**Scaffolding by teaching assistants in England: Exploring the interaction between practice and task structure**

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Internationally, teaching assistants (TA) support children with special needs and/or disabilities as they complete classroom tasks; meanwhile, teachers manage whole-class instruction. Given the limited training for TAs, Bosanquet et al. (2020) developed an influential framework promoting TA effectiveness. Their ‘scaffolding framework’ encourages TAs to provide minor support, such as prompting, while children complete tasks. Accordingly, children retain independence, maximising thinking and learning.

This study examined how different task structures, including open tasks, influence the strategies TAs use. Two focus groups were conducted with four TAs working in an English primary school. Through facilitated discussion, participants reviewed the scaffolding framework, and commented on videos showcasing the practices of another primary-school TA across open and closed tasks. Data were largely coded using the categories of the scaffolding framework.

The findings reveal that TA support, such as prompting, is recommendable across tasks. In open-task settings, TAs could also utilise more nuanced assistance, notably ‘what else’ questions. These encourage children to further elaborate on their ideas, leveraging the undetermined nature of open-task responses. Such scaffolding opportunities are more limited in closed tasks, which require precise answers. Moreover, the findings illustrate that effective TA practice stems from open-ended or closed tasks well-suited to children’s capabilities.

Keywords: children with special educational needs and/or disabilities; scaffolding; teaching assistants

Key Points:

* Teaching assistants (TA) are vital in supporting children with special educational needs and/or disabilities in England and globally. They assist with tasks while teachers focus on designing learning activities and managing whole-class instruction.
* Existing research studies have focused on TA support strategies, such as prompting and cueing, used to help pupils address learning tasks. However, these studies have yet to fully consider how the structure of tasks—particularly open tasks—influences the interactions TAs have with pupils and shapes their support strategies.
* This study found that, in closed tasks, TAs maximise children’s independence in task completion and learning through strategies like prompting. In open tasks, TAs can also employ more tailored strategies, notably asking open-ended questions.
* This research illustrates that task engagement and learning significantly depend on aligning tasks—open or closed—with children’s capabilities and interests. Schools should encourage regular collaboration between teachers and TAs, enabling TAs to share insights about the children they support and to help teachers design tasks that optimise learning outcomes.

# Introduction

Increasingly, support staff with limited teacher training play a crucial role in the education of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND; Ciletti, 2023). These staff, often known internationally as teaching assistants (TA), are deployed to support children with SEND during lessons in mainstream classrooms. Meanwhile, teachers design classroom activities for the entire class, and manage whole-class instruction.

In the largest study to date involving TAs, Blatchford, Russell, and Webster (2011) found that the participating children who received TA support, namely children with SEND, made less academic progress than those having little or no support from TAs. ‘Ineffective’ TA practices, such as immediately correcting the children’s responses and providing answers, were identified as contributors to these outcomes. Crucially, Blatchford et al. (2011) emphasised that this situation was not the fault of TAs. Factors outside TA control were central to explaining their practices: in particular, a lack of opportunities for teachers to review lesson content with TAs, and to provide them with feedback before/after lessons. Such liaison sessions are important for ensuring that TAs are well-prepared for classroom activities, and equipped to perform their roles effectively (EEF, 2024).

Building on the findings from Blatchford et al. (2011), Bosanquet, Radford, and Webster (2020) put forward an influential theoretical framework to promote TA effectiveness. Their scaffolding framework (Figure 1) is informed by rigorous sociocultural principles in child learning. The use of the framework encourages TAs to provide the least amount of support to children while they undertake classroom activities. In this way, children retain as much responsibility as possible for their progression through tasks, thereby maximising their thinking and learning.

