

Scaffolding Poetry Pedagogy: An Action Research among Bachelor Students

Krishna Prasad Parajuli  & Samuel Collins

Abstract

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Corresponding Author

Krishna Prasad Parajuli

Email

krishna@dsmc.edu.np

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Department of English Education
Faculty of Education, P. N. Campus,
Tribhuvan University, Nepal
Email: enged@pncampus.edu.np
URL: www.pnrc.tu.edu.np

In this Action Research study, we explored how scaffolded instructional strategies enhanced undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' confidence and engagement in reading English poetry. We conducted this study among twenty bachelor level, first year EFL students in one month-long poetry reading project at a campus in a rural area of Nepal. When we observed students' struggle with figurative language, unfamiliar vocabulary, and culturally distant imagery in poetry reading lessons, we introduced scaffolded poetry instruction strategies which included guided recitation, collaborative reconstruction of poetic lines, visual and contextual scaffolds, and structured discussion on interpretation. In addition to these interventions, we taught them poetic devices and provided opportunities to compose poems. We collected data from classroom observations, informal interviews with the participants, students' artefacts, and our reflective accounts. The study found that the scaffolding activities reduced cognitive load and enhanced students' understanding of the poems. The study also showed that scaffolded instructions have visible improvements in students' explorations of text, interpretation, and creativity. These findings align with recent evidence that scaffolding strategies, such as peer support, guided noticing, and concept-mapping, significantly improve comprehension and learner agency in EFL contexts. The study demonstrates that scaffolded poetry instruction can transform poetry from an intimidating task into an accessible and meaningful component of language learning in the context, where students get limited opportunities to explore poetry.

Keywords: Poetry, scaffolding, pedagogy, figurative language, action research

Introduction

When strategically introduced, poetry can be powerful resource for English language learners as it offers opportunities for language awareness, cultural understanding, personal engagement, and critical thinking for English as EFL students (Civelekoğlu, 2015; Ilyas & Solihati, 2025; Kennedy,

2017; Omiunu & AWP, 2024; Şişman, 2020; Teixeira, 2025). However, EFL students experience challenges when dealing with vocabulary, metaphors, symbolism, allusions, lexical and semantic deviation while reading English poetry, unless they receive structured support (Abidin & Wai, 2020; Parajuli & Regmi, 2025). To overcome the challenges faced by students, teachers intentionally scaffold texts and tasks, which develop learners' comprehension, confidence, and participation in learning activities (Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim et al., 2023; Boonmoh & Jumpakate, 2019; Enyew & Yigzaw, 2015). Findings of these studies indicate that scaffolding strategies have potential for effective poetry instruction. This Action Research was conducted to assess the effectiveness of scaffolding based instruction on students' English poetry reading among the English language students in Nepal.

Context of Study

During a teaching placement of the second author at Drabya Shah Multiple Campus in Gorkha, Nepal, the first author and second author worked with a group of young students aged 18–22 in a Nepali-medium higher education setting. English was a compulsory subject, yet for many of the students it remained a language largely confined to the classroom. While they demonstrated determination and respect for their studies, their engagement with English literature, particularly poetry, was noticeably hesitant. We deeply reflected on how poetry should be introduced EFL contexts where students have limited opportunities to read English poetry.

During the four-week period, we observed a number of challenges. Students would often approach poetry as mysterious text to decode for examination purposes. They did not explore it as a text to enjoy. They were intimidated with unfamiliar vocabulary and linguistic devices, such as metaphor and simile. Additionally, classroom culture in Nepal is traditionally teacher-led explanation over exploratory discussion, thus reducing opportunities for students to actively engage with texts. As a result, many students lacked both the reading skills and the confidence necessary to approach poetry independently.

Poetry has a significant place in English language teaching and learning. English language courses from grade one to bachelor level in Nepal have poems. When taught effectively, poetry can encourage critical thinking, creativity and personal expression (Chiusaroli & Ober, 2016; Cronin & Hawthorne, 2019). It offers learners the opportunity to interpret meaning, and also to connect emotionally and intellectually with language (Lazar, 1993; Young, 2023).

However, poetry can appear dense, abstract, and intimidating, especially for students who are still developing confidence in English (Abidin & Wai, 2020; Parajuli & Regmi, 2025). Thus, poetry demands delicate handling in the EFL classrooms.

