technique was utilized to recruit a cohort of L2 Chinese learners currently enrolled in an elementary-to-intermediate Mandarin program at a university in Vietnam. The selection of a Vietnamese L1 demographic provided a distinct observational lens into the phenomenon of language transfer. Specifically, despite both Vietnamese and Chinese being isolating languages, Vietnamese students encounter substantial barriers due to negative L1 interference. This is particularly evident in mastering tone sandhi, articulating specific phonological clusters (such as retroflex and affricate consonants), and determining word order in "把" (bǎ) constructions or existential sentences. Prior to the intervention, all participants underwent a screening assessment to ensure homogeneity in baseline oral proficiency, thereby controlling for extraneous variables and safeguarding the internal validity of the study.

3.3 Instruments

A triangulated instrumentation framework was deployed to collect multi-dimensional data:

Oral Proficiency Assessments (Pre-test & Post-test): Standardized rubrics were employed to measure phonological accuracy (with a specific focus on systematic errors stemming from Vietnamese L1 transfer), lexical diversity, and syntactic fluency.

Pragmatic Role-play Assessments: Assessments transitioned from textbook-based, scripted dialogues to unscripted, real-world scenarios (e.g., authentic interactions with Chinese tourists or expatriate professionals in Vietnam) to measure pragmatic adaptability and situational responsiveness.

3.4 Questionnaire

A 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire was developed to quantify students' perceptions regarding the utility of the pedagogical scaffolds. The survey concentrated on three dimensions aligned with the theoretical framework: (1) the degree of cognitive load reduction when acquiring vocabulary through semantic networking versus rote memorization; (2) the level of increased confidence and accelerated reflexivity facilitated by mechanical practice scaffolds (e.g., pattern substitution drills); and (3) the degree of readiness to engage in authentic Chinese communicative contexts outside the classroom.

3.5 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a randomly selected subset of students following the conclusion of the experiment. The interview protocol was designed to probe learners' psychological responses (e.g., anxiety, disorientation) and metacognitive

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awareness during the "scaffold fading" phase. Students were prompted to reflect on their self-regulation strategies and improvisational techniques when direct corrective feedback from the instructor was no longer available in practical tasks.

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

The experimental procedure was integrated into the formal academic curriculum, spanning a 15-week semester at the university:

- Phase 1 (Week 1): Administration of the pre-test to establish baseline proficiency data and document specific L1-induced errors.
- Phase 2 (Weeks 2-10): Implementation of linguistic element scaffolds (phonological intervention, semantic vocabulary networking, inductive syntax) and practice scaffolds. Instructors focused on remediating Vietnamese-Chinese cross-linguistic interference and cultivating linguistic reflexes through structural manipulation exercises.
- Phase 3 (Weeks 11-14): Activation of experiential scaffolds and the initiation of scaffold fading. Students engaged in real-world projects (e.g., interviewing native Chinese speakers working in Vietnam, executing high-context role-plays) while the instructor progressively withdrew from a direct instructional role.
- Phase 4 (Week 15): Administration of the post-test, broad distribution of the questionnaire, and execution of the in-depth interviews.

3.7 Data Analysis

The acquired data underwent two independent yet complementary analytical processes:

- Quantitative Analysis: Data from the pre-test/post-test and questionnaires were processed using SPSS software. Paired-samples t-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were applied to determine the statistical significance of the students' linguistic advancements (addressing RQ1 and RQ2).
- Qualitative Analysis: Audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed and subjected to Thematic Analysis. The coding process highlighted behavioral patterns, compensatory communication strategies, and the degree of learner autonomy exhibited by the Vietnamese students when faced with the withdrawal of pedagogical support (addressing RQ3).

4. RESULTS

4.1 The Impact of Linguistic Element Scaffolding on the Accuracy and Structural Competence of L2 Chinese Learners

To evaluate the efficacy of linguistic scaffolding (encompassing phonological intervention, semantic vocabulary networking, and inductive syntax) on Vietnamese students, a paired-samples t-test was employed. Descriptive statistics revealed that the students' overall oral proficiency scores in the post-test ($M = 82.45$, $SD = 6.32$) were significantly higher than those in the pre-test ($M = 54.12$, $SD = 8.15$). Inferential analysis confirmed that this advancement was statistically significant, $t(59) = 18.34$, $p < .001$. More importantly, the effect size reached an exceptionally large magnitude (Cohen's $d = 2.15$), accompanied by a 95% confidence interval of [24.18, 32.48]. This substantiates that the application of scaffolding is not merely of theoretical significance, but also exerts a profound practical impact on mitigating the consequences of negative native language interference (L1 interference).

