

Teacher Questioning as a Way to Open up Dialogue in the EFL Intensive Reading Classrooms in China*

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Abstract:

This paper examines teacher questions in the Intensive Reading (IR) classrooms at the tertiary level in China. It has been found that teacher questions were predominantly used to elicit factual reports or recitation based on the factual information in the text and that they rarely validated students' contributions by incorporating their responses and contributions into subsequent questions. According to Nystrand and Gamoran (1997, p. 37), this is the very profile of monologic classroom discourse. The nature, causes, and consequences of the problem are discussed. To challenge the dominance of monologic discourse and open up classroom talk so as to facilitate learning opportunities in the IR classroom, possible solutions are proposed in two main aspects: first, incorporation of teacher questioning techniques that change the lockstep of the conventional IRE format; second, reconceptualization of classroom teaching as dialogue instead of monologue. The first perspective mainly focuses on the micro level of this problem while the second its macro scope.

Key Words: Teacher questions, Dialogic instruction, Monologic instruction, EFL Intensive Reading

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been growing concern on the role of teacher talk in restricting or facilitating learning opportunities and in shaping learner contributions (Nystrand, 1997). In language classroom, the quality of talk is even of more significance in that language is not only the means through which learning is mediated but also an indispensable aspect of the pedagogical goal in itself. Good teaching entails not only structured planning of pedagogical content but also improvising (van Lier, 1996). He/she needs to be not only a transmitter of linguistic knowledge but more importantly able to detect learners' difficulty in language use, provide timely scaffolding, orchestrate participants' contributions within a social participation structure and most important of all acknowledge learners' interactional space and voice.

Intensive Reading (IR) is a compulsory course for all English language program students for Bachelor degree in Chinese universities. At Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT), one of the top-ten universities in China, students majoring in English need to take 720 hours of intensive reading instruction throughout the four academic years. Such a substantial time allocation to classroom instruction obligates both teachers and researchers to scrutinize the quality of teacher-student interactions, especially the nature of teacher questions since it can steer the classroom discourse to a variety of directions.

2. DESCRIPTION OF DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Three female IR instructors from the English Department of HIT who have at least ten years of professional experience of EFL teaching at tertiary level were involved in the study. For each of the three teachers, a ninety-minute lesson focusing on the study of the main text in one unit was audio-taped and transcribed. Altogether, data included over 28,000-word transcripts from the three lessons. Data about questions were used to build profiles of instruction and classroom discourse in that question-answer exchanges "play a key role in both accommodating and excluding student voices in the public, authoritative discourse of the classroom" (Nystrand and Gamoran, 1997, p.36). For the sake of consistency, questions (such as those for housekeeping purposes) unrelated to the teaching of the reading passage were excluded from data analysis, though warming-up questions that were intended to build students' schema were included since they were an integral part of the lesson. Altogether, 564 questions were identified in the three lessons and examined in the context of the whole lesson at the time they were asked. Coding categories were created both deductively and inductively. Originally Nystrand and Gamoran's (1997) taxonomy was used as a model in which questions were coded for source (whether from teacher or student), response (whether they receive response or not), authenticity (whether or not an answer was pre-specified), uptake (whether there is incorporation of previous responses into subsequent questions), and cognitive level (questions eliciting old information such as report and recitation are coded as lower order while questions eliciting new information in the

form of generalization, analyses or speculations are coded as higher order). However, the coding categories were also continuously refined and added as new types of questions emerged. For instance, in addition to questions relating to the discoursal content of the reading texts, language-focused questions were also found prominent that elicit translation, paraphrasing or linguistic analysis of the form (such as “what does the word mean?” “Is it an adverb or adjective?”). Also found were questions proposed by the teachers that aim at eliciting student-initiated questioning concerning grammatical structures and vocabulary knowledge (such as “do you have any questions about this paragraph?”). These questions together with questions concerning confirmation check, asking for clarification, and nomination were labeled under the category of *regulation*, which regulate interactional behaviors and manage classroom participation. Table 1 summarizes the coding categories employed in the study.