The main challenge that we faced was not only linguistic difficulty, but a lack of motivation and students' negative self-belief about reading English poetry. Students frequently described poetry as 'difficult' or 'confusing'. The participation in early lessons was marked by long silences and visible uncertainty. Without structured support, poetry risked reinforcing the students' feelings of inadequacy instead of building their competence in English language. Based on initial challenging in presenting the poetry lesson, we decided to adapt scaffolding strategies in the classroom to make the poetry lessons effective.

Collaboratively, we conducted an Action Research in our classroom, with the purpose of exploring whether scaffolded teaching strategies could improve students' engagement with and

confidence in reading English poetry.

This Action Research had the following specific research questions:

- a. What kinds of scaffolding activities can be used in teaching and learning reading English poetry?
- b. How does scaffolding activity support students' engagement in reading English poetry?

Through the observation of classroom interaction, students' responses, and participation over a period of time, our inquiry sought to examine how structured pedagogical support could transform poetry from a source of anxiety into an accessible and meaningful component of English language learning courses.

Review of Literature

Although poetry affords rich pedagogical benefits, its textual density and figurative complexity often pose considerable hurdles for language learners as it exposes them to a text which uses highly concentrated linguistic features (Kellem, 2009). Therefore, poetry is a useful tool to assist in raising language awareness among the learners and support them to develop their language skills (Lazar, 1993; Syed & Wahas, 2020). Suwastini et al. (2023) further observed that reading poetry enhances vocabulary knowledge, awareness of grammatical rules, and the ability to decipher figurative meaning of the texts. It can also be used to raise phonemic awareness of the language learners (Simecek & Rumbold, 2016). In addition to these gains, poetry enhances learners' personal engagement with the text and develops self confidence in the interpretation of meaning (Boldireff & Bober, 2022). Yet, a wide range of vocabulary, rearranged syntax, and densely used poetic devices make poetry inaccessible for the students with low language proficiency (Dalal & Farrukh, 2024; Nishihara, 2022). Additionally, cultural references and allusion add complexity in the poetry reading for EFL learners (Pendell et al., 2020; Simel, 2024). Recently, in the Nepali context, Poudel (2024) found that teachers face challenges when teaching the aesthetics aspects of versified poetry due to cultural, pedagogical, and linguistic aspects of English poetry. Thus, pedagogical approach in EFL contexts demands careful consideration of affordances and barriers while using poetry as a language learning resource.

Sociocultural Theory and Scaffolding

Sociocultural theory and scaffolding are key theoretical concepts which assume that learners can exceed their current performance level when they are provided with appropriate level of support. The socio-cultural theory rooted in the work of Vygotsky has a powerful impact in language instruction (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). According to Vygotsky, a learner can perform higher than their own independent capabilities when guided by a more knowledgeable person (Vygotsky, 1978). With his concept of Zone of Proximal Development, Vygotsky highlights the roles of a more capable person, especially in guiding the learners to achieve higher than their current level of independent performance. While implementing this theory in classroom situations, the teachers gradually build new learning activities based on the previous learning following the scaffolding process. Wood et al. (1976) described scaffolding as teacher's control of those which are beyond the initial capacity of the learners and allowing them to concentrate and complete those tasks which they can perform within their level of competency. Thus, sociocultural theory and scaffolding model of pedagogy advocates for the creation of a collaborative learning environment where teachers scaffold the learning activities, so

that students can complete increasingly difficult tasks rather than being intimidated by new learning situations.

Evidence for Scaffolded Reading

Research has consistently shown that scaffolding reading activities are beneficial for language learners (Brown & Broemmel, 2011; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Yawiloeng, 2021, 2022). Yawiloeng (2021) found that scaffolding activities improve speaking skills of the learners. Similarly, Sigvardsson (2020) found that scaffolding activities enhance readers' interpretative abilities in poetry classrooms. Scaffolding activities such as modelling, bridging, and organizing heightened readers' understanding and developed their confidence in the reading process (Mahmood & Abdul-Majeed, 2015). While investigating effectiveness of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Wood et al. (1976) scaffolding in reading instruction, Tastemir and Seidaliyeva (2025, p. 1) found that "scaffolding facilitates the enhancement of reading and comprehension skills while also fostering independence, critical thinking, and self-confidence". They outlined prereading, modelling, questioning and discussion, contextual support, shared reading, text structure analysis, post-reading reflection, group work and interaction, gradual reduction of support, and metacognition as scaffolding strategies. In the same vein, Li et al. (2025) found that situational, structural and peer scaffold reading comprehension. Similarly, Bhatta (2026) found that scaffolding strategies such as prereading, reading in peers, and summary writing promoted active learning among school students in Nepal. Thus, scaffolding is empirically verified support strategies for language learners, which support the readers to overcome their low language proficiency.

