A DIALOGIC TEACHING APPROACH TO UNDERGRADUATE ESL INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this paper is to further the understanding on how dialogic theory and research could be a valid lens through which ESL Composition teaching is approached. First,this paper puts forth a rationale to explain why dialogic teaching matters before building on theorists whose dialogic frameworks align with my purposes. Likewise, I draw upon Bakhtin, Freire, Nystrand, and Alexander to inform my understanding of dialogic theory. Later in this paper, I propose a dialogic teaching approach to an undergraduate ESL Composition course. What this paper has shown is that implementing dialogic instruction in ESL has numerous benefits to students' overall learning. Specifically, using classroom talk seems to be effective in the teaching and learning of argumentation. However, unless ESL programs acknowledge the need for dialogic teaching approaches, we risk perpetuating what is already a pervasive monologic teaching practice in ESL. Finally, this paper overviews relevant pedagogical implications.*

KEYWORDS: dialogic teaching, dialogue, ESL Composition, ESL students, dialogic feedback, classroom talk, argumentative writing.

A Dialogic Teaching Approach to ESL Composition

"Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction."
— Bakhtin

INTRODUCTION

Freshmen ESL students in American Universities often lack the opportunity and confidence to participate in classroom discussions in their non-ESL credit courses; however, the ESL classroom remains perhaps the best avenue for ESL students to develop their voice. Many ESL students tend to take what they hear from teachers and what they read in academic sources at face value. Hence, teachers should prepare their students to shift from what Barnes (2010) called *right answerism—* evaluating students' contributions as either right or wrong— to discussing the reasoning behind their input. This practice is more beneficial to their learning than simply evaluating their responses.

As Lefstein and Snell (2014) made clear, dialogue has the potential to elevate classroom talk to incorporate critiquing and thinking together about knowledge. The challenge remains that many ESL students are reticent toward interactive classroom talk. Bauer and Picciotto (2013) reported the same: "the dialogic and democratic pedagogy does not always seem to work effectively with our international students perhaps due to limited English proficiency, perhaps due to the kinds of reading and writing experiences they have encountered in the past" (p. 79). This awareness remains essential if we want to provide ESL students with an environment that is conducive to learning, one that Silva (1993) envisioned as implementing ESL friendly teaching and curricula.

Theoretical Framework
I build my understanding of dialogic teaching on the work of Bakhtin, Freire, Nystrand, and Alexander. Of particular importance to my focus on dialogic teaching is an examination of Bakhtin's theory of speech genres. Bakhtin (1981) distinguished between two speech genres: authoritative and dialogic discourse. The former is monologic—the speaker emphasizes their perspective that is viewed as true—while the latter is democratic—it allows for conversational turns to happen and for different perspectives to be articulated. According to Bakhtin (1986), every utterance is necessarily a response to preceding utterances within a given sphere of communication. Indeed, Bakhtin considered thinking itself is dialogic since it involves an interaction between one's own ideas and those of others. It follows, therefore, that language itself is dialogic: "After all, our thought itself is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought" (p. 92).

Freire (1970) distinguished between two educational models. First, *the banking model* reinforces the dominance of teachers as depositors of knowledge while students are passive receivers of knowledge that is rarely subject to negotiation. Freire dismisses this model as misguided and oppressing. Second, *the problem-posing model* frames dialogue as central to the teaching and learning enterprise: teachers and students cocreate knowledge in an environment that values student voices and fosters critical thinking. Freire, moreover, expected educational dialogue to liberate students from indoctrination and disrupt teacher authoritarianism. While teachers initiate classroom talk with more content knowledge, the ultimate end of conversations should not be predetermined: "Dialogue is the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p.14).

Similarly, Nystrand (1997) argued for a *dialogically organized instruction* (DOI) that consists in teacher-student conversations where students are asked to think rather than simply memorize materials or provide answers to closed-ended questions. DOI involves opening dialogic spaces that incorporate and value students' voices. Specifically, Nystrand noted that classroom talk that fostered learning and critical thinking presented three essential elements: *authenticity*, *uptake*, and *high-level* evaluation. Nystrand's framework emphasizes the importance of teachers' *authentic questions* in promoting dialogic classroom talk. Open-ended questions encourage diverse perspectives and invite students to a conversation that is reciprocal, one where knowledge is co-constructed. Secondly, *uptake* builds on student responses instead of viewing them as ending points that need to be evaluated before moving to a subsequent conversation. Finally, *high-level*

evaluation affirms students' contributions to classroom talk and incorporates them into ensuing conversations.

