Improving Essay Writing skills through Scaffolding Instruction in Grade Six Bhutanese Students

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of Scaffolding Instruction on learning achievement and satisfaction of 22 Grade Six Bhutanese students in English essay writing skills. The study was conducted in one of the semi-urban schools in eastern Bhutan. A one-group experimental pre-test post-test design was employed. The study was carried out in the second semester of 2021 for a period of one month. The quantitative data gathered from the achievement tests were analyzed using paired t-tests. The mean score of the pretest and the posttest were 1.8 and 2.9 respectively. The mean score of the posttest is higher than that of the pretest with a mean difference of 1.1. Most importantly, the statistical analysis of using 6+1 writing traits through Scaffolding Instruction revealed that there is an improvement in all the seven writing traits in the posttest. It is observed that for all the writing traits, the mean score of the posttest is higher than that of the pretest with a mean difference of; 1) Idea 0.6, 2) Organization 1.5, 3) Voice 1, 4) Convention 1.5, 5) Word Choice1.1, 6) Sentence Fluency 1.3, and 7) Presentation 1.5 respectively. Similarly, the responses from the satisfaction survey questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis and the items were grouped into four themes: Independent learner, Confidence, Improved writing skills, and Organization of ideas. Four emerging themes were rated on 5-point Likert Scale and the levels of satisfaction were interpreted in percentage. Amongst the four themes, the highest level of satisfaction was rated for the theme 'Confidence' with 65% of 'strongly agree' followed by 'Independent learner' (59%), 'Improved writing skills' (56%) and 'Organization of ideas' (50%).

Keywords: Writing, Scaffolding Instruction, Learning Achievement, Learning Satisfaction

1. Introduction

English has been taught as a second language to Bhutanese students ever since modern education began. It is used as a medium of instruction to teach all the subjects except for Dzongkha, which is the national language of Bhutan. Bhutan follows the prescribed curriculum system developed by the Royal Education Council. The English curriculum consists of four modes of discourse namely reading and literature, writing, grammar, listening, and speaking. It is one of the main subjects and serves as a linkage to understand other subjects.

Generally, learning English as a second language is a major concern pertaining to the quality of education. Lhamu (2016) affirmed that the students' inability to write quality answers results in low performance in English. The Grade Six students are expected to write 200 to 250 words descriptive and narrative essays. However, writing essay is considered one of the most challenging tasks for the students. Most students lack qualities of a good writing essay and they exhibit extreme weakness in coherence, focus and organization of thoughts and ideas, lexical and grammatical errors, (Tshering, 2016;

Zangpo, 2005). According to Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment (BCSEA, 2017), the year-end testing as a Competency Based Assessment Test [CBAT], for Class VI English, the mean score was 54.33, while it declined to the mean score of 48.86 in the year 2018.

Wangmo (2018) claims that writing is one of the ultimate ways through which students get to discover, build ideas and express numerous forms of knowledge. However, to be a proficient writer in English is a big challenge for many ESL learners (Cole and Feng, 2015). It has been observed that difficulty in writing becomes prominent in upper elementary level. Further, Cole and Feng (2015) argue that the feeling of incompetence in writing leads to anxiety, stress and self-doubt, which is a hindrance to achieve good quality writing. Teaching appropriate use of punctuations, spelling and grammatical rules are perceived as the effective strategy to develop students' writing skills (Namgay, 2016). Wangmo (2018) further warns that the most important traits of good writing such as coherence, focus, development and unity are somewhat neglected. Writing skills in the upper elementary level need genuine attention and intervention to groom them into expressive individuals in terms of writing.

The poor writing skills may be due to the concern about covering up the syllabus rather than teaching the content in-depth since Grade Six students sit for board exams prepared by BCSEA. The learning achievement score is measured upon the quality of answers they write. Moreover, it is expected that feeling pressured by the subject teacher and school administration, the teaching of quality essay writing skills is least focused. This study focuses on scaffolding instructions to improve the quality writing skills of descriptive and narrative essays. Scaffolding Instruction is a systematic process that offers the students with ample guidance until the process is learned, and then slowly removes the support in order to transfer the accountability for completing the task to the student (William and Marry School of Education, 2015). Therefore, the researchers are convinced that it is worth conducting an action classroom-based research to study the effectiveness of Scaffolding Instruction in teaching essay-writing skills.

