

The Application of Scaffolding Theory to Teach Traumatic Memory in Robert Hayden's Poetry for EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the application of structuring scaffolds and problematizing scaffolds in the teaching of traumatic memory in Robert Hayden's poetry. Both forms of scaffolds achieve the effects in the comprehension of personal traumatic memory, historical traumatic memory, and the strategies of Hayden's traumatic memory writing in the poems. It is suggested that scaffolds can be used for literary development in the Chinese EFL context.

Keywords: *Scaffolding Theory, Literature teaching, Robert Hayden, Traumatic memory.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Scaffolding in teaching and learning can be described as the the teachers' help, assistance or support to the students. As a result, the students are able to complete learning tasks that previously could not be completed independently. Meanwhile, they can make improvements in their understanding of the learning task and their problem-solving abilities. The notion of scaffolding is associated with Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) proposed by Vygotsky (1978), referring to the gap between the current and potential levels of children's intellectual development. The gap can be eliminated with the help of the teachers' instruction. Therefore, teaching should never passively adapt to the current level of the children's intellectual development, but should continuously guide the children's intelligence from one level to another new level. In this case, scaffolding takes effect for the progress of the students. According to David Woodet al. (1976), scaffolding refers that adults or experts provide assistance to children or novices, enabling them to solve problems. In other words, scaffolding in teaching is student-centered, aiming to cultivate the students' problem-solving and active learning abilities.

As for the different forms of scaffolds, Brian J. Reiser (2004) put forward two complementary

mechanisms of scaffolding, namely, structuring scaffolds and problematizing scaffolds. The former can help build problem-solving tasks, while the latter can make the topic problematic. The research by Inge Molenaaret al. (2011, 2014) indicated that structuring scaffolds simplify the learning task and encourage the students to focus on the information. In contrast, problematizing scaffolds increase the complexity of the learning task and encourage the students to engage in some constructive activities. Both structuring scaffolds and problematizing scaffolds are effective in teaching and learning.

Robert Hayden (1913-1980) was one of the most technically gifted and conceptually expansive poets in the history of African American poetry. He was the first African American to serve as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (the post now called Poet Laureate) in 1976 and awarded Grand Prize for Poetry for the poetry collection *A Ballad of Remembrance* at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966. However, Hayden's poetry has been rarely discussed academically in China. Thus, the teaching of Robert Hayden's poetry contributes to the development of Hayden's poetry research and the understanding of contemporary American literature.

Guided by Scaffolding Theory, the current study aims to investigate the application of

structuring scaffolds and problematizing scaffolds in the teaching of traumatic memory in Robert Hayden's poetry. In addition, it is hoped that the current study provides pedagogical implications for literary development in the Chinese EFL context.

2. TEACHING ROBERT HAYDEN'S POETRY WITH SCAFFOLDING THEORY

Literature teaching, to some extent, is a constructive process. The current study has been conducted in a literature course focusing on British and American poetry in a university in China. The teacher specializing in English language and literature has been teaching English for nearly twenty years. The students are English majors who show their interest in British and American poetry. With the help of structuring scaffolds and problematizing scaffolds, the students take the initiatives to study Robert Hayden's poems in his poetry collection *A Ballad of Remembrance*, reflect on personal traumatic memory and historical traumatic memory in the poems and eventually examine the strategies of Hayden's traumatic memory writing. Generally the two forms of scaffolds take effect to facilitate the students' comprehension of traumatic memory in Robert Hayden's poetry.

2.1 Personal Traumatic Memory

The personal poems in the poetry collection *A Ballad of Remembrance* derive from Robert Hayden's memories of his personal history with inner agony. In particular, the poems "Those Winter Sundays" (Robert Hayden, 2013: 41) and "The Whipping" (Robert Hayden, 2013: 40) deal with Hayden's traumatic memories of his family. When it comes to the discussion of the main ideas of the two poems, the teacher applies structuring scaffolds by stating the life experiences of the poet and offering an example of making a summary of the poem.

