



## Troubles with dialogic teaching



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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines dialogic teaching in Czech lower secondary schools and shows how Czech teachers use forms of dialogic teaching in their practice. We understand dialogic teaching as a method that harnesses communication and students' work with language to promote their activity, deepen their thinking and enrich their understanding (Alexander, 2006). Yet, although Czech teachers praise the benefits of dialogic teaching, they are not capable of fully implementing its forms in their teaching. This paper identifies the basic deficits that accompany attempts at dialogic teaching. These are insufficient emphasis on rational argumentation and semantic noise. The paper concludes by suggesting that it is necessary to further develop the concept of dialogic teaching so that it can be incorporated into everyday teaching.

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## 1. Introduction

Classroom discourse has become one of the key topics of educational science. Many authors have a long-term research interest in forms of talk in the classroom and their educational functions (Alexander, 2001, 2006; Cazden, 1988; Gutierrez, 1994; Gutierrez et al., 1999; Hall, 1998; Lemke, 1988; Littleton & Howe, 2010; Mehan, 1979, 1984; Mercer, 1995, 2000; Mercer & Howe, 2012; Mercer & Sams, 2006; Mesa & Chang, 2010; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2001; Pappas & Varelas, 2006; Poole, 1990; Scott, 2008; Sharpe, 2008; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Wells, 1993, 1999, 2009). Such an interest can be divided into two types. The first type focuses on the intense development of theoretical concepts that enable to identify and evaluate the educational potential of distinct communicational processes. The second relates to empirical researches which observe the nature of these processes in the real environment of the classroom.

This paper analyses data gathered at Czech lower secondary schools through the perspective of dialogic teaching. It shows that although Czech teachers do use some of the dialogical forms, these are accompanied with troubles. We propose that the troubles that appear in the collected data can be thought of as typical in the Czech environment. Hence, the aim of this paper is to explain how they come into being and provide a theoretical explanation for our findings.

## 2. The theory of dialogic teaching

This paper uses theoretical concepts that come from sociocultural theory, which is represented by Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1978). Vygotsky claimed that each psychological function appears twice in the development of a child. Its first appearance takes place on the social level (i.e. in the interaction of the child and other people) while the second takes place on the individual level (on the level of internalised psychological processes). Vygotsky believed that there is a strong connection between thinking and speaking and that whatever a child is capable of saying is later internalised and becomes a part of its thinking. Vygotsky (1978)

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established the term *the zone of proximal development* which describes the difference between what a child can do without the help of a teacher and with what a child can do with the help of a teacher. In this scheme, good teaching is believed to be slightly ahead of what a child can do at a given moment. Hence, teachers and students communicate about matters that are slightly out of the reach of students and the guidance they receive is believed to be internalised by the students. In sum, what comes from outside (be it a competent teacher, a parent or a gifted peer) becomes absorbed into the cognitive structure of a child's mind.

Vygotsky's emphasis on verbal interaction between a less competent child and a more competent adult was further developed by Bruner into the metaphor of education as scaffolding (Bruner, 1978). The scaffolding metaphor implies a short-term help provided by a teacher to a student with the aim of acquiring a particular skill or a type of knowledge. It is understood that acquisition of the desired goal would not be possible without the teacher's support (Hammond, 2001; Sharpe, 2008; Wells, 1999). Once a child starts working on a task, the competent adult intervenes so as to inhibit the child's freedom at doing the task which results in the child's greater concentration on the desired goal. An additional benefit of scaffolding is the decrease of students' failure rate (Mercer, 2000).

