Implications of Dialogic Teaching: Practices of and Reflections from English Language Teachers

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Abstract

Researches often endorse discussion, dialogues, and other learning tasks for the promotion of fluency, critical thinking, reasoning, and ability to evaluate and justifying. Keeping in view the Pakistani context, especially, the local context, it is not clear what type of classroom practices prevail in the region and what reflections teachers have about the use of such practices. Taking Bakhtin's and Vygotsky's ideas of dialogism and learning as a social entity, the present study aimed at knowing the teaching practices of English language teachers from the perspective of dialogic teaching and also at exploring how do teachers reflect on such a teaching approach. For this purpose, English Language Centers of district Mardan were taken as data sources where twenty classrooms were observed for classroom practices and the concerned teachers were interviewed for their reflections. It was found that the teachers use of dialogic teaching having positive and negative impacts. The positive impacts of dialogic teaching include creativity, thinking ability, confidence building, and other social impacts. It has little negative impacts that include challenges for the teachers in terms of behavior problems and control of talks.

Keywords: Classroom Talk, Dialogic Teaching, Teachers' Practices, Teachers' Reflections, English Language Teacher

Introduction

Classroom interaction usually takes place in three ways. One of these ways is the triadic sequence where the teacher starts, the students give a response and the teacher evaluates at the end (Well, 1999). Through the triadic sequence which is different from a routine natural conversation students' learning is measured that is usually tailored towards developing school-related specific registers, e.g., style and discourses, e.g., speech pattern, (Heath, 1978; McHoul, 1978). This type of learning is usually common in different content-based learnings, however, criticized for limiting the meaning as well as restricting the meaningful engagement of the learners (Mercer, 1995).

Triadic talks have lead to monologic and dialogic talks that stem from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogue that is based on language, thought, and authority (Nystrand, 2013 cited in Sulzer, 2015). Sulzer says that according to Bakhtin's (1986) view, an utterance can be nomologically or dialogically oriented. According to the former notion, an utterance is associated with the control of participants and authority; the latter refers to dialogue as reciprocity where the participants are of equal importance. Monologic talk, though often taken as a monologue, is usually different from the monologue. This type of talk assumes another participant, usually students, thus creating genuine dialogues. In this type of teaching, the purpose is mostly the transmission of the knowledge with more autonomy of the teacher where the teacher's goal of disseminating the knowledge is fulfilled. Instead of creating space for manifold voices, monologic talks create asymmetrical power relationships with the repression of the students' ideas and genuine interaction. monologic talks and triadic talks are referred to as Initiation, Response and Feedback (IRF) (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). IRF, says Lyle (2008), provides a ground for direct instruction with more control of the class by the teachers. Such techniques, Lyle adds, are the cause of promoting explanations and questioning of the teacher. In such contexts, students find less time and opportunities to set on their own, question, and explore. This

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means that in this way of teaching, with little or no opportunities for students to share, students pass time where genuine dialogue skills are not developed.

Afterward, Vogotsky's (1978) plea that learning is a social and cultural engagement was taken. For him, children can do better with the assistance of someone instead of doing it on their own. How children get involved in the world and make sense of their surroundings has contributed a great deal to the current understanding of knowledge including language learning. To Vygotsky, language is a tool of social construction, has a great role in a child's development. It has lead to the importance of talks in the learning of learners. About which, Bakhtin (cited in Bingham, 2000, p. 20) says "A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence."

As said earlier, Bakhtin's concept of dialogue also contributed to dialogism in teaching. Bakhtin's work was much praised in the field of literary theory but being the contemporary of Vygotsky, Bakhtin also advocated the importance of language as a social entity, calling all thoughts dialogic. His concept of dialogism assumes that dialogues play a great role in learners' development where knowledge is seen as something done together instead of doing individually.

Although many researches support the importance of dialogic talks in the classroom where different skills can be developed, however, it is not clear how dialogic teaching can be a challenge in a certain context. Keeping in view this argument, Pakistani context which is different from the contexts where most of the researches are conducted which claim the importance of dialogic teaching, the purpose of the present research is to know what practices are in use and what opinions are held about the use of dialogic teaching by English language teachers working in language centers.

Research Questions
1.   What classroom practices prevail in the English language classrooms in district Mardan?
2.   What reflections do English Language Teachers have about the use of dialogic teaching?

