



A case study of a transition to dialogic teaching as a process of gradual change



Klara Sedova¹

Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine the process of a gradual transformation of teaching practices.
- The process of change is non-linear and includes stages of acceleration and regression.
- Reflective interviews play an important role in the process of change.
- Reflective interviews enable appropriation of new pedagogical tools.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this case study was to examine a process of gradual change in teaching practices during a development programme on dialogic teaching. The change process was seen to be non-linear. It included stages of regression – caused by a disharmony among the elements of dialogic teaching: indicators, principles and methods – and stages of progress which, on the contrary, came into effect when the partial elements were successfully brought into a harmonious relationship. The reflective interviews played a key role in the process of change, providing a tool for recognising disharmony and for creating a plan to overcome it.

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1. Introduction

Dialogic teaching is a concept that is richly elaborated on the theoretical level, but teachers have found it difficult to put into practice (Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013). This difficulty is an expression of the widely discussed gap between teaching theory and teaching practice (see, for example, Mercer & Howe, 2012). Professional development programmes offer one way to overcome this gap, but it has been repeatedly shown that such programmes rarely cause a change in teaching methods (see Adey, 2006; Butler, Novak Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, & Beckingham, 2004; Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013; Van den Bergh, Ros, & Beijaard, 2015). Yet, because some successful programmes do exist, it is important and useful to identify the basic mechanisms that caused them to be more effective than others (Berson, Borko, Million, Khachatryan, &

Glennon, 2015).

Between 2013 and 2015, we twice conducted an intensive development programme for teachers at Czech lower secondary schools. The programme proved effective, with changes in the participant teachers' teaching practices, as well as in the nature of classroom discourse (see Sedova, Sedlacek, & Svaricek, 2016). In this paper, we discuss the gradual change in one teacher's classroom practices in the light of the programme. We document the change step by step, while combining evidence of what a teacher does (data from video recordings of lessons) with how the teacher thinks about it (data from interviews stimulated by video recordings). This interconnection of data sources allows to demonstrate the logic of the development, and discuss causes, conditions and underlying mechanisms. A study of this kind has, to our knowledge, not yet been conducted. It is this type of analysis, however, that can reveal the actual and effective characteristics of a teacher development programme.

E-mail address: ksedova@phil.muni.cz.

¹ Permanent address: Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Arna Novaka 1, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Dialogic teaching and its elements

The concept of *dialogic teaching* currently has many proponents in the educational sciences (see, for example, Alexander, 2006; Lyle, 2008; Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013). Alexander's (2006) definition of the concept states that spoken language should play a central role in teaching, since students' involvement in classroom discourse provides them with an opportunity to influence their thought processes. Questions in dialogic teaching are structured in such a manner as to provoke thoughtful answers, which in turn ideally provoke further questions. This serves to create a coherent line of enquiry (Alexander, 2006, p. 41). The dialogic teaching approach is based on such teacher-student communication, in which higher forms of cognitive processes are dominant on the student's part. Students in this kind of teaching are actively engaged, endowed with high levels of autonomy and empowered to influence the development of the classroom discussion to a certain degree.

The concept of dialogic teaching is rooted in socio-cultural theory, as represented primarily by Vygotsky (1978). It is based on the conviction of a close relationship between speaking, thinking and learning. Proponents of dialogic teaching see the learning process not as the adoption of a particular item of knowledge but rather as participation in a certain type of discourse (see, for example, Sfard, 2008). Another key theoretical source is Bahktin's (1981) concept of dialogism as switching between various mental perspectives and the interanimation of different voices. A dialogic approach in a classroom occurs when various speakers respond to each other, when they support others' ideas, criticise them, or even get into conflict over them. The goal is to lay out various positions, with knowledge understood not as given but as gradually constructed in interaction (Mortimer & Scott, 2003).