Based on these principles, the scaffolding framework identifies a series of scaffolding practices attuned to children’s competencies in completing classroom tasks (Bosanquet et al., 2020). The first step is for TAs to observe children attempting to complete their work, and allow them to identify and address challenges as they arise on their own. This is called self-scaffolding. When TAs notice that children have some difficulties, they can offer prompting, which gives ‘*no specific information that might help [task completion]—it simply encourages the pupil[s] to think some more*’ (Bosanquet et al., 2020, p. 64). Prompts take the form of (a) repeating task instructions, (b) pointing to a specific item on task sheets, (c) reassuring children, or (d) giving students extra time to formulate their answers. If these prompts are insufficient, TAs can then gradually raise the level of support by providing one or more clues: semantic information on the solution of a given task. This more direct involvement in task completion narrows the scope of the immediate problem, thereby helping children identify the task’s solution. If the children require greater assistance, TAs can verbally demonstrate the steps needed to address the task (i.e., modelling). As a result, children can see the procedural steps, mimic them, and complete the task. As a last resort, and having tried all preceding steps, TAs could supply the solution to the classroom activity or correct mistakes the children have made in their attempts. TAs are advised to use these techniques sparingly.

Figure 1: the Scaffolding framework

![A diagram of a pyramid

Description automatically generated with medium confidence]()

*Note.* Bosanquet et al. (2020, p. 58)

A notable aspect of this framework appears to be its general application across different tasks, such as open and closed tasks (Webster & Boer, 2023). In line with this, TAs are encouraged to begin with assistance such as prompts and escalate to more direct support, including clueing and modelling, as needed to help children complete any type of task.

However, research in linguistics shows that task structure can shape participation in task completion in educators and children, potentially informing more tailored scaffolding practices (O’Connor & Michaels, 1993). For instance, closed tasks—namely, structured activities designed to elicit children’s knowledge in literacy or mathematics—typically invite students to generate predetermined responses, such as word definitions (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Crucially, these responses draw on existing academic knowledge that teaching practitioners already possess. Hence, educators can ‘quickly’ devise a series of less direct and more direct support strategies to guide students to task solutions.

By contrast, open tasks introduce greater unpredictability into classroom discourse (Erickson, 2011). Open-ended tasks, such as describing one’s holidays, either do not have a correct answer or have multiple acceptable responses, meaning educators cannot fully predict students’ responses in advance. Therefore, educators may need to acknowledge students’ initial responses to think about their next step (Radford et al., 2014). Where possible, educators could also encourage further student expression through open-ended questions (e.g., ‘What else?’), leveraging the undetermined nature of open-task responses. Hence, task structure appears to influence TA scaffolding practices.

With this in mind, this exploratory research aimed to contribute to the understanding and use of the scaffolding framework, and TA scaffolding in general: especially, insofar as open and closed tasks shape the type of support supplied by TAs. The research also explored the external factors that enhance (or are barriers to) TA scaffolding, such as teacher-TA liaison sessions. Thus, the findings may provide valuable insights to improve TA classwork.

The research was conducted within English primary education. This educational context was chosen based on the significant influence of the scaffolding framework on primary-school TA training in England (Whole School SEND, 2021). Additionally, English primary schools include the largest group of TAs in England and beyond (Webster & Boer, 2023). Hence, English primary schools are a particularly exceptional educational context to be explored, and potentially (positively) impacted by this research’s findings.

# Method

This study used a collaborative design in order to amplify the voices of TAs, and to produce findings that are more aligned with the educators’ practical needs (McGeown et al., 2023). A small sample of TAs in an English primary school was invited to review the scaffolding framework, and to discuss effective practices across open and closed tasks. Additionally, the TAs were encouraged to identify external factors that act as barriers and enablers to working effectively in the classroom. The following research questions (RQ) informed the study:

1. What do TAs perceive as effective scaffolding practices across open and closed tasks?
2. What external factors do TAs consider to influence effective scaffolding?

## Participants

Four TAs from a primary school in England were recruited. All were female, aged between 35 and 65, and worked across classes in Reception and Year 2. Each TA had at least seven years of experience in the role.