Gap in the Literature

The use of scaffolding in reading instruction has drawn the attention of researchers around the world (Tastemir & Seidaliyeva, 2025). These research studies have been conducted predominantly in Western countries (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Li et al., 2025; Saputri et al., 2021), with very few studies having been conducted on poetry instruction in the context of Nepal (Parajuli & Regmi, 2025; Pokharel, 2020; Poudel, 2024). These scholars studied students' experiences, challenges and expectations in teaching and learning poetry. Yet, the effectiveness of scaffolding strategies in poetry classrooms among Nepali undergraduates has received very little attention, so this study was conducted to fill the gap in the literature.

Methodology

This study took place over a four-week period and followed a collaborative action research model suggested by Burns(1999) and (Bradbury, 2015), structured around a continuous cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The cyclical nature of action research made it particularly suited to the classroom context at the campus, as it allowed teaching strategies to be adjusted in response to students' needs in real time. We planned and delivered lesson collaboratively. We adjusted subsequent lessons according to our reflection and students' feedback. We ensured that our interventions activities were practical, and grounded in classroom reality of the participants.

Text Selection

We selected the poem 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' by William Wordsworth for the poetry learning activities. Its manageable length, clear imagery, poetic features, musicality, and

its potential for cultural exploration attracted us. The elevated diction and geographical references presented authentic linguistic challenges, making it an appropriate text to trial scaffolded support strategies.

Participants

Twenty first-year Bachelor of Education (B. Ed) students at Drabya Shah Multiple Campus in Gorkha participated. Reflecting gender distributing in class, one male participant was recruited in the study. The other participants were female. The majority came from Nepali-medium schools with limited exposure to English literary texts beyond examination-focused study. As they were preparing to become teachers themselves, many had doubts on their ability to read and analysing English poetry.

Data Collection

The data was collected through observation, informal conversation, classroom artefacts and our own reflection on poetry teaching experiences.

Intervention

Initial classroom observations demonstrated that students were respectful and attentive yet hesitant to participate in classroom discussion. Reading aloud was often quite fragmented and interpretative discussion was limited. These observations helped us to plan the intervention.

The four-week intervention had a series of scaffolded activities based on 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge.' Each activity was designed to break down the perceived complexity of the poem and to provide structured entry level for students' engagement. As the intervention progressed, there was a noticeable change in the students' attitude towards poetry.

At the initial stage of the study, many students approached poem with apprehension, viewing it as difficult text with hidden meanings which demands a single 'correct' interpretation. As a result, the participants were reluctant to share ideas. However, the scaffolded activities gradually increased their confidence. By the end of the poetry project, they approached poetry with greater curiosity and minimal fear of making mistakes.

We taught them the structure and poetic diction and engaged them in collaborative discussions. By the end of the poetry project, the students were more willing to offer personal interpretations, ask questions, and engage in discussion with their classmates. For example, one participant said, "the poetry sessions were more engaging as we got the opportunity to enjoy the rhythm and rhymes in the poem, and explore the deeper meaning of the poem". Poetry became more accessible, interactive, and meaningful text by end of poetry project. This growing sense of confidence among the participants changed the classroom atmosphere and encouraged them for a far more positive engagement with literary study.

Reciting Poetry Aloud

The first activity involved modelling reading by the second author, followed by guided group recitation. Students practised reading in pairs and small groups. Then, they volunteered to read the poem to the whole class. This activity familiarized them with the rhythm and sound patterns of the poem while reducing anxiety associated with individual performance. Listening to the poem several times allowed the students to understand the poem before attempted to analyse it.

Reassembling Jumbled Lines

After the recitation of the poetry, the students reassembled cut-up strips of the lines of the poem collaboratively. They focused on logical order, grammatical clues, rhyme scheme, punctuation marks while reassembling the jumble lines. Instead of reading poem passively, students started to interact with the text.

Identifying Figurative Meanings

When the students were comfortable with the literal meaning of the of the poem, we moved them towards interpretation. For this, we encouraged them to explore the key vocabulary and phrases through guided questions rather than direct explanation. This practice was different than usual classroom practices. After discussing poetic devices, we asked students to work in groups to identify imagery, metaphor, and personification, syntactic deviation. Then, we discussed how these devices shaped the poem's mood. Students were more comfortable to use these terms into the textual analysis.

