

## Scaffolding in a Productive Skill Lesson

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Although there are two distinct definitions for the term scaffolding in use in English language teaching, most teachers-in-training are only familiar with one definition. This lack of awareness often causes confusion. In this paper, the definitions for scaffolding will be clarified by showing that the definitions vary depending on which domain of teacher action is being discussed. The paper will also provide examples of how the second definition of scaffolding relates to planning lessons. The paper will then demonstrate that there are two kinds of scaffolding at the lesson planning stage. The first kind of scaffolding relates to the lesson or target language, and the second kind of scaffolding relates to the task or activity. The paper will conclude by providing an example of when and where to use scaffolding in a model lesson plan.

The impetus for this paper comes from my experience as a teacher-trainer. The goal of this paper is to help teacher-trainers, teachers, and teachers-in-training to develop knowledge and awareness about how the term *scaffolding* is defined and used in our field. I will begin by briefly describing my teacher-training context. I will then examine the definition of scaffolding as put forward by course books in second language acquisition and course books for English language teaching methodology. Next, I will describe the prior learning my teachers-in-training need in order to do the awareness-building task that will provide the learners with a concrete example that serves as a bridge; a bridge that will connect their old understanding of scaffolding to a more refined understanding of scaffolding, I will then use this task to introduce how the definition of scaffolding differs depending on the domain of teacher action, and I will conclude the paper by discussing a lesson plan that exhibits the two kinds of scaffolding that get planned into lessons.

### **CURRENT TEACHER-TRAINING CONTEXT**

I currently work as a teacher-trainer in a TESOL certificate program at a university in Seoul, South Korea. I teach several different courses in this program, but the two courses that I teach most frequently are Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Materials Design and Development (MD). I like to tell my students that MD is really applied SLA. The focus of MD is lesson planning and the process used to select, adapt, and create materials. Consequently, whenever I have my learners making lesson plans and selecting, adapting, or creating materials, I

remind them that they are taking what they know about teaching and learning, and constructing a testable hypothesis. I want them to realize that every lesson plan and the materials that they use should reflect their beliefs about teaching and learning, and that they can test these beliefs in their classrooms by reflecting upon what helped and hindered student learning during their lessons.

Our program uses a sixteen-week semester which is followed by a two-week practicum. The sixteen week semester focuses on building learner knowledge, awareness, skills, and attitude (KASA; Freeman, 1989). There are five core courses in the program: Testing, Culture and Pragmatics, Second Language Acquisition, Materials Design and Development, and Speaking Listening Reading Writing Methodologies. The purpose of the two-week practicum is to give participants the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned, that is, participants take what they have learned and put it into practice in a classroom while being observed by their peers and a teacher-trainer. Participants are guided through the experiential learning cycle by their teacher-trainer with the hope that they will leave the program as reflective educational practitioners.

## **SCAFFOLDING**

### **The Common Definition**

The common definition of *scaffolding* that is presented in this paper comes from three sources; two of the sources represent textbooks we use in our program, and the third definition comes from a fairly recent paper published in *TESOL Quarterly*. The first of the three definitions is from *How Languages are Learned* by Lightbown and Spada (2006):

Scaffolding refers to a process in which a more knowledgeable (or expert) speaker helps a less knowledgeable (or novice) learner by providing assistance . . . for example, drawing the novice's attention to the task, and simplifying or limiting the task demands (p. 131)

Scaffolding: The language that an interlocutor uses to support the communicative success of another speaker. It may include the provision of missing vocabulary or the expansion of the speaker's incomplete sentence. (p. 204)

The second definition comes from *Learning Teaching* by Scrivener (2005):

Scaffolding refers to the way a competent language speaker helps a less competent one to communicate by both encouraging and providing possible elements of the conversation. It is the way a primary school teacher might help a young child to communicate or how a chat-show host might draw out a guest. The listener offers support . . . to help the speaker create his own spoken structure. (p. 162)

The third definition of *scaffolding* comes from Ko, Schallert, and Walters' (2003) *TESOL Quarterly* article.