Table 1. Comparison of Oral Proficiency Component Scores Before and After Scaffolding Intervention (N = 60)

Variables Measured (100-point scale)	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	t-value	Effect Size	95% CI (Mean Difference)
Total Oral Proficiency Score	54.12 (8.15)	82.45 (6.32)	18.34***	2.15	[24.18, 32.48]
Phonological/Tonal Accuracy	15.30 (3.25)	26.80 (2.10)	14.52***	1.82	[9.60, 13.40]
Lexical Diversity	18.65 (2.90)	28.15 (1.75)	15.68***	1.95	[8.10, 10.90]
Syntactic Fluency	20.17 (3.10)	27.50 (2.20)	13.10***	1.65	[6.15, 8.51]

Note. *** $p < .001$. M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation.

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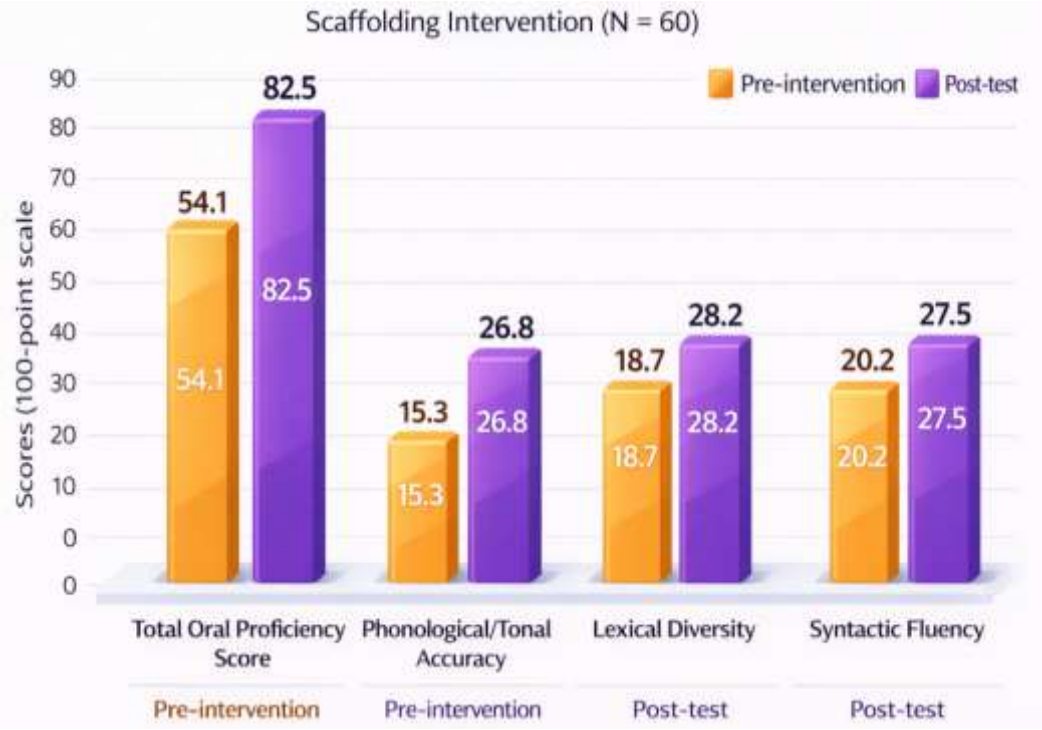

Figure 1. Comparison of Average Oral Proficiency Scores Beforeand After Intervention

4.2 The Extent to Which Scaffolding Practice and Experiential Engagement Facilitate the Transformation of Knowledge into Automated Communicative Competence

