



Exploring the dialogic space in teaching: A study of teacher talk in the pre-university classroom in Singapore



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers tend to ask more 'display' than 'exploratory' questions in class.
- They acknowledge what students say but seldom ask them to clarify or justify.
- This pattern of teacher talk discourages dialogue, discussion and debate.
- It stifles students' critical thinking and discourages knowledge co-construction.

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and framed within the paradigm of 'dialogic teaching', this article focuses on teacher talk and its potential for encouraging student discussion, dialogue and debate. Through a close analysis of lessons taught by 18 teachers in 7 schools, it examines the teachers' attempts to initiate and stimulate discussion among pre-university students in Singapore. The findings point to a pattern of teacher talk that stifles student participation and cognitive engagement, producing a predominantly monologic and transmissive classroom culture. The article closes with a discussion of the implications for teachers, teacher educators and educational policy makers.

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1. Introduction

The classroom is arguably the crucible where 21st century competencies, such as cross-cultural communication and collaboration skills and critical and creative thinking (Wan & Gut, 2011), are first forged and refined under the expert guidance of the teacher. However, there are few teacher training programs that target the teaching or development of 21st century skills and virtually no clear policy for either the formative or summative assessment of these skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Furthermore, due to the strong presence of the teacher in the classroom, students are more often than not relegated to a passive, peripheral role of listening and uncritically accepting and assimilating, rather than actively and critically engaging with, ideas and information (McInerney & Liem, 2007). Classroom researchers have also found

teacher talk to lack pedagogic purpose, being used largely to assert control rather than to facilitate students' learning and thinking (Bolhuis & Voeten, 2001; Liu & Hong, 2009; Sol & Stokking, 2009; Vaish, 2008; van den Bergh, Ros, & Beijjaard, 2013). This is probably because, traditionally, teachers' classroom management strategies have arisen from a reaction to students' misbehavior rather than being motivated by a proactive desire to engage students (McCaslin & Good, 1992). The role of the teacher in stimulating dialogue, discussion and debate among students, especially through the structuring and directing of classroom talk to encourage student participation and engagement, is therefore of paramount importance (Alexander, 2008; Howe & Abedin, 2013; Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

It has been said that 'language is the medium by which much teaching takes place, and in which students demonstrate to teachers much of what they have learned' (Cazden, 2001, p. 2). This echoes what Vygotsky has argued about language not being just a medium for articulating ideas but an essential mechanism for

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forging new ways of thinking and knowing (Vygotsky, 1968). The language used in the classroom can therefore be seen not only as the medium through which teaching takes place but also where evidence of learning is located. This study casts the spotlight on the language of teacher talk, examining how teacher questions are framed and feedback formulated, and how linguistic inflections in both embed specific intentions and nuances of meaning that have a manifest impact on encouraging (or stifling) student talk and thinking. In so doing, the study seeks to shed light on the dialogic space created by teachers in the classroom to foster the development of critical thinking as a 21st century competency.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher talk

Teacher talk can be construed simply as the language employed by teachers to give directions, explain activities, and check students' understanding (Sinclair & Brazil, 1985), including providing feedback on student learning (Wallace, Sung, & Williams, 2014). While the literature on classroom talk and how it can promote productive interactions in the classroom is extensive (Alexander, 2008; Chin, 2006; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Nystrand, 1997; Walsh, 2011; Wells, 1999; *inter alia*), there has been little focus on the specific discursive structures or linguistic features of teacher talk that impact student talk.

