The Contribution of the Teachers’ Use of Dialogic Discourse Pattern to the Improvement of the Students’ Speaking Ability

Behzad Barekat\(^a\), Saeedeh Mohammadi\(^b,\)\(^*\)

\(^{a,b}\) Guilan university, Guilan, Iran

Abstract

As influenced by Bakhtin’s conceptualization of discourse (1984), monologic and dialogic patterns are considered as the opposing ends of teachers’ discourse continuum. The current research is to ascertain whether the establishment of the dialogic discourse pattern can improve the students’ speaking ability or not. To this end, firstly, the crucial pre-conditions and rules for the dialogic discourse pattern were recognized. Then, the case study teacher was asked to apply the rules. The students’ speaking was pre-tested and post-tested. The results indicated that the use of the dialogic discourse pattern could significantly contribute to the students’ speaking ability.

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Keywords: discourse; monologic discourse pattern; dialogic discourse pattern; teachers discourse pattern; students’ speaking ability

1. Introduction

The importance of the need to learn how to speak a foreign language is self-evident and the matter of globalization adds to this significance. According to Razmjoo and Riazi (2006), “English assumes a pivotal role in Iranian educational system; in recent years, an increasing demand for teaching and learning English as a foreign language has been witnessed in the society” (pp.144-145). However, English instruction that is offered in Iran public schools mostly focuses on learning and memorizing grammatical rules and does not lead to the development of oral abilities and even the memorized grammatical rules are forgotten after a while. On this line, regarding the importance of the need to learn how to use language and the lack of the speaking ability of the Iranian students who pass the school time, the study focuses on the students’ speaking ability.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +0-912-744-1126; fax: +0-242-282-3157.
E-mail address: saeedhm63@gmail.com
Among the many elements concerning the students’ success in second language learning, one of the important factors is classroom discourse which involves the oral interaction among the participants in the classroom including the teacher and the students. In this setting, as long as the teachers establish the use of language in the classroom (Johnson, 1995) and play a central role in student achievement, our study centers on the teacher and the contribution of what she/he does in the classroom to the development of the students’ speaking abilities.

The present research is a pioneering work in that it looks at the contribution of classroom discourse to learners’ speaking development. However, there have been studies which have been done in western countries about the relationship between the dialogic discourse pattern in the class and improvement of the students’ participation and learning. Yet, a few of them presented ways to change the classroom discourse to a dialogic one (e.g. Hall, 1997; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Nystrand, 1997; Johnson, 1995). In this line, there is no study conducted in Iran.

The current study, thus, presents practical ways to make changes in classroom discourse, to a great extent, applicable in any level of EFL classes. To arrive at this overall aim, we had two research questions:

- What are the necessary preconditions and rules for the teachers to have a dialogic discourse pattern?
- Does the use of dialogic discourse pattern by the teachers improve the speaking ability of the learners?

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. EFL in an Iranian context and the role of the teacher

In spite of the undeniable significance and pervasive use of English in Iran (Talebinezhad & AliAkbari, in progress), unfortunately the system of education in Iran produces students unable to effectively communicate using English language. According to Dahmardeh (2009) in countries like Iran, there is especial emphasis on achievement standards in school. Moreover, Farhady, Jafarpoor & Birjandi (1994) consider the perceived better communication skills of students attending Iranian schools outside Iran as the first notable difference between the teaching of English in Iran and in other countries like Japan and Malaysia. They maintain that even Iranian students at the university level lack the necessary skills to be able to use English communicatively. Ghorbani (2009) also maintains that the oral skills are neither emphasized in Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks nor tested in the school final exams and university entrance examination. However, a study done by Allami et al. (2009) in Iran high schools revealed that learners prefer their classrooms to be spent on listening and speaking in English and if any explanation is required English description is preferred. This signifies the learners’ interest in learning how to use language communicatively.