Discussing Cultural Allusions and Geographical References

We explained context of the poem help understanding the poem's references to Westminster bridge and its depiction of an early morning cityscape. We introduced the visual images of London and background explanations of the city and the author to provide visual support, as many of the students had not seen a picture of London. Rather than presenting this information as lecture content, students were encouraged to compare the poem's setting and visualise with their own experiences of similar cities in Nepal. This comparative approach helped them see poetry not as distant or foreign, but as something that is rooted in universal observations of place.

Collaborative Presentation

As a concluding activity, students worked in small groups to prepare short presentations. They analysed different aspects of the poem such as imagery, structure, theme, and cultural context. They presented to their peers required them to articulate interpretations in their own words.

Composing a Similar Poem

To cap the poetry project, the students were asked to compose a poem similar to Composed upon Westminster Bridge. They were asked to include geographical features and their personal feelings about the place they selected. Most of the students attempted this activity. The second author to this paper provided constructive feedback to those students and encouraged them to compose similar poems.

Results

At the outset of the intervention, students approached poetry with visible hesitation. The participation was limited, and responses were often brief and cautious. When invited to read aloud, some of them read the poem with uncertain voices. Many students avoided eye contact with the authors to avoid their turns to read the poem. Poetry was commonly described as 'difficult,' 'confusing,' or 'hard to understand,' and enjoyment appeared minimal. Engagement was largely driven by the expectation of examination requirements rather than genuine interest and enjoyment of poetry reading.

Students had lack of confidence to read poems and draw won interpretation. This reinforced the fact that poetry was seen as something fixed and authoritative, rather than a text that was open to discussion. The classroom dynamics, while respectful, lacked spontaneity or collaborative exploration.

It reinforced the need for scaffolded strategies that could reduce anxiety and create safer entry level for engagement. As the scaffolded activities were introduced, gradual but measurable changes began to emerge, thus providing answers to our initial question.

Recitation and Familiarity

Repeated reading and group recitation of ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’ helped demystify the poem, and hearing it aloud multiple times, practising in pairs before reading to the whole class, appeared to reduce anxiety around the poem. Students became more comfortable with pronunciation, rhythm, and pacing. By the end of the poetry project, students were volunteering to read sections aloud. This outcome that was unlikely at the beginning.

Reassembling Jumbled Lines

Reconstructing the poem from cut-up lines promoted active students’ participation in the early intervention. The students debated sequence, punctuation, and rhyme in small groups. This collaborative problem-solving encouraged discussion without the pressure of producing a ‘correct’ answer. The increased movement, conversation, and laughter during this task indicated that poetry reading became more engaging lesson.

Exploring Figurative Meaning

Gradual introduction of the poetic devices such as metaphor, personification, and imagery deepened comprehension. Similarly, such practice reduced anxiety of textual analysis. Instead of offering readymade interpretations, we asked them series of questions which allowed students to come with collective understanding. As students’ confidence grew, they began to volunteer their own interpretations. They moved beyond literal level understanding to more thoughtful reflections on mood and tone of the poem. Understanding literal meaning encouraged them to fully comprehend the poem. It also increased their willingness to take intellectual risks.

Cultural and Geographical Connections

Providing contextual support for the poem’s references to Westminster Bridge and encouraging students to compare bridges on familiar river proved particularly effective. When students were invited to relate the poem’s depiction of early morning stillness to their own experiences of Nepali towns and villages, the students felt that the poem has universal appeal although it is based on the particular context at the surface level. We observed that poetry was no longer distant and foreign concept to them. They realized that poetry reflected their personal life regardless of time and location.

Change in Classroom Dynamics

By the end of the poetry project, there was a marked difference in classroom dynamics. The students were more confident in reading poetry aloud. They recited the poem with clear voice and correct pacing. Students no longer hesitated to read the poem aloud. Importantly, their written and spoken responses reflected a deeper understanding of both the literal and figurative meaning of the poem. The poem becomes a subject of discussion which sparks their genuine interest to read more poems. When we collected informal feedback, we found that students’ activities, particularly the collaborative tasks, were helpful and engaging. Finding from the project suggested that the scaffolded approach changes not just ability, but also attitude regarding reading English poetry.

