**What is dialogic teaching?**

The term ‘dialogic teaching’ is now in regular use but like all such terms means different things to different people. As developed by Robin Alexander since the early 2000s, dialogic teaching harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend students’ thinking and advance their learning and understanding. It helps the teacher more precisely to diagnose students’ needs, frame their learning tasks and assess their progress. It empowers the student for lifelong learning and active citizenship. Dialogic teaching is not just any talk. It is as distinct from the question-answer and listen-tell routines of traditional teaching as it is from the casual conversation of informal discussion. It requires:

* **interactions** which encourage students to think, and to think in different ways
* **questions** which invite much more than simple recall
* **answers** which are justified, followed up and built upon rather than merely received
* **feedback** which informs and leads thinking forward as well as encourages
* **contributions** which are extended rather than fragmented
* **exchanges** which chain together into coherent and deepening lines of enquiry
* **discussion and argumentation** which probe and challenge rather than unquestioningly accept
* **professional engagement with subject matter** which liberates classroom discourse from the safe and conventional
* **classroom organisation, climate and relationships** which make all this possible.

Robin Alexander’s framework for dialogic teaching comprises clearly-specified justifications, oral and organisational repertoires, classroom indicators and guiding principles or criteria.   His approach is now in regular classroom use in the UK and other countries.

# Teaching Approaches/Dialogic teaching

## 1 Introduction to Dialogue

The difficulties of defining dialogue begin with the question of how many can take part before it turns into something else. In ordinary conversation, the managing of turns is a shared responsibility, and competition for 'having one's say' in groups larger than, for example, half a dozen makes a diversion into parallel conversations very likely. Most classroom talk, in contrast, involves a centralised communication system. Teachers direct the talk by doing most of it themselves, combining lengthy exposition with many questions, allocating the right or obligation to answer those questions and evaluating the answers. The transmission of knowledge creates very unequal communicative rights to those who 'know' and those who do not. This is why the sequence of (teacher) initiation - (pupil) response - (teacher) evaluation has emerged from so many research studies as the 'essential teaching exchange'1 In whole-class questioning, it carries risks that a single right answer will be taken as representing a class-wide understanding and a single wrong answer as a common failure to get the point.

## 2 Typical Classroom Dialogue

Research in many countries has shown that in whole-class sessions teachers tend to talk much more than their pupils. They also ask the great majority of questions. Moreover, most of their questions will form the first part of an exchange between a teacher and pupil known as an initiation-response-feedback (IRF) exchange.1 These IRF exchanges give classroom talk its distinctive and familiar form.

There has been much debate amongst educational researchers over the years about the functions and value of this characteristic form of classroom interaction.2 In this debate, it was at one time very common to find researchers criticising teachers for talking and questioning too much. However, most classroom researchers would probably now agree that such judgements were too simplistic. One reason is that critics did not properly acknowledge teachers' professional responsibility for directing and assessing pupils' learning of a curriculum, and the ways that they must rely on questions and other prompts to do so. Secondly, they tended to assume that all IRF exchanges were performing the same communicative function. Through the work of sociolinguists, linguistic philosophers and psychologists, we now know that it is dangerous to assume that forms of language have any direct and necessary relation to their functions. By this I mean that, for example, we cannot assume that when someone poses a question to another person, they will always be 'doing the same thing'. At an everyday level, we all appreciate this very well. In a personal conversation we are likely to perceive the question 'Do you really think that you can talk to me like that?' as carrying a very different kind of message from 'Do you want a cup of tea?'. What is more, even an apparently simple and direct question may take on special meanings within a particular setting or relationship.

In the classroom, teachers' questions can have a range of different communicative functions. For example, they can be used to test pupils' factual knowledge or understanding ('Can anyone tell me the capital city of Argentina?'), to manage classroom activity ('Are you all ready now to put your pencils down and listen?') and to find out more about what pupils are doing ('Why did you decide to have just three characters in your play?').

Even the above analysis is an oversimplification, because a question can have more than one function (for example, to find out what pupils are doing *and* to make them think about it) and because it takes on special meanings in the life of a particular class (have they studied Argentina already or are they about to begin?). But the key point is that the distinction between form and function is important for analysing and evaluating teacher-pupil dialogue.

## 3 Dialogic Talk

Through his comparative research in the primary school classrooms of five countries, Robin Alexander3 has shown that if we look beneath the superficial similarity of talk in classrooms the world over, we will find teachers organising the communicative process of teaching and learning in very different ways. In most of the classrooms he observed, teachers talked more than the pupils; but the balance and nature of contributions varied considerably, both between countries and between classrooms. One of the reasons for this variation was that in some classrooms a teacher's questions (or other prompts) would elicit only brief responses from pupils, while in others they often generated much more extended and reflective talk. The concept of 'dialogic talk' emerged from these observations as a way of describing a particularly effective type of classroom interaction. 'Dialogic talk' is that in which both teachers and pupils make substantial and significant contributions and through which pupils' thinking on a given idea or theme is helped to move forward. It may be used when teachers are interacting with groups or with whole classes.

I can illustrate my understanding of the function of this kind of talk through the example below. It was recorded in an English primary school by Open University researcher Manuel Fernandez, who is investigating the role of computers in children's literacy development. In this extract, the teacher is talking with some members of her year 5/6 class about their current activity; they are communicating by e-mail with members of a class in another local school about the shared curriculum topic 'How to have a healthy lifestyle'.