Table 1 Coding categories

Question type	Subcategory	Description	Examples
Language-focused questions	Local	Literal meaning of words, translation of words, rephrasing, linguistic category	<i>What does infringe mean?</i> <i>How to translate fine sand?</i> <i>Can you use another word to replace encounter?</i> <i>Is it an adverb or adjective?</i> <i>Is it a set phrase?</i> <i>What's the difference between examine and inspect?</i> <i>As if usually followed by what?</i>
	Global	Discourse structure, tone, style	<i>How many parts can the text be divided into?</i>
Content-oriented questions	Lower level	Questions eliciting report/recitation	<i>What did he do with his jeep?</i>
	Higher level	Questions eliciting generalization/analysis/speculation	<i>What do the two learning moments refer to?</i> <i>Why does the author mention Highland Fling?</i>
Regulation	Invitation to questioning	Invite students to ask questions	<i>Do you have any questions about paragraph one?</i>
	Invitation to recall	Invite students to think about things learnt before	<i>Do you remember we learned this word in lesson five?</i>
	Invitation to respond	Invite students to answer questions	<i>Do you want to try that?</i>
	Asking for repetition	Ask students to say again	<i>What?</i>
	Comprehension check	Ask students whether they understand	<i>Do you understand?</i>
	Confirmation check	Questions to confirm what is said is correctly understood	<i>Four times, is it?</i>

Source	From teacher
	From student
Response	Yes
	No
Uptake	Yes
	No
Authenticity	Yes
	No

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Altogether, 564 questions are identified in the data. They were coded in terms of source, response, uptake, authenticity and types. The following table is a summary of the number of occurrences and percentage of each different category of questions in relation to the total number of questions found in these IR classrooms.

Table 2 Sources, response, uptake, authenticity and types of questions in IR classroom

			No. of occurrences	% of total questions
Sources		teachers	547	97.0
		students	17	3.0
Responses		yes	175	32.0
		no	372	68.0
Uptake		yes	2	0.4
		no	543	99.6
Authenticity		lower-level	54	10.0
		higher-level	10	2.0
Types	language-focused	local	239	43.0
		discoursal	5	1.0
	content-oriented	recitation/report	178	33.0
		generalization/analysis/speculation	29	5.0
	regulation	96	18.0	

As can be observed from the result of the data, an overwhelming majority of the questions (over 97%) were asked by the teachers. Students rarely took initiatives. Even if students were urged to ask questions, the questions that they produced, however, were homogeneously form-oriented concerning only grammatical structures and language use. They were found to ask few content-oriented questions concerning the reading of the text. In other words, they had little ownership and voice in the meaning making process of reading the text. Among the content-focused questions that the teachers asked, it has been found that teacher questions were predominantly used to elicit factual reports or recitation based on the factual information in the text. Most of them were display questions to which there were pre-specific answers. These “known information questions” (Mehan, 1979) seldom invite multiple viewpoints and

interpretations from the learners. They were asked for the teachers to assess how much students know or remember about the text. These teacher questions seldom involved what Collins (1982) calls “uptake” from students’ responses. That is, in these classrooms, the teachers rarely validated students’ contributions by incorporating their responses and contributions into subsequent questions. In these classroom interactions, the teachers’ role tended to be the “primary knower” whereas the students’ job was to locate information in the text or to guess what was in the teachers’ mind.

3.1 Nature of the Identified Problem

According to Nystrand and Gamoran (1997, p. 37), this is the very profile of monologic classroom discourse. The term “monologic” is not used in its usual sense of only one person talking with no interactional involvement with another party. Rather, it characterizes the type of classroom talk or instruction that treats the text and the teacher as the sole source of knowledge and positions students as receptacles to be filled with linguistic knowledge and factual information from the reading passages. Like the transmissionist model of teaching and what Freire (1990) calls the “banking” method of instruction, the monologic instruction ignores the co-constructed nature of knowledge and learning while seeks to “fill students up” with the right answers and “essential” linguistic points. As Nystrand (1997) observed, this type of instruction is more concerned with requiring students to recall what someone else thought or said, rather than to articulate, examine, elaborate and revise what they themselves thought or wanted to express.