Scaffolding . . . was introduced by Bruner (in Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) in

describing what Vygotsky . . . meant when explaining how learning occurs as a result of the interpsychological support coming from the more knowledgeable other that leads learners to internalize what is being learned. Such scaffolding is said to be helpful only when it is appropriate to the learner's current and potential level of development (the learner's zone of proximal development [ZPD]). (p. 304)

The salient features of these three definitions are that scaffolding:

- happens in the domain of “teaching-in-action;” that is, during the craft of teaching
- happens during interaction (usually speaking)
- happens naturally
- happens spontaneously
- goes from more knowledgeable to less knowledgeable
- allows for the less knowledgeable speaker to construct and make meaning

These are the features of scaffolding that are currently recognized by SLA theorists from the interactionist, constructivist, and socio-cultivist perspectives. What is important to realize about this conception of scaffolding is that it does not refer to materials or lesson planning but to interaction that happens between individuals either the teacher or other learners. Therefore, scaffolding is something that happens during interaction; it happens naturally because it is a part of the learning process, that is, during interaction between a learner and a more knowledgeable other. Consequently scaffolding is not seen as a planned activity but a necessary feature of the craft of teaching and the process of learning. It can thus be inferred that scaffolding happens spontaneously and naturally when it is appropriate to a learner's current and potential level of development or in Vygotskian terms, when the task or activity is within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development.

Vygotsky (1978) defined the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as:

The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers . . . [Thus] the zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation. (p. 86)

Based on Vygotsky's definition of ZPD, Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) identified six types of scaffolding functions that can be used by the more knowledgeable other to help the less knowledgeable learner complete a task. These six functions (as cited in Ko, Schallert, & Walters, 2003) are:

1. recruiting the learner's interest
2. simplifying the task
3. highlighting its relevant features
4. maintaining motivation
5. controlling the learner's frustration
6. modeling

What is important to note about the features that Wood, Bruner, and Ross identified is that many of these functions can take place in either domain of teacher action: both the domain of “teaching-in-action” and the domain of “teaching-in-planning.” These ideas will be developed later in this paper.

### **What My Learners Already Know in Relation to Task**

Although the definitions discussed above are compatible and straightforward, the confusion comes when the term *scaffolding* is used in terms of materials development and lesson planning. It is confusing because lesson planning and material development happen in the domain of “teaching-in-planning” rather than the domain of “teaching-in-action.” To clarify this distinction, I usually have my participants engage in a classroom task in which they plan how to teach someone to ride a bicycle.

Before I describe this task, however, it is important to review what the participants know in terms of lesson planning and the productive skills framework. This task usually comes in week 6 of the semester, when the participants are comfortable with two important ideas related to the concept of scaffolding, especially as it applies to the domain of “teaching-in-planning.”

First, my participants are comfortable with the idea of student learning objectives (SLOs). They have read Fadil’s (1985) article for homework and have participated in a workshop in which they have written their own learning objectives. The workshop helps them to implement the acronym SMART (Drucker, 1954), that is, the idea that any objective should be:

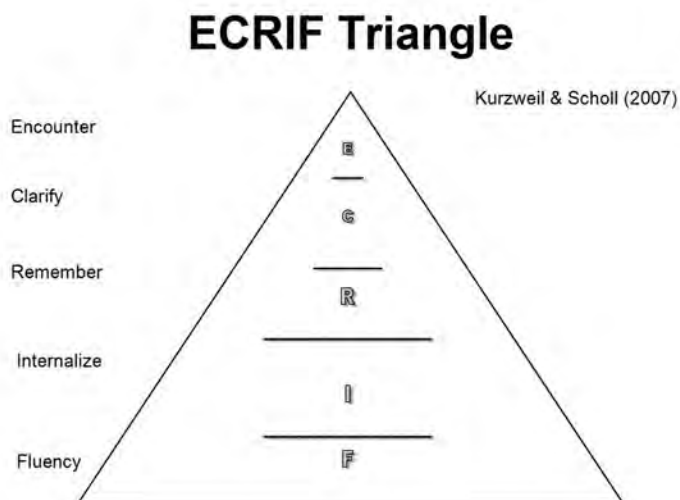
- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Time-Bound

They are also comfortable with the idea that in order for an objective to be measurable, they need to be able to observe some specific student behavior (Mager, 1975) and one of the criteria for acceptable performance is that the behavior being observed should be situated in a context of use that requires authentic, meaningful interaction and/or use.