The teacher is the most important person who can establish different discursive patterns in the class. “Based on Vygotsky’s beliefs about the complex interplay of thought and language in shaping meaning, Mercer (2000) suggests that teachers shall reduce their role as orchestrator and controller of classroom talk, and instead reposition themselves as enabler of talk for thinking” (Molinari and Mameli, 2010: 3858). Hence, a teacher must not be the only director of the lesson who determines the contents and procedures of the talk as well as the learners’ participation opportunities in the classrooms. Johnson (1995) asserts that the teachers establish and maintain classroom discourse patterns. Additionally, as cited in Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long (2001), “because of their unique role in the classroom, teachers play a key role in moving classroom into dialogic modes, and this requires both skill and perseverance” (p. 6).

1.1.2. Dialogic discourse pattern

Nunan (1993) considers classroom discourse as a distinctive type of discourse that occurs in classrooms. Discourse in the English classroom is generally a matter of the oral use of language in the instructional setting. Classroom research is one way for teachers to monitor both the quantity and quality of students’ output (Demo, 2001). Instructional discourse patterns are often described by two terms of “dialogic” and what seems to be its opposite, “monologic”. In Bakhtinian term, dialogically organized instruction provides enough space for students’ response, reinforcing and promoting their different voices, values and perspectives (Bakhtin, 1981). It is now a recognized necessity to take steps to change the classroom discourse to a dialogic discourse pattern. Many studies have provided evidence in support of the fact that the acquisition of useful knowledge is related to quality of discourse (e.g. Nystrand, 1997; Nystrand et al., 1997; Alexander, 2004; Scott, 2006; Innes, 2007). However, O’Connor and Michaels (2007) maintain that we don’t know exactly how to characterize the elements of dialogic practices and what kinds of tasks and activities to use in order to promote dialogic practices.

According to Nystrand et al. (2001), it seems clear that what the teacher does in her class can affect the
construction of a dialogic discourse both positively and negatively. As cited in Molinari and Mameli (2010) “the dominance in classrooms of the teacher’s voice at the expense of the pupils’ own meaning-making voices constitutes one of the main barriers to the implementation of genuine dialogic teaching” (pp. 3857-3858). Now, the three significant issues including IRF patterns, teachers’ turn management and teachers’ questioning behavior are dealt with which have crucial contributions to the type of discourse pattern in the class.

1.1.2.1. IRF PATTERNS IN THE CLASSROOM

Several classroom researchers (e.g. Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Mehan, 1979) have documented a common instructional pattern occurring in the classroom, “IRF”, where ‘I’ represents an initiating move, usually a question posed by the teacher; ‘R’ stands for the response, usually a short and simple response from student(s) and ‘F’ stands for follow-up or feedback from the teacher. The IRF mode has been empirically revealed to be the default pattern of classroom interaction at all levels of education and in all types of classrooms (Cazden, 2001).

Nassaji and Wells (2000) pointed out that the teacher has a variety of options in the F move of the IRF though teachers do not always exercise this variety of options. They show that even within the traditional “triadic dialogue” or IRF, by choosing the right kind of follow up move, the teacher can create a more dialogic classroom. When the teacher dominates the F move by evaluation, it suppresses students’ participation. Conversely when the teacher avoids evaluation and instead draws out justifications and more explanations and makes connections with other parts of the students’ total experience and allows students to self-select in making their contributions, s/he promotes more student participation and enhances a genuine dialogic teaching (Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Wells, 1993). On the same lines, several other studies indicated that the default IRF pattern can be manipulated to a true classroom dialogic exchange (e.g. Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Cullen, 2002; Vaish, 2008; Waring, 2009).

1.1.2.2. TEACHERS’ TURN MANAGEMENT

In a classroom discourse, the teacher is able to improve the interaction and degree of dialogicity through the control and management of turns that the students take for floor in speaking. The creation of opportunities for students to participate in communicative activities is especially important in EFL classrooms and it is very crucial to their language development (Xie, 2010). Hall (1997) also revealed that different turn-regulation patterns can lead to different opportunities for learning. The teachers’ wise management of the F move in the IRF pattern can improve a dialogic discourse in the classroom (Xie, 2008). For example, in the F move, the teacher can choose to give the floor back to the responder by asking him/her to modify or elaborate his/her reply or give the floor to other students.