A dialogic teaching framework includes various conceptual tools, which can be in general distinguished as indicators, principles and methods of dialogic teaching. *Indicators* are observable and signal that dialogic teaching is present. Different authors have used different indicators in their research studies (see, for example, Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Molinari & Mameli, 2013; Molinari & Mameli, 2015; Myhill & Warren, 2005; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2001; Pimentel & McNeill, 2013; Sotter et al., 2008). Hennessey et al. (2016) have recently published an extensive system of codes to indicate expressions of dialogic teaching. In our research, we worked with five key indicators: (1) the expression of students' thoughts with reasoning (Pimentel & McNeill, 2013) – a student's utterance with characteristics of a sentence, which includes an argument or reasoning; (2) a teacher's open question of high cognitive demand – an authentic question, which aims to reveal a student's ideas and opinions, and for which there is no set answer; such a question requires cognitive operations of a higher level than memorising (Gayle, Preiss, & Allen, 2006); (3) uptake – a situation in which the speaker builds on what has been said by the previous speaker; typically, a teacher creates a follow-up question based on a student's answer (Nystrand et al., 1997); (4) the occurrence of student questions (Nystrand et al., 2001); (5) open discussion – a sequence that includes at least three participants who respond to each other for more than 30 s (Nystrand, 1997).

There are also claims, however, that the presence of indicators as such does not guarantee that dialogic teaching is occurring (see, for example, Boyd & Markarian, 2011; 2015) but rather that indicators work as hints (Alexander, 2006) and it is the basic epistemology of classroom interactions that is decisive. This is why Alexander (Alexander, 2006) proposes a set of *principles* that teachers should follow in dialogic teaching. Classroom dialogue must be: (1)

collective – if possible, all students should participate in classroom communication; (2) reciprocal – teachers and students should listen to each other and share thoughts and ideas; (3) supportive – there should be freedom in the classroom to express one's own ideas without the fear of giving a wrong answer or being ridiculed; (4) cumulative – communication should be directed towards the gradual accumulation of knowledge through steps which follow each another; (5) purposeful – interaction should be subject to given educational goals.

Indicators and principles thus represent two different elements of dialogic teaching. There is also a third element – *methods*, or ways to achieve the desired learning outcomes. Many methods serve the purpose of introducing dialogic teaching. For example, collaborative reasoning (Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001; Reznitskaya et al., 2009), the Paideia Seminar (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002), and Philosophy for Children (Daniel et al., 2005; Hardman & Delafield, 2010) are some of the methods that have been suggested (see Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009 for a metaanalysis). A method is basically defined as a sequence of actions prescribed to a teacher and the students. For example, in the case of collaborative reasoning in literacy lessons, activities should be organised in the following way: first, a text is to be read and then the teacher sets a central question relating to the text. The question should present a dilemma that the students should consider and take a position on. The students then defend their position and try to find arguments against an opposing position (Chinn et al., 2001). A method is never a goal in itself but, rather, it is a means of achieving the indicators or principles of dialogic teaching. In the case of collaborative reasoning, such an indicator would be a growth in the students' ability to develop a rational argument (Reznitskaya et al., 2009), or, as in our above-mentioned indicator, an expression of students' thoughts with reasoning (Pimentel & McNeill, 2013).

2.2. Professional development programmes aiming at the implementation of dialogic teaching

Research studies carried out in various countries have repeatedly revealed that commonly used teaching practices are quite distant from an ideal of dialogic teaching (see, for example, Burns & Myhill, 2004; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010; Nystrand et al., 1997; Parker & Hurry, 2007; Sedova, Salamounova, & Svaricek, 2014). To address this gap, several intervention studies have been carried out by researchers who have sought to transform participants' teaching and to monitor any transformation (Chinn et al., 2001; Lefstein & Snell, 2014; Osborne, Simon, Christodoulou, Howell-Richardson, & Richardson, 2013; Pehmer, Gröschner, & Seidel, 2015; Pimentel & McNeill, 2013; Snell & Lefstein, 2011; Wells & Arauz, 2006). In all these research projects, participant teachers took part in a development programme, their teaching of lessons was recorded on video and researchers observed (most often by noting the presence of selected indicators) whether any elements of dialogic teaching underwent transformation. The effects achieved differed widely in content and scope. Some of these programmes can be regarded as highly successful, while others were rather ineffective, despite all programmes being well designed, having a good theoretical grounding and being carried out by experienced researchers. As stated in a previous study (Sedova et al., 2016), we believe that the nature of the educational support provided to the teachers may be the key factor which determines success or failure of the intervention.

There are programmes in which teachers received feedback on their teaching in class and that involved some kind of reflection on the videos. Research in Chinn et al. (2001) included one to-one reflective interviews, where each teacher worked in a pair with

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