2. Research Objectives
1) To study the effectiveness of Scaffolding Instruction in improving essay-writing skills of Grade Six students
2) To investigate the students' perceptions on use of Scaffolding Instruction in essay writing

3. Research Questions
1) Would Scaffolding Instructions improve the essay writing skills of Grade Six students?
2) Were the students satisfied with Scaffolding Instruction in their essay writing classes?

4. Research Hypotheses
1) There would be an improvement in Grade Six students' essay writing skills after the treatment with Scaffolding Instructions
2) This experimental group of Grade Six students would be satisfied with Scaffolding Instruction in their essay writing classes

5. Literature Review

5.1 English literacy in Bhutan

English is the predominant language in Bhutanese curriculum. The English curriculum went through a major reform in 2008 when the educators and experts felt the deterioration of quality learning in English. The present curriculum emphasizes improvement of language skills, aimed at enabling students to be competent global citizens in the 21st century. Most importantly, the English curriculum is in line with the philosophy of Gross National Happiness aimed at instilling the students' appreciation of the values of the country's unique culture and tradition. The revised curriculum focuses on four modes of discourses, namely, reading and literature, writing, listening, speaking and grammar. Besides that, students are expected to know different genre types and their significances (Royal Education Council [REC], 2015).

However, students' writing ability plays a vital role in the students being promoted to the next grade. Writing a 200-250-word essay becomes a major task as students make progress from lower to upper elementary level. As per the curriculum framework (REC, 2012), Grade Six students should be able to write for wide range of purposes and audiences such as explanations, summaries, invitations, reports and realistic fictions. Further, students should develop the writing skills with competencies to use appropriate punctuations, accurate sentence structure and sensible use of vocabulary (Wangmo, 2018). As prescribed in the English curriculum the Grade Six students are introduced to write both descriptive and narrative essays and gradually, they move to the more complex ones in the next higher grades. Moreover, a writing portfolio consisting of poems, short stories, daily journals, and book reviews is mandatory for them to improve their academic skills.

Writing is a complex but important skill that demands a lot of cognitive and linguistic abilities learned from easiest to most difficult ones in formal classroom settings (Chikita, Padmadewi & Suarnajaya, 2013; Al-Roomy, 2016). Writing and reading are reciprocal skills, which strongly complements one another. Choi et al. (2018) claim that there is a positive significance between the reading comprehension and writing performance. However, writing is what makes thinking visible and can connect people regardless of time and place. It involves many activities including exploring different modes of writing, modeling, and engaging students in meaningful interactions with the text (REC, 2019). Hence, writing is one of the mandatory skills that every student must have, as it is the determinant of academic successes.

5.2. Scaffolding Instruction

Scaffolding Instruction is a process of providing necessary support and guidance until the learner becomes an independent in applying the knowledge. It provides the novice with adequate assistance until the process is absorbed, and then progressively detaches the supports in order to transfer the ownership for completing for the task assigned. According to Slavin (cited in Arthini & Padmadewi, 2018), Scaffolding Instruction is a support provided in solving the problem that includes the clues, encouragement, and modeling that allows students to become an independent learner. The facilitator must offer learners with the optimal extent of guidance and assistance indispensable to complete the task, and then gradually decline the level of support until the learner becomes capable of accomplishing the activity of their own.

The term scaffolding refers to providing contextual support by the teacher through simplified language, showing visual and graphics, clues, and giving hand on learning experiences (Ovando & Combs, cited in Mohani et al,.2020). It is a step-by-step support

provided and finally the teacher transfers ownership of learning when the learner can work on their own. Faraj (2015) states that Scaffolding Instruction is a writing tool for a teacher to guide the learner transitions from assisted tasks to an independent performer. It is cognitive support, which is a contextual, social, and temporary framework for the successful academic domain in writing (Verity, 2015; Vygotsky, 1987).

