Advances in research on classroom dialogue: Commentary on the articles

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A B S T R A C T

This commentary reviews the six articles that comprise the Special Issue on 'Advances in research on classroom dialogue: Learning outcomes and assessments'. The commentary focuses on the general methodological and conceptual messages that can be drawn from the reported research and that are relevant for progressing the field further. Issues discussed include the conceptualization and assessment of oral communicative competence; the meaning of 'participation' within the context of dialogue and the implications of participation for student outcomes; and the characterization of educationally productive dialogue. The commentary concludes by anticipating research that does not merely specify the productive features but also elucidates the processes by which the features have their positive effects.

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1. Introduction

The declared goal of this Special Issue is 'to examine how certain modes of classroom dialogue might contribute to students' learning outcomes'. I was delighted to see this goal because the main conclusion of a systematic review that I co-authored a few years ago (Howe & Abedin, 2013) was that research of relevance was then sorely lacking. In brief, the review focused on 225 empirical reports published during the 40 years up to 2011, of which 158 (i.e. 70%) were concerned with characterizing classroom dialogue as it typically occurs. These reports did not evaluate the implications of dialogue for learning outcomes. Moreover, although the remaining 67 reports were explicitly evaluative, 22 treated dialogue as a window on student competences rather than as a potential influence, and 30 engaged in what we referred to as 'model-based assessment'. In other words, the reports used background theory to derive models of good practice and assessed dialogue against those models, but since little independent evidence existed to warrant the models the results were ultimately inconclusive. A mere 15 reports genuinely related classroom dialogue to learning outcomes, and the majority of these were concerned with small-group interaction amongst students. Thus, while the results were often

promising, they do not necessarily extrapolate to the predominant forms of classroom interaction, namely those involving teachers.

With the Howe and Abedin review as background, I must confess to a little disappointment when I first read the six articles that comprise this Special Issue, for only two of them struck me as unambiguously concerned with the underlying goal. In particular, using further data from a study published in 2015 (and itself an exemplary, albeit small-scale, instance of what, a few years earlier, Howe and Abedin had found to be lacking), O'Connor, Michaels, Chapin and Harbaugh examine how modes of participation in classroom dialogue interact with the dialogue's overall quality to determine performance on a mathematics achievement test. Using a concept of high quality dialogue that closely resembles O'Connor et al., van der Veen, de Mey, van Kruistum, and van Oers explore the consequences of promoting key practices for children's biological understanding and their oral communicative competence. Of the remaining articles however, those authored by Kumpulainen and Rajala and by Forman, Ramirez-DelToro, Brown, and Passmore focus on describing and interpreting how teachers' attempts to reconfigure classroom dialogue triggered marked changes in student participation. While relations between dialogue and learning outcomes were arguably demonstrated, I found it hard to interpret dialogue as, 'contributing' to those outcomes when patterns of participation are part-and-parcel of dialogue itself. Even further removed from the goal, I thought, the articles authored by Mercer, Warwick and Ahmed and by Wegerif, Fujita, Doney, Perez Linares, Richards, and van Rhyn outline new approaches to student

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assessment covering respectively oral communicative competence and group thinking. However, these articles are not concerned with how classroom dialogue affects the performance scores that student actually obtain.

Happily, as I thought more carefully about what the articles were saying, my disappointment evaporated. I began to see how, by virtue of their overlapping themes, all six articles highlight issues that are profoundly important as regards the Special Issue's overarching goal. In particular, I believe that, in addition to the specific findings of interest, there are general methodological and conceptual messages to be drawn, which are relevant for any researcher concerned with the relation between classroom dialogue and learning outcomes. These messages are all the more impressive for being based on data collected in a range of contrasting countries (Finland, the Netherlands, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and covering all age groups from early primary school to late secondary/high school. It will be easiest, I think, for me to highlight the messages if I start by reviewing the two articles that address oral communicative competence, then consider the three articles that spotlight student participation, and finally with a focus upon Wegerif et al.'s article draw out some cross-cutting themes. This therefore is the structure I employ in what follows. I appreciate that my structure differs from the one that the Special Issue's editors perceive, but re-echoing one of the Issue's recurring themes I hope the contrast of perspectives will ultimately prove helpful.