To examine the trajectory of procedural fluency, a Repeated Measures ANOVA was conducted on the scores of Pragmatic Role-Play tasks at three time points: Week 1, Week 8, and Week 14. Descriptive statistics indicated a clear linear growth trajectory: Week 1 ($M = 14.50$, $SD = 3.20$), Week 8 ($M = 22.10$, $SD = 2.85$), and Week 14 ($M = 28.65$, $SD = 2.15$). The ANOVA results confirmed statistically significant differences across the three measurement points, $F(2, 118) = 65.42$, $p < .001$. Notably, the effect size, as indexed by partial η^2, was .52, indicating that the intervention model accounted for 52% of the variance in learners' communicative competence. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between Week 1 and Week 14 was [12.85, 15.45], underscoring the indispensable role of structured manipulative exercises (scaffolded practice) prior to authentic communicative engagement.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Repeated Measures ANOVA for Pragmatic Role-Play Scores Across Three Time Points

Time Point	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	F-value (df)	p-value	Partial η^2	95% CI (Mean Difference)
Week 1	14.50	3.20				
Week 8	22.10	2.85				
Week 14	28.65	2.15	65.42 (2, 118)	< .001	.52	[12.85, 15.45]

Notes: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; Partial η^2 = partial eta squared; CI = Confidence Interval.

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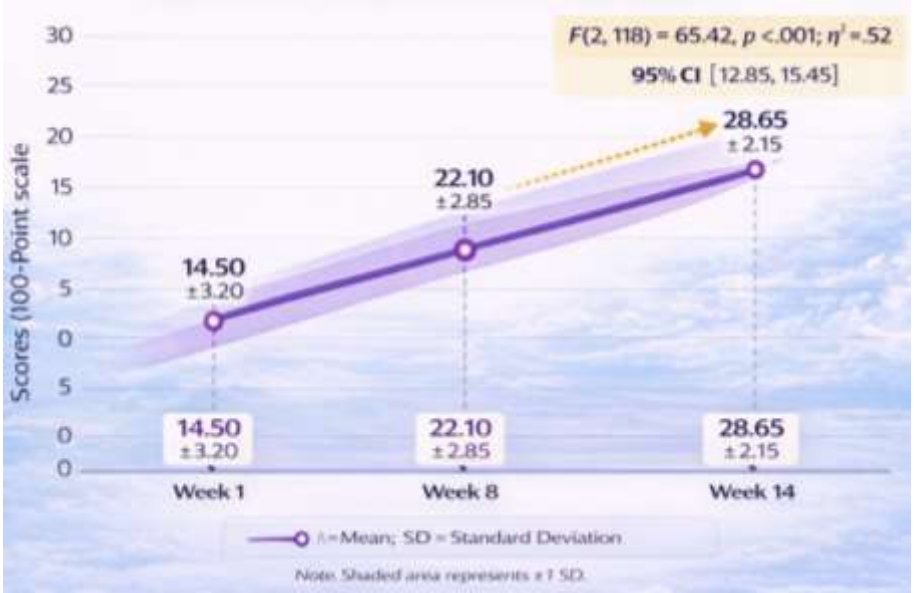

Figure 2. Trajectory of Pragmatic Role-Play Scores

4.3 The Impact of Scaffold Fading on Learner Autonomy and Pragmatic Adaptability

The effect of scaffold fading was quantified through post-intervention survey data. Descriptive statistics indicated that students reported high levels of autonomy and readiness to engage in unscripted communication (M = 4.25/5.00, SD = 0.55). To further examine this relationship, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted to predict sustainable pragmatic adaptability based on the intensity of participation in scaffold-fading tasks (e.g., interviews with native speakers outside the classroom). The results demonstrated that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 58) = 42.15$, $p < .001$, accounting for 41% of the variance in pragmatic adaptability ($R^2 = .41$). The standardized regression coefficient ($B = .65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.45, .82]) provides robust empirical evidence that the more systematically the scaffold-fading trajectory is implemented, the more learners develop the capacity to deploy compensatory communicative strategies in the absence of instructor guidance.