According to Alber (2014) as well as Burns and Joyce (2015), Scaffolding is a range of instructional help rendered to learners during the process of learning cycle to accomplish the learning targets and assist in mastery of tasks. Educators use this instructional support based on learners' experiences and previous knowledge during the process of acquiring new skills. However, these supports are slowly aloof as learners' progresses their ability for self-learning and teacher gradually shifts more responsibility over the learning process to the students.

5.3 Scaffolding Instruction in teaching writing skills

Students constantly seek opportunities to learn and excel in their academic scores. Acquiring good writing skills at an elementary grade is one of the most important skills, which later determines the effective academic achievements. Therefore, scaffolding instructions are helpful in developing the writing skills for ESL elementary learners. Hasan and Karim (2019) state that scaffolding instruction is a special force provided to the learners until their cognitive potential is ready for the new and independent learning. Teaching of writing skills demands constant support and guidance until the student can produce good quality writing. Scaffolding process involves inquiring of students' background knowledge, providing clues and examples, modeling, practicing shared writing, collaboration amongst the circle of friends, and finally giving an opportunity to grow as an independent learner (Read, 2010; Slavin, 2006).

The successful implementation of Scaffolding Instruction depends on how the teacher manages to provide support and guidance as per the students' need. Researchers (Faraj, 2015; Padmadewi & Artini, 2019; Sing et al, 2020; Wadiana & Sabsiq, 2021) claim that Scaffolding Instruction is an effective and systematic guidance provided to optimize the learning, enhance critical thinking and develop processes to create concepts, sentences, and paragraphs while writing. Faraj (2015) is convinced that practicing the five writing processes, namely prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing with scaffold instruction enable the students to produce a good piece of writing more accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately.

Generally, writing is a process in which the thoughts are developed and their written language made more precise. At the prewriting stage, the students practice brainstorming, webbing, fast writing mind mapping and discussing the title with friends. They organize the ideas by making an outline to visualize the topic and paragraphs to be written (Mohtar et al, 2020). The second stage is drafting. Students begin writing essays based on the outline created. During this stage, the writer chooses the purpose, the voice and tone for the audience (REC, 2017). In the third stage, the teacher does the editing based on correct use of language, content, organization, and coherence of ideas and thoughts. In the fourth stage, students revise their writing and rewrite the essay following the comments, suggestion and feedback. Finally, students get to publish their work and share with friends. However, Mohtar et al, (2020) claim that this model of writing process does not aim to help the ESL learners to write. They further argue that the writing process is too lengthy and tiresome for

the students whose language proficiency is low. Hence, the students' inability to express their ideas impedes the quality of writing.

5.4 Benefits of Scaffolding Instruction in teaching writing skills

Students need assistance to move from not knowing or not being able to becoming independent and competent individuals (Barkley, 2010). The effective Scaffolding Instruction provided on any tasks will help students become independent and take the autonomy of their own learning. McKenzie (1999) put forward eight benefits of Scaffolding Instructions. They are:

1) Scaffolding Instruction provide clear instructions.

The teacher provides clear and step-by-step instructions on what and how to carry out the task to achieve the desired goal. This reduces the confusion in students and it increases an efficiency in learning.

2) Scaffolding clarifies purpose.

Use of Scaffolding Instruction clarifies the purpose of the task and its importance. Students will have goal to accomplish, and keep them focused on their task.
 Scaffolding keeps the students on task.

Students are engaged in tasks and they are aware of the direction in which their lesson is heading.

3) Scaffolding offers assessment to clarify expectation.

Teacher explains what is expected of doing that particular task. Moreover, students are made aware of the assessments and set goals that define excellence:

1) Scaffolding reduces uncertainty, surprise, and disappointment.

Teacher makes sure that the lesson or any activity is checked before the implementation to avoid complications. Probationary is carried out before the real teaching to maximize the efficiency in learning.