The poem "Those Winter Sundays" is the remembrance of Hayden's foster father, and reviews Hayden's childhood traumatic experience. Hayden highlighted "those" days and "winter" days with the implication of the emotional coldness for several times in the poem. In straightforward narrative description the boy reminisced about the father, who rose as early on Sundays as he did the rest of the week to build the fire that warmed the house and warmed the body. When the boy woke

up, the room gradually warmed up. The father called the boy to wake up, but he slowly got up and dressed because of the anger accumulated over the years. In spite of his father's efforts, the boy remembered that no thanks were given to the father and recalled his coldness to the father. The main reason was that the boy suffered from the angers of the family members continuing for a long time. Despite his father's hard work every day, the family still had to live in a poor environment, so Hayden's childhood was full of quarrels, and this disharmonious family atmosphere brought him trauma and pain.

Similarly, another personal poem "The Whipping", remembering Hayden's foster mother, also concerns his childhood traumatic memory. This poem is about an old woman who whips a boy. The poem started with a direct description of the recurrent punishment the boy experienced as a child, for the first line stated that the old woman was whipping the boy again. Besides the physical punishment by her striking the boy until the stick breaks in her hand, the boy recollected the verbal abuse from her accounts. The old woman told the neighbors her good personal quality towards the boy's wrong behaviors. In a consequence, the boy suffered from more pains of those hateful words than the whipping by the old woman. He called these recollections unhappy past experiences in terms of physical and psychic trauma.

With the help of structuring scaffolds, that is, exploring the life experiences of the poet to understand the topics in the two poems, the students are informed that Robert Hayden was born of the rather fragile union of an impoverished black couple in the Detroit black ghetto. His natural parents eventually divorced, leaving the baby with the neighbors, William and Sue Ellen Hayden. Although the foster parents provided true parental concern and real love for Hayden, his foster mother always accused him of being ungrateful. In this case, Hayden described the repeated punishment by his foster mother in the poem "The Whipping". When his natural mother went back to Detroit, the quarrels often occurred between his natural mother and his foster mother. As a result, Hayden could not put up with such angers of the family members continuing for a long time depicted in the poem "Those Winter Sundays". When he grew up, Hayden recalled his memory of family life in his childhood and gave his response to the personal trauma by means of his poetry.

2.2 *Historical Traumatic Memory*

The historical poems in the poetry collection *A Ballad of Remembrance* originate from Robert Hayden's memories of African American history with misery and bitterness. Hayden showed a strong interest in African American history, and his poetry witnessed important historical moments and contained important historical information. In particular, the poems "Middle Passage" (Robert Hayden, 2013: 48-54) and "Frederick Douglass" (Robert Hayden, 2013: 62) both deal with Hayden's traumatic memories of his ethnic group. By the time the students read the history poem, they have no idea of the history of enslaved Africans. In this case, the teacher employs structuring scaffolds by explaining the topics concerning historical background in the poems.

In the poem "Middle Passage" the poet shows his concern with the history of enslaved Africans associated with the voyage from Africa to the America, that is, the transatlantic slave trade. At that time, capitalism in European colonial countries developed rapidly, and a large number of products determined that they could exchange it for enslaved Africans. Starting from Europe, the slave traders sailed to Africa and captured enslaved Africans. After they arrived in Africa, they exchanged for young and strong enslaved Africans. Enslaved Africans were purchased by slave traders like commodities. Then the slave ship loaded with enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic, which was called the "Middle Passage". This route was what Hayden depicted in his poem. Ships carrying enslaved Africans to America were often overloaded. The air was foul and the food provided was extremely poor, making it easy for enslaved Africans to contract various diseases. Enslaved Africans who died of various epidemics were thrown into the sea and suffered quite tragically. Enslaved Africans were treated as goods, and female slaves were subjected to humiliation.

Based on the structuring scaffolds by the teacher, the students understand that Hayden drew inspiration from the history and archives of the transatlantic slave trade in his poetry, combining the Amistad Rebellion of 1839 and the court case to expose the cruel, violent, and exploitative nature of the slave trade. By means of the ironic names of the slave ships, ship logs, the sailor's letter, and the fragmented narration of slave traders, the poem "Middle Passage" describes the inhumane treatment suffered by the slaves on ships. This again proves the harsh environment on slave ships and the cruel

and inhumane treatment that slaves were subjected to, which manifests the historical traumatic memory of African American people.

