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The role of provisional language in dialogic space

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that provisional language is important for creating a dialogic space between speakers, where ideas are open for discussion; where participants respect each other's viewpoints; and where the goal is to encourage and explore multiple perspectives. Whilst much of the research on children's talk in the classroom focuses on the language of reasoning (for example, "I think … because") less attention has been given to the role of more provisional language ("might," "could," "maybe") as students think together. Drawing on previously published research in elementary classes, the article innovatively uses rich examples of children's classroom dialogue to make the case that there is more to idea-sharing than justification and reasoning, and that being "provisional" in language enables a productive and collaborative learning space. The article argues that provisional language deepens and extends a metaphorical dialogic space by enabling creative thinking, epistemic modality and social cohesion.

Introduction

In this article I will argue that learning and thinking together is best enabled through an environment where peers and teachers listen carefully to each other and engage together in the shared endeavor of joint meaning making. I explore how *dialogic space* is realized through provisional language (using words such as "might," "maybe" and "could") and consider how carefully chosen modal vocabulary serves to deepen and extend a Dialogic Space of Possibility (Maine, 2015) between speakers, with consideration of how dialogue can propel creative thinking and the exploration of the "possible." Drawing on previously published research in elementary classes, the article moves from theory into practice by using rich examples of children's classroom dialogue to make the case that there is more to idea-sharing than justification and reasoning. The examples illustrate how being "provisional" in language enables a productive and collaborative learning space. These ideas are paramount for teachers seeking to encourage students to engage in talk and listen to each other's ideas.

The conceptualization of "dialogic space" in educational theory can broadly relate to 2 quite distinct notions. On the one hand dialogic *spaces* are environments that are conducive to collaborative and democratic learning and where key principles of giving voice to all participants are underpinned by shared values and *value orientation* (see for example, Alexander, 2020; Aukerman & Boyd, 2020). For other researchers, leaning perhaps more

specifically on the writings of theorists such as Bakhtin (1986) and Buber (1947), the concept of dialogic *space* is more philosophical, describing a metaphorical space between ideas as relational, fluid and infinite. Wegerif describes the space as a place of tension between ideas (2013) and thus fundamental to dialogue; it is the positioning of different viewpoints in relation to each other that creates a space between them.

Much of the research on children's talk in the classroom focuses on how the language of reasoning in dialogic interactions (such as, "I think … because") can enable high levels of critical thinking and argumentation in learners (see for example, Hennessy et al., 2016; Howe et al., 2019; Nystrand et al., 1997). Discourse markers that serve as proxies for reasoning have been used to evaluate the effectiveness of different learning contexts (Murphy et al., 2009; Soter et al., 2008) and some attention has been given to the role of speculation and provisionality as part of reasoning in dialogic environments (see for example, Boyd et al., 2019; Maine & Čermáková, 2022).

This article turns the spotlight on *how* provisional language creates a dialogic space between speakers where ideas are open for discussion, participants respect each other's viewpoints, and the goal is to encourage and explore multiple perspectives. After contextualizing the research within the sociocultural framing that underpins dialogic pedagogy, the article will move from theory into practice by exploring the language of thinking and dialogue in the classroom. It will present three cases of classroom talk to highlight the importance of provisional language in the enablement of creative thinking, epistemic modality and social cohesion as students embark on a journey of learning together.

Sociocultural framing and dialogic pedagogy

This study is framed by sociocultural theory that positions talk and language as key tools for learning (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978) and context as central in considering human action (Wertsch, 1991). Kumpulainen and Wray (2002, p. 26) describe a sociocultural view as one that, "stresses intersubjectivity and the construction of meanings in interaction," and thus it is not surprising that this theory underpins much educational research that considers the real contexts of school and other learning environments. As teachers well know, learning is a social endeavor.

Sociocultural theory has been influential in studies of classroom talk, highlighting the differences between monologic models of teaching where knowledge passes from teacher to student and dialogic approaches where learning can flourish in reciprocal and dynamic ways.

Alexander (2008) proposed a set of principles that would enable dialogic *spaces* after studying classroom practices across several countries, and these original principles sit well with the notion of creating dialogic space. He argued that dialogic classrooms would be: *collective* with teachers and children addressing learning tasks together; *reciprocal*, where teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints; *supportive* in that children might articulate their ideas freely without fear of embarrassment over wrong answers and they help each other to reach common understandings; *cumulative* in that teachers and children will build on their own and each other's ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry; and finally, *purposeful* with teachers planning and facilitating dialogic teaching with particular educational goals in view. For many researchers in the field, these

broad principles are embraced as indicators of dialogic pedagogy and they are equally recognizable to teachers trying to engage their students in meaningful learning activities.