Significance
The current study is significant as it documents and evaluates the importance of dialogic teaching from the perspective of teachers, who, along with the students are the main stakeholders. Based on the shreds of evidence, this study may be of help to the curriculum developers, teachers, and students to maximize teaching based on dialogic talks and also to push forward classroom culture with an emphasis on dialogic talks, which will enable the learners to learn how to reason, argue, evaluate and justify more maturely.

Statement of the Problem
In language classrooms, different practices prevail. Some teachers adopt one kind of methodology while others prefer a different one. Language classrooms are the places where apart from the lecture method, discussion is encouraged and tasks are performed through dialogues. But the question remains unanswered that type of methodologies are at work in language classrooms and what opinion and reflections language teachers have about these practices.

Literature Review
Dialogic teaching has a positive role across disciplines including mathematics, science, literature, and language (Kazak, Wegerif, & Fujita, 2015; Barker, Chisholm and Quillen, 2016; Lehesvuori, Viiri, and Rasku-Puttonen, 2011; Reznitskaya, 2012; Cooper, 1994). As said earlier, dialogic is from Bakhtin's dialogue, which has also stems from Vygotsky's sociocultural model of learning. According to Alexander (2017), many similar approaches focus on classroom talk as a source of learning. In some, teachers talk with little contribution from the students, such as monologic and triadic teaching methodologies; in others, such as dialogic, both teachers and students talk. It is not only the structure that determines dialogic talks but the function also (Lefstein and Snell, 2014). In this way, deciding what is dialogic and whatnot is the task that needs attention.

In this fashion, it is said that dialogic teaching is beneficial but not all dialogues. Bakhtin (1986) believed that dialogue is a special characteristic, and those answers which do not let other questions emerge, are not considered as dialogue. As some dialogues are questions and answers without further building the answers, these are often less creative and can least promote the thinking capabilities of students. Mercer and Howe (2012), therefore say that dialogic teaching is a form of conversation where the participants are heard and collectively considered for answers and brainstorming. They claim that because of the long history of monologic talks, teachers still are addict to the traditional methodology in which they direct the conversation as they ask questions and also

select who to answer. In this way, the student's skills are not developed in the desired direction. Therefore, to achieve the desired goals, Alexander (2008) presents the following principles for dialogic teaching:

- Collective: teachers and learners collectively deal with the task together in the form of a group;
- Reciprocal: teachers and learners pay attention and listen to each other, present their point of views, and consider an alternative point of views;
- Supportive: learners share their ideas freely without the fear of humiliation in case of wrong answers, and the common understanding is developed;
- Cumulative: the teachers and learners build on each others' ideas and also on their ideas, which results in a chain;
- Purposeful: keeping in view specific goals, teachers plan and facilitate dialogic teaching.

Boyd and Markarian (2015, p. 273) while taking the support of different researches say that dialogic talks consist of oracy markers like "patterns of talk", "agenda-setting in the talk", and "contingent practices and inter-animation of ideas." The pattern of talking is mostly concerned with the type of question to be asked, the time taken by students to talk, and norms of turn-taking. Agenda setting in talk means who is to select the topic for talk and who to control the discussion. Contingent practices and inter-animation of ideas mean the part played by the intention of the speaker in the discourse. Boyd and Markarian believe that these aspects of discourse make the stance of dialogic instruction, which plays an important role in developing the pattern of talk that how opinions are shared and what role does students' and teacher's decision making play. They further elaborate that these types of decision-making help students and teachers recognize the learning and teaching, i.e., knowledge and the process of knowing. It also helps teachers knowing the goal of teaching where they not only listen and lead the talks but also respond and directs the talks. In this way, the students' analytical learning is developed because of the involvement of multiple voices and multiple perspectives. By adopting dialogic talks, not only analytical knowledge is obtained but a conducive language environment is also created. Christoph and Nystrand (2001) believe that dialogic talks involve authentic questions, a high level of evaluation, uptake, and cognitive level. From an authentic question, they mean those questions which do not have a pre-specified and predetermined question. High-level evaluation means contribution by the students that allow the discussion to be directed to a new topic. Uptake means follow-up questions or building the responses further. The cognitive level is the thought which is required by the students to answer questions from the teacher.