2) Scaffolding delivers efficiency.

The lesson delivered using Scaffolding Instruction proves to be efficient and most importantly achieves the learning goal with very little time wasted.

3) Scaffolding inspires.

Use of Scaffolding Instruction promotes enthusiasm and inspires learners that enhances their deeper understanding of the lesson. Teacher's consistent guidance and timely constructive feedback inspire to learn more.

Writing is a cognitively oriented process; ESL learners at the beginning of their essay writing face the challenges of choosing appropriate words and bringing those words together (Wadiana and Sabsiq, 2021). Hence, It's Lit Teaching (2020), Lynch (2018), and Alber (2014) put forward the six steps for Scaffolding Instruction while teaching writing skills in students. They are as follows:

Step 1: Demo Lesson

Showing the students on how to write a good essay is very important task. Through the demo lesson, the students know what they are supposed to write in each stage. This gives the students to think aloud and brainstorm their ideas.

Step 2: Connecting to Prior Knowledge

One of the ways to make academically challenged students feel more comfortable doing the work is to connect what they already know from the previous knowledge to the present topic. Using K-W-L charts, brainstorming, and concept maps will help the students connect their learning to new topic. When students can connect new ideas to their prior knowledge, stepping into next level seems less scary.

Step 3: Familiarize on Writing Process

The five-paragraph essay is a great example of a writing framework. The writing process is a framework for how to write an easy. It consists of six steps: brainstorming, prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, evaluating, and publishing. Providing the writing framework help all kinds of students with different kinds of writing. The most commonly followed five-paragraphed essay includes introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion paragraph. Wadiana and Sabiq (2021) describe that the use of Scaffolding Instruction provides the students with a step-by-step process to create concepts, sentences, and paragraphs.

Step 4: Peer Discussion and Feedback

When there are diverse learners in the classroom, it is always important to encourage the students discuss and share ideas. Most students learn best from their peers when students are engaged in discussing the gist of what they learned, discovered any challenges to their friends. Most importantly, a teacher's constructive feedback and suggestions play a pivotal role in enhancing the writing skills of students.

6.   Methodology

A one group pre-test post-test experimental design was adopted to study the students' learning achievement and satisfaction in learning essay-writing skills using Scaffolding Instruction. The research participants consisted of 22 Grade 6 students selected through cluster random sampling. The research was carried out for a period of one month. The two most senior English teachers were requested to check the validity of the achievement test and the satisfaction survey questionnaire prior to carrying out the study in order to obtain accurate and authentic measurement items. The pretest-posttest on the topic 'Best friends are friends forever' was conducted to assess the students' learning achievement in essay writing. They are assessed on 6+1 writing traits: 1) ideas, 2) organization, 3) voice, 4) word choice, 5) sentence fluency, 6) convention, and 7) presentation. After the pretest was conducted, the students were oriented on how Scaffolding Instruction are carried out by the teachers to teach essay writing. The students were taught essay-writing skills using the Scaffolding Instruction for the entire one month. The satisfaction questionnaire consisting of 10 questions was carried out at the end of the month to measure the levels of learning satisfaction.
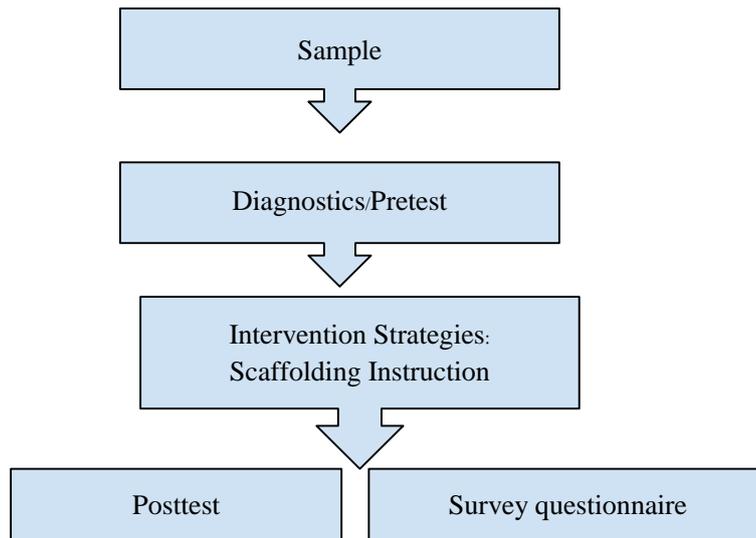
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Figure 1. Research Process

