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Teacher professional development as a means of transforming student classroom talk

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined the effects of a teacher development programme focused on the implementation of dialogic teaching.
- A change in classroom discourse parameters was identified. The amount of talk with reasoning increased.
- Student talk with reasoning is related to the occurrence of other indicators of dialogic teaching.

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with the impact of a teacher development programme focused on the implementation of dialogic teaching practice. Four indicators of dialogic teaching were measured: student talk with reasoning, teachers' open questions of high cognitive demand, teacher uptake, and open discussion. An analysis of video recordings made before and after the programme showed a change in classroom discourse and an increase in the amount of student talk with reasoning, attributed to changes in teacher communication behaviour. The participants were eight Czech teachers in lower secondary schools who took part in a one-year action research teacher development programme.

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1. Introduction

Classroom discourse — forms of talk in the classroom and their educational functions — is a key topic in the educational sciences. Researchers increasingly agree that learning is most effective when students are actively involved in a dialogic co-construction of meaning (Wells & Arauz, 2006). One approach to the dialogic co-construction of meaning, termed 'dialogic teaching' (Alexander, 2006; Lyle, 2008; Reznistkaya & Gregory, 2013), aims to use communication to promote higher cognitive functions in students. "Dialogic teaching harnesses the power of talk to engage children, stimulate and extend their thinking, and advance their learning and understanding" (Alexander, 2006, p. 37). Other important features of dialogic teaching are engaged students, student autonomy and the fact that students are allowed to influence the course of action in the classroom, at least to a certain extent. Power relations between teacher and students are flexible; there is room for negotiation as to what constitutes an adequate answer (Resnistkaya & Gregory, 2013).

Despite evidence (e.g., Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Gutierrez, 1994; Kutnick & Colwell, 2010; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Scott, Ametller, Mortimer, & Emberton, 2010) that dialogic teaching is possible and beneficial, research based on larger samples has consistently shown the prevalence of a transmissive mode of instruction in which teachers present to students certain facts and then check whether students have learned them (Wells & Arauz, 2006). Teachers ask students a large number of questions that are mostly closed-ended, i.e., certain answers are seen as correct and it is the students' task to produce these answers. These questions are typically characterised by a low level of cognitive demand, requiring students merely to show that they remember subject

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matter presented to them earlier. Student answers are short and simple and are usually lists of learned facts, corresponding to the requirements of the teacher's questions. The teacher's feedback is usually a brief response to the correctness or otherwise of the student's answer; the development of a student's answer or suggestions for further consideration are generally absent. Although there are studies evidencing the ability of students to autonomously influence, to a certain degree, the patterns of classroom discourse (see e.g., Rampton, 2006), it is important to bear in mind that classroom interaction is shaped by cultural norms “limiting the times at which students can talk, the topics they can legitimately address, and the ways in which they can express themselves” (Segal & Lefstein, 2015).

These features of communication in lessons, discussed in a number of international research studies (Alexander, 2001; Burns & Myhill, 2004; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997; Parker & Hurry, 2007; Sedova, Salamounova, & Svaricek, 2014) demonstrate that dialogic methods are rarely part of teachers' inventories of teaching methods. One possible explanation is that teachers do not get the kind of educational support that would allow them to implement dialogic teaching in their work. According to Corden (2009), teachers probably did not encounter this type of teaching when they were students themselves, nor were they systematically trained in this method in the course of their pre-service education. To address this gap, we designed and implemented a professional development programme – focused on the implementation of a dialogic approach into teaching practice – for lower secondary school teachers in the Czech Republic. The questions we posed were whether the project led to a change of classroom discourse parameters, and if so, what were the main variables contributing to this shift.

2. Theoretical background

The term *dialogic teaching* is most directly associated with Alexander (2006), who states that spoken language should play a central role in teaching, since it provides an opportunity to influence students' thought processes through their involvement in classroom discourse. Questions in dialogic teaching are structured in such a manner so as to provoke thoughtful answers and these answers are supposed to provoke further new questions. This serves to create a coherent line of enquiry (Alexander, 2006, p. 41). Among his inspirational sources, Alexander (2005, 2006) emphasizes in particular Vygotsky and Bakhtin.