Advocating dialogic teaching, researchers claim that dialogic teaching helps support cognitive inquiry and activity where through various stances, ideas of fellow students or teachers are supported or contradicted (Boyd and Markarian, 2015). The conversation that a dialogic talk involves advocates relationship as per the environment. Once developed, these different relationships produce a learning environment where distances are removed and issues are discussed thoroughly. The discussion carried out meanwhile, said Barker, Chisholm, and Quillen (2016), build and is built by classroom relationships. This can be a teacher-student relationship or a student-student relationship. He further adds that in this type of environment, an instructional system results where fruitful classroom relationships lead to dialogic talks while discussing, interpreting, and negotiating meaning. This type of discourse involves different discourse structures and functions important for developing critical thinking and fluency. In dialogic talks, people are listened to and their opinions are valued leading to the development of a learning community.

Alexander (2001) reported that in some schools in Russia, dialogues were used by teachers for engaging students in question and answer sessions. This leads to the development of thinking ability. Planned dialogic instruction with the use of dialogic tools results in a higher ratio of students talk than teacher's talk (Caughlan, et al, 2013). Anagnoostopoulos, et al (2008) drew similar conclusions by saying that in the dialogic classroom, discourse is more dominant and persuasive as the students have the understanding that their ideas are given value. The students assume that the class is not a repetition of the previous class, quiz, or homework, rather a collaborative engagement where meanings are discussed, built, and implemented. Alexander (2018), who conducted a study, found that the students whose teachers received training in dialogic teaching performed better than those whose teachers did not get training in dialogic teaching. Alexander (2008) continues that through dialogic

teaching, students' ability to think and ask questions, explores new ideas and constructs new knowledge.

Dialogic teaching, though beneficial in many respects, can be a challenge for new teachers (Dunn, 2018). Dialogue, say O'Connor and Michaels (2007, p. 276), are around us all the time, but "some are more dialogic than others." Choosing more dialogic for students' development can also be a problem for teachers. They believe that monologic talk which is the other extreme is linked with the diffusion of fixed ideas and unchanging status. Dialogic, on the other hand, brings a relationship based on equal status, with more possibilities for evaluation and critique, creativity, and intellectual openness.

Based on the literature, dialogic teaching can have more advantages. It can be used to develop different skills of the learners. It can also make students independent learners. However, it has challenges as well that make it more a tough decision to implement.

Methodology

To know the implications of the dialogic teaching approach, ten English Language Centers from district Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, were selected. For this purpose, twenty teachers were selected through purposive sampling. Data was collected from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. It is worth mentioning that only those teachers were interviewed whose classrooms were observed for classroom practices. The purpose of the observation was to know the extent to which dialogic teaching is used in the classroom. As many times dialogic teaching is confused with collaborative learning and other types of group discussion, it was important to know what dialogic teaching is and what is usually taken for dialogic teaching. As sometimes identifying dialogic teaching is confusing, the observation was also important because it made it easy to explain to the interviewee dialogic teaching in case they were not clear. In other words, observations authenticated the data obtained from the interviews.

Analysis and Discussion

Regarding the adaptation of dialogic teaching in classrooms, it was observed that dialogic teaching was less frequently used in these classrooms. The majority of the classroom had a group discussion and traditional dialogues that were not built on the structure of real dialogic teaching. Rather, these dialogues were carried out in the traditional manner where the teacher had some queries or questions and the learners' answers. However, there were classrooms where dialogic teaching in the true sense was used. It seemed that the students were partners sharing a common goal and not merely the recipient of content and knowledge. Proper questions that needed thinking to answer were asked, and details were added from different students. Thus through negotiation, speculation, and justification, arguments were listened to and responded to. However, having its complex nature, dialogic teaching was not fully implemented in the classrooms. There were variations across different classrooms.

To know the quantity of talk, it was observed that there was a mixed trend. In some classes, the teachers were more involved. It seemed more like collaborative tasks where teachers facilitated the discussion more often. Their interference was pretty observable. It does not mean that in the classroom, dialogic teaching was not practiced. There were classrooms where the students were given opportunities to talk. The students got actively involved. In most cases, they through strong arguments defended their stance. They gave answers and carried on the discussion in more a designed manner. Questions were posed by the teacher, answered by students, passed from one student to another or the teacher back. The students, more often defended their stance through arguments, added by examples.

To observe the level of confidence of the students in these talks, it was found that there were different levels of students. Some students controlled the talks and more often presented their points of view, whether correct or incorrect. They sometimes did not give a turn to other students and sometimes, even to the teacher. They rather commandeered the floor. Some students remained isolated from the whole process.