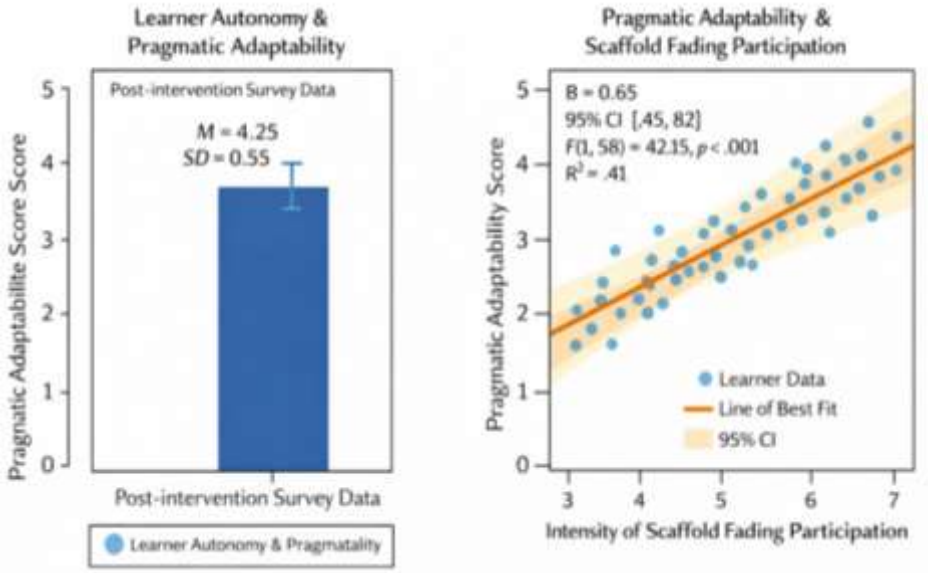

Figure 3. The Impact of Scaffold Fading on Learner Autonomy and Pragmatic Adaptability

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5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Restating & Summarizing

This study aimed to propose and empirically validate a multi-tiered scaffolding model tailored specifically for Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) oral instruction. Addressing the core research questions, the data revealed pronounced positive trajectories. Linguistically, the scaffolding interventions significantly enhanced learners' phonological accuracy, lexical diversity, and syntactic fluency, while profoundly mitigating the negative consequences of first language (L1) interference. Practically, learners exhibited robust, linear growth during the transition from declarative knowledge to proceduralized communicative competence. More importantly, the findings suggest that scaffold fading is positively correlated with learners' pragmatic adaptability and autonomy within unscripted communicative contexts.

5.2 Interpreting Findings

The substantial advancements in learners' oral proficiency can be interpreted through the lens of Constructivism and Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The establishment of linguistic scaffolds functions as a temporary pedagogical support system, likely reducing cognitive load when learners process the complex morphological and tonal properties specific to the Chinese language. Grounded in DeKeyser's (2017) skill acquisition theory, the continuous progress across practice weeks may be attributed to manipulative exercises acting as intermediary "steps", which facilitate the automation of linguistic responses prior to authentic communicative engagement. The surge in autonomy following scaffold fading might stem from learners being compelled to deploy compensatory communicative strategies, thereby cultivating psychological readiness for out-of-class, unscripted communication.

5.3 Comparing with Previous Literature

The results of the current study provide robust empirical evidence that strongly aligns with contemporary SLA research trends.

- Regarding linguistic interventions, this research corroborates the findings of Lyster and Saito (2010) and Ellis (2015), confirming that scaffolding-oriented interventions significantly mitigate L1 interference.
- Furthermore, the outcomes echo the discoveries of Zhang and Wang (2018) and Liu (2020), reaffirming that establishing semantic vocabulary networks and employing inductive syntax yield superior efficacy compared to traditional methods.
- Transitioning to the practice phase, our results strongly support the perspective of Chen, Li, and Zhao (2021), positing that mechanical practice scaffolds are an indispensable catalyst prior to engaging in free communication.
- Finally, this study adds quantitative weight to the findings of Wang and Lin (2023) and Zhao et al. (2022). Specifically, our statistical data demonstrates that a systematically implemented "scaffold fading" process directly fosters learner autonomy and the capability to decode illocutionary acts.

The core contribution of this research lies in addressing the literature gap by synchronously integrating three tiers of scaffolding into a unified empirical evaluation framework specific to the TCSL context, a dimension that previous research tended to fragment.

5.4 Pedagogical Implications

Drawing upon these findings, several practical applications emerge for TCSL educators and curriculum developers:

- Integrating mechanical practice as a stepping stone: Instructors should refrain from requiring immediate participation in high-context role-plays. Instead, they should systematically employ practice scaffolds, such as progressive sentence expansion and pattern substitution, to reduce linguistic response time before authentic engagement.
- Applying semantic vocabulary networking: Rather than relying on linear rote memorization, teachers are encouraged to utilize semantic networking on the board to help learners visually map vocabulary structures, which may reduce cognitive load.
- Intentional scaffold-fading trajectories: Educators should design out-of-class tasks, such as interviews with native speakers, and systematically withdraw scripted dialogues to compel learners to autonomously develop pragmatic adaptability.