This problem of monologism that excludes students’ “voice” has been found prevalent in foreign language classrooms where students are very often not the authors of their own language (Morgan, 1996); question/ response cycles are predetermined and learnt by rote (Donato, 1988), and teachers maintain a traditional controlling role by the use of questions where the answers are already known to and pre-constructed by the teachers themselves (Tan, 2007). In a monologically organized instruction, the textbook and teacher’s voices are the dominant voices and the legitimate sources of knowledge whereas students’ voices are given limited public classroom space and their observations, experiences, and everyday knowledge are excluded from classroom life (Nystrand, 1997).

The main loss, as Dyson (1993, p. 19) puts it, is that many “teachable moments” are missed by not inviting, responding and expanding students’ contributions in timely and contingent ways. As Rosen (1992) asserts, “It is necessary to disrupt the authoritative voice with the unheard voices of our students, to help them engage in the difficult struggle...to articulate, develop, refine and advance their meanings as against the mere reproduction of words of the textbook, the worksheet, the encyclopedia and the guides” (p. 127).

Nystrand (1997) summarized the key features of monologically and dialogically organized instruction and pointed out that monologic instruction is epistemologically grounded on objectivism that views knowledge as given rather than co-constructed by the interaction of

different voices. In a monologically oriented foreign language classroom, the objectivist conceptualization of knowledge may lead to linguistic and pedagogical practices that reify the system of language and regard “living languages as if they are dead or alien (Voloshinov, 1976, p. 81). Language may be objectified and taught as discrete, decontextualized system of entities. Compliant with the transmissionist model of teaching, a monologically oriented teacher may treat language teaching as imparting linguistic knowledge as if it is something totally outside the learners, instead of having them enter “the stream of verbal communication” (ibid.).

In addition, monologism in these EFL reading classrooms as indicated by the teachers’ obsession with questions concerning factual information of the reading passages tends to treat the text as “autonomous” with meanings completely independent of readers. The students on the other hand were treated as only passively “decoding” the message in the text rather than making critical and strategic use of prior knowledge. Multiple viewpoints and interpretations were excluded from the reading process. This monologic conceptualization of the “autonomous” text has been widely challenged (Olson, 1991). For instance, Olson (1991) argues,

...is textual meaning really autonomous? I would acknowledge that it is not. Texts are always open to re-interpretation....Not only do their meanings change as contexts change but also the textual or sentence meanings change as cultural conventions change. So there is no absolute meaning of a text. (p. 19)

Nevertheless, the myth of the “autonomous” text seems to prevail in the IR classroom where the teachers persist in asking questions calling for factual recall and recognition with an attempt to decode the “full” meanings within the text while ignoring the interactive role of the reader in the construction of meaning from text cues.

3.2 Causes

Pedagogy entails not only the act and procedure of teaching but rather encompasses the act “together with its purposes, values, assumptions, theories and beliefs which inform, shape and try to justify it” (Kramer-Dahl, 2007). In order to comprehend why there exists the prevalence of monologic instruction in the IR classroom, we need to first of all examine the theoretical assumptions and beliefs that underpin such practices. The monologically oriented pedagogical instruction is grounded on the conceptualizations of language as a self-contained, neutral system and EFL learning as acquiring formal rules of the linguistic system by individuals. Such assumptions tend to exclude or downplay the social, cultural, interpersonal and contextual aspects of language use. For instance, in one IR class, the students was asked to “make sentences” with “newly learnt” expressions. These contrived sentences were then treated as autonomous entities to be scrutinized in terms of their grammatical correctness. While there might be some pedagogical value with these form-focused activities, such sentential-level linguistic exercise ignores the social nature of language and its actual use in larger communicative contexts.

Second, the teachers' striving for monologism in the IR classroom may be explained by their perceptions of learner proficiency and their expectations of what learners can do with the target language. In an informal interview with one of the three instructors from HIT on why she spent a substantial amount of time having student retell and memorize the reading passage in her classroom teaching rather than giving students sufficient interactional space to voice their own thinking, the teacher confessed that she was afraid that the students might not be able to express complex ideas in the target language due to their limited proficiency. However, it might be misleading to prescribe what learners can do by confining them in a perceived proficiency zone while neglect the potential of scaffolded interaction in enabling learners to develop in the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978).

