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How many are talking? The role of collectivity in dialogic teaching

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with the impact of a teacher development program focused on the implementation of dialogic teaching practice. The participants were eight Czech teachers in lower secondary schools and their classes. An analysis of video recordings of their lessons made during a one-year action research program revealed that classroom discourse had changed. Students had started to participate in a more productive way, which led to an increase in complex student talk characterized by thought and reasoning. In this study, we pose the question whether there is a relationship between the quality of student talk and the number of students participating in classroom discourse. Our analysis shows that the greater the number of students who participate in communication, the higher the probability that elaborated student talk with thought and reasoning will occur. However, this relationship is not a direct one; it is induced by a mediating variable constituted by the duration of open discussion.

1. Introduction

We carried out a teacher development program that focused on the implementation of dialogic teaching practice. The aim of the program was to achieve a transformation of classroom discourse that would lead to higher quality student talk. In this study, we addressed the question of whether there is a relationship between number of students participating in classroom discourse and the quality of student talk. In other words, we asked whether the establishment of dialogic discourse benefits the class as a whole, or whether it is only a small group of students that participate in classroom dialogue in a productive way.

2. Theoretical background

Educational research is increasingly interested in how students participate in classroom discourse. This interest is grounded in sociocultural theory, particularly as represented by Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978, 1981) postulated that each higher psychological process appears twice in the development of a child – first on the social level (i.e., as the child interacts with other people) and only later at an individual level (in the form of internalized psychological processes). He believed that speech and thought are closely interlinked and that what the child is able to talk about will later become interiorized and integrated into their thinking. It follows from this thesis that as more opportunities for communication are created, children's internalization of knowledge is both faster and of a higher quality. The assumption that communication and thinking are closely related is widely accepted by the scientific community. Sfard (2008) uses the term *commognition*, coined as a blend of communication and cognition, to emphasize the indivisibility of these phenomena. Sfard (2007, 2008), with reference to Vygotsky, understands learning as a means of participating. What students have learnt is manifested through the changes in the way they communicate during a lesson. In simple terms, if a student is communicating using information that they did not have before and is performing cognitive operations at a level that was beyond their

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previous capabilities, then learning has taken place (Sfard, 2008). Classroom talk is, in this conception, considered the most essential cultural tool mediating learning (Lehesvuori, 2013).

From this perspective, student participation in classroom discourse plays a particularly significant role. Molinari and Mameli (2013) state that the degree of student participation can be considered a measure of the overall quality of classroom discourse and, on a general level, of the quality of education. They understand effective teaching as teaching that encourages students to actively engage in talk about what they are learning. Similarly, Lefstein and Snell (2014, p. 135) indicate that students learn best through active participation in a rich and stimulating discourse, and therefore, such participation should be encouraged and conditions for it should be created. It follows from this that increased student engagement in classroom communication, both in terms of the number of students and their level of engagement, will lead to better results. This hypothesis has been confirmed by a number of empirical studies (e.g., Chinn et al., 2000; Howe et al., 2007; Ing et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2014). In a complementary fashion, other studies provide evidence that weak participation works to students' disadvantage (see e.g., Black, 2004, 2007; Heyd-Metzuyanim, 2013).

This does not mean that any participation in the discourse leads to the same quality of learning. Black (2004, pp. 36–37) distinguishes between productive and unproductive participation. In unproductive participation students talk but they are passive; their primary goal is to follow the teacher's guidelines. Their utterances are short, not surprising in any way, and do not require much cognitive effort. In contrast, productive participation requires student interactions that contain verbal actions that appear to create and maintain the shared understandings underpinning the learning process. Student utterances are, in such cases, elaborate and contain argumentation and reasoning. This differentiation of two types of participation is in accordance with the concept of productive classroom interaction postulated by Edwards and Mercer (1987).

2.1. *Different student participation patterns*

Empirical research shows that not all students engage in classroom communication to the same degree. The classic study of Brophy and Good (1970) demonstrated that both quantity and quality of verbal interactions with the teacher is considerably different for individual students in a class. Similar results were produced by other research studies, mostly taking the form of quantified structured class observation, either directly with the observer present in the class, or indirectly using a video recording, e.g., Myhill (2002), Black (2004), Kelly, 2008, Jurik, Gröschner, and Seidel (2013), Clarke (2015), Helgevold (2016).

Black (2004) drew attention to the existence of patterns of unequal participation in whole-class discussions and proposed a typology for identifying productive and non-productive interaction, classifying students into several types: students who participate in a productive way on a continuous basis; students who tend to only participate in a non-productive way (involuntarily, abruptly, and only when called upon by the teacher); students characterized by a balanced proportion of productive and non-productive participation; and, students with a generally low participation rate. The variability of participation patterns was also highlighted by Kovalainen and Kumpulainen (2007), who distinguish: (1) vocal participants, who are very active, respond to teacher's questions, but also pose questions themselves; they take part in feedback and react not only to the teacher, but also to other students; (2) responsive participants, characterized by a medium degree of participation; they are focused on interaction with the teacher and mostly respond to their questions; (3) bilateral participants, characterized by a medium degree of participation; they are focused on interaction with the teacher, but also with their classmates; these students respond to questions and also pose them themselves; and, (4) silent participants who rarely take part in communication.

The question of what determines the degree and productivity of participation is worth exploring. Seidel (2006), like Jurik et al. (2013), Jurik, Gröschner, and Seidel (2014), find causality in different student characteristics. They found that students who frequently take part in communication are characterized by better cognitive capabilities (measured by cognitive capability tests), higher inner motivation and positive emotional relationships with the subject. There is also evidence to support the finding that students' academic results are correlated with classroom discourse participation (Brophy & Good, 1970; Hernandez-Martinez et al., 2011; Jurik et al., 2013; Kelly, 2008; Myhill, 2002). Interesting light is shed on these findings by the study of Clarke (2015), who showed that students verbally participate primarily when they think they know the right answer. Not knowing the right answer is indicated as the main obstacle to participation. However, through analysis of student narratives, Clarke (2015) also found that high talkers are able to transcend this conception of knowledge as precondition for participation and are willing to risk entering the communication even when they do not know the right answer.

Black (2004) as well as Kelly (2008) argue that participation patterns are related to the socio-economic background of the students; students coming from families with a higher socio-economic status are more likely to adhere to productive participation patterns. Engin (2016) suggests limited linguistic resources as a reason for students' lack of participation in communication. In general, we may say that the studies cited show that there is something like "communication capital" possessed by the students, either facilitating or inhibiting their entry into classroom discourse and participation in it.

An alternative explanation suggests that the degree and nature of student participation are determined by teacher communication behaviour. As Webb (2009) indicates, the teacher is capable of influencing student participation by encouraging the student to communicate and use strategies and practices that may promote student elaboration of ideas. Ing et al. (2015) demonstrated that the more the teacher supports participation of a particular student, the more that student participates (in the sense of expressing their own ideas and considering the ideas of others). The higher the degree of participation, the better results the student achieves (Ing et al., 2015).

We do not view the propositions, (a) that participation is determined by student characteristics, and, (b) that it is formed by teacher behaviour, as contradictory. On the contrary, they can be construed as a mutually conditioned interaction cycle – particular communication tendencies of the students induce particular teacher behaviour which in turn forms further communication

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