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| --- | --- |
| Teacher | Right. Somebody is going to read this to me now. |
| Declan | ‘Dear Springdale. In science we are looking at the healthy human body. We need a lot of exercise to keep our muscles, hearts and lungs working.’ |
| Samia | ‘Working well.’ |
| Declan | ‘Working well. It also keeps our bones strong.’ |
| Samia | Yeah. We don’t need a full stop. |
| Teacher | Yeah. That’s fine. That’s all right. Carry on. ‘Flies …’ |
| Declan | ‘Flies and other animals can spread diseases and germs. That is why it is very important to keep food stored in clean cupboards, etcetera.’ |
| Evan | Is cupboards spelled wrong? (It is written ‘cubourds’) |
| Teacher | Yes, it is spelled wrong actually. It is cup-boards. Cup-boards. |
| Samia | (Reading as teacher writes) B-O-A-R-D-S. |
| Teacher | It’s a difficult word |
| Evan | O, A. |
| Teacher | OK. Can I ask you a question? And etcetera is ETC, not ECT. I want to ask you a question before you carry on. So why have you felt it is important as a group to send Springdale this information? |
| (Several children speak together) |  |
| Teacher | Just a minute. Let’s have one answer at a time. |
| Samia | Cause if they haven’t done it yet. We can give them the information … |
| Teacher | Yeah. |
| Samia | … that we have found in the book and so when they do get – when they do this part they will know, they will know, so, to answer it. |
| Teacher | OK. Excellent. So what were you going to say Declan? |
| Declan | So they can have a healthy body and they can use it for information. |
| Teacher | OK. |
| Evan | And plus, if they haven’t got the books. |
| Teacher | And if they haven’t got the books. Now before you tell me anything else you’ve found in a book, I think, don’t know what you think, do you think it would be a good idea to tell them why you are … what you’ve just explained to me? We are sending you this information because … |
| Samia | Just because, we couldn’t find, something like … |
| Declan | They could be doing it right now. |
| Teacher | Well, they might be. |
| Samia | We are sending you this piece of information just in case you haven’t done it yet, to help you. |
| Teacher | Right, discuss it how you want to say that. OK? |

In the first part of the example, the teacher uses prompts to find out what the children have done. The first actual question comes from a child, on a point of spelling accuracy. When the teacher then begins to question the children, it is not to assess their spelling; it is to elicit their reasons for what they are writing to the children in the other school. She provides feedback on their answers ('OK. Excellent.'), so the episode has some features of the familiar IRF structure; but the teacher's questioning is used to encourage the pupils to perceive more clearly the nature of their task. She then picks up on what they have said to guide the next part of their activity, by suggesting that it will be useful to share their reasoning with their audience (and modelling how they might do it: 'We are sending you this information because ...'). She is using this interaction to build the knowledge foundations for the next stage of their activity - talking with them to guide their thinking forward. So we have here talk in which pupils make substantial and thoughtful contributions, and in which the teacher does not merely test understanding, but guides its development. What is more, all the pupils present are exposed to this reasoned discussion. This may not be 'whole-class dialogue', because the discussion is not shared with all members of the class; but it certainly seems to qualify as 'dialogic talk'.

We can consider further what 'dialogic talk' offers, from an educational point of view. One of the prime goals of education is to enable children to become more adept at using language, to express their thoughts and to engage with others in joint intellectual activity (their communication skills). A second important goal is to advance children's individual capacity for productive, rational and reflective thinking (their thinking skills). Dialogic talk can help achieve both these goals. The work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky is relevant for understanding why this is so.4 He suggested that using language to communicate helps us learn ways to think. As he put it, what children gain from their 'intermental' experience (communication between minds through social interaction) shapes their 'intramental' activity (the ways they think as individuals). What is more, he suggested that some of the most important influences on the development of thinking will come from the interaction between a learner and more knowledgeable, supportive members of their community.

Although developed over half a century ago, Vygotsky's intriguing ideas have only really been put to the test in recent years. Now research has confirmed the validity of some of his claims about the link between language use and the learning of ways of thinking. Research has shown that teachers' modelling of ways of asking questions, offering explanations and providing reasons can have a significant and positive effect on how children use language in problem-solving tasks.5 Research by myself and colleagues has shown that a programme of carefully designed teacher-led and group- based activities enables children not only to become better at talking and working together but also at solving problems alone.6 The group-based activities of this programme are very important; but equally important is the kind of dialogue a teacher uses in whole-class plenaries and group monitoring. It is no coincidence that the teacher in the example above has been involved in this programme. And this brings us back to 'dialogic talk'.

## 4 Why Dialogic Talk?

For children to become more able in using language as a tool for both solitary and collective thinking, they need involvement in thoughtful and reasoned dialogue, inwhich conversational partners 'model' useful language strategies and in which they can practise using language to reason, reflect, enquire and explain their thinking to others. By using questions to draw out children's reasons for their views or actions, teachers can help them not only to reflect on their reasoning but also to see how and why to seek reasons from others. By seeking and comparing different points of view, a teacher can help those views to be shared and help children see how to use language to compare, debate and perhaps reconcile different perspectives. Providing only brief factual answers to IRF exchanges will not give children suitable opportunities for practice, whereas being drawn into more extended explanations and discussions of problems or topics will. This is the valuable kind of educational experience that 'dialogic talk' and 'whole-class dialogue' can offer.

<http://oer.educ.cam.ac.uk/wiki/Teaching_Approaches/Dialogic_teaching>

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