In the SLO workshop, participants become confident in using the following formula: *By the end of the lesson, SWBAT (students will be able to) \_\_\_(1)\_\_\_ by \_\_\_(2)\_\_\_.* In this formula the first blank represents the target skill and/or the target language that the students are to learn and the second blank represents the authentic and meaningful task that will allow students to interact and demonstrate their ability to use the target skill and/or target language. For example, if I wanted my participants to write a student learning objective for *be going to* using this formula, I would expect an objective like this:

By the end of the lesson, SWBAT ask and answer questions about future plans using *be going to* in the dialog “A: What are you going to do \_\_\_\_\_? B: I’m going to \_\_\_\_\_.” by making a weekend plan with their partners.

Second, the participants are familiar with an adapted version of the productive skills framework as put forward by Kurzweil and Scholl (2007). They describe something which they call the ECRIF Triangle (Figure 1). ECRIF stands for “Encounter, Clarify, Remember, Internalize, and Fluent Use.” In my adapted version, I simplify the triangle into just three stages: Encounter, Internalize, and Fluency. The reason for this simplification is that clarification of the target language can come either prior to use or after use, depending on the target language/skill, age, and level of the learners.



**FIGURE 1. ECRIF Triangle**

The EIF Triangle is similar to the ECRIF Triangle:

**Encounter Stage:** At this stage, schema is activated and the context of use is established by providing students with authentic exposure to the target language or skill in a context that is familiar and relevant; students meet the target language through an activity, such as a puzzle or game; student prior knowledge is assessed through brainstorming, mind mapping, or elicitation; student interest is generated by providing materials and activities that have impact; and rapport with students is built through providing students with a familiar and relevant context. In the encounter stage, students are not expected to produce the target language; the stage focuses on comprehensible input.

**Internalization Stage:** At this stage, the students internalize and remember the target language through activities that progress from controlled forms to less controlled forms of practice. Thus, controlled group work that uses repetition drills to focus on pronunciation will give way to pair work that will focus on accuracy, which will lead to either group or pair work that focuses on meaning and use. Whenever possible, an inductive approach is utilized to facilitate student discovery and learner self-investment.

**Fluency Stage:** At this stage, students demonstrate their ability to use the target language and/or skill on their own through some kind of communicative task. The task is constructed so that it provides a clear context of use for the target language or skill that the teacher is trying to assess. Successful completion

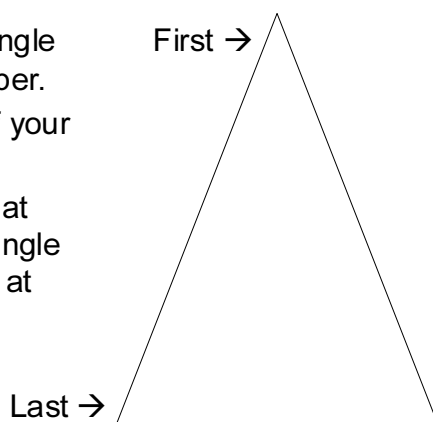
of the activity or task should allow the teacher to determine whether or not they have attained their student learning objective.

## USING TASKS TO REVIEW, INTRODUCE, AND CLARIFY UNDERSTANDING

The task that I will introduce in this section is designed to both review what my students already know in terms of the productive skill framework and student learning objectives as well as to help clarify the idea of scaffolding as it relates to the domain of “teaching-in-planning.” The task involves having my students work in small groups to discuss how they would teach someone to ride a bicycle. As they are discussing the steps, I pass out poster paper and markers to each group. Next, I ask them to draw a large triangle on the poster paper (see Figure 2). They start by writing the first step at the top of the triangle and continue until the last step is at the bottom.

### How would you teach someone to ride a bike?

- Draw a large triangle on the poster paper.
- Make a poster of your steps.
- Put the first step at the top of the triangle and the last step at the bottom



