Dialogic Teaching to Improve Students' Learning: A Discussion with Reference to
Teacher Education in KSA

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Abstract

Adopting a qualitative design, the present study aimed to highlight Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in relation to the objectives of teacher education in KSA. To bring this theory to teacher education, the study considered the ways in which students, texts and the instructor interact – enter into dialogue – in order to generate meaning and understanding. The aim of the dialogue was to explore new interpretations of the texts. At the end of the experiment, a questionnaire was administered to 20 students – enrolled at the English department, Humanities and Administration College, Qassim Private Colleges, KSA. Students stated that dialogic learning was very problematic at the very beginning; nevertheless, they eventually realized it vital for their professional development as well as their development as learners.

Keywords: Dialogic teaching, teacher education, KSA, questionnaire

Dialogic Teaching to Improve Students' Learning: A Discussion with

Reference to Teacher Education in KSA

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of *dialogism* offers a significant challenge to contemporary educational practice; especially to an authoritative one like that in KSA. Being affected by a religious stance, the Saudi educational system unintentionally (the opposite is mentioned in its policy) forced its students to learning by rote. Conversely, understanding of Islam necessitates collaboration in dialogues. Meanwhile, dialogism has the potential to open up new pathways to exploring new meaning of texts.

The common trend in the Saudi educational system is that knowledge exists out there, independent of the students, or can be mounted up in their minds. Therefore, it is not surprising to see some educational practices in terms of knowledge transmission, retention, recall and transfer. Currently, minds are containers and that language itself is a container, into which speakers insert meanings that they transmit to listeners who subsequently unpackage the containers, extract the meanings and insert them into their own minds. The role of students under such circumstances is limited to remembering what others, particularly teachers and textbooks, have said, not figuring things out and not producing any new knowledge. In classrooms where interaction is teacher-dominated, and lecture and recitation scripts are used as the principal tools of teaching, a fixed, static understanding of knowledge and transmission model of learning are assumed.

On the other hand, dialogism is concerned with the effect of decentering learning, locating it in social interaction rather than in the head of any one learner. It treats the content of learning, not as given, but rather as emergent, nondeterministic, and contingent since learning can be seen as a transaction taking place between the learner and the environing situation (Koschmann, 1999). For him, *dialogism* is a term meant to capture the relational nature of all texts. It shares two roots: the Greek *dia* for through and *logos* for word and concerns the way in which dialogue occurs within and across particular utterances.

For Bakhtin, dialogism is not a reference to actual dialogues between people as an empirical fact and site of investigation, but it is rather a reference to his understanding of texts.   An utterance – the unit of analysis of all texts, even books – is a part of a dialogue. Far from being "monolithic", the single voice of a single author contains traces of many voices often engaging in dialogues within the text itself. Therefore, all utterances are, at one level, dialogical because every utterance has (a) *responsivity*, that is, an utterance is a response to a situation or to somebody else's utterance and (b) *addressivity*, in other words, an utterance is addressed to somebody who has to do something with it. In other words, spoken and written language acquires meaning only through social usage. Meaning in a text does not stand on its own out of context and is not unaffected by the people who use it, rather it is socially constructed (Wegerif, 2007; Yüksel, 2009).

Review of Literature

Dialogism suggested that an individual's speech is shaped in continuous interaction with others' utterances through the experience of assimilating others' words. He argued that "all our utterances are filled with others' words, varying degrees of 'our-own-ness'…which we assimilate, rework, and reaccentuate" (1986, p. 89). He advocated that there is no singular teacher, parent or student voice but instead

voices-within-voices, each orienting and reorienting through genres for recognition and understanding.

Bakhtin differentiated between "authoritative discourse" and "internally persuasive discourse" (1981, p. 342). The former "enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it" (p. 343). The latter is "half ours and half-someone else's" (1981, p. 345). He argued that there were two ways of assimilating discourse: "reciting by heart" which is an inflexible kind of assimilation fused with authority that is transmitted and "retelling in one's own words" (1981, p. 341) which is flexible, responsive, and transformative. Internally persuasive discourse results from the struggle of the two forms of assimilation and is an ongoing creative process that can be applied to new situations.

Authoritative discourse – official discourse – is periodically summoned by the teacher and her colleagues as a means of justifying and maintaining their identity as professionals, and further imposed by management, who in turn is compelled to fulfill its obligations with the Ministry of Education, as a means of meeting accountabilities. Abd Elkader (2014) calls this *pedagogical violence* when teachers penalize the students for not complying with their preset goals.