1.1.2.3. TEACHERS’ QUESTIONING BEHAVIOUR

A series of studies conducted on the use of teacher questions in ESL and EFL classrooms have explored questioning behaviours and the amount of learner production elicited. Shomoosi (2004) and Behnam & Pouriran (2009) indicated that the teachers asked display questions more frequently than referential questions. Also, they concluded that not all referential questions could bring about enough interaction. However, drawing on data from ESL classes, some researchers (e.g. Long and Sato, 1983; Brock, 1986) found that the use of referential questions stimulated much longer and syntactically more complex student responses than the use of display questions. Furthermore, Sadeghi (2010) suggested that higher frequencies of referential questions had an effect on Iranian adult EFL classroom discourse.

In the following, the four important dialogic bids (as called by Nystrand et al., 2001) related to the teachers’ questioning behaviour are explained in brief. It must be highly emphasized that the teachers’ right application of these dialogic bids can enhance a dialogic discourse pattern in the classroom.

**Authentic questions:** An authentic question is defined as one for which the asker has no pre-specified response. Requests for information as well as open-ended questions with indeterminate answers are examples for authentic questions.

**Uptake:** When teachers, instead of answering questions and getting back to the lesson, let the classroom talk move in directions prompted by the raised questions by the students, enhance the uptake in their classrooms.

**Level of evaluation:** For level of evaluation to be coded as high, the evaluation had to be more than “Good,” “Good idea,” or a mere repeat of a student's answer. Instead it might be, for example, “How do you know that?”. In high-level evaluation, the teacher draws out more justifications and explanations.

**Cognitive level:** Questions with high cognitive level open up the cognitive field beyond a mere reporting or replication of another’s voice, rather involving the speakers’ own voice and perspective. These questions can’t be
easily answered with reference to prior knowledge.

2. Method

2.1. PARTICIPANTS
As influenced by the results of interviews and classroom observation obtained from our previous research, we selected one teacher as the case study teacher to switch the teacher’s monologic discourse pattern to a dialogic one. (The previous research indicated that the teachers used a monologic discourse pattern in their classes.) A period of two weeks in the summer was dedicated to giving the teacher some instructions regarding the basic distinctions of the dialogic and monologic discourse patterns, important ideologies concerning them, and the pre-conditions and key rules for the establishment of dialogic discourse pattern (the response to the first research question). All of them were also handed in print to the teacher. Moreover, a day before any class observation, all the steps to be taken and techniques and activities to be done in the class were precisely thought out and handed in print to the teacher. For observing and video-taping the classes, the permission of the chief of education office of Tarom town as well as the principals of the schools was obtained. The total number of the students involved in the study was 38 pre-university students from two high schools in Tarom town.

2.2. MATERIALS
As one of the qualitative research instruments, we applied case study. An advantage of case studies is that they allow the researchers to focus on the individual in a way that is rarely possible in a group research (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Our case study included the study of one English teacher in Tarom town teaching at a high school level. Due to the fact that the second research question was whether the teacher’s use of dialogic discourse pattern contributes to the students’ speaking development, the placement conversation was selected as an appropriate speaking test due to its practicality and availability for assessing the speaking ability of the two groups of students from two different high schools. The Placement Conversation is a ten-minute, face to face interaction with an individual student. During the conversation, students are encouraged to perform specific functions and demonstrate their ability to use language in a given topic or task.

2.3. PROCEDURES

2.3.1. CASE STUDY PROCEDURE
The case study process involved the teacher’s instruction, establishing the rules of the dialogic discourse pattern in the class, observation and video-recording of classes for a ten week period and transcriptions of the events to precisely show how the rules are put into practice. To establish the dialogic discourse pattern in the class, we asked the teacher to apply the rules of the dialogic discourse pattern in her classes. Then, we observed and video-taped the classes resulting in ten transcripts of the whole class videos.