## Data collection and analysis

The TAs took part in two audio-recorded focus groups of about 75 minutes each. Focus Group 1 was semi-structured, including a discussion of effective teaching practices across open and closed tasks (RQ1). Factors potentially compromising effective scaffolding were also analysed (RQ2). To guide the conversation around RQ1, a presentation and discussion of the scaffolding framework, and its strategies were included. Additionally, two videos were shown to the participants. Video 1 illustrated a TA supporting a child with SEND to complete an open task: describing a picture. Video 2 showed the same dyad working on a closed task: identifying a grammar mistake in a sentence. The TAs were invited to use the teaching contexts in the videos to describe effective strategies they might adopt in comparable circumstances.

The data from Focus Group 1 were analysed thematically, to produce an in-depth account of the participants’ perspectives and voices (Braun & Clarke, 2023). To begin the analysis, audio data were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then interrogated in relation to the research questions to identify relevant patterns. The categories of the scaffolding framework, such as prompting and clueing, were largely applied to label patterns related to teaching practices in the dataset (RQ1). The remaining data patterns, including those related to factors influencing the practices employed by TAs (RQ2), were coded inductively, resulting in original categories.

Focus Group 1 findings were shared with the participants in Focus Group 2 for confirmation and further elaboration. The data drawn from Focus Group 2 were analysed thematically, following the same procedure as in Focus Group 1.

In the findings section, focus group extracts corresponding to identified categories are presented, along with the proportion of participants contributing to each category (e.g., ‘one TA reported X’ or ‘two TAs suggested Y’). This approach highlights the level of consensus or variation in perspectives among the participants. Participants’ names are pseudonymised to ensure confidentiality.

# Findings

## Effective scaffolding practices across open and closed tasks

The participating TAs agreed that support for children should be adapted to the task at hand. In the context of closed tasks, the entire group of participants concurred with Stefania, who indicated that TAs should start ‘*with the self-scaffolding, then the prompting and then obviously you think: “Ok, they’re not getting this, let’s give them a few clues”*’. If children have trouble, a further level of support, such as modelling, may also be necessary. As Figure 1 shows, modelling, as well as clueing, narrows the task scope and facilitates task completion while decreasing the amount of independence pupils have in addressing the task. In line with this, all participants acknowledged that TAs should, as much as possible, use self-scaffolding and prompting to allow children to maximise their thinking and learning.

In open tasks, the four TAs similarly emphasised the value of the scaffolding framework’s (Figure 1) support strategies. They particularly noted that children’s independence could be fostered through (a) listening to the children’s responses (self-scaffolding) or (b) giving students extra time to formulate their answers (prompting). However, three TAs also recognised the potential for more ‘nuanced’ follow-on strategies. In the extract below, Stefania and Ida highlighted the opportunity to ask open-ended questions, such as ‘what else’ questions. This type of support would allow children to elaborate on their original answers, further enhancing their thinking and learning.

Stefania: [Referring to Video 1] I think my next step [after self-scaffolding and prompting], if I’m sure that’s what you’re asking, would be the “who, what, when, why questions”. You know, what can you do? What else can you see? Why do you see fire?

Ida: Yeah, yeah. You’ve [had] a lot more discussion. Yeah, a lot more discussion.

Stefania, Alba, and Ida identified additional forms of open-task support: rephrasing children’s original answer, or illustrating visuals echoing it (e.g., word labels; see extract below). These neutral re-elaborations of the children’s talk help them make new connections between their existing knowledge and the task at hand. Thus, children could further refine their initial open-task answer.

Stefania: [Referring to Video 1] Once you find out where his understanding is at, by that given sentence, obviously he […] was able to get the words out: fire, smoke, smell […]. So, when he’s sort of had his own words […], I probably would have let him use them, making his own sort of word bank like label[ling] the picture. Get some more words like a visual on the picture […]

Alba: […] Some descriptive words on for him to look at, and then that’s how we would have supported him in our class.

Finally, three TAs perceived that providing more direct support in open tasks could limit children’s thinking and learning potential—perhaps even more than in closed tasks. In the extract below, Ida emphasised that TAs should be cautious when assessing the need for clueing and modelling. Due to TAs’ greater epistemic authority, these forms of support could lead children to provide the answers they think the TAs are expecting. As such, the use of these strategies could result in missed opportunities for children to engage in critical thinking and enhanced self-expression, which open tasks are designed to foster.