6.1 Data collection

The quantitative data was gathered from the learning achievement tests; pretest and posttest. 6+1 writing traits by Culham (2003) were adapted for diagnostic tests and intervention purposes. The students were asked to write an essay of about 200 words on 'Best Friends are Friends Forever'. After analyzing the standards of essay writing skill, the researcher put forward intervention strategies. The students were familiarized with writing processes; moreover, they were supported, guided and coached for the entire writing processes. The posttest was conducted to examine the students' writing abilities after Scaffolding Instruction was employed as an intervention strategy.

Another set of data was obtained from 10 satisfaction questionnaire items. The data obtained was analyzed based on a five-point Likert Scale to study the students' level of satisfaction. The lesson plans were used as an instructional instrument for practical intervention.

6.2 Intervention program

Based on the pretest error analysis, the researcher implemented the Scaffolding Instruction as an intervention strategy to answer the research question: Would Scaffolding Instruction improve the essay writing skills of Grade Six students. The lesson plans and Scaffolding Instructions on 6+1 writing traits were carried out as an intervention program for a period of one month. Moreover, the students were familiarized with the writing process through Scaffolding Instruction.

6.2.1 6+1 Writing traits

1) Ideas: Ideas are the main message or the content of any writing piece. Cox (2019) states that the strong writers use the right amount of idea to convey the clear and overall message. During the intervention process, the students are taught how to write and elaborate the main ideas and concepts of their essay.

2) Organization: Organization is the intriguing pattern and logically sequenced ideas in writing. Sequenced ideas and paragraphing are necessary for any written piece. Students are provided with sample essays discussed on how the ideas in the essays are

sequenced logically. The researcher modeled and emphasized the importance of making strong connections from one point to another.

3) Voice: Voice is the individual writer's strong feelings and expressions through words. The feeling of conviction and wits add magic to the writing. Sample essays are provided and let the students figure out how the writer's feelings are used to express certain things. Students are taught on use of proverbs, sayings, and idioms to support their ideas.

4) Word Choice: An appropriate choice of words, rich, colorful, precise language can move and enlightens the readers. A good set of vocabulary, antonyms, and synonyms are taught to make it more impactful in choosing the right words.

5) Sentence Fluency: Sentence fluency is about having a good flow of language. It takes into account of word pattern. In the intervention process, the students were taught word order and sentence pattern to create a sensible meaning in it.

6) Convention: Convention is the mechanical correctness of the writing; spelling, grammar, punctuations, sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, and the use of capitals. Prior to their essay writing skills, the students are introduced and familiarized on correct use of all the grammatical structures.

7) Presentation: Presentation is the use of correct layout, its readability and pleasing to the eyes. The researcher consistently guided on the correct layout of the essay, maintaining neatness and cleanliness of their work. Make sure that their writing is presentable.