Alexander (2020) considered that "Dialogic teaching harnesses the power of talk to engage students' interest, stimulate their thinking, advance their understanding, expand their ideas and build and evaluate argument,empowering them for lifelong learning and for social and democratic engagement" (p. i). Dialogic teaching, then, involves a judicious use of classroom talk to foster students' thinking and facilitate their learning. Noteworthily, Alexander proposed a model for dialogic teaching based on five guiding principles that describe dialogic teaching as:

collective: teachers and children address learning tasks together.
reciprocal: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints.
supportive: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings.
cumulative: teachers and children build on their own and each other's ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry.
purposeful: teachers plan and facilitate dialogic teaching with particular educational goals in view (Alexander, 2017, p. 28)

LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned previously, Lyle (2008) offers remarks that underline the pervasive nature of the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) teaching model. Similarly, Gillies (2015) found that teachers who received training in dialogic teaching practices were able to implement dialogic practices while Wells and Arauz (2006) found the IRF was omnipresent although its frequency declined after their intervention. Reznitskaya et al. (2009) explored *collaborative reasoning* to argue that students build a knowledge for argumentation through active participation in classroom dialogue. Moreover, Reznitskaya and Gregory (2013) noticed that inquiry dialogue springs from *the teacher's evaluativist epistemology* that prioritizes collective inquiry.

Mirroring Nystrand (1997), Mercer et al. (2009) highlighted the necessity for valuing students' contributions to classroom dialogue. Along with Wingate (2019) and Sedova et al. (2014), they invited teacher training programs to explicitly address how to effectively implement *dialogic pedagogy*. Shea (2019) enumerated effective dialogic teaching strategies like authentic questions and extensions of ideas. From another perspective, Phillipson and Wegerif (2017) came up with a dialogic framework involving four interrelated Cs. In their view, thinking together involves being **critical** (questioning ideas and asking for evidence), **creative** (suggesting hypotheses and alternatives), **caring** (respecting opposing views), and **collaborative** (supporting one another in the joint objective of meaning-making).

While some studies emphasized that knowledge is co-constructed through classroom talk (Applebee et al., 2003; Barnes, 2008; Sharpe, 2008), others investigated how classroom dialogue

was implemented (Teo, 2013; Lee, 2016; Burns & Myhill, 2004). Although these studies agreed on the potential of classroom talk to promote learning, they noted a host of challenges that hinder dialogic classroom interactions. Similarly, Teo (2013) indicated that building egalitarian teacher-student relationships involves a reconceptualization of the default expert-novice duality where teachers control classroom talk and students contribute only when called upon. Burns and Myhill (2004) noticed that course objectives and teacher-led questions limited students' opportunities to engage in classroom talk.

Middendorf (1992 and Jesson et al. (2016) viewed writing as a dialogic interaction between writers and readers. Learning to write, then, is learning to participate in dialogue. As such, Kuhn and Crowell (2011) and Kuhn et al., (2016) revealed that dialogic activities improved students' individual essays and their understanding of evidence in argumentation. Other studies reported a positive impact of dialogic approaches on the teaching and learning of argumentation (Al-Adeimi & O'Connor, 2020; Egglezou, 2016; VanDerHeide et al., 2016). It follows, therefore, that teaching should emphasize feedback as dialogic. Teachers could engage in conversation with their students to discover their feedback needs (Sutton, 2009). However, building supportive learning environments is critical if we want our students to feel confident about participating in classroom talk (Carless, 2012; Steen-Utheim, & Wittek, 2017). For instance, Macklin (2016) developed a Compassionate Writing Response framework. She engaged in dialogic feedback with her students. Essentially, her experiment framed feedback as dialogically constructed and as being based on mutual respect.

A Dialogic Approach to ESL Instruction

Given the overarching dialogic teaching principles guiding this paper, the purpose of this section is threefold. This section will address *the curriculum* in terms of scope and sequence. Later, I will explore *the pedagogical aspect* of this approach by overviewing the type of teaching and learning experience that ESL classrooms should reflect. Finally, this section offers an example of an argument writing task that is informed by dialogic theory.