Other researchers have focused more closely on what teachers and students are doing in such dialogic environments. Focusing on teachers' talk, Nystrand et al. (1997) placed particular importance on the role of authentic open-ended questions and the need for uptake of student responses that extends beyond a simple affirmation of contribution. Following this, a recent comprehensive study exploring the impact of dialogic teaching in whole class contexts was conducted by Howe et al. (2019) who presented a thorough review of research literature in the field, synthesizing key literature around teachers' dialogic pedagogy into 5 key themes: (1) open questions, (2) extended contributions that build and elaborate on other ideas; (3) differences of opinion that are acknowledged, explored and critiqued; (4) lines of inquiry that are integrated through linking and coordination; (5) metacognition that enables children to reflect on their own dialogue practices and to be aware of their own learning processes.

These theoretical ideas offer an important foundation on which to build an understanding of dialogic classroom practice. Thus, with this theory in mind, attention now turns to a close-up view of how language not only enables reasoning and productive thinking in the dialogic space between speakers, but iteratively enables the context in which this can happen in practice.

The language of thinking and dialogue

A wealth of classroom research has explored the notion of productive educational dialogue through the study of the language features of teacher and student interactions (Boyd et al., 2019; Hennessy et al., 2016; Howe et al., 2019; Mercer et al., 1999; Nystrand, 2006; Rojas-Drummond et al., 2006; Soter et al., 2008). A coding scheme for dialogue (SEDA) created by researchers in Mexico and England (Hennessy et al., 2016), aimed to bring together existing work in the field to create a framework for analyzing dialogue in educational contexts. The scheme clustered different types of dialogic talk move, ordering these in terms of their dialogic potential. The scheme also built on seminal work by Mercer and colleagues, which investigated the value of small group peer talk and focused on the linguistic markers of reasoning (such as "I think ... because" and "agree") and highlighted modal vocabulary (such as "could," "might," "maybe") as often indicating the opening up of speculation and subsequently, reasoning. Extending this, Boyd and colleagues (Boyd & Kong, 2017; Boyd et al., 2019) have differentiated between different types of reasoning and pay particular attention to the language of possibility and modal vocabulary. These studies focus on critical thinking as the goal of productive dialogue and here modality is seen as a feature of reasoning.

However, other research (Maine & Čermáková, 2021, 2022) has argued that regarding provisional language simply as an indicator of subsequent reasoning somewhat undervalues the wider purposes of such language. We investigated modal words to examine the ways in which they enabled shared thinking with space for multiple perspectives and changes of mind, in other words, how they deepened and extended dialogic space. We found that individuals used these words not only in situations where peers were "thinking aloud in action" together (Maine & Čermáková, 2022, p. 14) but also when speakers presented ideas

to a larger audience with less confidence about how their ideas might be received. This is an important part of the concept of dialogic space—ideas are put forward into the void for consideration by others and it is their co-construction which augments them. As each idea is proposed, multiple possible responses exist. Calling this a Dialogic Space of Possibility (Maine, 2015) highlights the potential for creative, or "possibility," thinking (Craft, 2000) afforded by offering suggestions, speculations and proposals. This space can be described as a moment between speakers where ideas are fluid and provisional. It also relates to the ideas of Bakhtin, who argued that dialogue is infinite (1986) as there is always the possibility of response. For teachers, this means helping students to understand that there are multiple options available as response to ideas, including agreement, disagreement, extension, or even ignoring the point and saying something new. At the point where a response happens, a new set of possibilities are available. It is here that provisionality becomes important. If someone proposes an idea using modal language, this can be seen as a dialogic initiation as it is inviting alternatives. By suggesting something "might" be a good action or solution leaves open the idea that it "might not" be.

Approaches to studying classroom talk

The examples that feature in this article all come from studies situated within a sociocultural paradigm. These studies take the theory of discourse analysis and make it relevant to classroom practice by applying it to real interactions between students, peers, and teachers.

Three overlapping methodologies are at play here: Socio-Cultural Discourse Analysis (Mercer & Littleton, 2007), Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 2003) and Linguistic Ethnography (Copland & Creese, 2015; Lefstein & Snell, 2020). All 3 consider interactions as situated within a social context and acknowledge the value of an iterative movement between micro and macro perspectives. In other words, in addition to looking specifically at the frequency of different language features, it is important to consider what impact this has on learning and the learning environment. So, for teachers reflecting on idea sharing in their classrooms, attention should be given to *who* speaks, and *how* they speak.