7.   Results and Discussions
7.1 Data analysis of students' learning achievement

The pretest was carried out to ensure the writing ability of the group before the treatment; while the posttest was conducted to find out the effectiveness of the treatment and compare the writing skill and performance before and after the intervention. The quantitative data gathered from the achievement tests were analyzed using paired t-tests. The mean score of pretest and posttest were 1.8 and 2.9 respectively. The mean score of the posttest was higher than that of the pretest. The quantitative data gathered from the pretest and the posttest were analyzed to answer Research Question 1. Figure 2 shows the comparison of the mean scores between the pretest and the posttest. The posttest mean score was higher than that of the pretest score. There was an increase in the overall mean score of the posttest by 1.1 from the pretest score. The increase in the posttest score is mainly because of the cognitive support provided that is contextual, social and temporary framework to enhance academic writing skills in students through Scaffolding Instruction intervention (Verity, 2015; Vygotsky, 1987).
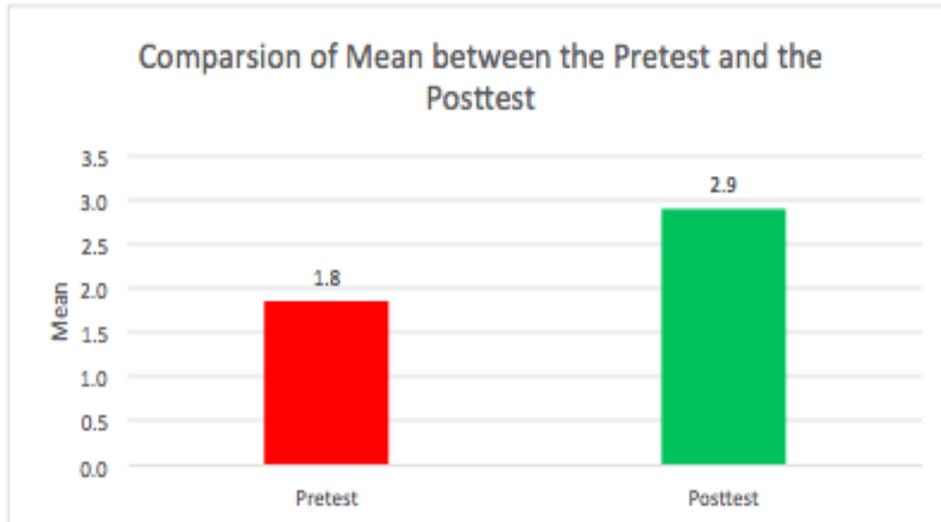
Figure 2. Comparison of Mean between the Pretest and Posttest

Moreover, Figure 3 shows the comparison of mean between the pretest and posttest for all the six writing traits. It clearly presents a higher increase of mean scores in the posttest than the pretest in each trait thereby denoting the effectiveness of scaffolding in writing using 6+1 writing traits. The mean score of the posttest is higher than the Pretest with a mean difference of; 1) Idea 0.6, 2) Organization 1.5, 3) Voice1, 4) Convention 1.5, 5) Word Choice 1.1, 6) Sentence Fluency 1.3, and7) Presentation 1.5 respectively. This finding is in accordance with the previous research conducted by Faraj (2015) who found out that scaffold instruction enables students to produce a good piece of writing more accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately. Moreover, Wadiana and Sabsiq (2021) supported that use of Scaffolding Instruction helps the students create concepts, sentences, and paragraphs while writing essays.
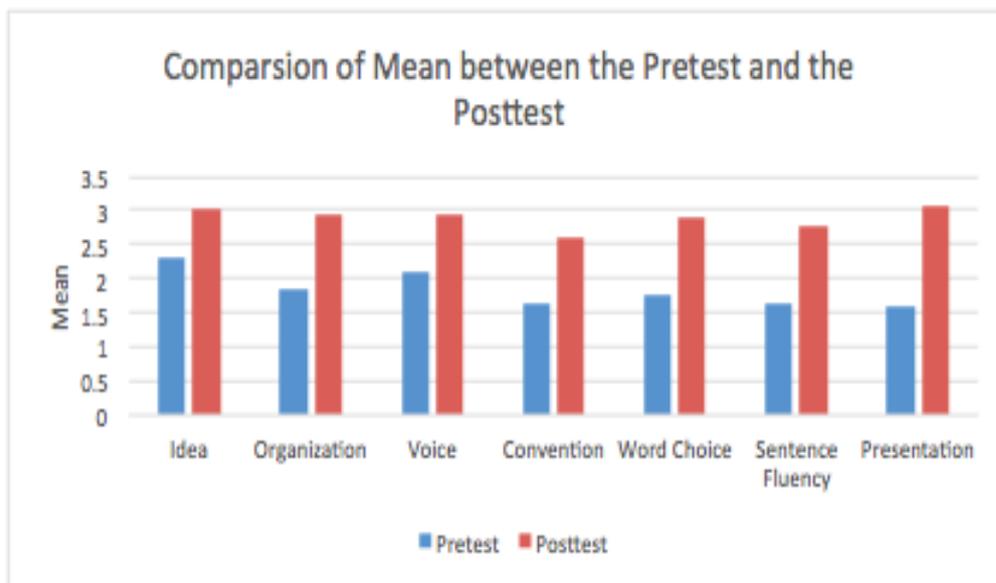

