Encouraging Critical Thinking Through a Dialogic Teaching Approach in the Beginner-level English Classroom

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Abstract

In Australia, the development of creative and critical thinking is considered a priority in the national school curriculum. However, accessing opportunities to develop these skills can be challenging for young adult, refugee-background students with limited or interrupted prior formal education. Low literacy, English language proficiency and age can preclude some of these learners from entering and completing high school in Australia. Instead, they are eligible to access initial English language tuition through a government-supported adult migrant English program (AMEP). In this teaching context, students develop functional English language skills, using curriculum materials that focus on foundational skills and vocational competence. While developing critical thinking skills is still important for successful participation in future Australian tertiary and work settings, it can be a challenge for teachers in beginner-level AMEP classes to employ teaching strategies that foster such skills. Activities which rely on extended interactions in English can be difficult to implement, as students' vocabulary and oral skills are limited. However, while working with a class of beginner-level young adults in an AMEP, I began to explore how my teaching practice could more effectively promote a dialogic approach, in order to engage students' critical thinking skills. In this paper, I analyse entries kept in my reflective teaching journal from a 6-month period, in which I recorded changes to my teaching practice to foreground a more dialogic teaching approach with my class. I note the subsequent changes in student engagement, confidence and oral language, and discuss how a more dialogic approach to teaching has the potential to enhance development of critical thinking skills in beginner-level English language classes.

Introduction

In beginner-level, English as an additional language (EAL) classrooms, spoken interactions between teachers and students can facilitate or hinder the new language learning process taking place (Gibbons, 2006). However, it has been suggested that English language teaching curricula in many beginner-level programs foreground "vocationally oriented literacy and numeracy training" (Ollerhead, 2012, p. 69). Other literature has noted that teachers of beginner-level adult English language learners tend to engage in mostly teacher-directed approaches to teach these foundational English skills (Windle & Miller, 2012). The development of core skills is necessary for learners who wish to access the "linguistic capital" (Liscio & Farrelly, 2019, p. 145) that proficiency in English offers them, and to assist them to negotiate their way into new cultural, employment and educational settings. However, as students at beginner-levels are developing core EAL skills, it is also important to consider how pedagogical approaches can more effectively extend their oral communication skills and confidence (Adoniou & Macken-Horarik, 2007; Creagh, 2019). One approach which has been found to successfully utilise the "power of talk" (Alexander, 2008, p. 185) to develop oral skills and confidence is a dialogic teaching approach (Alexander, 2001, 2008, 2020b). However, when working with beginner-level English language learners whose vocabulary and oral communication skills in English are at the very beginning stages of development, it can be challenging for teachers to find effective ways to engage students in extended dialogue.

In this paper, I discuss how this challenge prompted me to reflect on ways of implementing a more dialogic approach to teaching, as I worked with a class of young adult, refugee-background, beginner-level English language learners in an Australian adult migrant English program (AMEP). I outline Alexander's (2020b) framework for dialogic teaching, and my motivation for exploring this approach as a practitioner in an AMEP classroom. Following this, I describe classroom examples that reflected positive changes to students' engagement in classroom talk, critical thinking and confidence in class. In light of these experiences, I suggest that a more dialogic teaching approach in beginner-level adult EAL contexts may be able to foster students' "engagement, confidence, independence and responsibility" (Alexander, 2008, p. 35) as speakers of English.

Background to Dialogic Teaching

Dialogue to facilitate creative, critical thinking

A dialogic approach to teaching foregrounds the expression of critical and creative thoughts through spoken dialogue (Skidmore & Murakami, 2016). For second language learners, this involves talking "about...and at the same time in and with [the new language]" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 358). As an approach, dialogic teaching focuses on teachers' talk, students' talk and the types of talk and interactions that take place between speakers to promote learning. In this paper, I will refer to research and principles of dialogic teaching developed by Alexander (2001, 2008), as a framework in which to situate my classroom reflections on practice.

Following extensive studies into spoken interactions that took place in classrooms across the UK, France, India, Russia and the USA, Alexander (2001) noted that classroom talk in all these contexts was heavily dominated by teachers' rather than students' voices. Within teacher-dominated talk, Alexander (2008) identified that the two main "pedagogical habits" (p. 93) teachers relied on were *recitation* and *pseudo enquiry. Recitation* involved closed, display questions, to which the teacher already knew the answer, short recall answers by students, little feedback and teacher-student interactions in which "remembering and guessing supplant[ed] thinking" (Nystrand et al., 1997, p. 6). Alternatively, in an effort *not* to resort to closed questioning, teachers asked *pseudo questions* which, although appearing open, were broad and unchallenging. When students answered questions, teachers followed up with habitual praise rather than meaningful feedback, failing to engage students in further thinking or enquiry (Alexander, 2008).