In Mercer and colleagues' work (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Mercer et al., 1999) the SocioCultural Discourse Analysis (SCDA) approach meant using concordance processes to identify frequently occurring reasoning words, but these were then examined in context to check that their function in the talk was, in fact, reasoning and to consider this in the context of the learning environment of the classroom. For these authors, 3 levels of speech analysis apply to a sociocultural discourse analysis: cultural, social, and psychological, showing the situated nature of communication and interaction. For teachers, the relevance of this approach is in considering how students talk and think together, how they build on ideas through reasoning and listen to each other. The work recommended that students needed to generate ground rules for talk, that students could democratically agree and apply to their own group work.

An Ethnography of Communication (EoC) approach (Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 2003) sets "communicative acts" (utterances or "dialogic moves" with intended functions) within "communicative events" of dialogue, again highlighting the contextual nature of talk. In work by Hennessy et al. (2016) and Rojas-Drummond et al. (2006, 2017), patterns of qualitatively assigned codes for communicative acts are considered within the broader

context of communicative events and these are part of a "nested hierarchy" inside communicative situations. The implication for teachers in this approach is to consider the contexts for learning. Are small group discussions clear in their focus? How will students share ideas in the whole class? How can high levels of thinking be promoted by the dialogic moves of teachers. The EoC approach also highlights the importance of noting dialogic moves in a sequence, as highlighted by Rajala and Hilppö (2012) whose work looked at expanded responses in sequences of interaction, and Bloome et al. (2005), whose micro-ethnographic approach examined closely the relationships between different speech turns.

The third overlapping approach, Linguistic Ethnography (LE) (Copland & Creese, 2015; Lefstein & Snell, 2020), draws more explicitly on t2 contrasting fields, using the methods of corpus linguistics to identify patterns in language beyond simple concordance and then, as in SocioCultural Discourse Analysis, uses these patterns to look more closely at sequences of interactions. Copland and Creese (2015) argue that the affordance of a Linguistic Ethnographic approach is that by employing corpus linguistic techniques, episodes of interaction that intuitively seem to be dialogic can be analyzed to interrogate the linguistic patterns and participation structures. In turn, deep qualitative analysis enables an iterative focus between micro and macro levels, thus examining the close-up linguistic particularities of interaction, but without losing sight of the wider context of the dialogue.

Aukerman and Boyd (2020) rightly note the reductive danger of simply looking at functions and patterns of language in dialogic discourse, as the value-led orientations that lead learners and teachers to interact in particular ways are more subtle than simply being represented by a frequency of dialogic discourse markers. The importance for all 3 approaches is that whilst the analysis might "zoom in" on micro-level linguistic markers or dialogic functions, the analysis also "zooms out" to look at the macro-level context, in this case the dialogic space created by students and teachers in a dialogic classroom. At a meso-level, sequences of interactions enable insights into how a dialogic space between speakers is initiated and maintained.

Teasing these 3 methodologies apart may not in fact be that fruitful, the importance is that all are situated within a sociocultural framing that recognizes that the situation of the dialogue happening plays an important part in how meanings are made. To reflect on the opening of this article, in other words, these approaches enable examination of dialogic *space* within dialogic *spaces*. With these theoretical and methodological frameworks in mind, the next section examines 3 cases in classroom talk where this dialogic space between speakers is created and turns specifically to how provisional language is used as a pivotal tool.

Exploring three cases

Provisional language as an enabler of creative thinking in dialogic space

In the first case study, 2 boys aged 6 have been looking at a series of paintings to try to understand them. With the simple instruction to ask questions and work out what each painting is all about, the children set to it with gusto. They spend time identifying key parts of each picture, before reasoning together to co-construct meaning. In the exchange below, the boys are examining a surrealist painting by Rene Magritte. *Golconde* (1953) shows the

air filled with floating figures, all dressed in long coats and bowler hats. The children are perplexed by this, but gradually come to a solution that satisfies them both.