**FIGURE 2. Establishing the task**

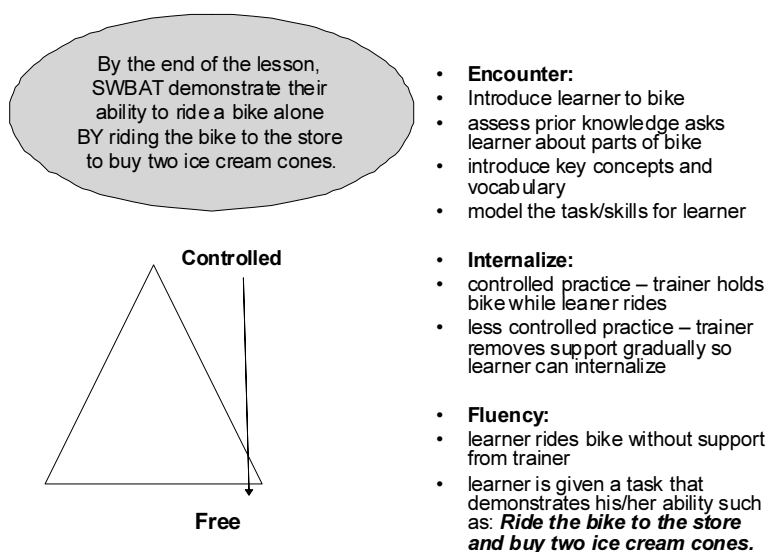
I generally circle through the class occasionally asking guiding questions to help groups who may have missed or forgotten a step. When the groups have completed their poster, they should label their steps E-I-F (encounter-internalize-fluency). Again, I circle the room asking guiding questions or answering student questions. After the groups have labeled the steps, I ask them: “Did you give your learner a clear, meaningful, and authentic task in which they can demonstrate their mastery of what they have learned? Please include a clear, meaningful, and authentic task in your last step, and then write a student learning objective for your lesson. Use the formula:

By the end of the lesson, SWBAT (students will be able to) \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_.

A useful activity is to get the participants to look at the posters of their peers and to give feedback and comments on what their peers have done. There are two

ways to do this: First each group can be given different-colored repositionable notes on which to write their comments and questions, or each group can be given a different colored marker to write their comments directly on the posters. For this activity I use the latter method and have them write the comment or missing steps directly on the posters.

When each group gets back to their original poster, I give them a chance to look over the comments or added steps, I then elicit the steps required to teach someone to ride a bicycle and write them on the board. I also have my participants tell me how to label the steps according to E-I-F, and then I let them share their student learning objectives. The last step is to compare what they have made with the model I have made (Figure 3).



**FIGURE 3. Model poster**

I debrief the task by looking at the student learning object: By the end of the lesson, SWBAT demonstrate their ability to ride a bike alone by riding the bike to the store to buy two ice cream cones. I usually ask questions like: What was my assessment task? What criteria did I set for successful performance? Did the assessment task provide a clear opportunity for outcome feedback? How did it provide the learner with a clear opportunity for outcome feedback? Can you think of any other performance criteria or assessment tasks that you could use to assess student learning in this lesson?

The salient features that these questions are designed to emphasize are that (1) assessment tasks ought to be real and relevant, such as riding the bicycle to the store to buy something, (2) the criteria for success should be clear and measurable, such as alone or without assistance, and (3) the assessment activity should not only be an assessment tool that the teacher uses, but should also be a learning tool to help the students assess their own success and build the confidence they need to be real bicycle riders or speakers of English.

Next, I go over the steps in the lesson by stages. I usually ask: In the encounter stage, are the learners expected to produce the skill that they will

learn? The purpose of this question is to highlight that in the encounter stage, the learner is not expected to produce anything new; it focuses on input and assessment. It is preparing the learner for what will come next.

We then look at the last two stages. I usually ask: What does the teacher do as he or she moves through these stages of the lesson? This question is designed to get the participants to notice that in the internalization stage we provide the students with a lot of scaffolding at the beginning of the stage, but as they move through the internalization stage, the scaffolding is gradually withdrawn, so that by the time we get to the fluency stage, our learners are able to ride a bicycle without support from the trainer, and they complete a task that demonstrates their ability such as *ride the bike to the store and buy two ice cream cones*.

### **A Refined Definition of Scaffolding**

In the domain of “teaching-in-planning,” scaffolding is still something that helps the learner internalize the target language, but rather than something that happens spontaneously and naturally during interaction, it is something that is planned into the lesson activities and materials. The scaffolding is provided so that students can interact by themselves without the teacher directly providing verbal support. Scaffolding which is planned into the lesson assures that the challenge level of our lesson remains in the learner’s Zone of Proximal Development. Therefore, the definition of *scaffolding* as it relates to the domain of “teaching-in-planning” is: *Scaffolding denotes the language support that the teacher or material developer builds into the productive skill lesson to facilitate the successful learning and use of the target language and/or target skill.*

Based on the six functions of scaffolding that Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) identified (above), three can easily be planned into lessons or materials: recruiting the learner’s interest, highlighting relevant features, and modeling.

