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Process quality of classroom discourse: Pupil participation and learning opportunities



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze the process quality of classroom discourse. The data corpus comprises twenty video-recorded lessons performed by primary school teachers. Four groups of lessons were identified by means of a cluster analysis, namely recitation, open, reasoning and flexible lessons. Their quality was measured by means of two indicators, one concerning the degree and type of pupil participation and the other accounting for the emergent discourse dimensions. The results confirm that the recitation lessons are not effective, while the other clusters are differently associated with indicators of the discourse quality. The authors suggest that future reforms in the field of education should be informed by research into classroom discourse and interaction.

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1. Introduction

The scientific community has widely accepted that the benefits children accrue from their school experience largely depend on the education quality (Alexander, 2008; Motola, 2001). In this regard, three different research tools and interventions have been developed. First, educational quality is measured by estimating quantitative factors, such as class size, teaching experience, and instruction time. As Alexander (2006) notes this kind of school effectiveness research conveniently translates quality into quantity but is based on an input and outcome paradigm with little attention to the process. Thus this paradigm meets the concerns of politicians and managers but offers few applied implications for teachers and students.

Second, certain studies have developed intervention projects aimed at improving the effectiveness of teaching methods. The ORACLE project developed in the 1970s in the UK and replicated twenty years later (Galton, Hargreaves, Comber, Wall, & Pell, 1999) constitutes one of the most systematic studies of this type. However, beyond the attempt to introduce innovation into teaching practices, the study has had limited impact as teachers “have continued to engage in the same patterns of exchanges with their pupils as their predecessors did two decades ago” (Galton et al., 1999, p. 32).

Another view is based on a contextual or process-oriented definition of educational quality (O’Sullivan, 2006; Zhang, 2008). This approach is expensive, requiring researchers to observe how discourse flows throughout a lesson. Originally introduced in a seminal study of classroom discourse (Mehan, 1978), the approach is receiving fresh attention because its quality analysis focuses on talk and action to account for the complex and unpredictable dynamics of teaching and learning (Mercer, 2010; Rojas-Drummond & Mercer, 2003). In this view, the quality of educational and didactic activities is

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conceptualised as depending on how the classroom discourse progressively unfolds and becomes meaningful for all of the involved parties.

In this article we present a process-oriented study that identifies how improvements in quality can be implemented in the classrooms. In particular, our study explores the quality of discourse in teacher-led activities in various disciplines. Our research focuses on the *interactive dimension of discourse*, corresponding to a series of questions, replies and comments (Lin, 2007; Wells, 1999; Wilen, 2004). We are aware that this approach has limitations, as Mortimer and Scott (2003) have argued that classroom discourse also introduces a non-interactive component to teacher–student communication. However, unlike secondary education, in primary schools the opportunities to observe the non-interactive component of discourse are rare. In fact, given young children's limited argumentative and linguistic skills, primary teachers actively involve them in what is being explained or discussed. For the purposes of our paper, we considered classroom discourse and interaction as interwoven constructs.

1.1. *The discourse process*

The vast literature in the field (Burns & Myhill, 2004; Lin, 2007; Myhill, 2006; Skidmore, 2006) has demonstrated that the goal and interactive orientation are responsible for the way discourse flows during a lesson. The goal of a lesson corresponds to its didactic purpose, while the interactive orientation depends on how teachers and students work to develop ideas in the classroom (Scott, Mortimer, & Aguiar, 2006).

For many years, the scientific debate on classroom discourse has considered the goals and orientations of discourse as overlapping and converging in the basic distinction between monologism and dialogism (Cazden, 2001; Lyle, 2008; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Sue, 2012). In line with a view of learning-as-acquisition (Krummheuer, 2010), monologic discourse is basically assumed to be a recitation script, serving the objective of knowledge transmission, with teachers dominating the interactive scenario. A dialogic approach instead relies on the concept of learning-as-participation, with teachers soliciting an open exchange of ideas. Through this approach, teachers and students jointly construct knowledge and understanding by means of discussions and opinion sharing (Alexander, 2008).

The debate on monologism and dialogism has been lively and has contributed to an in-depth understanding of classroom discourse (Burns & Myhill, 2004; Lyle, 2008; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003). However, as several authors have argued (Alexander, 2000; Mercer, 1995; Rojas-Drummond, 2000), the dichotomy between these two approaches is false because the distinction “is based on an impoverished understanding of the nature of classroom education and the multifunctional nature of talk within it” (Rojas-Drummond & Mercer, 2003, p. 101).

Several studies based on observation of classroom talk show that even the most common form of discourse (the teacher questions, the pupil answers and the teacher replies) can serve varied and useful purposes. For example, Mercer and collaborators (Mercer, Wegerif, & Dawes, 1999; Rojas-Drummond, Mazón, Fernández, & Wegerif, 2006) have contributed to enriching the debate on classroom discourse by arguing that this method may be an effective tool for ‘thinking together’. Based on the concept of exploratory talk originally developed by Barnes and Todd (1977), these authors showed that exploration is visible when speakers engage critically but constructively with each other's opinions, challenge ideas and offer alternatives. This engaging dialogue differs from a cumulative approach, when one builds positively but uncritically on what the previous speaker had said.

The same authors state that various discourse orientations are complementary ways of learning, as children need a careful combination of teacher guidance and thinking together dialogically. To grasp the complex picture of classroom discourse, researchers should rely on methods that preserve the dynamic and sequential aspects in classroom talk. In this perspective, Molinari, Mameli, and Gnisci (2012) applied sequential statistical analysis to interactive sequences extracted from whole-class lessons. These authors confirmed that teachers actually have several repertoires of talking styles and that the same structure of discourse (question–answer–reply) may indeed serve various purposes. In addition to monologic and dialogic sequences, the authors also described co-constructive sequences, offering opportunities for reasoning, and scaffolding sequences based on facilitating questions.

On the whole, the literature shows that classroom discourse flows in many complementary ways (Alexander, 2008) depending on the pattern of student-teacher interaction and the purpose that is undertaken. Its quality indicators should thus represent the unfolding of talk and interaction.

1.2. *Indicators of discourse quality*

The success or quality of discourse depends on two major indicators. First, a good lesson should encourage children to participate by engaging them in exchanges about topics arising from the curriculum (Wells & Arauz, 2006). Second, the development of good practices in school depends on the classroom's capacity to grasp the multiple opportunities for knowledge, conceptualising and understanding (Candela, 2005; Kovalainen & Kumpulainen, 2007).

The impact of classroom discourse in fostering pupils' *participation* is widely recognised in the psychology of education (Krummheuer, 2010). As the tool through which most school transactions take place, language plays a significant role in offering different opportunities for students to interact and be active classroom learners (Wells, 1999). Alexander (2006), for example, argued that an approach based on the concept of ‘dialogic teaching’ achieves the best educational results in

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