It was observed that mostly a skill was tried to be developed generally. If we take the example of speaking, the purpose of these dialogic talks remained fluency and confidence. It is true that in these language classes, the focus was not on content, rather on language skills. It was also observed that specific features of dialogic teaching were focused. To a very less degree, the structure of these dialogic talks was observable. There remained a gap between the purpose and structure of these talks. It means that sometimes the talks' structure was loose which lead to haphazard progress where

different pauses and intermissions came to the surface disrupting the smooth progression of these talks.

Coming to the interviews, when the participants were asked whether they know dialogic teaching or not, there was mixed understanding of the teachers' regarding the knowhow of dialogic teaching. Most of the participants believed that they know dialogic teaching but when they were asked to shed some light on what this teaching method is, they often confused dialogic teaching with group discussion and traditional dialogues (those carried out between two individuals). One of the interviewees said:

> Yes, I know dialogic teaching. It is where dialogues are performed between two students when they are given a topic like summer vocations, Eid, or other events. Here, first of all, one asks a question and the other answers and then the second asks some other questions, which are answered by the first one. In this way, the dialogue continues and students' learning of language is excelled.

The problem with this answer was that he meant dialogic as the method that is based on dialogue, which does not reflect the true essence of dialogic teaching.

To some, dialogic teaching is more like a group discussion or some sort of collaborative activity. They felt that dialogic teaching is any activity where discussion is carried out to complete a task. For example, one reported dialogic teaching as:

> It is a teaching method where some group discussion takes place or some tasks are completed with the help of dialogue and discussion. It is like a collaboration or collaborative activity. I do such activities in my class. They are helpful in confidence-building.

To the question about the adoption of dialogic teaching, it was reported that the methodology is in practice. Some teachers said that they do not know what this methodology is. On this, they were explained about the traits of the methodology. They agreed that they adopt this methodology with little variations. They were defining it as group discussion. One of the teachers said:

> Yes, we have this methodology in our system. In my class, I give questions for discussion. There, I little intervene to let the students free to talk.

To know the social impact of dialogic teaching, it was reported that dialogue is an important part of social life. This practice is present in homes, classrooms, and a place where one is serving. Through dialogues, people reach a consensus. Dialogues were considered as an agency to all humans where decisions are sought, not in the service of the powerful but those whose point of view is convincing. Keeping in view this aspect of dialogue, one interviewee said:

> Dialogic teaching, as the name dialogue suggests, can have more social implications if compared to other teaching methodologies. Dialogues give opportunities to discuss human problems with more mature arguments. Others are listened to and responded to. To me, dialogic teaching can have more social implications than any other method of teaching.

Referring to creativity, some participants agreed that dialogic teaching excels creativity. They believed that through dialogic talks, the whole class gets engaged which helps develop the collective thinking ability of the learners. It was reported by one interviewee:

> The students get a question, from the teacher or the other fellow students, they think about the answers. They dig out all the possible options to reach an answer. What is this? This is creativity. This is refined thinking. This is an evaluation.

To a question about disagreement and disputes in the dialogic talks, many teachers believed that disputes occur in such talks but that is not a destructive one. These disputes were considered as a type of disagreement which is solved by consensus that is developed later on. Few believed that because of dispute, these talks can prove to be less productive. To them, in the case of disputes and disagreements, the good cause of dialogic talks becomes less fruitful.

The participants reported some challenges of dialogic teaching. They said that sometimes controlling the behavior of the students becomes a challenge that puts teachers in panic. Over disagreement on some points, the students start misbehaving with each other. It was said that in classes there are students who are in opposite groups who seldom agree with each other. They have multiple perspectives engaging which positively is often a challenge.

Conclusion

We can calculate from the above discussion that dialogic talks help students in developing the skills of arguing, reasoning, discussing, and explaining but there should be a balance between the teacher

talk and the students' talk. Dialogic talk does not mean spending the whole time teaching dialogically. Instruction is the major part of learning, therefore, the teachers should equally allocate instruction time. It is also necessary that teachers should evaluate the purpose of the lesson and should devise the class accordingly. Furthermore, the responsibility lies on the shoulders of the students as well. They should share a common purpose, where they allow each other to achieve the goal of speaking according to the available time and suitability of the point they want to share. Building on each other arguments, they should tolerate differences of opinion and should stand for arguments. As obvious from the findings, the traditional monologic technique is continued in many English classes. It is important to provide opportunities so that maximum learners may benefit from the productive aspects of dialogic teaching. To sustain development, it is also vital to tackle the challenges of dialogic teaching to counteract the loopholes.

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