The scaffolding metaphor is well-suited for classroom application. Since speech is a key source of a child's cognitive development, the dialogue between a teacher and a child is understood as a possible scaffolding. Education is then perceived as a dialogical process which both teachers and students enrich by adding meanings, which they then reflect and process. This, however, does not mean that all communication is dialogical. Nystrand et al. (1997) states that teaching cannot automatically be considered dialogic just because communication exchanges are present. For, according to Bakhtin (1981) real dialogisation contains a change of various mental perspectives. This means that each participant brings to communication something unique and original. The consequent mixing of various elements creates a dialogue. Further, the so called dialogic space opens when different perspectives and opinions are compared together. The opening of dialogic space is essential for the development of thinking, creativity and the ability to learn because it enables a child to better understand a problem. Hence, dialogue can be understood as a desirable form of communication.

Scott, Ametler, Mortimer, and Emberton (2010, see also Scott, 2008) differentiate between a dialogue and interactivity. If classroom communication takes the form of dialogue between a teacher and a student then it is interactive. This is not the case of the teacher's un-interrupted monologue. Hence, it follows that communication is dialogic only in those cases when it is open to students' ideas. However, if the teacher steers the dialogue to a previously defined end point – which the students cannot influence or enrich the process with their thoughts – the situation is understood to be the very opposite of dialogisation.

Different authors use various terms to describe teaching which uses dialogic forms. Wells (1999) and Pappas and Varelas (2006) use the term dialogic inquiry, while Skidmore (2006) prefers dialogical pedagogy and Alexander (2006) dialogic teaching. The meaning of the terms is very similar, yet this paper uses Alexander's demarcation as it is clear and well laid out.

Dialogic teaching uses communication and students' work with language to promote activity, deepen thinking and enrich understanding (Alexander, 2006). The core feature of dialogic teaching is using such a type of communication which promotes higher cognitive functions in students. Other important features of dialogic teaching are engaged students, their autonomy and the fact that they are allowed to influence the course of actions in the classroom, at least to a certain extent.

According to Alexander (2006) it is possible to divide all communication situations into several genres. Yet, out of these only a few meet the criteria of dialogic teaching. Alexander's typology is as follows: (1) Instruction is a teacher's monologue which explains facts that students are to learn. Instruction is directed to all the students present in the classroom; (2) Rote is mechanical repetition of learned information and usually all the students participate in it; (3) recitation is used by teachers to test whether students have learned a particular piece of information which the teacher had taught them previously; it is based on closed-ended questions of lower cognitive order which are aimed at individual students; (4) Discussion entails an exchange of ideas and opinions between the teacher and students; its aim is to share information and generate ideas, while the questions used are open ended and students' participation is voluntary; (5) Dialogue is used by teachers not to control learned knowledge but to acquire new understanding; the scaffolding dialogue uses structured questions which build on each other in order to solve a problem that is too difficult for students. Dialogic questions are either directed to individual students or the classroom as a whole.

Even though all of the listed types have their place in education, Alexander claims that discussion and the scaffolding dialogue have the highest potential for the processes of students' learning (Alexander, 2006; Fisher, 2009). Hence, whenever we use the term dialogic teaching we understand it to refer to teaching based on discussion and dialogue.

### 3. Contemporary empirical findings

Although Alexander (2006) suggests which communication genres are useful for dialogic teaching, the genres themselves might not be easily identifiable in empirical reality. This motivates researchers to propose a set of indicators that should signalise the presence of dialogic teaching. (Nystrand et al., 1997, 2001) and Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) use the following criteria: (1) authentic questions: these are open ended questions which aim to reveal a student's ideas and opinions and to which there is no pre-given answer; (2) uptake describes a situation in which the speaker builds on what has been said by the previous speaker and thus increases the coherence of the dialogue; (4) teacher's feedback of higher order comments not only on the correctness or incorrectness of a student's response but it provides a more elaborate feedback on the content of the student's response; (5) open discussion describes a sequence that includes at least three participants who react to each other for more than 30 seconds<sup>1</sup>. Apart from these widely accepted indicators, researchers also suggest others, such as: open-endedness

<sup>1</sup> This criterion is not met by a situation in which a teacher asks first one student a question and then asks a different student another question. It is vital that students react to each other.

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