Third, monologism in the IR classroom instruction might result from the institutional pressure to cover the syllabus within pre-specific time and teachers' misconception that good teaching is fast-paced (Tsui, 1996). The phenomenon of a very short wait-time after questioning is prevalent in the traditional classroom, which is found to last merely one or two seconds (White & Lightbown, 1984). Teachers tend to be intolerant of silence and feel uneasy or impatient when they fail to get an immediate response from students for the fear that silence will slow down the pace and lead to disruption in the classroom (Tsui, 1996). Consequently, they may turn to a more "efficient" way of delivering the syllabus by cramming students with the prescribed knowledge instead of waiting for the emerging co-construction of knowledge that entails dialogic involvement of the learner in the learning task.

Finally, teachers' fear of losing control in the classroom might lead them to manipulate the instructional arrangements and sustain an authoritative stance by restricting students interactional space and maintaining their status as the source of knowledge and "primary knower" in the language classroom.

3.3 Consequences

One consequence of teachers asking predominately display questions in the language classroom that create only one-way information flow from teachers to students is that students' responses and oral output tend to be restrained. In a study that compared the effect of higher frequencies of referential questions (questions that request information not known to the questioner) on adult ESL classroom discourse with that of display questions, Brock's (1986) found that students' responses to display questions were generally shorter and syntactically less complex and contained fewer numbers of connectives than their responses to referential questions. And confirmation checks and clarification requests by the teacher were found to occur less frequently following display questions than following referential questions.

In a large scale study on eighth and ninth grade literature lessons in the US, Nystrand and Gamoran (1997) found that dialogically organized instruction, indicated by time devoted to discussion, authentic questions pertaining to academic subject, uptake, and high-level teacher evaluation, had a strong positive effect on achievement. They compared the low track classes

with the high track classes and found that differences in instructional discourse did account for their achievement inequality. This finding reaffirms an early study in which it was found that differences in interaction and pedagogy afforded the two groups of high-ability and low-ability students significantly different learning opportunities (Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995).

In addition, the imbalance in terms of interactional turns and space between students and teacher caused by the ubiquitous IRE (Initiation—Response—Evaluation) sequence (also known as “recitation script”) in which teacher questioning is embedded has also been seriously criticized. Researchers have criticized the triadic exchange as a teacher-dominant practice that is detrimental for promoting meaningful student participation. As Nassaji and Wells (2000) point out, the frequent use of display questions that elicit expected information, i.e. information that the teacher already knows as “the primary knower” leaves little room for students to answer in any unexpected way or to produce long or complex contributions. van Lier (1996) also argues that the IRE pattern does not provide the best possible opportunities for learning.

... the IRE sequence, while it is effective in maintaining order, regulating participation, and leading the students in a certain predetermined direction, often reduces the student’s initiative, independent thinking, clarity of expression, the development of conversational skills (including turn taking, planning ahead, negotiating and arguing), and self-determination. (p. 156)

In addition to its inhibiting effect on students’ linguistic development, academic achievement and opportunities of learning, the monologically organized instruction such as IRE at its extreme may be detrimental to learners’ perception of the nature of learning and of themselves as learners. In other words, teachers’ use of language in the classroom, far from being a neutral device for the transfer of information, can have moral consequences that impact how learners are positioned to the teacher, what kind of social roles and identities they are assigned, and how their learning experiences are shaped (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002). As Buzzelli and Johnston (2002) assert,

That some students are able to engage in the activity as active learners, whereas others are passive recipients, sends a powerful moral message to the students about their teacher’s expectations of them as students and learners, but also about the type of persons they could become. To put it another way, the moral message to students is about who they are, what they can learn, and what they can be. (p. 36)

In the monologically organized instruction, display questions serve to establish the position and role of the teacher as the “primary knower”, the provider of information, the assessor of knowledge and the initiator and regulator of learning activities. The student, on the other hand, is positioned as the learning object. The relationship between the teacher and students created by this form of discourse is hierarchical, with the role of each rigidly and hierarchically defined. The teacher asks questions and the students provide answers. This creates a relatively

large social distance between the teacher and students. As a result, the role of the teacher and students and the hierarchical nature of roles are reified (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002).