2.3.2. SPEAKING TEST PROCEDURE
The speaking test was administered two times for each class (pre-test and post-test). For the first time, it was administered before starting the classroom observation process and application of the rules of the dialogic discourse (as the treatment) by the teacher and for the second time, it was administered when the observation and subsequent procedures had all been finished. The aim of administering the test for the second time was to recognize if there is any improvement in the students’ speaking ability. Our control group was the one which received no treatment regarding the application of the rules of dialogic discourse pattern by the teacher while, the teacher of experimental group students applied the rules of the dialogic discourse pattern.

We started the test by asking the student to introduce herself to find out a little about her; then based on the initial impressions of the student’s speaking ability we selected the suitable task at a judged level. As the test went on, we immediately evaluated the student’s performance using the Placement Conversation Rating Form. When the student faced some challenge or difficulty in responding well to a task and continuing the conversation, that specific task was taken to be the student’s placement level.

2.4. DATA ANALYSIS
Qualitative part of the present study involved observing, video-taping and transcribing the case study teacher’s
classes; however, its aim was only to show how the rules were really applied in the class. Hence, the qualitative part of the study involves no data analysis. In the case of quantitative part, after the results of speaking tests were estimated, through the SPSS (16) software and incorporating independent samples test, it was recognized whether there is a significant difference between the scores of experimental and control groups and if the establishment of the rules of dialogic discourse pattern could significantly contribute to the students’ speaking ability.

3. Results

**Research question 1: What are the necessary preconditions and rules for the teachers to have a dialogic discourse pattern?**

Having conducted a thorough exploration in the previous studies done and the major figures’ studies regarding the both types of discourse, i.e. monologic and dialogic, we came at a number of eighteen pre-conditions on the basis of the radical maxims of dialogic discourse pattern as well as twenty-one rules for the teachers so as to transform their class discourse pattern from a monologic one toward a dialogic one.

**Table 1. The pre-conditions for the dialogic discourse pattern**

|   | The pre-conditions for the dialogic discourse pattern |
|---|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | To link academic objectives with the students’ concerns beyond the classroom (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). |
| 2 | To have more discussions, authentic questions, uptake, and high-level evaluation (Nystrand & Gameron, 1997). |
| 3 | To use discussion to open up the exchange of views and information and Scaffolded dialogue which includes: |
|   |   - *Interactions* which encourage children to think, and to think in different ways, |
|   |   - *Questions* which require much more than simple recall, |
|   |   - *Answers* which are followed up and built on rather than merely received, |
|   |   - *Feedback* which informs and leads thinking forward, |
|   |   - *Exchanges* which chain together into coherent and deepening lines of enquiry, |
|   |   - *Classroom organization, climate and relationships* which make all this possible (Alexander, 2008). |
| 4 | To follow up on students’ contributions to modify or expand on the lesson plan and syllabus (Nystrand, Wu, Gameron, Zeiser, & Long, 2001). |
| 5 | To let the students initiate discussion, have turns to explore their ideas, and provide evaluations of a peer’s contributions (Nathan, Kim, & Grant, 2009). |
| 6 | To ask more referential questions than display questions (Nunan, 1988). |
| 7 | To pose questions to be answered through negotiation and exploration of the topic more frequently than questions that simply called for checking of knowledge (Nassaji & Wells, 2000). |
| 8 | To ask questions which elicit longer answers from the pupils (Molinari & Mameli, 2010). |
| 9 | To use the four features of communicative classroom talk including *referential questions, content feedback, wait time*, and *student-initiated talk* (Thornbury, 1996). |
10. To teach collectively, reciprocally, supportively, cumulatively, and purposefully (Alexander, 2004).

11. To use the follow-up move to explore the topic, and expand on the student’s talk rather than evaluation of the response (Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Wells, 1993, 1999).

