Full length article

Dialogic literacy: Talking, reading and writing among primary school children

CrossMark

Sylvia Rojas-Drummond [a,*], Fiona Maine [b], Mariana Alarcón [a], Ana Laura Trigo [a], María José Barrera [a], Nancy Mazón [a], Maricela Vélez [c], Riikka Hofmann [b]

[a] Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM), Mexico
[b] The University of Cambridge, England
[c] Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN), Mexico

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the interplay between talk, reading and writing as 6th grade Mexican primary school children worked together, in small groups, on a psycholinguistic task that required them to read three related texts and then write an integrative summary. The study was conducted in the context of an educational program called 'Learning Together' (LT), which uses collaborative learning to enhance the development of children's oracy and literacy. Analyses of children's dialogues using the Ethnography of Communication in combination with a novel 'Scheme for Educational Dialogue Analysis (SEDA)' (Hennessy et al., 2016), revealed important improvements in effective oral communication - and specifically a shift towards the use of dialogic styles of interaction - between the children who participated in the LT program (as compared to those who did not). These improvements were accompanied by significantly higher quality integrative summaries, not only when children worked in small groups but also individually. The latter results indicate appropriation of sophisticated literacy abilities by the children. Further analyses of the relations among talk, reading and writing suggest that these processes are interwoven through subtle intertextual relations and support each other in a dynamic and iterative manner. We discuss the theoretical, methodological and practical relevance of the study.

1. Introduction

The central purpose of this research was to analyse the interplay between talk, reading and writing as Mexican primary school children worked together, in small groups (triads), on a psycholinguistic task called the 'Test of Textual Integration' (TTI). This task required the children to write an integrative summary text that provided a synopsis of their joint understanding of three texts on a common theme. The texts that they had read represented different genres, so the children needed to extract and jointly co-construct meaning (Palincsar, 2003), understand different linguistic registers, determine the importance of the information that they had encountered and work it into a new text form. This included the transformation of direct speech (as presented in an interview) into reported speech. Additionally, they were tasked with finding an appropriate title for their summary piece, which would demonstrate their ability to generalise and synthesise the information. As a collaborative task this was complex,

---

* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Psychology, Division of Research and Graduate Studies, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Av. Universidad 3004, Copilco-Universidad 04510, Coyoacán, Mexico, DF, Mexico.
E-mail address: silviar@unam.mx (S. Rojas-Drummond).

and the children's ability to co-construct knowledge and produce a coherent synthesised summary piece of writing was highly dependent on their ability to talk and think together.

As part of their ongoing school activities, children participated in an educational program called 'Learning Together' (LT) (see Rojas-Drummond, Mazón, Littleton, & Vélez, 2012), which provided the context and setting for the present study. The program centred on promoting collaborative learning and educationally productive dialogue. The latter entailed the use of dialogic styles of interaction, including Exploratory Talk (see Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Rojas-Drummond, Torreblanca, Pedraza, Vélez, & Guzmán, 2013), to discuss ideas and issues jointly. At the same time, emphasis was placed on enhancing diverse functional literacy abilities, including those for comprehending and producing texts of different genres. These genres included narratives; journalistic texts (such as news reports, opinion articles and book and film reviews); as well as academic articles. The psycholinguistic task detailed above (TTI) was undertaken by all participants (n = 120 children) as a pre- and post- test, at the beginning and end of the academic year. Macro analyses entailed comparisons of the performances of the experimental group of children who had engaged in the LT programme, with that of their control-group peers who only engaged in normal class routines in the pre- and post-tests. Rubrics for evaluating in detail the quality of the written summaries produced by each group were designed following the van Dijk and Kintsch's (1983) influential 'situation model' of text comprehension. The academic outcomes of the project (macro analyses) have been reported elsewhere (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2012). This paper offers the opportunity for more fine-grained, close-up, micro-analyses of children's dialogues as they engaged in the pre- and post-tests, and the relations between these analyses and those of their written summaries.

For micro-analyses, the dialogues and texts produced by a randomly selected set of four 'focal triads' (two experimental and two control), as well as the interactions between these oral and written communicative processes, were studied in detail. The texts were analysed using the rubrics mentioned above. Analyses of the dialogues in turn were carried out using a combination of a well-established approach for investigating dialogue - the Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 2003; see also Rojas-Drummond, Mazón, Fernández, & Wegerif, 2006) - alongside a methodological tool called the 'Cam-UNAM Scheme for Educational Dialogue Analysis (SEDA) (Hennessy et al., 2016). The present report is one of the first to employ SEDA in an empirical study (see also Rojas-Drummond et al., 2016). Results illustrate SEDA's potential to account for dialogic interactions in a systematic, fine-grained and comprehensive fashion.

2. Antecedents

2.1. Dialogue in learning

The study reported here adopts a sociocultural approach to understanding and investigating processes of learning and development, particularly in relation to oral and written communication. Studies which research language use in the classroom have typically focused on the quality of the interaction between teachers and students and among students working together, and highlight the potential for classroom talk as a powerful tool for learning (Howe, 2010; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Rojas-Drummond & Mercer, 2003). The most effective and productive dialogue between peers (the focus of this study) is that which enables the speakers to move their thinking forward together, to 'interthink' (Littleton & Mercer, 2013) effectively, not bound by closed questioning, but with open and extended possibilities for reasoning and argumentation. Mercer et al. (1999) defined this 'exploratory talk' as:

…that in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas. Statements and suggestions are sought and offered for joint consideration. These may be challenged and counter-challenged, but challenges are justified and alternative hypotheses are offered. In exploratory talk, knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk (p. 97).

However, in previous studies, Rojas-Drummond et al. (2006) found that within the classroom, opportunities for this very explicitly defined talk were task specific, and not necessarily afforded within more open-ended discursive talk tasks. These more fluid discussion opportunities would be typical of those found within literacy-based activities, which might necessarily involve a more interpretative stance and open-ended discussion. The researchers found that the children were able to adjust and use explicitly taught strategies for Exploratory Talk to the activity been carried out, even if it led to less defined and specific outcomes, most notably in relation to making reasoning visible through explicit argument. The authors proposed a more encompassing mode of talk which they termed 'co-constructive' as a 'single overarching framework', that includes: "taking turns, asking for and providing opinions, generating alternatives, reformulating and elaborating on the information being considered, coordinating and negotiating perspectives and seeking agreements" (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2006, p. 92). This broader concept offers a more flexible consideration of the exploratory mode, and is particularly relevant here, where children's dialogue is analysed as they engage in collaborative reading and writing tasks.

In current literature of communication in educational contexts, dialogic interactions have been found to enhance children's development and learning (e.g. Littleton & Howe, 2010; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Dialogic interactions harness the power of language to stimulate and extend students' understanding, thinking and learning. These interactions are collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful (Alexander, 2008). According to Hennessy et al. (2016), these forms of productive dialogue are further "open to new ideas and critically constructive, where negotiation of perspectives allows joint problem solving" (p. 3).

Dialogic interactions do not happen in a vacuum however, and from a sociocultural perspective, context is highly significant in understanding the dynamics of classroom talk. Hymes' (1972) work on the Ethnography of Communication provides a useful frame in which to set any analysis of classroom interaction. He describes a hierarchy in which communicative acts are nested within the context of communicative events, and subsequently, these events are nested within communicative situations.