3.4 Possible Solutions

To challenge the dominance of monologic discourse and open up classroom talk so as to facilitate learning opportunities in the IR classroom, possible solutions are proposed in two main aspects: first, incorporation of teacher questioning techniques that changes the lockstep of the conventional IRE format; second, reconceptualization of classroom teaching as dialogue as against monologue. The first perspective mainly focuses at the micro level of this problem while the second aims at its macro scope.

The first aspect of the solutions is based on the premise that teacher questioning has to be examined in the context of classroom teacher-student interaction rather than being treated in isolation. In other words, the value of teacher question techniques has to be perceived in terms of their facilitative potentials and usefulness in promoting substantive, coherent and quality classroom interaction rather than by treating teacher questions as discrete verbal behaviors and analyzing their forms and functions per se.

Referential questions pertaining to the academic task or what Nystrand (1997) calls “authentic questions” and questions that introduce issues for negotiation have been found to be more likely than known information questions to elicit substantive student contributions, to encourage a variety of perspectives and to bring about more opportunities for dialogic interactions (Nystrand, 1997; Nassaji and Wells, 2000).

Moreover, questions that involve uptake are also found to be conducive to meaningful classroom interaction (Nystrand, 1997; O’Connor and Michaels, 1993). Questions of this type can be seen as a link between the Follow-up move in one IRF sequence and Initiation in the subsequent IRF triad dialogue, serving dual purposes of both referring to students’ response and initiating a new round of exchange. According to Nystrand, interactions of this kind are contingent and produce textual coherence, which characterizes the discourse features of dialogically organized instruction (Nystrand, 1997).

One specific strategic move that involves uptake is revoicing (O’Connor and Michaels, 1993) in which the teacher reformulates students’ contribution and incorporates it in the subsequent question. Through revoicing, the teacher lends power and authority to the students’ weak voice, and at the same time allows them to retain some ownership over the reformulation (ibid.). More importantly, the revoicing move may animate students into roles and relationship (for example each defending a differing point of view) and involve them in the on-going co-construction of knowledge and reflective inquiry (ibid.).

Additionally, the nature of the follow-up (or feedback) move in the IRF sequence is also vital to the co-construction of knowledge and understanding, and the quality of student participation. In Nassaji and Wells’ study (2000), they found that when the follow-up was an evaluative one, it

did not facilitate further student contribution. However, in cases when the follow-up requested clarification, justification, connections, or alternative views, student responses were much extended. They also found a close relation between the initiation and the follow-up moves. When the initiation was a negotiatory question, also the follow-up tended to be “encouraging rather than evaluating” (p. 400). However, such a relationship was found not necessarily determinist. They argued that even if the initiation was a question eliciting known information, the teacher could steer it to the direction of a “more equal dialogue” if the follow-up was not evaluation, but rather something that requires “justifications, connections or counter-arguments” (p. 401) and gave students more interactional space and freedom. They also maintained that negotiatory initiation questions with no teacher evaluative follow-up tended to end up with students initiating moves. In these cases the IRF exchange pattern transforms to a more dialogic discourse or what Tharp and Gallimore (1988) called “instructional conversation”.

When talking about ways to exploit the prevalent IRF pattern in teacher-led classroom talk, Nassaji and Wells (2000) suggest that teachers do not have to take the role of the “primary knower”; rather, the role of the “primary knower” can be assigned to a student or to no specific individual, in which case all participants have a chance to make their own contributions to the construction of knowledge. They maintain that in addition to the role of the “primary knower”, there are two other roles in the IRF pattern that can also be occupied in different variations, the role of the “manager” and the role of the “sequence initiator”. Instead of taking the role of the “primary knower”, the teacher may occupy the role of the “manager” who can act as sequence initiator, or nominate a student to do the initiation and decide on direction and pace of talk. This conceptualization of the role of the teacher in the IRF teaching format allows teachers to make strategic choices to open up classroom talk. In other words, teachers may choose not to foreclose the co-construction of an explanation by positioning themselves as the primary knower, and giving their own answers to the problem. They may make managerial moves to help class co-construct understandings of an issue for which there is not a single, readymade answer.