Curriculum

Table 1. Scope and Sequence

Modules	Assessments & Assignments	Notes
Week 1: - Course overview Classroom talk - Types of sentences - Presentations	-Submit a reflection to an online discussion board (ODB) about what you expect from this course. -Respond to one peers' submission.	-Teachers explicitly explain what dialogic teaching means and how it can further students' learning -In pairs, students discuss presentation tips -Class discussion on presentation tips/skills

Week 2: Peer feedback and dialogic feedback -Introduction presentation:	-Presentations may include students' previous learning experiences, why they chose to study in the US, career goals, fun facts etc.	-The presentation is for students to tell their story, get to know their peers, and practice presentations skills. -Teacher address what dialogic feedback means. -Students receive feedback on their presentations -Students respond to/question the feedback they received.
Weeks 3 and 4: -Paragraph and essay structure	-Write a paragraph on one aspect of American culture you enjoy or don't understand. -Learning journal #1: submit a 150 word entry to the ODB on how you perceive dialogic feedback.	-Students will have 10 mins to draft their paragraphs, then read one of their peers' paragraphs before engaging in dialogic feedback in pairs.
Weeks 5 and 6: -Types of sources -Search tools -Evaluating sources	-Evaluating sources: Students select an article then draft a paper in which they comment on the article's overall strengths and limitations.	-Encourage students to take a critical stance toward academic sources -Students email their evaluation to a peer and exchange feedback electronically.

Week 7: -Plagiarism -Direct quoting	Learning journal # 2: students submit an entry on their experience evaluating academic sources. -Class discussion on students' peer feedback experience. .	-In pairs, students discuss what plagiarism means. -Class discussion on plagiarism. -Students collaborate with a peer to paraphrase academic quotes then discuss their work with another pair.
Week 8: - Paraphrasing and summarizing	- In pairs, students write a summary of an academic article	-Each pair reads then outlines their article in class, -Pairs collaborate to draft their summaries.
Week 9: -APA format: tips & guidelines	Learning journal # 3: submit an entry on your learning progress. -Students read a sample APApaper then discuss the paper's formatting and citation patterns. -Class discussion on APA rules	-In class, pairs exchange their summaries. -Pairs skim through the summary, then meet to discuss the feedback given and received.
Weeks 10-15: - Argument Writing	- Refer to pp. 8-9.	

Pedagogical Principles

Fostering Critical Thinking

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines critical thinking as "The objective, systematic, and rational analysis and evaluation of factual evidence to form a judgement on a subject, issue, etc." (OED, 2020). In fact, asking questions remains effective in engaging students as critical thinkers. However, the type of questions we ask our students matters. Highly dialogic questions—what Nystrand (1997) called *authentic questions*—remain the most effective in this respect. These open ended questions do not aim at eliciting predefined answers or at wrapping up conversations once a response is provided. Instead, they open the conversation for multiple perspectives. However, teachers should challenge students' assumptions by asking them to explain/elaborate on their ideas. These strategies stimulate reflection and deepen students' logical reasoning as Benesch (1999) noted: "Teaching critical thinking dialogically allows students to articulate their unstated assumptions and consider a variety of views" (p. 576).

According to Bakhtin (1981), thought and language are inherently dialogic. Likewise, critical thinking could be viewed as a mental and epistemic attitude toward learning. Helping students transition from passive learners to critical thinkers take time and involves supporting students in their efforts to embrace critical perspectives toward classroom talk. Encouraging students to be critical toward what they learn in class and beyond might be the most valuable skill students should acquire. For some students, however, being critical could easily be confused with criticizing someone's ideas. Teachers should explicitly address this misunderstanding among some ESL students.

Towards a Community of Learners

A community of learners involves teachers and students through teacher-student and student-student interactions. In essence, the level of interaction and engagement between students determines how their conceptualization of a sense of community is established. Similarly, classroom communities are strengthened when students can relate to each other and to the instructor hence the value of building rapport. Seen this way, the sense of belonging to a group positively impacts on students' motivation to learn and participate in classroom talk. Creating a community of learners means encouraging students to contribute to classroom talk. Broadly speaking, dialogic pedagogy involves, as Skidmore (2006) asserted, "the co-presence of the teacher as a concerned other, available to guide and coach the learner, as a member of a community of learners" (p. 513). Of equal importance is creating a safe and nonjudgmental classroom culture where students take risks and express themselves without being judged: every student's answer informs classroom talk and helps further understand their reasoning. Alexander (2017) describes this as *cumulative talk*: the community of learners builds on each other's ideas to achieve a cogent conceptual understanding. Ultimately, in cumulative dialogues, what matters is not the answers' accuracy per se, but the reasoning behind them; therefore, to further community building, teachers

should foster a culture of sharing their ideas, and, just as importantly, asking questions.