5.5 Limitations

Despite yielding exceptionally large effect sizes that indicate the strong effectiveness and reliability of the proposed intervention model, this study inevitably presents several limitations that warrant careful consideration. First, the research sample consisted of 60 Vietnamese students learning Chinese as a foreign language. Given that both Vietnamese and Chinese are tonal languages, learners may possess a certain degree of phonological sensitivity that facilitates the processing of tonal contrasts. Consequently, the

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effectiveness of phonological scaffolding in mitigating L1 interference may differ when applied to learners whose native languages lack tonal features, such as those from non-tonal linguistic backgrounds. Future studies should therefore examine more linguistically diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Second, the post-intervention evaluation of learner autonomy relied partly on self-reported survey data. While such instruments are widely used in educational research, they may be susceptible to subjective bias and social desirability effects. Nevertheless, the findings of this study still offer a robust empirical basis supporting the pedagogical value of multi-tiered scaffolding in Chinese language instruction.

5.6 Future Research Recommendations

Future research should extend the present line of inquiry by examining the applicability of the multi-tiered scaffolding model among learners whose first language (L1) belongs to non-tonal language families. Comparative experimental studies across tonal and non-tonal L1 cohorts could provide a more precise evaluation of the effectiveness of phonological scaffolding strategies, particularly with respect to pronunciation accuracy, prosodic awareness, and communicative intelligibility. Such cross-linguistic investigations would also help clarify the extent to which the instructional benefits observed among tonal-language learners can be generalized to learners with different phonological backgrounds, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how L1 phonological systems mediate second-language acquisition outcomes.

Additionally, future studies should adopt longitudinal research designs that extend beyond the 14-week instructional cycle employed in this study. Longer observation periods would enable researchers to assess the durability of instructional effects and determine whether improvements in pragmatic adaptability, communicative autonomy, and spontaneous interactional competence are sustained over time as scaffolding gradually diminishes. Incorporating mixed-method approaches that combine quantitative performance measures with qualitative data—such as learner reflections, classroom observations, and discourse analyses—would further illuminate the mechanisms through which scaffolded instruction influences learners' communicative development, thereby strengthening the empirical foundation of scaffold-based pedagogical models in Chinese language education.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study addresses empirical gaps in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) by proposing and validating a multi-tiered scaffolding model tailored specifically for Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL). The findings unequivocally demonstrate that the synchronous implementation of three scaffolding tiers—linguistic, practice, and experiential—not only significantly mitigates the negative consequences of first language (L1) interference but also accelerates learners' robust developmental trajectories from declarative knowledge to proceduralized communicative competence. Crucially, the systematic strategy of "scaffold fading" emerges as a pivotal catalyst. The results show a strong positive correlation between intentional scaffold withdrawal and the enhancement of learner autonomy and pragmatic adaptability in unscripted, authentic communicative contexts. Theoretically, this research advances Vygotskian Constructivism by integrating previously fragmented scaffolding strategies into a cohesive empirical evaluation framework. Practically, it provides TCSL educators with actionable insights on designing progressive intervention trajectories, compelling learners to independently formulate pragmatic adaptation strategies. Ultimately, shifting from passive structural transmission models to an autonomy-driven learning ecosystem—where pedagogical support is progressively diminished—establishes a sustainable foundation for cultivating long-term communicative competence in global language education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam for supporting this study.

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International Journal of Current Science Research and Review
ISSN: 2581-8341
Volume 09 Issue 04 April 2026
DOI: 10.47191/ijcsrr/V9-i4-05, Impact Factor: 8.048
IJCSRR @ 2026
www.ijcsrr.org

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Cite this Article: Thien Phung, V.G., Trung, T.H. (2026). Multi-Tiered Scaffolding and Scaffold Fading in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language: Effects on Oral Proficiency and Pragmatic Adaptability. International Journal of Current Science Research and Review, 9(4), pp. 1724-1733. DOI: https://doi.org/10.47191/ijcsrr/V9-i4-05