As a result of these findings, further research was conducted to explore how spoken language in classrooms could be taken "more seriously" (Alexander, 2020b, p. 1) by teachers, and thus effect positive changes in teaching

practices. This has resulted in Alexander's (2020a) dialogic teaching framework (pp. 199-203), which identifies six principles of classroom talk. Table 1 gives a brief description of the principles of *collective, reciprocal, supportive, deliberative, cumulative* and *purposeful* talk. Additionally, within a dialogic teaching approach, teachers can identify and develop *repertoires* of teaching (see Table 2) to frame and guide their planning and teaching. These refer to the classroom culture, organisational contexts (e.g., individual, group or pairwork), and patterns of talk which take place in classrooms. Table 2 shows the eight teaching *repertoires* included in Alexander's (2020a)) framework (pp. 199-203). The descriptions in the following tables give a brief overview of a dialogic teaching framework, and I recommend teachers read Alexander's (2020a) recent publication if they wish to explore this framework in more detail.

Principles of classroom talk					
Collective	*Supportive*	*Reciprocal*	*Deliberative*	*Cumulative*	*Purposeful*
In groups or as a whole class, teachers and students engaged in **collective** talk address learning tasks **together**.	**Supportive** talk encourages a culture of freedom to express ideas **without fear** of 'getting it wrong'.	**Reciprocal** talk involves listening to each other and **sharing ideas** or **alternative viewpoints**.	Talk is **deliberative** when different arguments are presented and evaluated, as speakers work towards reasoned outcomes.	Teachers and students engaged in **cumulative** talk **build on and link** ideas from different speakers into themes or lines of thinking.	Classroom talk, even if it is sometimes open-ended, is **purposeful** when it is structured with specific **learning goals** in mind.

Table 1: Principles of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2020a)

Repertoires of teaching						
Interactive culture	*Interactive settings*	*Learning talk*	*Teaching talk*	*Questioning*	*Extending*	*Discussing & arguing*
Establishing the **culture** of the classroom, so students and teacher have a shared understanding of the 'norms' for **classroom interactions**.	Considering **classroom settings** (group sizes, teacher-led/student-led, time, space etc) to **facilitate talk**.	The function of **student talk** for learning (answering, narrating, asking, suggesting, reasoning etc.).	The function of the **teacher talk** (rote memorising of facts, short question/ answer recall, instruction etc.).	The structure of **questioning** styles to engage learning, speaking and **thinking**.	Teacher feedback which **extends** and **builds on** students' responses and contributions.	Talk for **exchanging** ideas, **weighing up** ideas to reach agreement, or **arguing** a case.

Table 2: Repertoires of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2020a)

Classroom context

Why dialogic teaching with beginner-level, refugee-background English language learners?

My AMEP class comprised approximately 20 Iraqi and Syrian young adults, all of whom had very limited or interrupted formal schooling. A few of the students had some formal education in Arabic and English, but most were preliterate or in the beginning stages of English literacy development. As the class was a Youth Class, all the students were aged between 16-24 and had been assessed at a beginner level of English language. Although some of the students were at a high school age, their low literacy and interrupted schooling precluded them from entering and completing high school in Australia. In spite of these challenges, their aspirations for future study and

work in Australia were high and they possessed skills, maturity and life experiences that would be an asset as they embarked on future pathways (Naidoo et al., 2018).

In the AMEP, students at a preliminary level learn core skills of literacy, handwriting, alphabet and number recognition, communicating in short, conversational exchanges and becoming familiar with classroom routines and learning strategies. Each student is assessed periodically with one-to-one assessment tasks to ascertain their proficiency development. There is no external pressure or time limit on a student's participation in the AMEP, but students were generally motivated to develop their proficiency in English and progress to higher level classes in the course. Although the students were friendly, positive and excited about learning English, most lacked confidence to speak in English. They would usually apologise if they were not able to remember an English word, and seemed most secure when silently copying words from the board into their notebooks. At the beginning of the English language course, all the young men initially sat together. Most of the young women were hesitant to speak out loud and sat together on one side of the semicircle arrangement of desks I had set up in the classroom.