Mutual Scaffolding

Alexander (2017) explained that dialogic teaching opens spaces for teachers and students to address learning tasks together; teachers and students actively "listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints" (p. 28). Building on this, one way to implement dialogic teaching is through mutual scaffolding. My point here is to promote a culture of discussion where two students engage in dialogue to build a common understanding. For instance, students could discuss in pairs what certain concepts such as plagiarism means to them. Teachers could monitor the discussions, challenge students' assumptions, and ask them questions that serve as scaffolds to orient their discussions. As each pair discusses a given concept, they are grappling with nascent and sometimes divergent understandings that are essential to their learning. Teachers should nurture these instances of mutual scaffolding where dialogue is an instrument that promotes students' learning, agency, and voice.

Mutual scaffolding involves reciprocal meaning-making between two students at first and subsequently between pairs. Nonetheless, one might reasonably assume that simply putting students in pairs would naturally result in mutual scaffolding instances. That is not always the case. Providing guidance and support is sometimes inevitable if teachers expect dialogue to take place. The question I want to end with concerns engaging reticent students in classroom talk. On this account, Barnes (2010) reported that small group discussions have "the virtue of involving all the pupils in discussion and encourages the kind of exploratory talk that some pupils are hesitant to embark on when all their peers are listening" (p. 8). This strategy is worth considering when trying to help reticent students gradually ease into classroom discussion.

Sample Task: Argument Essay

Spanning a period of six weeks, students will examine an argumentative topic of their choice. (i.e., should students study abroad or in their home countries?). To convince their audience that their position is credible, students need to carefully examine the topic, collect, and evaluate evidence. Of particular importance is initiating students to evidence-based writing. Moreover, this task involves engaging one counterargument and providing credible rebuttals. As per the format, students will write a five-paragraph essay where they provide two arguments in support of their position, address one counterargument, and cite at least three academic sources.

Timeline

Table 2. Argument Essay Description

Modules	Activities
Week 10: - Argumentative writing	Day 1: In groups, students discuss what 'argument', 'argumentation', 'counterargument', 'rebuttal', 'evidence' mean to them before discussing their findings with another group. Wrap up with a class discussion. Day 2: In pairs, students discuss a sample argument essay then share their thoughts with another pair. -Students select an argument essay topic.
Week 11: -Topic selection and discussion -Counterarguments and rebuttals	Day 1: Students will choose/be assigned a peer collaborator for this task. -Short conferences with students to discuss their topics. Day 2: Learning journal # 4: a short entry on what argument writing means --- Entries should include a question to discuss in class. -Students draft a tentative outline and receive feedback from their partners. -Students implement the feedback then submit a revised outline to *OneDrive*. -Students search for three academic sources.
Week 12: -Discussing students' outlines and sources	Day 1: With their partners, students discuss their outlines and sources. -Conferences with students. Are they ready for the first draft? Day 2: Students write their first draft using the *OneDrive* file in class.
Week 13: Instructor and peer feedback	Day 1: In pairs, Students engage in dialogic feedback. Day 2: Conferences with students about their first draft.
Weeks 14 -Second draft and Customized feedback	Day 1: Students finish their second draft. - Customized feedback: students ask their partners/teacher a question about the most pressing issue in their paper. Day 2: based on the feedback, students revise their papers.
Week 15: Due date	- Students submit their final papers. *Note:* To facilitate dialogic feedback, a *OneDrive* file is created for each student. Access to each file is granted to the writer, their assigned peer, and the instructor.

Dialogic Teaching in Argumentation

As Nystrand (1997) and Alexander (2017) argued, classroom talk is at the heart of teaching and learning. In light of this assertion, the question naturally arises: does classroom talk impact positively on students learning. Ostensibly, several studies (VanDerHeide et al., 2016; Egglezou,

2016; Kuhn & Crowell, 2011; Jesson et al., 2016) have respectively underlined that conversation fosters the making of argumentative moves, peer voice (feedback) is transferrable to individual essays, some students are able to transfer dialogic talk into their own writing, and classroom talk has the potential to reflect the dialogic interplay between writers and readers.

