

ARE YOU SURE YOU DON'T HAVE ANY QUESTIONS? DIALOGIC TEACHING AS A WAY TO PROMOTE STUDENTS' QUESTIONS

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1. Introduction

The dialogic approach to teaching and learning stretches back to Socratic dialogue (Plato, 1903) and has contemporary relevance to rising interest in critical thinking skills (Paul, 1993; Nelson, 1994; Yang, Newby & Bill, 2005). This paper aims to investigate how dialogic teaching can promote students' questioning and provide more space for students to construct their knowledge. Questioning is said to help students direct their learning as they try to "merge their prior knowledge and new information in their attempts to make sense of these ideas" (Almeida, 2011: 635). The paper argues that unless teachers are ready to go beyond the traditional IRF pattern by integrating dialogic teaching principles (see: Alexander, 2008) into their practice, such as sharing their viewpoints on a familiar topic, classroom talk is likely to remain "monologic" (Wells, 2007) i.e. students are still denied the opportunity to make meaningful contributions to classroom dialogue.

Teachers could engage in question-answer exchanges, as we will see in this paper, and implicitly invite questions from students using some techniques such as place switching and appealing topics to assist learners with producing questions. Dialogic teaching essentially invites students' thoughts and opinions, allowing them to "think, interpret and generate new understandings" (Nystrand, 1997: 7). Dialogic teaching, it has to be said, has been less researched with adult learners; most research has targeted children in primary and secondary school classrooms (Fisher, 2009; 2013; Mercer, 2000; Mercer, Wegerif & Dawes, 1999). Unlike monologic discourse which is typically lecture-like, dialogic discourse is realized as discussion and it signifies social relationships of equal status, intellectual openness, and possibilities for critique and creative thought (O'Connor et al., 2007: 277). The paper is based on a research that targeted pre-intermediate EFL learners at Damascus University.

2. Theoretical background

Teacher questions and dialogic practice

Questioning is ideally situated "at the heart of teaching and learning" (Berci & Griffith, 2005). Special attention has been dedicated to the study of teachers' questions as a way of developing classroom interaction in an attempt to gain new understanding of and boost their teaching practice (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1988: 2). In this case, classroom context involves "one questioner with multiple respondents all at once, in various and serial settings day after day – all within the same room" (Dillon, 1990: 8). Graesser and Person (1994) reported that teachers spend up to 50% of class time on questioning and that they ask between 300 and 400 questions a day, while each student asks, on average, 1 question per week. Surprisingly, teachers seem to be unaware of this paradox (Almeida, 2011).

Dialogic teaching applauds teachers' questioning practice but emphasises asking certain types of questions - "real questions" - which go beyond the printed text to invite student application of the text to their experience (Galda & Cullinan, 2002: 51). Such questions are dialogic because they signal to students the teacher's interest in what they think and know (Nystrand, 1997: 7). Authentic questions are meant to initiate a new topical episode, e.g. "who [or what] do you think...?", "Could that happen to anybody...?" or "Do they believe you...?" (Boyd & Rubin, 2006: 155-6). Dialogic teaching implies that teachers respond to students' answers by showing interest in students' opinions and thoughts and challenging students to "think, interpret and generate new understandings" (Nystrand, 1997: 7). Nowadays, teachers are even encouraged to carry out self-study where they can examine their teaching experiences to "develop an understanding of the ways in which dialogue between students [and] teachers...can make teaching and learning a more collaborative and equitable effort" (Stewart et. al, 2013: 91).

Dialogic teaching and students' questions

Within “dialogic space” (Wegerif, 2007), learning is considered a process of knowledge exploration where “what is known at any one time is not static or final but is dependent upon continued dialogue” (Stenton, 2010: 17). The “co-relation” between questioning and learning is innate in us human beings, as Holt (1982: 189) explains: “we are by nature question-asking, answering-making, problem-solving [...] and we are extremely good at it, above all when we are little”. Dialogic teaching encourages students to take a more “inquiry-based” approach to the topic, and work to produce their own evidence and reasoning (O'Connor et al., 2007: 278). Alexander (2008) listed five indicators of dialogic teaching: “collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful” where teachers and learners “think together” (Mercer, 2002) taking equal parts in classroom dialogue. Dialogic teaching is collective when it brings teacher and students to discuss learning tasks together; reciprocal when they share and exchange their ideas; supportive when children are able to express their thoughts with neither fear nor embarrassment; cumulative when teachers and students build on each other's ideas and purposeful when teachers guide the dialogue with a pedagogical goal in mind (Alexander, 2008: 28). Students' questions seem to meet these features by emphasising the reflexive relationship between the teachers and students particularly in relation to building on questions and answers that embrace learning in a Socratic sense. The teacher's job, therefore, is to assist students “in giving birth to their own ideas” (Fisher, 2008: 111).