As I considered my teaching approach and the needs of my students, I felt there were three main areas which could benefit from implementing a more dialogic-oriented approach in the classroom: 1) my planning; 2) the quality of learning and teaching talk; and 3) students' confidence and "talk for thinking" (Myhill, 2006). In order to document changes in these areas as I explored a more dialogic approach, I engaged in a six-month, self-reflective journaling process. During this time, I recorded anecdotal observations of my practice and student developments in class. My reflective process was guided by two questions:

1. If I changed my teaching approach to a more dialogic approach, would this be reflected in changes in students' engagement and responses?

2. What would these changes look like for young adult learners with beginning levels of English language proficiency and literacy?

Reflective Practice as teacher research

Reflective practice as a means of professional learning

With these questions in mind, I began to seek answers by engaging in a process of "focused reflection" (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 7) on my teaching practice. The value of reflective practice as a source of professional learning is recognised in TESOL literature (Stewart, 2019), and there are many practical examples to guide teachers in individual as well as collaborative reflective processes of learning (see, for example, Chappell, 2017; Farrell, 2019; Mann & Walsh, 2017). Following Mann and Walsh's (2017) encouragement to make regular reflection part of my professional practice, I took their concept of "reflection in the wild" (p. 100) to heart. My "wild" included a hectic schedule of teaching, family life and postgraduate study, and so I utilised whatever time and resources were available to me for reflection on teaching practice. Over a six-month period, I maintained a teaching journal in MS word (see Appendix 1), in which I jotted down teaching ideas that I had observed or tried in my own and other colleagues' classrooms. I noted what seemed to be more or less successful, and possible explanations as to why this might have been the case. In the journal I also recorded observations and interactions with other teaching colleagues of Youth Classes, who all shared similar goals for finding more effective ways to engage and meet the needs of the young adult learners in our programs. Reflections on my classroom practice also included voice recordings on my iPhone, notes from email correspondence with teaching mentors and colleagues, and notes I took at conference presentations (Playsted, 2020). Photos taken of classwork which revealed changes in student responses and engagement were also included in my self-reflective teaching journal (Mann & Walsh, 2017).

I was an experienced teacher who had taught in classrooms for 20 years. However, I realised that much of my focus in teaching had been on 'what we needed to get through' in order to meet curriculum and assessment guidelines. In terms of *teaching talk*, *recitation* and *pseudo enquiry* were the "familiar and traditional bedrock of [my] teaching" (Alexander, 2008, p. 110). It was only after returning to postgraduate study and taking on new teaching roles in

adult TESOL contexts, that I began to read and reflect on my teaching practice more deeply (Playsted, 2019). In relation to a dialogic approach, Alexander (2008) has noted that this can "encourage...teachers to think, plan and act in a more holistic fashion" (p. 114). In my case, the process of reflecting on my practice helped me record the positive, holistic shifts in my planning and teaching more dialogically. As a journal entry (see Appendix 1) noted:

> "Dialogic teaching as an approach has changed how I think about teaching - about my place, [the] students' place and the focus of learning. I have thought in terms of activities (task based), I've thought in terms of skills (this will be a writing lesson/listening, grammar etc.), but now I have a different framework that underpins how I approach lesson planning and what happens in the classroom".

Moving towards a more dialogic teaching approach

Changes in my Planning

The first change I made to my teaching practice was to spend time considering the *interactive settings* (i.e., how students could be grouped to facilitate different types of talk and interaction) in my classroom. To do this, I spent time planning how I would work with different class organisational contexts throughout lessons (e.g., whole class, pairwork or groupwork), and considered how I could engage each student in classroom talk more effectively within these activities. I also spent more time at the end of a week reflecting on the week's lessons and thinking through the sequences of whole class teaching, pairwork or groupwork activities more deliberately than I had in the past. I considered how I could encourage students to speak and work together, so that individual students were given time to develop a skill.

Secondly, Alexander (2020a) notes that dialogic classrooms require a "shared understanding of the way talk should be managed" (p. 137), as this helps to establish an *interactive culture* in the classroom. To do this, I established routines with my students to help them become familiar with different contexts for different styles of class work. I consistently modelled the sentences and vocabulary I was encouraging students to use in class to signify these different contexts. For example, phrases used to focus on turn-taking included: "It's my/Sali's **turn** to speak", "Whose **turn** is it to speak?", "Please wait, Ali, it's not your **turn** to speak". As all the students spoke the same first language (L1) of Kurdish-Kurmanji, I learned a few simple Kurdish classroom instructions to manage transitions between activities. "Hemû" (all or everyone), "kom" (group) and "dost" (partner) were the consistent classroom organisation words I used to introduce class activities based on these configurations. To introduce these classroom concepts initially, I spent time explaining what a 'group' would look like by drawing desk and seat diagrams on the board.