[You have to] be very aware that you do not put your own opinions in, on something, and that you are led by what the child is saying, regardless of whether or not you agree to it, if it’s an open-ended task. […] If you’re going to put in your opinions, you’re swaying the child’s voice automatically. It automatically stops being their idea, because more often than not what happens, when you’re working with a child who needs a lot of support, is that they are wanting to please. And they will go along with your ideas […]. So, you [have] got to be so careful not to actually squash their ideas.

## External factors that impact TA scaffolding

One feature reported by all participating TAs as compromising effective scaffolding, whether in open- or closed-task conversations, was task complexity. In the extract below, Carla acknowledged that when tasks are too challenging for children, they struggle to understand and engage with them effectively. In such cases, support such as prompting becomes less effective. Consequently, some TAs might be tempted to over-support by supplying task solutions or, alternatively, to allow children to leave the tasks unfinished.

Carla: We were doing about travel, and we were doing about trains. And, I was trying to engage one of the pupils, that is quite difficult because he is on his own agenda but to be interested in trains […]. So, I finally got his attention. He just took the two yellow wheels and made a Gruffalo out of it […] and told him how wonderful it was.

Ida: Yeah. So then, one way of looking at that scenario is if […] he’s been presented with a task that he cannot possibly perform even to the slightest degree.

Carla: Yes. But most of the tasks […] aren’t set for him; he can’t.

Furthermore, Ida argued that misperceptions among TAs regarding how their performance is assessed could prevent effective scaffolding practices. She noted that TAs might ‘*think that the task has to be completed, and if the completed task does not happen, it’s their failure, not the child’s*’. This misperception, when compounded with the difficulties some children with SEND have in completing tasks within the allocated time by teachers, may encourage TAs to step in and complete the work themselves.

# Discussion

This research investigated the scaffolding practices used by TAs across open and closed tasks (RQ1), and the external factors influencing their instruction (RQ2). Before discussing the findings and implications, it is important to note that this study relied on subjective self-reported data, rather than objective data obtained, for example, via observation. Moreover, the small sample size (n=4 TAs) limits the generalisability of the findings.

The participating TAs indicated that task-level assistance should be contingent on the task’s primary output. All emphasised the importance of promoting children’s independence in the context of closed tasks (e.g., word definitions). To this end, TAs should prioritise self-scaffolding and prompting, for they allow students to complete the work by themselves (Bosanquet et al., 2020). As a result, children maximise their thinking and learning.

Similarly, the four participants argued that TAs should rely on self-scaffolding and prompting for open tasks, such as describing pictures. For instance, TAs could wait patiently for responses, and then prompt the child after a sufficient amount of time. This approach allows children to retain their independence in task completion and learning (Radford et al., 2014). Additionally, three TAs declared that the undetermined nature of open-task responses offers an opportunity to implement more nuanced support strategies. For example, TAs could ask open-ended questions—such as ‘What else?’—to elicit more detailed responses from students, provided the students have already given an initial answer. Also, TAs might revoice students’ answers using visuals (O’Connor & Michaels, 1993). Both of these nuanced strategies function as ‘prompts’, helping students connect their existing knowledge with the task at hand. As such, students could further elaborate on their answers, deepening their thinking and learning.

Whilst more direct forms of scaffolding support, such as cluing, were considered by all participating TAs to restrain children’s independence and learning across tasks, most TAs saw these support strategies as particularly unhelpful in open tasks. The TAs specifically recommended that TAs be mindful of their epistemic authority when providing direct support in open tasks. Interventions, such as providing clues about the task answer or modelling, could inadvertently lead children to provide the answers that they think the TAs are expecting. As a result, students—especially those with greater task independence—might miss out on the valuable and undetermined opportunities to express themselves and think critically, which open tasks aim to foster (Radford et al., 2014).

Regardless of the task type, the four participants nonetheless concurred that effective scaffolding is particularly possible when children face tasks consistent with their capabilities (and interests). Such tasks seem to enable children to engage with and complete them independently (Van De Pol et al., 2011). Thus, these tasks enhance children’s thinking and learning potential. By contrast, tasks that are too complex might discourage children’s engagement and task completion. In such cases, TAs may therefore end up observing children leaving the task unfinished, missing opportunities for thinking and learning.