2. Oral competence and contextual constraints

Of the two articles concerned with oral communicative competence, van der Veen et al. report a study, where 12 teachers participated in a professional development programme intended to promote what was termed 'productive classroom dialogue'. Such dialogue was deemed to involve children sharing and elaborating on ideas, listening to each other, deepening their reasoning, thinking together and building on their respective ideas, and together with their teacher reflecting on their behaviour (including their talk). The 12 teachers attempted to implement the target dialogue with their primary school classes, these classes comprising children aged from about 4 years to 6.5 years. The impact upon oral competence was assessed through comparing the performance of these intervention children on the *Nijmegen Test of Pragmatics* with the performance of similarly aged children from nine comparison classes whose teachers had not taken part in the programme. By contrast, Mercer et al. do not, in the second article, take a pre-existing test of oral competence, but rather describe the development and validation of a new *Cambridge Oracy Assessment Toolkit*. The toolkit revolves around three types of task, one spotlighting the seeking and providing of information, the second focusing on reasoned discussion, and the third requiring 2-min presentations. Three-point scales are used to rate spoken language (and associated non-verbal behaviour) during each type of task. Mercer et al. report the results of trials involving the assessment of 11- to 12-year old students.

When so much research in the field has focused upon curricular subject mastery, I found the highlighting of oral competence to be extremely refreshing. Indeed, I welcomed the two articles as pioneering attempts to broaden perspectives, and my comments should be interpreted with this in mind. The first of these comments relates to the contexts in which competence was assessed, for I was struck by the absence of overlap across the approaches that the two articles take. In van der Veen et al.'s study, the assessors were researchers who asked children series of questions and based their assessments on responses to those questions. In other words, the setting was a one-to-one interview, and the

assessors were actively involved within the setting. On the other hand, the first of Mercer et al.'s tasks involved students working in pairs, the second had them working in small groups (possibly also pairs — the article is unclear here), and the third required individual presentations. With all three tasks, the assessors, who included both teachers and researchers, were passive observers of what was in fact videotaped behaviour. While Mercer et al. do not report the correlations between each student's individual performance across the three tasks, the tabulated means suggest variation: it seems unlikely that the students who performed at, say, the gold level with one task invariably did this with the other tasks. Thus, even within the articles, there is evidence for how much context matters when attributing competence, and this made me wonder why the two research teams had chosen the contexts they focused upon. Indeed, I also began to wonder why the teams' reasoning had resulted in such differing selections. I appreciate that given the vast number of dimensions along which communicative contexts can vary (see Brown & Fraser, 1979; for an early attempt to spell these dimensions out), no single instrument can possibly cover everything. Nevertheless it would, I feel, help the field move forward if researchers address the options explicitly and argue the case for the choices they make.

Besides varying over assessment context, the two articles also differ over their conceptions of oral competence. While van der Veen et al. do not describe the *Nijmegen Test* in full they have told me separately that the test addresses communicative functions (from their article's examples including explanation and clarification) together with conversational skills. The so-called 'cognitive' scales in Mercer et al.'s *Toolkit* cover communicative functions and conversational skills are addressed via their 'social and emotional' scales. However, Mercer et al.'s conception of social and emotional functioning is broader, incorporating active listening, and self-assurance in addition, and they also include 'physical' scales which encompass body language and vocal fluency, clarity, and tonal variation, and 'linguistic' scales which relate to vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric. I like Mercer et al.'s broad approach, but I wonder if they fully appreciate how interwoven the dimensions are. For instance, the perceived functions of utterances (cognitive scales) can depend heavily on the relative status attributed to speakers and listeners (social and emotional scales): a string of words that is interpreted as 'providing assistance' when uttered by a presumed expert (teacher, clever student etc.) is likely to be interpreted as 'offering an alternative' or even 'intervening unhelpfully' when uttered by someone whose expertise is in doubt. One sequence that I have used elsewhere to illustrate the point (e.g. Howe, 2013) involves a 2-year-old child saying of a jigsaw piece 'I've put it in', and receiving the reply 'No it doesn't go there; it goes here'. Told (correctly) that the reply came from the child's mother, the comment cries out for interpretation as 'providing assistance'. However, suppose it had come from another 2-year-old: the interpretation is now much less certain.

The interweaving of speaker-listener status with perceived functions may add a further dimension to the struggle that, with admirable honesty, Mercer et al. report over achieving acceptable inter-assessor agreement. Their teacher assessors sometimes evaluated their own students and sometimes evaluated students with whom they were unfamiliar (as did the researcher assessors). Mercer et al. intimate that when the teachers considered their own students, they found it difficult to discount background knowledge and focus exclusively upon the videotaped dialogue. The point I am making here is that the background knowledge that the class teachers possessed about status differentials amongst their students will have coloured interpretation of the pair/group interactions even when the dialogue was in fact the exclusive focus. Moreover, the lack of background knowledge amongst the other