Prior planning of groupwork and classroom organisation resulted in reduced competition for my attention by students and allowed me to monitor individual student participation more easily. Students helped each other, but there appeared to be less pressure on individual students to complete a task (or have their friend or sibling complete it), and less calling out of "Teacher, finish!" by students who had completed a task earlier than others. Partner work was also easier to facilitate when students were seated in groups, although it took time for some students to see this as an opportunity to engage in learning rather than social talk. I was aware that students were adapting to many changes as they settled into a classroom in a new country for the first time. Time, consistency and patience were needed to establish an *interactive culture* in the classroom, as students became more confident with new ways of working together and learning. However, I noticed that by implementing these practical changes in the classroom, some less confident students became more willing to take risks speaking in English with a partner than in front of the whole class. This was a positive step towards establishing principles of *supportive* talk in the classroom.

Changes in the Quality of Classroom Talk

The second area of change I noticed was in the quality of classroom talk which took place in the classroom. I considered how I could introduce and encourage the use of different *repertoires* of *learning talk,* and *questioning* to students whose English vocabulary was in very early stages of development. In order to establish helpful *learning talk*, I began to consciously model the use of evaluative words such as same/different during episodes of whole class teaching. I made a point of using *interrogative* words and phrases (Alexander, 2020a) in my *teaching talk* (e.g., saying "Ask a question", in order to develop students' familiarity with question forms, rather than only learning statements by rote). I placed question flashcards ("What?", "Who?" etc.) as visual reminders for students above the whiteboard (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Question flashcards classroom display

Students were able to refer to the question flashcards to prompt their memory of how to accurately form a question in English. For example, after writing the question "What's your name?" on the board, I *extended* this question (Alexander, 2020a) to elicit a new question (i.e., where someone had lived before they came to Australia). Through my initial questioning, followed by responses and further questions between teacher and students, a student volunteered a response that the question would begin with "where". Another student was able to add: "are you from? Where are you from?". Following this, I wrote the word "where" on the board. I asked students to think of another question which could begin with "where". The phrase "Where do you live?" was volunteered quickly by more than one student.

As I engaged in more dialogic teaching practices, I paid closer attention to the *feedback* I was using in class. I moved away from giving habitual praise to students' responses (Chappell, 2016), and I became more comfortable with allowing students more "wait time" (Rowe, 1986, p. 43) to think about a question before they gave an answer. Other *interactive strategies*, such as maintaining turn-taking protocols in class by ensuring students raised hands to indicate a desire to answer, I also encouraged students to allow each other similar 'wait time' before answering a question. I rarely answered 'yes' or 'no' to students' questions. Instead, I used another question to support students, but also "push...[them] beyond their current abilities and levels of understanding" (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005, p. 9). Another example of my change to feedback practices was evident in a groupwork, word-picture matching activity. In this activity, students were required to match a word with the corresponding picture of animal body part. As some of the vocabulary was new, a number of the students found it challenging to complete this activity. Two pictures included a frog's mouth and a bird's beak. Students had seen the word 'mouth' previously, but not 'beak'. One student, Roca (NB.pseudonyms are used throughout) showed me the picture of the beak and asked "What?". "That's a good question, Roca. How can you find out the English word for this picture?" I responded. When he realised that I was not going to simply tell him the answer, he asked "Letter number one? Sound?". By asking the question a different way, Roca was beginning to explore *interrogatory* talk. This also demonstrated his use of newly-developed skills in English sound and letter correspondence, as tools to access new language and meaning.

Changes in Students' Confidence and "Talk for Thinking"

A third change I noted as I engaged in more dialogic teaching practices was the increase in students' general confidence in English. I focused on developing *supportive* talk in the classroom (Adoniou & Macken-Horarik, 2007), and sought to build a classroom environment in which students felt secure enough to ask questions and make mistakes. Gradually, students showed greater willingness to ask questions more frequently without fear of 'getting

the answer wrong' (Alexander, 2008). I modelled positive acknowledgement of each student's work and took time to focus on identity and self-esteem building activities in initial lessons with the class. As students grew more confident, I noted in a journal entry: "I didn't have anyone saying sorry today!" (see Appendix 1). This was an encouraging step forward; prior to this, students' responses, when I offered assistance with written work, were to immediately apologise and erase or cross out any errors.