Another important aspect of teacher questioning strategy involves extended wait-time. Allowing time for preparation and rehearsal prior to completing a task are found to result in longer, more complex learner responses (Tsui, 1996). Tsui (1996) adopted one specific strategy to reduce student anxiety and reticence due to the fear of losing face when asked a demanding, open question; students were given time to write down their responses before sharing with the class, a strategy found effective in Hong Kong ESL classrooms.

While these questioning techniques may be useful, perhaps most important of all, to challenge monologism in the IR classroom, there has to be a reconceptualization of language teaching as dialogue rather than monologue. The deployment of dialogue in educational settings can be traced back to Socrates who employed a dialogic method in his teaching. Socratic dialogue positioned the teacher not as the authority or transmitter of knowledge, but as enabler and

assistant to students' inquiry and search for evidence for untested arguments (Renshaw, 2004). Socrates himself likened his skill as a teacher to the qualities of a good midwife (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1989). As the metaphor suggests, having inconsistencies and inadequacies revealed can be painful as is childbirth. However, there will be joys of new understanding and insight as a result of the dialogue in spite of pain and discomfort. In a detailed analysis of Socratic dialogues, Haroutunian-Gordon asserts that as the "prototype of all subsequent teachers" (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1989, p. 5), Socrates demonstrated not only the knowledge and experience required to ask appropriate questions, the capacity to reveal inherent contradictions and inconsistencies and more importantly his situated engagement with others, the ability to "think with", in a theatre of inquiry (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1989).

Recent deployment of dialogue as a model for teaching and learning has been inspired by Vygostky's sociocultural theory of learning and Bakhtin's writings on the inherent dialogicality of language and thinking, both highlighting the social foundations of learning, the mediating role of language both in cognitive development and in identity formation, and the link between individual and social. Bakhtin's view of dialogue goes beyond verbal interactions. It may occur between a speaker and an imagined audience without whom one's utterances and thoughts could not make sense (Hicks, 2000). Indeed, any utterance is chained and contingent, its beginning "preceded by the utterances of others" and its end "followed by the responsive utterances of others" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 72). Even individual thought is dialogic in the sense that "thinking occurs through appropriating and using social forms of speech that are imbued with the accents, values and beliefs of previous speakers and speech communities" (Renshaw, 2004, p. 4). Dialogism characterizes language and discourse, which are constantly structured by tension between heteroglossic voices of self and other and with a juxtaposition of relative perspectives and struggle among competing voices (Holoquist, 2002).

Dialogic instruction differs from monologic instruction—the transmission model of instruction in that it emphasizes the interactive, contingent, flexible and responsive features of instructional activities (Nystrand, 1997; Alexander, 2005). Wertsch and Toma (1995) see dialogic teaching as the organization of instruction in such a way that teachers treat source texts, students' utterances, and their own statements as "thinking device". Knowledge and meaning are not treated as objective, existing outside the students, but rather as unfolding and co-constructed with teachers' facilitation. Using Socrates' metaphor, the teacher's role is likened to the qualities and characteristics of a good midwife who enables the birth of new understanding and the joy of insight. Dialogic instruction takes into account of what students already know and progressively expands this understanding. As Bakhtin (1984) writes:

The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to official monologism which pretends to possess a ready-made truth... Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. (p. 110)

However, the term dialogic instruction itself seems to bear an irreducible tension. On the one hand, it is goal-directed and typically involves asymmetrical roles between the teacher and the learner. On the other hand, it involves discursive and divergent practices of the novice. To reconcile the conflict, it is necessary to view teachers' role in such a teaching process as involving "a delicate balance between *following* the students' ideas and lines of reasoning, and *leading* them towards insight and understanding of more abstract, more consistent, and more generalized forms of thinking" (Renshaw, 2004, p.7 italics original).