Collaborative Learning

A collaborative learning spirit emerged as students gradually supported each other during group discussions and presentations. They asked clarifications where they were confused and offered suggestions to their peers in groups. The atmosphere in the classroom became more interactive and participatory, contrasting with the silence and hesitation from the initial sessions. Thus, scaffolded activities played a crucial role in transforming students' engagement and attitudes towards reading poetry.

Discussion

This study explored how scaffolded teaching strategies could improve students' engagement and confidence in reading English poetry. Scaffolding activities such as guided reading, explicit teaching of the poetic devices, exploration of the context, collaborative lessons can reduce anxiety of poetry reading and make poetry more accessible to foreign language learners.

The findings of the study suggest that a scaffolded activities can enhance confidence and classroom atmosphere in a poetry lesson. By the end of the four-week poetry project, most of the students who were initially hesitant and reserved showed willingness to read aloud, contribute interpretations, and engage in group discussions.

Enjoyment, though difficult to actually measure, was reflected in stronger participation, more open dialogue, and positive feedback. The classroom dynamics shifted from silence to collaborative exploration of the poem. The intervention demonstrates that when there is support and a structured approach to learning, reading English poetry does not intimidate EFL learners in Nepali. Instead of intimidating experiences, it can become a meaningful and participatory learning experience.

This study reflects ongoing discourse poetry teaching in EFL context in Nepal. It illustrates how relatively simple, structured adjustments to pedagogy can transform student attitudes towards a subject. This study indicated that authentic the text, such as poem, can be accessible to the EFL learners with appropriate scaffolding activities. The findings also reinforce the idea that confidence and motivation are not fixed traits, but can be cultivated through intentional instructional design.

The findings of this study align with findings of the previous studies on scaffolding strategies for developing reading comprehension, grounded on Vygotsky sociocultural theory (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Li et al., 2025; Tastemir & Seidaliyeva, 2025; Yawiloeng, 2022). However, most of these previous studies were concerned with roles in scaffolding strategies for reading English language in general. This study resonates with the study by Bhatta (2026) who reported that scaffolding strategies promoted active participation of English language learners. This study focuses on the roles of scaffolding strategies on reading poetry in particular. The findings of this study show theoretical ideas of Zone of Proximal Distance proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and scaffolding by Wood et al. (1976) set a strong foundation for using a wide range of scaffolding strategies for teaching poetry.

Conclusion and Implications

There were some limitations of this study which must be acknowledged. The study was conducted with a small sample size of twenty students, within a single campus, and focused on only one poem. The findings cannot be generalised broadly without further research. Similarly, as the intervention only took place over a four-week period, long-term retention of confidence and engagement were not formally measured.

The future research with a larger and more diverse group of students across multiple institutions, and a wider range of poetic texts from different cultural traditions may provide a more conclusive answer to the research questions of the study. Expanding the intervention to include poetry comparisons or contemporary works may also yield further insight. Importantly, integrating scaffolded poetry pedagogy into teacher training curricula could potentially help equip future educators with practical strategies for teaching literature in second-language contexts. By embedding these approaches at the training stage, the potential for sustained, long-term impact within English language classrooms is significantly strengthened.

This study suggests that when poetry is taught through carefully selected scaffolding activities, we can support EFL students to explore, enjoy and interpret poetry. The collaborative, and culturally responsive methods have the power to develop language skills and reshape students' perceptions of their own reading abilities. It shows that if students are given the right kind of support at the right time, they can quickly overcome linguistic, cultural, emotional and metacognitive challenges of reading English poetry. The findings of this study positively indicate that poetry is not a boring text encrypted with mysterious messages but an interesting piece of linguistic composition meant for both for enjoyment and interpretation.

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Krishna Prasad Parajuli is an Associate Professor of English at Drabya Shah Multiple Campus in Gorkha, Nepal. He has done MPhil in English Education from Nepal Open University, Nepal. Currently, he is a PhD scholar at the Graduate School of Education, Tribhuvan University. His areas of research interest include educational technology, especially mobile technology in education, open and distance learning, and literature for language development

Samuel Lari-Collins is a writer and teacher based in North Yorkshire, England. He studied at Exeter University specialising in the Humanities and has taught in schools all over the United Kingdom. He spent three months working alongside Krishna Prasad Parajuli at Drabya Shah Multiple Campus teaching English in 2025. He now works as a full time writer in England, writing stories that explore different cultures from around the world.