Finally, as students' confidence developed, so too did their engagement in what (Myhill, 2006) terms "talk for thinking" (p. 21). My journal record of a teacher-student interaction with a young lady named Mina highlighted this. Mina was 23 and had limited prior experiences of formal education. She was hesitant to speak in English at all for the first few lessons. In my journal, I noted an interaction in which Mina read a sentence to me which she had written. In this sentence, the word "and" was misspelt as "at". When she read her sentence aloud to me, she read the word clearly as "and". Mina's correct *use* of the word "and" in the context of her sentence showed a developing confidence to try using a new word in English which she had heard. Noting this, I praised her use of the new word in a sentence, rather than correct her spelling error with the word. After this, I asked her to read the sentence again, drawing her attention to the sounds each of the letters in "at" might make. (Connecting letters with their spelling was a strategy we had been working on as a class.) As Mina sounded out the letters, I asked her which sounds the word "and" contained. As she said sounded out "a-n-d", Mina realised she had written "t" instead of "nd". She smiled and corrected her spelling. Later that morning, when students were taking turns to read a sentence aloud, I asked the class how we might add another piece of information to a sentence (e.g., if we were to talk about two things we liked to eat, rather than one). Mina was quick to raise her hand to volunteer the answer: "And! And!". Mina's noticing and self-correction of a word's spelling suggested to me that, from the beginning stages of EAL literacy development, students are able to engage in talking "through a problem" to develop "the 'thinking' tools for later problem-solving" (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005, p. 15).

Exploring a dialogic teaching approach in other teaching contexts

In this paper, I have described examples and observations of implementing dialogic teaching principles with a class of young adult, beginner-level learners. For teachers in other contexts seeking to explore a similar approach in their own classroom, I would suggest taking time to read and reflect on the principles and repertoires of talk introduced in Alexander's work (a helpful overview can be found here: https://robinalexander.org.uk/dialogic-teaching/). In depth explanations can be found in Alexander's (2020a) book, "A Dialogic Teaching Companion". Once you are familiar with these principles, you can observe and reflect on the talk occurring in your classroom. What styles of talk are taking place in students' interactions with each other? With you? Do you default to *recitation* or *pseudo enquiry* in whole class teaching time, thereby reducing students' opportunities for talk and engagement? Are you allowing sufficient "wait time" for students to think about and answer a question?

Next, considering the curriculum guidelines, classroom space and resources you have available, plan to include different types of interactive settings (e.g., groupwork or pairwork) to encourage student talk. You may find it useful, as I did, to introduce and regularly model target phrases in your teacher talk, which establish and facilitate a shared understanding of classroom "norms" within a dialogic, interactive classroom culture (see Table 2). Finally, you may find it helpful to reflect and record some of the challenges and successes of your dialogic teaching and learning journey. What did you find most effective in your context? Based on your experiences, what suggestions would you offer other teachers working in similar settings?

Concluding remarks

The journey into and through a new educational system is a complex one for refugee-background students with histories of forced displacement, trauma and interrupted schooling. Developing the confidence to interact in new academic and social contexts in spoken English is an important part of the journey. With sensitivity and respect as

the basis for classroom interactions, I believe my experiences of exploring a more dialogic teaching approach with beginner-level English learners fostered a classroom environment in which students were free to develop and use language to question, solve problems, and begin to "take risks with English and...give expression to [their] voice" (Adoniou & Macken-Horarik, 2007, p. 13).

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Reflective journal entry 1.8.18

1.8.18
We study teaching and get to work and it can be difficult to challenge ourselves in new areas, we keep doing what we do because it's what is expected and what's always been done in our area. We can have curriculum changes, but this doesn't always mean a paradigm change for our teaching.
Dialogic teaching as an approach has changed how I think about teaching - about my pace, students place and the focus of learning ....
I have thought in terms of activities (task based), I've thought in terms of skills (this will be a writing lesson/listening etc), grammar etc. But now I have a different framework that underpins

how I approach lesson planning and what happens in the classroom.
Subject - compare dialogic and traditional teaching model

Reflective journal entry 17.10.18

Although I spent a lot of time today setting up m/f mixed groups, to the point where ▮▮ said "Finish time!", I felt that it did enable more focused talk on tasks, and the individual

competition of "Teacher finish!" started to lessen. Timing the sight word activity gave us a goal, and took away the "teacher finish!" aspect too.

I didn't have anyone saying "sorry" today. This was an achievement, I think. Even in ▮▮ incorrect answer.

Tagged 21st Century Skills