Within the IRF talk format, teacher-student interaction is often viewed to be monologic since “there is an answer the teacher is looking for, and the content is to be taken as it is, not challenged” (O'Connor et al., 2007: 280). Young (1992) further highlights that the asymmetry of the teacher-initiated IRF pattern represents “students' powerlessness”. To gain relative power, the student may well ask a question which allows them to “have control of the conversation” (Sacks, 1992: 54). The data shows (see Example 3) that students may assume this powerful position and be on some occasions able to control the conversation temporarily. For instance, when students negotiate meaning, they open a slot to accommodate dialogic dimension to their talk.

3. Data collection and analysis

Research site

The Syrian EFL classroom is undergoing a metamorphosis at the moment both at the level of the curriculum development and the teachers' adoption of new teaching approaches. In the Higher Language Institute at Damascus University, teachers are encouraged to use the Communicative Approach and to encourage students to be actively engaged and contribute their ideas. Although some teachers have started using a communicative teaching style, learners continue to act as staunch supporters of the model where teachers act the ‘*teacher knows best*’ role inside the classroom as one student exclaimed. Being a teacher myself at HLI, I had to recognize that importing a bundle of change into the doorstep of these teachers would be rather inadequate if we were to consider the responsibilities that the teachers already have on their agenda let alone students' teacher-centred views. It was therefore seen as appropriate to “explore the possibility ... of exploiting current patterns of behaviour as a way of achieving the desired change” (Coleman, 1996: 13) before suggesting implications for dialogic teaching. The study targeted pre-intermediate level students in 7 English Language classes.

Modes of enquiry and data

The study lends itself to ethnographic research through elements like “the small scale focus” (Hammersley, 1990: 3) as well as in the fact that “data are gathered from a range of sources.. [where] participant observation is the main one” (ibid: 3). The ethnographic methodology used in this study also deals with multiple realities and sheds light on “the culture/characteristics of a group in real-world” (Nunan, 1992: 55). Particular attention was paid to respecting the identity of the participants through both anonymity and confidentiality. Students were identified as S1, S2, etc. and teachers were referred to as T1, T2 and so on.

Based on mixed methodologies including questionnaire, interviews, observation as well as participant observation, the current research targeted “breadth and depth of understanding” (Johnson et al., 2007: 123) the given EFL context. Twelve teachers at the English Department in the institute took part in the interviews, two of whose classes were the main focus of the study in terms of class observation “to view the experience through the eyes of the participants” (Walsh, 2011: 87) and to check for

whether people do what they say they are doing (Robson, 2002: 310). Teacher participants were in their twenties with different qualifications ranging from BA and diploma in translation and literary studies to MA from some UK universities. The survey we conducted at an early stage of the research was designed to map a framework for students' questioning views which prepared to data-led interviews and observation. Student participants in the questionnaire data totalled 85 students from five pre-intermediate classes at the institute. They were university students with different majors, most studying English to assist them in passing the English module at their respective departments. Most are in their early twenties, including males and females and making a total of sixteen students in each class. Interviews with student participants were conducted on a smaller scale targeting students from the two observed classes.

Data analysis and discussion of results

Data analysis aimed to establish the attitudinal and social background of students and to examine the types of questions students tend to ask in the classroom. Three major types of questions make their way into students' questioning behaviour. They have been classified according to function: cognitive, instrumental and personal, as illustrated in Table 1 and Table 2. The first two categories were borrowed from Wajnryb (1997) while the third emerged from the data itself and was therefore added as a variable in its own right. Our approach to the three types of questions will be in terms of their correspondence to dialogic/monologic dichotomy that we discussed earlier.

Example 1: Cognitive questions

For students to enter into dialogue they need to be able to generate meaning and understanding (Bakhtin, 1986), and questioning is a powerful tool to achieve this goal. The production of cognitive questions - questions which deal with the field of knowledge - is high when language is thought of as "rule-governed" (Wajnryb, 1997). Students in the current study embraced this view and tended to ask cognitive questions more than any other kind, particularly grammar questions 'Students love grammar more than we love our mothers' (T5). Students' cognitive questions were classified into meaning and grammar. The two categories did not necessarily occur in contexts that were purely semantic or grammatical respectively. For instance, during a vocabulary discussion, a question about grammar might arise as in the following example.

- 1 B14: Do we say are you loving?
- 2 T2: Do you love. ((correcting))
- 3 B14: Do you love.
- 4 T2: Do you love, love we can't use it
- 5 with ing

Dialogically speaking, the teacher moved beyond the yes/no answer and responded to the student's question by providing the correct grammatical form. Not only did her response create a "dialogic space" (Wegerif, 2007) for student's self-repair, but it was also extended by explaining the reasoning behind using this particular form (Alexander, 2008: 43). The use of the same utterance by both the teacher and student B14 further echoes Bakhtin's notion of dialogue where "the word is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word" (Bakhtin, 1981: 294).