Another thing to be aware of in terms of scaffolding is that there are two kinds of scaffolding at work within any productive skill lessons. There is lesson plan or target language/target skill scaffolding, and there is also activity/task scaffolding. Lesson plan or target language/target skill scaffolding is the scaffolding which needs to be taken away as the students move through the lesson. Activity/task scaffolding, on the other hand, is the support that you give to students so that they can successfully complete a specific activity or task.

The target skill support that was provided during the bicycle lesson is the help given as the learner rides the bicycle. As we move through the lesson, this support decreases until there is none. At the end of the lesson, the teacher gives the learner an assessment activity: *Ride the bike to the store and buy two ice cream cones*. The teacher also gives the learner some money and says, “Good luck,” but the learner looks at the teacher and says, “I don’t know where the store is”? The teacher draws a map, and after the learner looks at the map, she goes off on her bicycle. A few minutes later she returns with the ice cream cones.

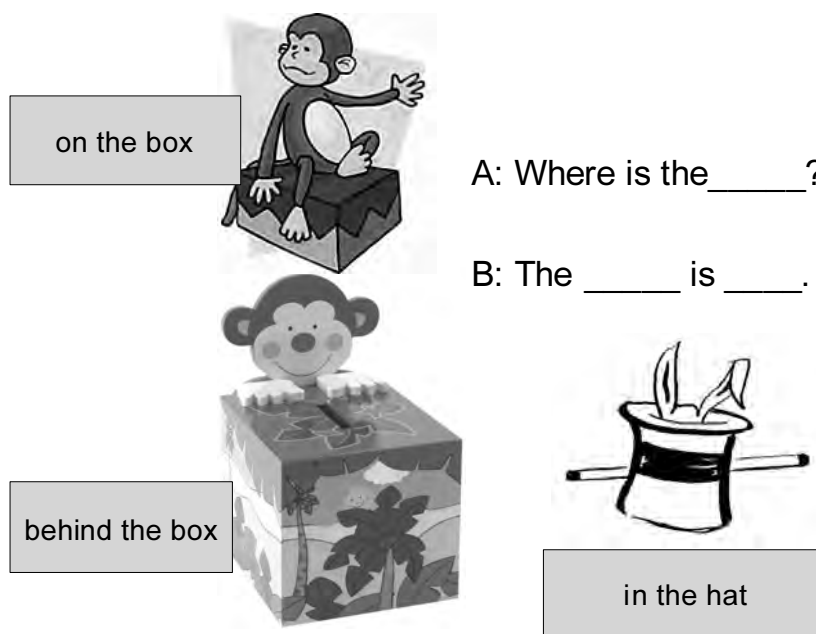
Based on the performance criteria established in the student learning objective, the trainer cannot hold the bicycle as the learner rides to the store because that would be providing target skill or lesson support; however, the trainer can provide a map, because the map does not help the learner ride the bicycle (riding the bike, not following a map, is the skill which is being assessed

in the assessment activity). Thus, holding the bicycle is lesson plan or target skill scaffolding, and the map is activity or task scaffolding.

### Scaffolding in Planning: An Authentic Example

Finally, I would like to look at the features of scaffolding in the domain of “teaching-in-planning” in a language learning scenario. Let us imagine that the teacher has planned a lesson to teach prepositions of location to a class of young learners. For her less controlled practice activity, the teacher has put the students into groups of four; each group has four stuffed animals, a hat, and a box. One student takes a stuffed animal and places it somewhere, and then asks the question: *Where is the monkey?* One of the other students answers: *The monkey is in the box.*

The teacher is pleased. The students are having fun, and they are doing the task well. About halfway through the activity, as the students continue to practice, the teacher removes the visual support for the prepositions from the whiteboard (see Figure 4).