Figure 3. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores of 6+1 Writing Traits

7.2 Data analysis of satisfaction survey questionnaire

The data gathered from the questionnaires were used to find out the students' level of satisfaction on using Scaffolding Instruction Strategy based on a five-point Likert Scale. A set of 10 items were rated from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Figure 4 shows the students' level of satisfaction in each item. Remarkably, none of the research participants has rated 'Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree' in 9 items out of 10 in total, which clearly indicates that the students are satisfied with using the Scaffolding Instruction as Strategy to enhance the essay writing skills. However, 1 student rated 'Disagree' for Item Number 2 which represents the smallest portion of the whole. The majority of the students rated 'Strongly Agree' followed by 'Agree' in all the items.
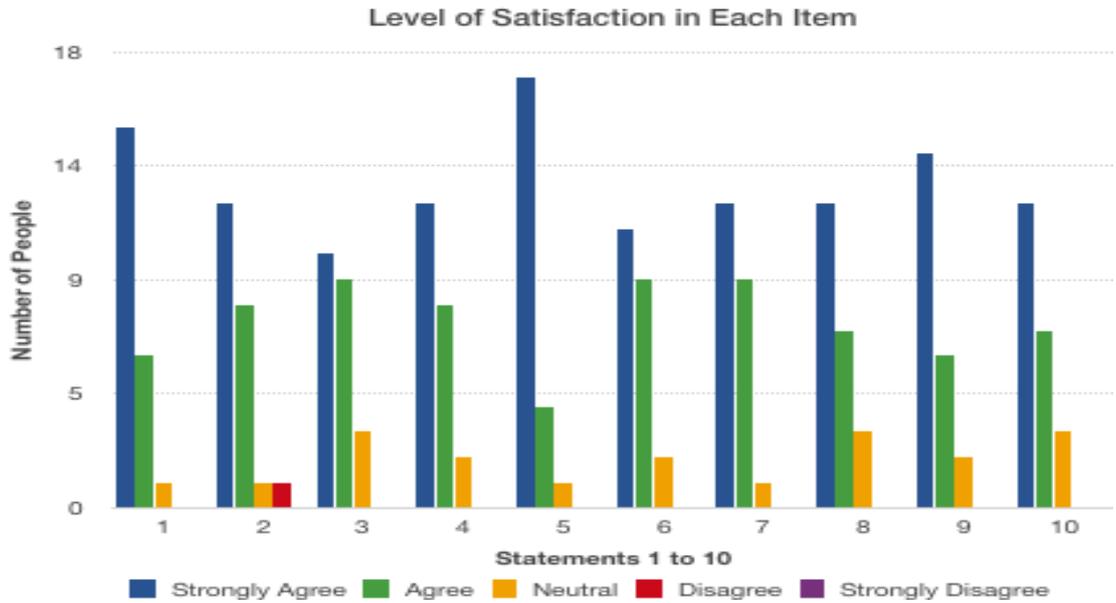

Figure 4. Graphical Representation of Level of Satisfaction in Each Item

In order to analyze the data one step further. The study adopted data grouping Through coding categorization, four themes emerged, namely independent learner, confidence, improved writing skills, and organization of ideas. Table 1 presented below shows the theme with the level of satisfaction interpreted in terms of percentage for the emerging four themes.