Table 1. Types of Questions Asked by Class A.

	Total number of questions	Cognitive		Instrumental	Personal
		Gram.	Mean.		
Class A/S1	6	1	5		
Class A/S2	7	1	1	3	
Class A/S3	5		2	3	
Class A/S4	14	2	1	9	1

Table 2. Types of Questions Asked by Class B.

	Total number of questions	Cognitive			Instrumental	Personal
		Gram.	Mean.	Pron.		
Class B/S1	13	7	3	1	2	
Class B/S2	4	1	1			
Class B/S3	14	3	7		1	3
Class B/S4	1	1				

(NB. Gram.= grammar, Mean.= meaning, Pron.= pronunciation)

Example 2: Instrumental questions

One essential feature of dialogic teaching is being cumulative; i.e. teachers and learners ‘build on their own and each other’s ideas (Alexander, 1996: 28). Instrumental enquiries about assigned classroom tasks make a good example where learners try to make sense of a given task by relating the new ideas to what they already know. In the example below, student B2 requests clarification about whether he has to do the task according to his past experience or from imagination. The question emerges as the teacher was giving instructions on a places-to-visit activity where students had to tick three options on a given list.

13 B2 : in my- in our [ed-]
 14 T2 : [of course]=
 15 B2 : =education?=
 16 T2 : =of course according to you
 17 according to your experience

When students make use of what Rost (1990:112) calls “listener queries” - requests that “indicate non understanding or confusion” (ibid: 112), they become able to contribute to their own success on a task, rather than having to exert their efforts with no aid and then having the looming failure measured. Dialogic teaching enables such engagement by emphasising the choice of authentic topics which provide implications for real-life situations (Maiorana, 1990-91).

Example 3: Personal questions

Dialogic teaching demands handling classroom space in ways that foster “reciprocal” principle where teachers and students share their viewpoints (Alexander, 1996: 28). The excerpt below illustrates how a student’s question emerged during a discussion where students had to share their ideas on how they would react if somebody overtook their place in a queue. Student B7’s question (line 38) seems to fit in the ‘space’ created earlier by the teacher when she set the topic for discussion (Wegerif, 2007: 28). By creating such dialogic space, the teacher succeeds in inviting students’ question and she continues to hold the floor to guide students towards understanding (ibid: 28).

23 B6: This fist?
 24 T2: (All of them) together your fingers
 25 together
 26 this is fist okay and you (..) punch
 27 ((mimes a punch in the air))
 28 B14 : punch
 29 T2 : people-
 30 B2: -(what meaning)-
 31 T2 : okay (..) fist is no not only °you

32 know° slapping with your fingers
 33 (also) NO (..) hitting with your
 34 fingers tight like this okay
 35 this is punching, fist is the noun
 36 fist is the shape of the hand (.)
 37 okay and this one is a verb clear?
 38 B7: Teacher have you ever punished
 39 someone?
 40 T2: yes
 41 B7: yes
 42 T2: ye- someone was walking behind
 43 me in the street
 44 B7: of course
 45 T2 : (xxx)
 46 B2: What about- ((student makes a
 47 mime of slap))
 48 T2: No I didn’t slap him I (..)
 49 punched him. No no no

Setting up a supportive dialogic environment (Bakhtin, 1981) enables students to control what to come next in the conversation (Wang, 2006). Student B7’s “voice” (Hargreaves, 2004) in the example above has been interestingly elicited by the teacher’s dramatic explanation using body language to explain the word *punch*. That said, student B7 was inspired to switch roles and take the lead to direct the discussion. This new social context appears to be “dynamically created” (Heritage, 1997: 162) depending on the role that participants claim to themselves. Although the norms of “institutional identities” (Drew & Sorjonen, 1997: 92) appear to be shaken by the student’s enquiry, the teacher welcomed the student’s question and went beyond the yes/no answer exchange placing herself in a story-teller’s shoes. Her willingness to share ideas and her use of humour could even probe further students’ thinking and questioning (Alexander, 1996: 27). Therefore, personal questions are clearly the product of a dialogic environment generated by the teacher. This kind of questions apparently seems to oil the wheels of dialogue to go further on.