Within a classroom context, the teacher who subscribes to dialogic instruction needs to be able to accommodate, without fear of loss of control, a diversity of attitudes and responses to what is being taught. He/she also needs to be sensitive to the language resources that students bring to the classroom and consciously bring official language of the discipline and the unofficial vernacular of learners into dialogue so that "the power inherent in the formal language of the school curriculum can be made accessible and meaningful to students" (Renshaw, 2004, p. 5).

Alexander (2005) conceptualizes dialogic teaching in terms of three repertoires: teaching talk, learning talk and interactive organization. He suggests that teachers should strategically use discussion and scaffolded dialogue in addition to the familiar kinds of teaching talk such as recitation (using short test questions for students to recall and recite what is known), and exposition (imparting information and explaining things). According to him, discussion involves the open exchange of views and information in order to explore issues and tackle problems. Scaffolded dialogue entails teacher-student interactions that encourage students to think, teacher questioning that requires more than simple recall, uptakes, extended contributions, coherent exchanges and supportive classroom climate and relationships. The ultimate purpose is to successfully transfer what is learnt from teacher control to student self-regulation and to assimilate and integrate new learning to existing knowledge and understanding (Alexander, 2005).

3.5 Interactional Patterns in the Dialogic Classroom

Five characteristic interactional patterns can be identified in the dialogic classroom. First, the teacher is not asking display questions which he or she has already had a prescribed, or assessing how students remember or reinforcing key points but rather engaged in a genuine conversation where learners can be the primary knower and primary source of knowledge.

Secondly, dialogue in the classroom produces textual coherence. Alexander differentiates dialogue from conversation in a classroom context. "Where conversation often consists of a sequence of unchained two-part exchanges as participants talk at or past each other...classroom dialogue explicitly seeks to make attention and engagement mandatory and to chain exchanges into a meaningful sequence." (Alexander, 2005, p.8) This according to him is an overly Bakhtinian version of dialogue who maintains, "if an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, then it falls out of the dialogue" (Bakhtin, 1986, p.168). In a dialogic

discourse, the utterance is in response to a previous one and in expectation of another to follow it. There is a sense of contingency of utterances with one building on another.

Thirdly, dialogic instruction produces substantive talk of high cognitive level such as reasoning, comparing, analyzing and justifying. Since the teacher and learners are engaged in authentic communication and negotiation of meanings, their talks are extended and substantive. Moreover, students are entitled greater interactional rights and agency in turn-taking and topic shifts. The teacher serves as a facilitator enabling learners to navigate in the “interactional architecture” (Seedhouse, 2004). He/she is ready to offer scaffolding to the learners without interrupting their interactional opportunities. In addition, in a dialogic class, talk that reflects both individual voice and collective thinking is less predictable, less repeatable, negotiated and jointly determined (Nystrand, et al, 1997, p. 6).

4. CONCLUSION

It is necessary to point out that, in actuality, we cannot find one language classroom that is totally monologic or ideally dialogic. Perhaps it is more reasonable to conceptualize classroom instructions in terms of their degree of dialogicality.

In the L2 classroom, the quality of talk is of high significance in that language is not only the means through which learning is mediated but also an indispensable aspect of the pedagogical goal in itself. Alexander’s conceptualization of dialogic teaching comprised of three repertoires of talk suggests that a dialogic teacher should not only ask test questions to elicit recall and recitation. Rather he or she needs to employ discussion and scaffolded dialogue to encourage genuine exchange of views. Variations on the traditional format of IRF, such as initiating with a negotiatory question, revoicing and strategic reformulation, follow-up that challenges learners to justify, compare or clarify can also lead to the opening up of classroom talk, thus creating more conducive and facilitative opportunities of learning. In addition, teachers in the dialogic classroom do not always take up the role of the primary knower; instead their authoritative and institutional role can be suspended in order to foster genuine dialogue and different voices in the language classroom.

It is important to note that dialogic teaching cannot be reduced to a set of skills and procedures though at the micro level certain techniques of teacher talk can be identified. Rather it entails teachers’ “professional outlook” (Alexander, 2005) that is firmly grounded in a dialogic view of language, learning and human interaction.

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