Table 1. Theme and Level of Satisfaction in Percentage

Items	Themes	Level of Satisfaction in Percentage				
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.Scaffolding Instruction helps me to become a dependent learner 2. Use of Scaffolding Instruction grabs my attention.	1.Independent learner	59	31.8	7.6	1.5	0
4. Scaffolding Instruction allows a lot of time to interact with friends and	2. Confidence	65	27	6.8	0	0

teacher. 5. It helps me build my confidence when the teacher guides me. 7. It reduces my fear and anxiety of writing essays when the teacher directs and guides me.						
6. The teacher's consistent feedback and suggestions helps me to write better essays. 10.It encourages me to write more essays on varieties of topics 9. The use of Scaffolding Instruction makes the essay writing skills easy.	3.Improved writing skills	56	36.4	7.6	0	0
3.Scaffolding Instruction helps me in organizing my thoughts and ideas while writing essay. 8. It helps me to have good flow of words.	4.Organization of ideas	50	36.4	6	13.6	0

Amongst the four themes, the highest level of satisfaction rated was theme 2 'Confidence' with 65% 'strongly agree', 27% 'agree', and 6.8 % 'neutral'. Followed by theme 1 'Independent learner', 59% rated 'strongly agree', 31.8% 'agree', and 7.6% 'neutral'. However, 1.5% rated 'disagree', which represents the smallest portion of all. Theme 3 'Improved writing skills', 56% rated 'strongly agree', 36.4% 'agree', and 7.6% 'neutral'. None of the students has rated 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. Finally, theme 4 'Organization of ideas', was rated lowest of all with 50% 'strongly agree', 36.4% 'agree', 6% 'neutral', and 13.6% 'disagree'. Most importantly, none of the themes were rated 'strongly disagree', which clearly indicated the presence of remarkable satisfaction level when Scaffolding Instruction was used in teaching essay-writing skills. This finding is supported by the previous research studies carried out by Arthini and Padmadewi (2018), Wadiana and Sabiq (2021) who supported that use of Scaffolding Instruction provides support in solving the problem that includes the clues, encouragement, and modeling that allows students to become an independent learner. Moreover, Read (2010) and Slavin (2006) also support that scaffolding process involves probing of students' prior knowledge, providing clues and examples, modeling, practicing shared writing, collaboration amongst the circle of friends, and finally giving an opportunity to grow as an independent learner.

8. Conclusion

Based on the findings from students' learning achievement and satisfaction survey questionnaire it can be concluded that scaffolding plays a vital role in developing the writing skills in students. The use of Scaffolding Instruction is found to be one of the suggestive strategies to enhance the students' essay writing skills, whereby it increases the confidence level when the teacher provides them constant guidance and support in the due course of writing using 6+1 writing traits. It is observed that there is an improvement in all the writing traits; idea, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, convention, and presentation, when the students are provided with consistent guidance and constructive

feedback through Scaffolding Instruction. Moreover, the strategy implemented in this study has benefited the students in becoming an independent learner, improved their writing skills, and it helped them in organizing the ideas while writing an essay. The findings from this study aligns with the previous researches carried out by Wadiana and Sabiq (2021) in teaching concepts, sentences, and paragraphs, Sing et al (2020), Padmadewi and Artini (2019) and Faraj (2015) in enhancing critical thinking and preparing students to be an independent learner.

8.1 Recommendations for Implementations

1) Since the use of Scaffolding Instruction was found effective in enhancing the essay writing skills, the English teachers are recommended to use it as one of the strategies to teach writing skills.

2) English teachers should employ Scaffolding Instruction to teach at different grade levels in different genres.

3) English teachers are recommended to allocate the maximum time for writing with constant and constructive feedback until they become an independent learner.

8.2 Recommendations for Future Research

1) Future researchers may examine the effectiveness of Scaffolding Instruction to teach other forms of writing essay like expository and argumentative.

2) This study has focused on Grade Six students, so future researchers may study different grade levels with larger groups.

9. Authors

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