As *Table 2* illustrates, classroom talk can be seen as the driving force for students' learning, but it takes different forms and happens at different levels. Classroom talk occurs at the macrolevel in whole class discussions when introducing the guiding principles of argumentative writing and through modeling based on the sample essay. This correlates with Alexander's (2017) concept of dialogic teaching as *collective*. Additionally, scaffolding language learning takes place at the microlevel in teachers' interactions with individual students and pairs or when students engage in group discussions. What matters most is to allow students to establish their voice and articulate their thinking in classroom talk and in their writing. It remains equally important for students to expand their learning at the microlevel: when they engage their peers in dialogic discussion, introspection, and feedback.

Let me now elaborate on the value of dialogic feedback and role play in teaching argumentation. According to Carless (2012), dialogic feedback reflects "interactive exchanges in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated" (p. 90). Hence, I propose promoting the role of peers as critical readers, reviewers, and interlocutors. As Alexander (2017) underlined, reciprocal meaning-making interactions are inherently dialogical. Likewise, opening dialogic spaces beyond the classroom remains necessary for students to expand on and respond to the feedback they receive. Online platforms such as *Google Docs* and *OneDrive* help transition dialogic feedback from the classroom to the online sphere provided, of course, the feedback should not be purely prescriptive. Rather, it should open dialogic spaces for students to exchange their ideas, make suggestions, offer alternatives, and ask questions about each other's writing.

One of the challenges faced by ESL students in argumentative writing remains identifying and rebutting counterarguments. What I propose here is to incorporate role play during brainstorming and outlining. The activity will consist of pairs exchanging their outlines and discussing their overall arguments. To give a brief example: take a pair that consists of students A and B. Student A will share their supporting arguments with student B, then the latter will play the role of someone holding the opposite stance to Student A. Likewise, instead of having student A hypothesize potential opposite views, having student B play that role facilitates student A's understanding of potential opposing arguments. What follows then is a second role play segment where the two students swap roles.

The dialogic virtues of role play return us to Bakhtin (1986). He argued that our thought "is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought" (p. 92). Given this idea, it would seem to make sense that beyond providing students with opportunities to explore potential counterviews and rebuttals, role play could raise students' audience awareness. What this means, moreover, is that while students engage in the role play activity primarily as speakers and listeners, the role play dynamic would necessarily involve them as readers and writers too. That is, role playing might be an effective way for students to test the credibility and validity of their arguments.

Implications

Dialogic teaching approaches seem to correlate with improvements in students' learning. However, numerous studies have underlined the resilient and pervasive nature of the IRF monologic teaching approach. I see no reason why ESL programs and teachers cannot adopt dialogic approaches in their classrooms. As Adler et al. (2003) and Caughlan et al. (2013) noticed, providing support and feedback to teachers on how to implement dialogic teaching resulted in better dialogically organized instruction in their classrooms. There is a great need, then, to prioritize dialogic teaching approaches in ESL, but that would necessarily require training teachers on how to design and implement dialogic interventions. What I am arguing for is more attention to how dialogic teaching is theorized. In this respect, I believe that Bakhtin, Friere, Nystrand, and Alexander offer a solid theoretical framework that ESL programs could use as sources to inform their training. As much as possible, ESL programs should balance the theoretical and practical elements involved in dialogic instruction.

However, implementing dialogic teaching is no simple task. The challenges are numerous: teachers may not always be able to cover the curriculum in a timely fashion while also providing ample time for classroom talk, dialogic instruction requires building quality rapport with the students, classroom size may undermine the effectiveness of this approach etc. Another significant implication relates to how students perceive dialogic instruction. It takes time to get ESL students acquainted with an interactive mode of teaching. It is possible that ESL students' previous learning experiences resembled Freire's *banking model* where the teaching is monologic, and the teacher is the undisputed authority. As this paper proposed, explicitly addressing the nature and value of dialogic teaching with ESL students is critical. Teachers could incentivize their students to embrace dialogic approaches and help transition their students from expecting to be lectured to a learning environment where their voice matters in shaping their learning experiences

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