According to White (2009), dialogic pedagogy compels the teacher to engage in dialogues characterized by paying attention to the internally persuasive discourses that exist in the classroom with authorial ones. This includes posing and responding to students' questions as points of view, promoting debate, engaging in learning with a sense of fun, and keen attunement to students' suggestions of their preferences and learning styles.

In contrast to Vygotsky's constructivism, dialogic learning is a process not of knowledge construction, but of knowledge exploration – where what is known at any one time is not static or final but is dependent upon continued dialogue. In specific, Bakhtin does not pay specific attention to tools or artifacts as mediating concepts, to participants as objects, or to activity per se, but instead focuses upon language-in-action as a living source of insight and renewal. Bakhtin's view of language extends beyond the written or spoken word alone to embrace the way reality is perceived in "the form of still latent, unmuttered future work" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 90) which includes a consideration of tone, sound and body language as it is interpreted in dialogue.

In sum, dialogism proposes a shift of focus for educators from instilling the correct knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions into students; to organizing and supporting internally persuasive discourse on the subject matter, promoting the emergence and development of the students' voices. Knowledge is born collectively when students co-build it in their process of social interaction; as it is "constructed and reconstructed between participants in specific situated activities, using the cultural artifacts at their disposal, as they work towards the collaborative achievement of a goal" (Wells, 1999 as quoted by Yüksel, 2009, p. 3).

Dialogism and Teacher Education in Saudi Arabia

Like other elements of the educational system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, teacher education is designed and evaluated in relation to the overall national development plan, and is considered essential for fulfilling the potential of the Kingdom's greatest resource, its people. Over the last five decades, the standards for teacher education have been rising steadily, paralleling the general development of the

educational system in the Kingdom (Educational system in Saudi Arabia, 2006; Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010).

The researcher has started her experience of teaching prospective Saudi teachers in 2010, Majmaa University and Qassim Private Colleges. She could recognize her students' ability of rote learning of long, difficult English texts. Being trained throughout their different stages of education to learn by rote large parts of Holy Quran, its interpretation and understanding (Tafsir), students could tackle all texts in the same manner. They did not try to express what they understood or even to write in their own words in final exams; they wrote what is mentioned in textbooks, word for word.

In simple terms, the Saudi educational system provides quality instruction in diverse fields of modern and traditional arts and sciences with the study of Islam at its core. For Sedgwick (2001) and Lindsey (2010), modern Saudi Arabia needs educated young Saudis with marketable skills and a capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, that is not generally what the educational system delivers, steeped as it is in rote learning: The study of Islamic religion has affected the Saudi educational system on all educational levels, and in particular, the curriculum.

Nevertheless, Islamic principles do not contradict developing students' mental skills in their different forms. For Alabdulkareem (no date), the most distinct objectives of Islam help in attaining the purposes of the Saudi educational policy as follows:

1. Demonstrating the full harmony between science and religion, as Islam is a combination of religion and secularism, and Islamic thought meets all the human needs in their highest forms and in all ages,

2. Encouraging and promoting the spirit of scientific thinking and research, strengthening the faculties of observation and meditation,

3. Understanding the environment in all forms, broadening the horizons of students by introducing them to the different parts of the world, and

4. Furnishing the students with at least one of the living languages, in addition to their original language, to enable them to acquire knowledge, arts and useful inventions, to transmit their knowledge and sciences to other communities, and participate in the spreading of Islam and serving humanity.

Among the goals set by the Saudi Ministry of Education Ten–Year Plan, 1425–1435 is "development of syllabi based on Islamic values leading to the development of male and female students' personality and to their integration in society as well as to the achievement of scientific and thinking skills and life characteristics resulting in self-education and lifelong learning" (Wikipedia, 2016). For achieving this, the universities in the country accept their full role in preparing and training teachers upgrading the educational and professional standards (World Data on Education, 2011). Dialogism is among modern theories that can play a great role in teacher education.

Statement of the Problem

Previous studies (e.g., McCarthey's, 2004; White, 2009) used dialogic teaching as a *collective*, *reciprocal*, *supportive*, *cumulative* and *purposeful* theoretical approach which involves students in *meaningful* learning of texts. Taking this view as a starting point, the present research sought to see how the concept of dialogic teaching could be applied to the actual talk and interaction in a Saudi classroom for teacher education at

Humanities and Administration College, Qassim Private College, Buraidah, KSA. It addressed the following specific questions:

1. How can dialogic teaching contribute to improve students' learning of texts?

2. What is the students' reaction to dialogic teaching before and after the experiment?

Method

Design

At Qassim Private Colleges, Humanities and Administration College, Buraidah, KSA, the present study was conducted during the second semester of the academic year 2015/2016. It adopted a qualitative design seeking to gather an in-depth understanding of classroom talk adopting dialogic teaching and students' reaction towards it.