Teaching implications

Developing the practice of questioning by students could well be a real challenge particularly in a teacher-fronted environment taking into account students’ as well as teachers’ attitudes that would rather carry on in the same old tone with which they are familiar. Students come to class with their own conceptions of teacher identity from school as “the language expert [who] knows more than the student, and is thus in superior position” (Prabu, 1987). Buzzelli & Johnston (2002) drew a distinction between “assigned identity-the identity imposed on one by others-and claimed identity, the identity or identities one acknowledges or claims

for oneself.” Interestingly, both teacher and students seem successful at claiming a new identity in the newly created context as we have seen in Example 3. This finely reflects the “interactional sociolinguistic” (Dijk, 1997: 95) dimension of the exchange where “the ‘speakers’ identities are remodelled not as background givens but as interactionally produced in the given context” (ibid: 95). Levinson (1979: 365) further explains this by suggesting that “having a grasp of utterances involves knowing the nature of the activity in which the utterances play a role”. Switching places, as illustrated in personal questions, is likely to occur in response to questions posed earlier by the teacher. Prompting therefore could be utilised to initiate question asking. This procedure seems “suitable for the educational environment as it requires minimum time and demands no alteration of the ongoing classroom structure” (Knapczyk & Livingston, 1974:118). Exchanging roles between learner and teacher will enable learners to take more initiative and will result in “more interaction and thereby increase[d] comprehension of input” (Garton, 2002: 50).

On the other hand, “even teachers who are committed to communicative language teaching can fail to create opportunities for genuine interaction in the language classroom” (Kumaravadivelu, 1993: 12). These courses, we should emphasise, have to put less pressure on teachers “to follow lesson plans as closely as possible” (Cadorath and Harris 1998 quoted in Garton, 2002: 55) and be flexible to accommodate “unplanned learning opportunities” (ibid: 55). For instance, teachers who could increase wait-time beyond three seconds (Cotton, 1988) allowed a larger number of questions on the part of students. The easiest way to get students to ask questions, according to some teachers, is to ask them ‘Do you have any question?’ but to what extent is this particular question effective in prompting students to raise questions? (see excerpt below).

- 1 T1: Do you have any questions?
- 2 A3: No
- 3 T1: Sure you don’t have any questions?
<any question
- 4 (name of student A3)>?
- 5 A3: no ((embarrassed))

We looked at how students reacted to such a question in the survey and whether they were really encouraged to come up with questions as they were expected. Eventually, this question did

not help, as much as teachers anticipated, in making students ask questions. Students stated that they used to come up with no questions mainly because they believed that they had understood the idea already explained by the teacher. According to the evidence arising from the data, the best way for students to generate questions is to expose them to appealing topics that are relevant to students’ lives, needs and interests (Li, 2008) or even allow them to initiate their own topics for conversation (Mackey et al., 2001). It is also essential to welcome those questions once they emerge and to respond to them vigorously so that students continue to take an ‘inquiry-based’ approach to the topic and work to generate their own evidence and reasoning. When teachers invite the exchange of ideas and viewpoints, they give new meaning to content and provide implications for real-life situations (Maiorana, 1990–91).

In addition to promoting students’ questions, dialogic teaching can be useful to teacher development. Teachers could manage the five principles of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2008) by creating a dynamic dialogic environment where classroom talk sounds collective, reciprocal and supportive. Once these qualities are established, Alexander suggests we could proceed to recognize the purpose of the talk and invest cumulation to meet these purposes (ibid: 52). To make this possible, teachers could examine data from their own classes and try to identify whether these principles are met. If not, they might want to re-think their classroom practice so that they allow space for students to think and talk as equal educational partners.

3. Conclusion

Student question-asking is an important learning skill because of the interaction patterns it establishes which “closely respond to their needs” (Garton, 2002: 48). The study’s findings indicate the possibility for dialogic discourse to foster learner questions even in a teacher-fronted environment, where teachers implicitly could invite students’ questions and build on them to develop the dialogue further.

The types of questions students come to ask vary but they all share an attempt to make sense of the exchanged knowledge and generate new understandings accordingly (Nystrand, 1997). Adopting the questioning position, however, needs explicit learner training: “ask man a question and he inquires for a day; teach a man to question and he inquires for life”. (Wolf 1978: 81) Such training is not possible unless teachers

are trained themselves on how to accommodate every opportunity for posing questions in the language classroom such as increasing wait time and building a more equal relationship with students. With a dialogic approach, the traditional roles of teacher as 'expert' and student as a 'learner' should be reconsidered in favour of a more imaginative, radical and democratic relationship (Fielding, 2001; Tennant, 2006).

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Transcription Conventions

- (.) Micropause
- (..) Pause of about 0.5 second
- [] Overlap
- ___ Emphasis
- (xxx) Unable to transcribe
- () Unsure transcription
- (()) Other details
- Abrupt cut-off
- = Latched utterances
- ° ° Quieter than surrounding talk
- < > Quicker than surrounding talk