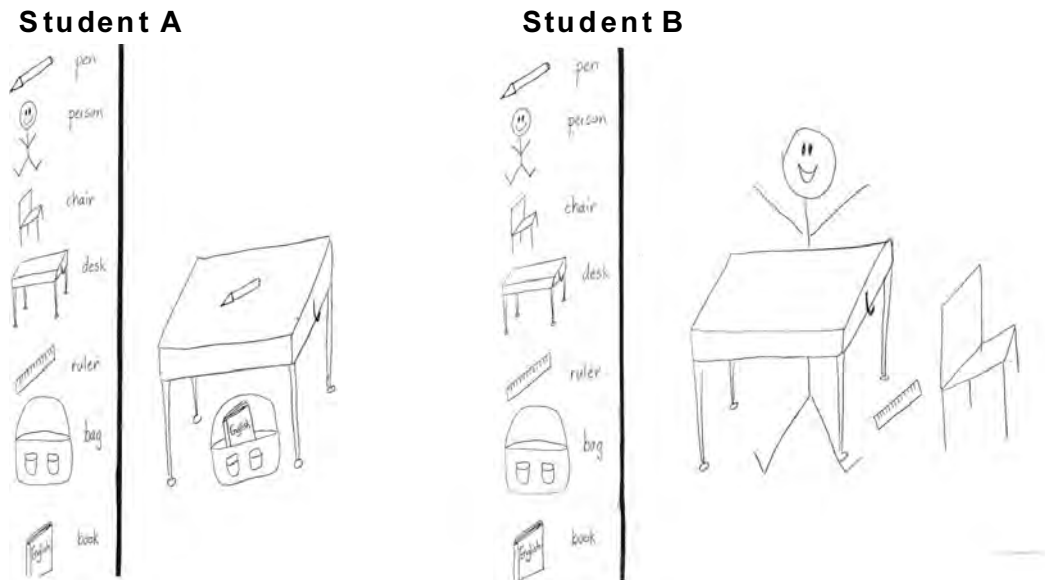


**FIGURE 4. Lesson plan or target language scaffolding for practice activity**

The teacher notices that interest in this activity is starting to wane so she claps her hands to get student attention so that she can set up the final learning task. The final learning task is an information gap. Student A has a picture of a room and student B has a picture of the same room but with slightly different objects (see Figure 5). Students will ask and answer questions about where different objects are in the room. (For example, A: “Where is the person?” B: “The person is behind the desk.”) When selecting the materials for the task, the teacher was a bit concerned. She was not sure if her students knew all the vocabulary in

the information gap.

Knowing that she shouldn't provide any scaffolding if she wants to be able to assess her student learning, her solution was to adapt the activity. She provides the students with the vocabulary support they need but removes the target language or dialog support (Figure 5). The vocabulary support allows students to complete the task successfully in a way that does not interfere with the assessment of the learning outcome. The activity also provides students with outcome feedback because after they complete the task they can compare their pictures with each other and see how successful they were at communicating the information.



**FIGURE 5. Information gap assessment activity with task scaffolding**

## CONCLUSION

In the domain of “teaching-in-planning,” scaffolding can be defined as the language support that the teacher or material developer builds into the lesson to facilitate the successful learning and use of the target language and/or target skill. Because of the student learning objective, we can see that there are two kinds of scaffolding that we plan into our lessons: target language/target skill scaffolding and activity/task scaffolding. The first is support that enables students to achieve the SLO, whereas the latter is support that allows students to complete an activity or task successfully. Secondly, the major difference between the scaffolding that happens in the domain of “teaching-in-action” and the domain of “teaching-in-planning” is that the scaffolding in the former happens naturally and spontaneously, and it arises out of the learning process; however, scaffolding in the domain of “teaching-in-planning” assumes that content needs to be broken down into manageable parts so that the learners do not find what is being taught to be outside their zone of proximal development. By making the distinction between

these two kinds of scaffolding, teachers can plan better lessons and more effectively assess the learning that is happening in their classes.

## THE AUTHOR

**James Braun** has over fifteen years of teaching experience: nearly ten years of experience with curriculum and materials development, and over five years of teacher-training experience. He started as a high school English teacher in Texas, but a sense of adventure pushed him to distant shores. He currently works in the Graduate School of Education at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, South Korea. He is also a licensed teacher-trainer with the School for International Training in Vermont, USA. His research interests include teacher-training, materials development and co-teaching. Email: [jbrown67@gmail.com](mailto:jbrown67@gmail.com)

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