The similar structuring scaffolds have been applied in the teaching of another poem "Frederick Douglass" covering African American history. Obviously, this poem focuses on introducing Frederick Douglass, the leader of Abolitionist Movement in America during the 19th century. Frederick Douglass was a slave at the age of eight years old, and finally got free from slavery at the age of twenty-one years old. The experience of being a slave brought both physical and psychological trauma to Frederick Douglass. But Hayden's statement in the poem that Frederick Douglass will always be remembered further confirms that freedom and liberation will come ultimately.

2.3 *Violence and Transcendence*

Violence and transcendence are the two strategies of traumatic memory writing in Robert Hayden's poetry collection *A Ballad of Remembrance*. In order to elicit the students' comprehension of the poetic texts as well as their abilities in solving problems in the learning task, the teacher applies problematizing scaffolds such as "Why are you going to respond to Robert Hayden's poetry concerning traumatic memory?", "How are you going to respond to Robert Hayden's poetry concerning traumatic memory?", and "Did you figure out the strategies of traumatic memory writing in Robert Hayden's poetry?".

In Hayden's personal poems in the poetry collection *A Ballad of Remembrance*, domestic violence turns out to be pervasive, mainly due to his childhood traumatic experiences. In a seemingly autobiographical reference to his youth, he recalled the angers of the family members continuing for a long time in the poem "Those Winter Sundays". The poet was torn by the frequent quarrels and conflicts in the family. In the poem "The Whipping", an old woman whipped a boy, leading to his miserable memories of physical and psychic trauma. Moreover, the violent characteristic is heightened by cacophony such as the rough and harsh sound /k/. The two poems include "blueblack cold", "cracked hands that ached", "madebanked fires blaze", "the chronic angers of that house" and "She strikes and strikes the shrilly circling boy till the stick breaks", "woundlike memories". By means of violence, the poet spoke the unspeakable,

in remembered response to the psychic trauma of his “unusual” family life (Fred M. Fetrow, 1984: 3).

However, Hayden’s sense of human transcendence evolved over his life. In the poem “Middle Passage”, enslaved Africans did not directly and explicitly express their demands, and they did not speak up and defend themselves. However, Hayden applied the silence of enslaved Africans to reveal the truth of silence. The silence of the victims precisely reflects the violent behavior of the perpetrators, and the silence of enslaved Africans also implies that they are resisting in a subtle way, ultimately completing the voyage and achieving a spiritual level of liberation and freedom with the help of human transcendence. This poem examines and criticizes racism through intertextual writing of historical and literary texts, aiming to transcend racial limitations and point out the necessary path to freedom for people all over the world. So it is the same with the analysis of the poem “Frederick Douglass”.

Thanks to problematizing scaffolds, that is, exploring the strategies of traumatic memory writing in Robert Hayden’s poetry by raising the relevant questions, the students are informed that Hayden wrote African American historical poetry, especially slave history poetry, to examine that period of traumatized history from a unique perspective. His poetry restored the truth of history and connected the past and future, helping people overcome the shadow of trauma with a detached and transcendent attitude. Hayden explained the universality of human nature and identity from a racial perspective, expressed his transcendent national cultural stance as well as his multicultural ideas, and demanded for a universal value, achieving transcendence over racial identity.

3. CONCLUSION

The current study examines the application of structuring scaffolds and problematizing scaffolds in the teaching of traumatic memory in Robert Hayden’s poetry. Both forms of scaffolds achieve the effects in the comprehension of traumatic memory in Robert Hayden’s poetry. Structuring scaffolds help to understand personal traumatic memory and historical traumatic memory, and problematizing scaffolds contribute to the exploration of the strategies of Hayden’s traumatic memory writing in the poems. It is suggested that scaffolds can be used for literary development in the Chinese EFL context. However, there is room for the further research on the comparison of effects

between structuring scaffolds and problematizing scaffolds on the learning outcomes in literature courses.

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