12. To manage the turn taking patterns taking three points into account:
   1. Low-achieving students may feel even more unwilling to participate if the teacher sets low objectives for them by only directing them easy questions.
   2. Occasionally directing elicitations, especially open-ended ones, to individual students to challenge them makes them braver and more active, also allows active students to have their voices heard.
   3. Language teachers who understand some of the prior turn-taking experiences of their students will ‘have a knowledge base from which to make their own interactional choices in the classroom (Xie, 2010).

13. To frame and facilitate the activities and respond at any time keeping utterances and intervention to a minimum (Nystrand, 1997).

14. To have a minimal teacher selection of students and to let students either self-elect or select other students (Nystrand, 1997).

15. To negotiate subtopics of discussion with the students (Nystrand, 1997).

16. To indicate implied goal as developing shared knowledge, but still including a preference for correct information (Nystrand, 1997).

17. To initiate questions for which there are no specific correct answers as well as questions that are constructed from students’ previous responses (Nystrand, 1997).

18. To contribute students’ topic expansions as well as teacher’s and other students’ incorporation of these expansions into the ongoing lesson (Nystrand, 1997).

The following includes the rules that must be applied by the English teacher in the classroom in order to make a dialogic discourse pattern. The point of high importance is that each of the following rules is basically rooted on the pre-conditions of the dialogic discourse pattern. It must be added that as discussed before, these rules were applied for the case study teacher to establish the dialogic discourse pattern in her classes.
Table 2. The twenty-one key rules for a dialogic discourse pattern

| Rule N1 | Make connections between your lesson and students’ concerns and interests outside the classroom. |
| Rule N2 | Give room to your students’ questions and responses and follow up on your students’ contributions. |
| Rule N3 | Use **authentic questions** as far as possible. (Authentic questions are those questions that you ask your students but you don’t have any pre-determined answer in your mind.) |
| Rule N4 | Use **uptake** in your class. (Make your students ask questions related to what other students have said and direct your class in the directions of the raised questions by the students.) |
| Rule N5 | Have **high-level evaluation** for the students’ responses to your questions. (Evaluate your students’ responses by making them explain more, clarify or give more information rather than just giving them answers like “very good” or “you are right” and getting back your lesson.) |
| Rule N6 | Include questions with **high cognitive level**. (Such questions can’t be answered neither by reporting an event or reciting others’ voices nor using the students’ own prior knowledge. These questions need more critical thinking involving students’ own voice and perspectives. For example, instead of asking a question like “what happened in the paragraph?” ask “what do you think will happen?”) |
| Rule N7 | Use **referential questions** rather than display questions. (The teacher does not know the answer for referential questions and they are answered through negotiation and exploration of the topic; whereas, the teacher knows the answer for display questions and demand a single or short response of the low-level thinking kind. “Why” and “how” questions are more likely to be used as referential questions than display questions.) |
| Rule N8 | Ask questions that need longer answers. |
| Rule N9 | Give **content feedback**. (Content feedback is the feedback on the content of what the student says rather than its form.) |
| Rule N10 | Provide your students with **wait time**. (Wait time is the time you allow your students to answer questions.) |
| Rule N11 | Develop **student-initiated talk**. (Let your students sometimes start the talk.) |
| Rule N12 | Teach **collectively**. (Do learning tasks with the students as a group or as a class rather than make them work alone.) |
Rule N13  Teach *reciprocally*. (Listen to your students and make your students listen to each other very carefully and share their ideas.)

Rule N14  Teach *supportively*. (Make your students articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment and make them help each other to reach common understandings.)

Rule N15  Teach *cumulatively*. (Make your students build on each other’s ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry.)

Rule N16  Teach *purposefully*. (Plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals.)

Rule N17  Carefully manage the *F move*. (If we consider your question as initiation (*I*, the first move), the students’ response as response (*R*, the second move) and your reaction as follow up (*F*, the third move), the last move can enhance a dialogic discourse. In other words, when you dominate the *F move* by evaluation, it suppresses students’ participation. Conversely when you avoid evaluation and instead request justifications, connections or counter-arguments and allow students to self-select in making their contributions, you change discourse pattern of your class from a monologic discourse to a dialogic one.)