Another factor identified as compromising effective scaffolding across tasks was the misconception among TAs regarding how their performance is assessed. Where TAs sense that their effectiveness is judged in relation to task completion, they may unintentionally place greater emphasis on getting tasks completed. When coupled with the challenges some children face in completing tasks within the demanding timeframes of lesson schedules, this misperception may lead TAs to intervene and finish tasks themselves. Thus, children’s independence, thinking and learning potential could be diminished.

Unlike other themes in this research, which were supported by the majority of the TAs, the concern about TA misperceptions regarding their performance management was raised by only one participant (i.e., Ida). The limited discussion of this topic in the focus groups did not seem to provide an opportunity to explore the level of agreement or disagreement among the other participants. Therefore, it is possible that this concern could be shared by a broader group of participants, rather than being held by just one. Further research is nonetheless needed, particularly on the issue of how TAs understand their performance management, to explore factors that might either hinder or promote TA effectiveness in England (and beyond).

## Implications for practice

This research provides preliminary evidence concerning the role of task structure in TA scaffolding. Forms of scaffolding support, such as self-scaffolding and prompting, are recommended for both open and closed tasks. These allow students to retain independence in task completion, maximising thinking and learning. In open tasks, TAs can also explore more nuanced support strategies, such as open-ended questions and revoicing children’s original answers. These strategies encourage children to expand on their original answers, further scaffolding their thinking and learning. Such scaffolding opportunities are instead more limited in closed tasks, where children’s response is constrained by the need for a precise answer (Radford et al., 2014).

In light of these findings, incorporating task-based guidelines into TA training may be warranted. Such guidelines could put particular emphasis on enhancing children’s dialogue in open tasks through the use of open questions or revoicing children’s original answers. Incidentally, this research highlights the opportunity to integrate these open-task strategies into the broader concept of prompting within the scaffolding framework, given its influential role in TA training in England and beyond (Whole School SEND, 2021).

Furthermore, this research supports the view that children learn best when tasks are tailored to their needs and capabilities. These targeted tasks, whether open- or closed-ended, enable children to complete them independently. If needed, the TAs would intervene by providing minor support, such as prompting, to promote task completion. In doing so, TAs would ultimately maximise children’s thinking and learning potential.

In England and internationally, the role of TAs in setting or modifying classroom tasks is however limited, including for those children TAs frequently support—namely, children with SEND (Webster & Boer, 2023). Rather, teachers are responsible for planning and structuring the tasks children undertake in class. The workload demands facing teachers have long since limited opportunities for them to meet, plan, prepare and discuss with TAs (Blatchford et al., 2011). Hence, teachers’ task planning does not often benefit from TAs’ insights into the interests and competencies of the children they know and support.

To promote better collaboration between teachers and TAs and teaching effectiveness, existing evidence-based guidance for schools in England recommends providing substantial opportunities for teachers and TAs to meet (EEF, 2024). The findings from this study further support the value of schools providing liaison time. During these sessions, teachers could share lesson content with TAs, and emphasise the value of scaffolding when supporting task completion (rather than simply focusing on getting tasks completed). These sessions would enhance TAs’ pedagogical preparedness and teaching effectiveness. Furthermore, these meetings would also enable TAs to offer valuable insights about the children they support to teachers, thereby effectively informing task planning.

In conclusion, this article highlights the need for research and training practices for TAs that take task structure into account. Further research is needed to confirm and extend our findings on effective TA practice across both open and closed tasks. Future research should also broaden the scope of this study, for example, by examining relevant internal factors that may impact TA effectiveness, such as teaching experience or commitment to personal development. TAs are a valuable workforce worldwide, so ensuring they receive the best possible training and preparation for such a responsible role is essential.

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# Conflict of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

# Data availability statement

Research data is available from Ciletti (2024).

# Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted via the University of Southampton’s ethics process.

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