Subjects

23 female students, enrolled in an EFL-credit programme, have a four-hour lecture a week throughout the term to write their senior projects for the fulfillment of the requirements of their graduation as teachers of English. The instructor – the researcher – teaches them this course in writing. At their final level at college, students are asked to write a research paper in English for the first time in their academic life.

Setting

At the very beginning of the second term of the academic year 2015/2016, 23 students were asked to be divided into collaborative groups randomly. Each group had been assigned a task reading and interpreting a certain text. They formed five groups consisting of 5, 5, 4, 4, 5 students.

Instruments

A *Student Questionnaire* (Appendix A) was introduced to some jurors to check its validity. It consists of 20 statements for gathering information about students' reaction to the whole process of participating in dialogic learning. Because it was difficult to administer the questionnaire twice or use another rater, its intrareliability was measured using the coefficient of Cronbach Alpha for internal consistency. It was 0.663 indicating an average level of internal consistency with this specific sample. Deleting the statements # 9 & 17, internal consistency raised to 0.720 to be satisfying. However, the questionnaire reliability remains limited due to the small number of the study sample.

Results and Discussion

The results of investigating the problem of the present study can be shown in the following way:

The first question:

How can dialogic teaching contribute to improve students' learning of texts?

For determining some strategies of dialogic teaching, the researcher referred to Tuckley and Thompson (no date), Mercer (2007), Fisher (2011), Haqyar (2013). Using dialogic teaching, the instructor:

   a. monitored and referred to students' understandings,
   b. asked for reasons and justifications for students' points of views,
   c. encouraged students to comment on each other's point of view,
   d. asked students to take turns in whole class and small group interactions,
   e. helped students to make their own ideas, understandings and questions explicit,
   f. brought together different points of view,
   g. managed construction of knowledge temporally, and
   h. handed over the responsibility to her students.

On 3rd February 2016, the subjects of the study were given a guided training session to learn how to engage in dialogues. Divided into 5 collaborative groups, 23 students were given different texts from different course books they studied in the previous term. Through subsequent weeks, they were asked to read and discuss these texts to give their interpretations of them; meanwhile they were asked to apply 3 notetaking techniques: summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting to the texts.

As dialogic teaching progressed, students became active participants. They were asked to articulate their own points of view and refer and respond to the points of view of others. The instructor attended to whole class interactions; especially to students who did not prefer to join in dialogues because they preferred to work in isolation rather than join a community of classmates, being shy or not wishing to talk within the classroom context. Therefore, the instructor had to encourage those students to write questions, comments for the discussion. Besides, she had to look at what they wrote in reflection about the material.

To sum up, dialogic teaching entailed that both the instructor and students showed a commitment to listening and responding to one another's viewpoint rather than talking over it. In this sense, dialogic teaching allowed students to see and believe that their voices were valued and heard. It also meant emphasizing the linguistic diversity in the dialogic classroom as a necessity for the students to use language to develop and share their own thoughts. Besides, the instructor needed to develop the attitude of regarding students' native language as a resource for learning rather than as a deficit for their English language skills.

The second question:

What is the students' reaction to dialogic teaching before and after the experiment?

On 9th March, 20 students were present to respond to the questionnaire, see Appendix A. It consists of 20 statements for gathering their overall reaction and commitment to the whole process being engaged in dialogic learning. Each statement requires the students to respond choosing: *strongly agree*, *agree*, *neutral*, *disagree*, or *strongly disagree*. For the questionnaire administration results, refer to Appendix B. Students concluded that dialogic learning was very problematic at the very beginning; nevertheless, they eventually realized it vital for their professional development as well as their development as learners.

The last statement is dialogic asking students to describe what is different regarding their dialogic learning. For this, they concluded that it is:

- better than copying off the board,
- different talking to each other,
- sociable and open,
- talking more and expressing thoughts,
- useful to find out how other classmates read texts,
- helpful in finding out different ways to do things,
- hard but suitable in groups, and
- better because they can speak English.

Focusing on students' voices (and the voices within their voices), on the other hand, this study offered a new and powerful framework for analyzing learning, one that allowed for an appreciation of changes taking place both within the students and the social environment. Knowledge emerges from the interaction of voices as it should be viewed other than something lying in the text. It is in what writers and readers create as they exploit texts as external tools to mediate their own mental activity of representing and knowing. In such an orientation, the instructor's authoritative discourse was distinct in the form of utterances which ask the students to recite from the text to explain their own point of view or to agree to the position expressed by the others. By contrast internally persuasive discourse invited students to retell the text in their own words and voice their own evaluative judgments. Read the following dialogue among the instructor and some students regarding their different points of view:

Instructor: Nouf paraphrased the text in that way... What do you think about it?