In a comprehensive review, Mercer and Dawes (2014) surveyed seminal work by scholars who have contributed to our current understanding of the forms and functions of classroom talk. Notable among this interdisciplinary body of research is work by linguists Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) who identified the minimal structure of talk between teacher and students as Initiation-Response-Follow-up (IRF). This refers to the teacher's attempt to initiate student talk by, usually but not necessarily, asking a question. This provokes some form of response from students (which can include silence), which the teacher then follows up on. This well-known acronym has sometimes been referred to as IRE (Mehan, 1979), where 'E' stands for Evaluation, or where the 'F' is changed to Feedback. Both 'evaluation' and 'feedback', however, suggest a degree of authority and power being enacted by the teacher in providing evaluative commentary on students' responses. Moreover, both terms suggest a more restrictive scope compared to the original term 'follow-up', which encompasses ways of responding that include, but are not limited to, giving feedback and evaluating. For instance, teachers can get students to elaborate on or clarify, give reasons to justify their position, or even seek other students' opinions on the matter. However, empirical evidence from classrooms suggest that the IRF/IRE structure in classroom talk tends to follow a rigid and restrictive pattern of interaction between teacher and students, stifling and stultifying student talk and thought (Cazden, 2001; Hardman, Smith, & Wall, 2003; Hiebert *et al.*, 2003). Studies have also shown that teachers tend to cling tenaciously to their teaching script, which predisposes them to ask students for predetermined answers and evaluating their responses on the extent to which they conformed to their preferred answers, refusing to open up opportunities for students to engage in more open-ended and meaningful talk (Wells & Arauz, 2006). Much work has also been done on the role of teacher feedback in promoting student learning (Harks, Rakoczy, Hattie, Besser, & Klieme, 2014; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; van den Bergh, Ros, & Beijaard, 2014). For instance, Hattie and Timperley (2007) proposed a conceptual model of feedback aimed at moving students closer towards their learning goals. Interestingly, they conceptualized the provider of feedback as 'an agent' (p. 81), who can be a peer, parent, book or even self (via self-reflection) and not

necessarily the teacher.

This extensive body of work on classroom talk, focusing on various aspects of teacher-student interactions to advance student learning, has raised our awareness of the importance of teacher talk in student learning and offered ways of examining and enhancing its productive value in the classroom. As Mercer and Dawes (2014) observed at the end of their review, educational researchers now know considerably more about the forms and functions of classroom talk, with results strongly suggesting that 'when teachers make regular use of certain dialogue strategies, students' participation in class and their educational outcomes are likely to benefit' (p. 439). However, the precise nature and impact of these discursive strategies remain under-investigated through empirical work. This present study targets the Initiation and Follow-up moves made by teachers to examine the specific ways in which teachers initiate and respond to student talk and, in particular, how linguistic inflections in both moves embed specific intentions and nuances of meaning that have a manifest impact on encouraging (or stifling) student talk and thinking.

2.2. Dialogic teaching

As a study concerned with the way in which teachers create a dialogic space for students to actively participate in and critically engage with discussion and thereby take ownership of their learning, this study is aligned with and situated within the pedagogic paradigm known as 'dialogic teaching' (Alexander, 2008; Burbules, 1993; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). This is an approach that draws on dialogue, with its emphasis on bi-directionality, interactivity and, most crucially, egalitarianism, as a tool for learning. 'Dialogic teaching' does not simply refer to engaging students in dialogue, but opening the space for students to question ideas and opinions from their peers, teachers or textbooks, so that there is a greater negotiation and construction of knowledge, rather than knowledge being transmitted unilaterally from teacher (or textbook) to student (Alexander, 2008).

The theoretical foundation of 'dialogic teaching' as a pedagogic paradigm arises from the work of Bakhtin (1981) and his notion of dialogism. By demonstrating how the voices of other people get interwoven into what we say, write and think, he theorizes that thinking and knowing occur in and through dialogic speech which acts as an interface between a speaker and a real or imagined audience, without which one's utterances would not make sense. In so doing, Bakhtin has provided an epistemological stance and perspective that highlights meaning (and learning) as necessarily arising from the interactive act of drawing from and rearticulating the thoughts and languages of others. It effectively decenters learning from the cognitive processing that takes place in an individual learner to the social interaction in which learners participate (Koschmann, 1999). According to Haworth (2010), what makes an utterance dialogic and hence meaningful is the capacity to respond to 'otherness' and to signal reciprocity in relation to, but not necessarily in agreement with, a speaker or text (p. 99–100). Hence, the contrast between monologic and dialogic utterances within a classroom setting is that the former involve students' accedence to and acceptance of the fixity of meanings expressed through 'authoritative' texts and talk, while the latter involve students' resistance, reshaping and re-accentuations of these meanings by populating them with their own intentions, accents, and appropriating them by adapting them to their own semantic and expressive intentions (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293–4). Put simply, the educative power of dialogic teaching lies in teaching students not what to think but *how* to think (Reznitskaya *et al.*, 2009, p. 35, my emphasis).

The pedagogic potential of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism has

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