Exchange 1: Harry and Ben discuss *Golconde*

14 H: But … I ***wonder if*** they are going up or down. That's a question, isn't it?

15 B: [Hmm]

16 H: Because they're going down on … they look like …

17 B: [Cos cos they're on the floor]

18 H: … I know, but they ***might*** have been taking off … and how are they getting up there?

19 B: [yeah … or …] … or they ***might*** have jumped out of a helicopter (unclear)

20 H: I know … how can an airplane or a helicopter hold so many people in it?

21 B: Well … there could be 1, 1, 1, 1 (gestures) … it ***could be*** like …

22 H: [there ***could be*** 10 of them]

23 B: … and then they'd set out of another 10 … and … another 10 and another 10 and another 10 …

24 H: [And] then they ***might*** all fly back up again and they ***might*** go and land somewhere else ***mighten*** they?

25 B: Yeah … and do something …

(from Maine, 2012, p. 7)

The boys' dialogue is rich with possibility demonstrated through their questioning, wondering and hypothesis. They are not constrained by the frame of the picture but extend its storyworld through "possibility thinking" (Craft, 2000) with questions, suggestions, and idea generation. They work together to creatively solve the problem of the text and their modal language enables each of them to respond to the other. Harry's initial question reflects creative thinking—that the picture does not show static figures in limbo—nor do the children assume that the figures are falling, but rather Harry engages with the picture itself as a snapshot, a moment to respond to dialogically. He is not bound by conventional thinking (nor indeed by any cultural saturation that might lead him to suggest that it is "raining men"). As Ben proposes that they "might have jumped out of a helicopter," Harry queries the practicality of this, leading Ben to revise his suggestion to propose that there might be many helicopters, the number of which are left dangling in ellipsis, "another 10 and another 10 …." In this example, the provisional language offers possibility of *might* or *could be*, modes at the heart of possibility thinking (Craft, 2000). These creative proposals enable the joint construction of meaning, not just through agreement in which the dialogic space would be limited, but through critical questioning and story embellishment, thus extending the space of possibility into new and creative thinking.

Extending and deepening dialogic space through epistemic modality

The second example of classroom talk explores the notion of epistemic modality. This a linguistic term which refers to language "concerned with the speaker's assumptions, or assessment of possibilities, and, in most cases, it indicates the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed" (Coates, 1987, p. 112). In other words, epistemic modality involves the proposition of an idea, but with a "get out" clause: "I propose this idea, but I'm not entirely committed to it." It is enacted through provisional language and is an important part of dialogic space between speakers. Rowland (2007) found in his study of mathematics classes that "vague language" was also often used as ideas were being constructed and renegotiated as children solved mathematical problems. Following this, in a recent study exploring the correlation of different discourse markers it was found that linguistic vagueness, provisional language and reasoning language create epistemic modality as ideas are explored together (Maine & Čermáková, 2022).

In the exchange below, a class of 9–10 year-olds are discussing a short wordless film called *Baboon on the Moon* (Duriez, 2002) and its themes of homesickness, loneliness, and belonging. Differently from the first exchange which involved 2 peers, this interaction occurs between student and teacher or more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978). Here the sociocultural context of learning is clearly apparent as Lucy's teacher offers extensions so that Lucy can deepen her thinking.

Exchange 2: Lucy and her teacher discuss the film *Baboon on the Moon*

389 L: We can't really say like the baboon's home IS on earth or on the moon, because he **might** actually be missing something in his [home]—

390 T: [Yeah].

391 L: Because—

392 T: And **if** he went back to earth, **would** there be elements **maybe** that he missed about the moon?

393 L: Because [on]—his home on the moon uhm it's like he **might** just be missing something 'cos I I moved house and I didn't like it at first, but then when I got all my stuff in—

394 T: Yeah.

395 L: It sort of felt like home. So **maybe** he **might** be missing a family member or something.

(from Maine & Čermáková, 2022, p. 10)

It is important to note that the context of this talk is a whole class discussion, so the whole class is listening to both Lucy's and the teacher's ideas. Epistemic modality is created through the participants' use of "maybe," "might" and "if." This allows the idea to be proposed without loss of face if others disagree, as it is tentatively proposed rather than stated as fact. It also, like the creative thinking of Harry and Ben, allows for responses that might take the discussion in a different direction, opening the door to

multiple perspectives and interpretations. Enlisting a corpus linguist to look closely at the language, however, we noticed something else as a pattern in the language. As Lucy was thinking and presenting her ideas at the same time (thinking in action) there were other discourse features apparent, notably the use of linguistic vagueness (such as, "something," "like" or "stuff"). Whilst school curricular value highly the use of specific reasoning vocabulary, there may be emphasis on "correct" English usage (see, for example, Snell & Cushing, 2022) which actually inhibits the authentic creation of meaning by restricting vocabulary. In this discussion, Lucy is able to explore and develop the idea through responding to the teacher, so vagueness allows her to maintain the openness of the idea without tying it down to specificity. Additional speakers might add the detail, in the same way that Harry and Ben embellish their story of helicopters. Here both notions of dialogic space/spaces are fundamental. The text to be interpreted is suitably ambiguous as to invite a widened dialogic space of possibility. Additionally though, the classroom ethos is one where children feel comfortable to share emerging ideas, hedging and using linguistic vagueness as they pick their way through their own thinking.