Vygotsky (1978, 1981) believed that there is a strong connection between thinking and speaking; he pointed to the central role of language in the development of higher mental functions. At the same time, he claimed that each psychological function appears twice in the development of a child, first on the social level (i.e., in the interaction between the child and other people), and second on the individual level (the level of internalised psychological processes). It follows from this reasoning that a child can adopt and appropriate other people's voices, ideas and thought processes as a tool for its own thinking and learning. Classroom talk is in this conception considered the most essential cultural tool mediating learning (Lehesvuori, 2013). More recently Sfard (2007, 2008) uses the term *commognition* – coined as a blend of *communication* and *cognition* – in order to emphasise the indivisibility of these two phenomena. She recommends viewing learning not as acquisition of knowledge, but as participation in a certain discourse. Simply put, if a student if a student is engaging in a discourse and performing cognitive operations at a high level, then learning has taken place (Sfard, 2008).

Bakhtin (1981) concerned himself with micro processes of discourse and language. He used the term dialogism in the sense of switching between various mental perspectives and the interanimation of different voices. This means that each participant brings to communication something unique and original. The consequent mixing of various elements creates a dialogue in which individual voices react to one another, each utterance responding to the previous one and stimulating the following one. In the situation of a school class where classroom discourse is not controlled by the teacher but, rather, the teacher's and various students' perspectives and positions are presented, creating a polyphony of voices, then students' thinking, creativity and learning abilities develop because problems are better understood thanks to the realization of differences (see Mortimer & Scott, 2003).

Nystrand et al. (1997) distinguish dialogically versus monologically organised instruction, depending on whether the construction of meaning involves several voices (students and teacher), or one voice (the teacher as the only one to decide what is valid knowledge).

A more elaborated view is offered by Mortimer and Scott (2003), who, inspired by Bakhtin (1981), distinguish between authoritative and dialogic discourse. Authoritative discourse aims to deliver and achieve the reproduction of specific content that is considered to be true and accurate whereas the aim of dialogic discourse is to offer content for thought. Such content is open to questioning and alternative perspectives. An approach common in schools is when the teacher asks questions of the students to check their memorised knowledge and the students answer. This form of discourse cannot be considered dialogic (see also Scott, 2008; Scott et al. 2010).

In schools, the presence of both types of discourse is desirable, since authoritative discourse guarantees continuity and the reliable transmission of culturally valued content, while dialogic discourse encourages creativity and allows for innovation. Indeed, Nurkka, Viiri, Littleton, and Lehesvuori (2014) suggest that the teacher should alternate between authoritative and dialogic discourse, and thus create a rhythm in classroom discourse. However, the research cited above shows that while authoritative talk between teacher and students is abundant in schools, genuine dialogue is rare.

2.1. Indicators of dialogic teaching

Through engaging students in a rich and stimulating discourse, with different voices being heard, dialogic teaching develops mental activity, deepens thinking and enriches understanding. But how is such teaching to be recognised? Scholars involved in empirical exploration of the issue have drawn on different indicators to determine the presence of dialogic teaching. Nystrand et al. (1997) (see also Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2001; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003) employs the following criteria: (1) *authentic questions* – open-ended questions which aim to reveal a student's ideas and opinions and for which there is no set answer; (2) *uptake* – a situation in which the speaker builds on what has been said by the previous speaker, increasing the coherence of the dialogue; (3) *higher order teacher feedback* – comments on the correctness or incorrectness of a student's response, as well as more elaborate feedback on the content of the student's response; (4) *open discussion* – a sequence that includes at least three participants who respond to each other for more than 30 s.

Alongside these widely accepted indicators, other researchers also suggest: total student talk time during interactive sequences (Molinari & Mameli, 2013), triadic interaction – discursive sequences that involve at least three actors (Molinari & Mameli, 2013; 2015), the occurrence of student questions (Nystrand et al., 2001), the expression by students of thoughts with reasoning (Pimentel & McNeill, 2013), the presence of elaborated explanation in student talk (Sotter et al., 2008), the open-endedness and cognitive

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