Fawzeia: I think it is too long. It is better to be summarized like this …

Nouf: Yes, … But, I think that the style of the text is good and it will lose something if it is shortened.

Mezoun: I see that we can use a merge between both as I did …

Instructor: Do you agree with Mezoun? …

The dialogic function of a text facilitated the emergence of new meanings and opened the floor to new ideas. It invited the students to react to the text from a different perspective by adding their own meanings, interpretations, and ideas. There was more give and take between the instructor and her students, particularly concerning the substance of discussion. *Reciprocity* of dialogic teaching helped the instructor build her teaching onto the student's contributions. In this, students not only answered questions; they also made points and contributed to discussions. Above all, they profited from their own talking and what others contributed.

This result is in accordance with Yüksel's comparison (2009) between dialogic teaching and recitation. For him, the former involves more conversational turns as the instructor and her students alike contribute their ideas to a discussion in which their understating evolve. As a result, dialogic teaching is more coherent, sustained, and thematic than recitation since the instructor's role is to moderate, direct discussion, probe, foresee, and analyze the implications of students' responses. Her questions have not pre-specified an answer and include requests for information as well as open-ended questions with indeterminate answers.

In dialogism, meaning is the effect of interaction between a speaker and a listener produced via the material. Teachers need to actively engage with both the authoritative and internally persuasive discourses as necessary components of

pedagogy which is essentially and always dialogic. White (2009) confirms that "teaching and learning is less a learnt 'skill' to be acquired than it is a process of engagement in dialogue which enables an appreciation of difference and behooves teachers to interact centrifugally as well as centripetally" p.15.

To bring dialogism to teacher education programmes is to reconsider the ways in which prospective teachers, texts and instructors interact – engage in dialogue – in order to generate meaning and understanding. The instructor acts as a commentator or decoder who challenges and opens up alternative readings of experience. The aim of the dialogue is not to find the "truth" but to explore new possibilities; no wrong answers. Students are given the chance to explore, through discussion, the complexities, problems of some, if not all, of their curriculum (Stentson, 2010). In the present study, the instructor created a space and set the topic for dialogue, her role was to place herself within the dialogue as just another voice – a voice which at times might seek to gain control or authority or guide students towards understanding – but one which, theoretically, *could not* control, in any Bakhtinian sense, what others said.

In their reaction to their experiment, some students mentioned that the notion of dialogue appeared – at the beginning – potentially problematic and an idealised view of education which would consequently waste the class time. For them, the optimal goal was to achieve registration and to pass final exams. They expressed their interest in that approach, where discussion confirmed them as cocreators of knowledge. Overall, they found the course useful for getting started with academic research, citing the combination of discussion and feedback as being most effective.

Conclusion

Supporting the view that dialogic teaching has the potential to promote meaningful understanding of texts, this study suggested it can be used for improving prospective teachers' learning. As mentioned in the Wikipedia (2016), the Saudi educational system has been criticized for "poorly trained teachers, low retention rates, lack of rigorous standards, weak scientific and technical instruction, despite generous budgets, that have compelled the kingdom to depend on large numbers of expatriates workers to fill technical and administrative positions." The study subjects participated in dialogues which appeared to shift their understandings and give them new insights.

This study gives the rationale for using dialogue in teaching but also maintains that dialogue could be a problem because both teachers and students have not learned to dialogue throughout their schooling experience. Besides, it offers a contribution to the literature of discussion-based instruction in conventional classroom by showing how teachers can be prepared, trained, and guided through the process of implementing dialogues.

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Appendix A

Student Questionnaire

No.	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	I thought that dialogic learning is problematic.					
2.	I thought dialogic learning would waste class time.					
3.	I feel confident talking in pairs rather than in front of the class.					
4.	I feel confident when I can find things out for myself.					
5.	I enjoy answering difficult questions.					
6.	I enjoy the new challenges I am being given.					
7.	I am happy to listen to others.					
8.	I ask my friend when I need help in class or with homework.					
9.	I ask my instructor when I need help in class or with homework.					
10.	Dialogue challenges each other to clarify, or re-state opinions.					
11.	I can improve my learning being able to talk about what I have learnt.					
12.	I feel that this approach leads to a different level of understanding.					
13.	I have to work in a different way to engage in dialogue.					
14.	I encourage each other to participate and share ideas.					
15.	I build on my own and each other's viewpoint.					
16.	I strive to reach common understanding and agreed conclusions.					
17.	I respect minority viewpoints.					
18.	I think dialogic learning is vital for my development as a learner.					
19.	I think dialogic learning is vital for my professional development.					
20.	Describe what is different regarding this new way of work: ……………………………………………					