Rule N18  Let your students *self-elect* themselves or sometimes select other students.

Rule N19  Be a wise *turn manager*. (Under the IRF pattern, you have a variety of options for regulating turns. For example, in the *I* move, you can address the question to the whole class or select a specific student to reply. In the *F* move, you can choose to give the floor back to the responder by asking him/her to modify or elaborate his/her reply or give away the floor to other students.) In managing the turns in the class, remember the following issues:

1. Sometimes ask the less active and more silent students difficult questions.
2. Ask the more active students more open-ended questions.
3. Try to identify which turn-taking habits your students have in the classroom.

Rule N20  Try to frame and facilitate the class activities and keep your utterances and intervention in a minimum.

Rule N21  Negotiate topics and subtopics of discussion with your students and sometimes let your students choose the topics.

**Research question 2:** Does the use of dialogic discourse pattern by the teachers improve the speaking ability of the EFL learners?

To respond this research question, the aforementioned rules were applied in the case study teacher’s classes for a period of ten weeks to see whether or not the application of the rules could promote the students’ speaking ability. As explained previously, we had instructions for the teacher and assigned the activities for teacher’s each session to help her in establishing a dialogic discourse pattern through the application of the clarified rules. However, we had
no change in the other teacher’s classes. So, the two teachers’ students included our experimental and control groups. The students’ speaking in both groups was pre and post tested.

The analysis of pre-test results revealed that there was no meaningful difference between the experimental and control groups (sig= 0.601 > 0.05). This made us certain of the comparability of the two groups before the application of dialogic discourse pattern rules (our treatment) by the teacher of students acting as our experimental group. In fact, both groups did equally well in the speaking test. Though, the analysis of post-test results indicated that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups (sig=.006 < 0.05). Therefore, in the light of this research question, the findings can be interpreted as follows: The teachers’ application of the rules of the dialogic discourse pattern can lead to the development of the students’ speaking ability.

Table 3. Independent samples test

|                  | Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances | t-test for Equality of Means |
|------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                  | F  | Sig. | t    | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference |
| pretest          |    |      |      |    |                |                 |
| Equal variances assumed | .006 | .939 | -.526 | 46 | .601          | -.15344         |
| Equal variances not assumed |       |      |      |    |                |                 |
| posttest         | .033 | .857 | 2.900 | 46 | .006          | 1.00529         |
| Equal variances assumed |       |      |      |    |                |                 |
| Equal variances not assumed | 2.824 | 38.015 | .008 |    |                |                 |

4. Conclusions

It is self-evident that to make the students ready for the application of language in real world, a traditional monologic, teacher-controlled instruction must be switched to a dialogic one. However, in order, for the teachers, to establish a dialogic discourse pattern, there are some crucial pre-conditions to consider and some key rules to apply in the classes. In fact, the significant point is to deeply understand how these rules can be useful for teachers, who are called to promote students’ different abilities in different situations and at different levels of knowledge.

Based on our findings, we conclude that the application of aforementioned rules for the establishment of a dialogic discourse pattern could successfully result in improvements in students’ speaking ability. The step by step application of the rules in the case study teacher’s classes revealed that applying the rules are entirely practical in Iran school classes which have their own specific lacks. It is highly recognized that the rules of the dialogic discourse in any learning setting is not only applicable but also advantageous and resulting in successful developments. However, the right maintenance of the dialogic discourse pattern in the classroom demands teachers’ meticulous consciousness of the distinctions between the monologic and dialogic discourse patterns and the required pre-conditions and rules for the dialogic discourse pattern.

In future studies, the proposed rules can be applied by the teacher to see the change in other aspects of students’ behavior including their amount of interaction in the class, their turn-taking habits, their cooperation with the peers and the like. Furthermore, the current study could be replicated to see the results in places other than public schools like language institutes and universities which either teach English as a general course or for specific proposes. Moreover, more longitudinal studies can be conducted in the future.

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