Appendix B

Questionnaire Administration Results

Statement No.	Frequencies	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	Std Deviation	Result
1.	Frequency	3	7	3	4	3	3.15	1.34	**Agree**
	Percentage	15	35	15	20	15			
2.	Frequency	-	6	1	4	9	2.20	1.32	**Strongly disagree**
	Percentage	-	30	5	20	45			
3.	Frequency	8	7	2	2	1	3.95	1.19	**Strongly agree**
	Percentage	40	35	10	10	5			
4.	Frequency	15	2	3	-	-	4.60	0.75	**Strongly agree**
	Percentage	75	10	15	-	-			
5.	Frequency	7	6	6	1	-	3.95	0.94	**Strongly agree**
	Percentage	35	30	30	5	-			
6.	Frequency	2	6	8	4	-	3.30	0.92	**Agree**
	Percentage	10	30	40	20	-			
7.	Frequency	12	8	-	-	-	4.60	0.50	**Strongly agree**
	Percentage	60	40	-	-	-			
8.	Frequency	7	12	-	1	-	4.25	0.71	**Agree**
	Percentage	35	60	-	5	-			
9.	Frequency	6	10	4	-	-	4.10	0.72	**Agree**
	Percentage	30	50	20	-	-			
10.	Frequency	5	8	6	1	-	3.85	0.87	**Agree**
	Percentage	25	40	30	5	-			
11.	Frequency	14	6	-	-	-	4.70	0.47	**Strongly agree**
	Percentage	70	30	-	-	-			
12.	Frequency	7	12	1	-	-	4.30	0.57	**Agree**
	Percentage	35	60	5	-	-			
13.	Frequency	3	9	7	1	-	3.70	0.80	**Agree**
	Percentage	15	45	35	5	-			
14.	Frequency	11	6	1	-	2	4.20	1.24	**Strongly agree**
	Percentage	55	30	5	-	10			
15.	Frequency	13	4	2	1	-	4.45	0.88	**Strongly agree**
	Percentage	65	20	10	5				
16.	Frequency	9	6	2	2	1	4.00	1.21	**Strongly agree**
	Percentage	45	30	10	10	5			
17.	Frequency	9	9	2	-	-	4.35	0.65	**Agree**
	Percentage	45	45	10	-	-			
18.	Frequency	5	15	-	-	-	4.25	0.44	**Agree**
	Percentage	25	75	-	-	-			
19.	Frequency	4	14	2	-	-	4.10	0.55	**Agree**
	Percentage	20	70	10	-	-			

حوارية التدريس لتحسين تعلم الطلاب: مناقشة مع الإشارة إلى نظام إعداد المعلمين في المملكة العربية السعودية

تهدف هذه الدراسة ـ في إطار نظرية الحوارية Dialogism لمايكل باختين Mikhail Bakhtin ـ إلى تسليط الضوء على أهداف إعداد المعلمين في المملكة العربية السعودية ، و محاولة تطبيق هذه النظرية في التعليم الجامعى هو لإعادة النظر في الطرق التي يتفاعل بها المعلم و الطلاب مع النصوص ـ من خلال الدخول في حوار ـ من أجل توليد المعنى والفهم ، و قد تم تطبيق هذه الدراسة في الفصل الدراسي الثاني للعام الأكاديمي 2015/ 2016على 23 طالبة يدرسنَّ بالمستوي الأخير في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية العلوم الإنسانية و الإدارية بكليات القصيم الأهلية ـ المملكة العربية السعودية ، هذه الطالبات يحضرنَّ للقسم يومين في الأسبوع لمتابعة محاضرات بحث التخرج و باقي الأسبوع يذهبن للتربية العملية بالمدارس ، وبناءً على نتائج استبيان تم تطبيقه على 20 طالبة منهنَّ فقط ، فقد أجمعت هذه الطالبات أنهنَّ وجدنَّ إشكالية في البداية في تعلم الحوار داخل الفصل من ناحية و تعلمه من أجل استقراء معان جديدة من النص من ناحية أخري ؛ ومع ذلك فقد أدركنَّ في النهاية أن للحوار دور حيوي في تحسين تعلمهن كمتعلمات ، و كذلك سيكون له أكبر الأثر كمعلمات في المستقبل.