Building social cohesion as foundational to dialogic space

Arguably, the most important function of provisional language is that it builds social cohesion between speakers. Talk is a "social mode of thinking" (Mercer, 1995, p. 1) and Maybin argues that even "one utterance can (and usually does) serve a number of different cognitive and social purposes simultaneously" (1994, p. 148), so in this final case study, the social element is the focus. The space between speakers, where individuals share ideas openly without concern that they might be ridiculed, relies on some preexisting shared values around voice and participation. It means that participants in a dialogue need to be able to tolerate the ambiguity of there being potentially several answers, or a non-definite resolution to a problem. Formal argumentation structures, that appear often in classroom debate, position ideas on one side or the other of an issue with a goal of seeking agreement. However, in reality, discussions are rarely as clear cut, and not all position ideas against each other with resolution as the goal. To be able to exist in a world where there are multiple ideas and perspectives, where people may not only have different answers but may be asking different questions, means that some attention to "social cohesion" (Maine, 2015, p. 101) is paramount to ensure that harmony is maintained and that there are not social consequences to disagreeing or proposing alternative viewpoints.

The disposition of tolerating ambiguity not only means being receptive to the unknown (Stiftung & Cariplo, 2008) but also seeking out new and innovative discoveries (Deardorff, 2006). It is congruent with the idea of dialogic space as provisional and exploratory, and at the heart of the concept is the social goal of inclusion. In another class of 9–10 year-olds, a group of 4 children discuss how the baboon might feel on the moon and Matthew proposes that maybe he is not sad, but angry:

Exchange 3: Matthew, Rose, Nicole and Owen discuss *Baboon on the Moon*

Matthew: Listen though, I've got an idea. [...] **What if—what if** he's not sad. He's just angry?

Rose: How come?

Matthew: ***What if*** he's been put on the moon for no reason whatsoever? You're gonna be angry. [...] Like you've been put on the moon, haven't you, and—

Nicole: Yeah.

Matthew: But we don't know he's been put on the moon, but by the way he acts and he's sad and he walks slow, always has his head drooping, it sort of gives you the impression that he is upset and ***maybe*** he's more angry than upset of the way he's been treated by people on earth.

Owen: Yeah.

As in the other exchanges, the children's reasoning is correlated to provisional language and is used to propose ideas. However, here Matthew explicitly tries to persuade his peers about his idea and encourages them to see his point of view. Again, when analyzed closely, linguistic vagueness is also a feature. It allows a novel and possibly contentious idea to be proposed but without being adversarial (or closing down the dialogic space). In addition to this modal vocabulary, Matthew also colludes with his peers, bringing them into his argument through his use of second voice, for example, "gives you." He invites the other children to empathize with the baboon: "You're gonna be angry. [...] Like you've been put on the moon, haven't you ...." It is deeply persuasive, both offering provisionality, but positioning his listeners so that they too are part of the argument. Matthew's awareness of a goal of social cohesion means that he realizes the need to bring his peers along with him in the social dialogic space.

Implications for practice

The 3 case studies demonstrate how dialogic space between speakers is necessarily provisional, relying on contributions to be proposed rather than stated if the discussion is to grow. Teachers are used to modeling the language of reasoning and prompting children to justify their ideas. I argue that teachers should also model the language of provisionality, showing how ideas can be presented as contestable, and as invitations for other points of view. This means creating an environment where teacher talk extends beyond the asking of questions and includes offering opinions and ideas as part of collaborative learning.

Surrounding the talk itself, is the ethos of a classroom where commitment to the inclusion of different voices and tolerance of ambiguity around multiple perspectives are prerequisite. This ethos is reliant on genuine, authentic discussion tasks that do not simply position children on either side of a debate but invite open-ended creative responses. This necessitates careful consideration of learning tools. Visual texts such as wordless picture-books or films are inclusive and also appealing, they offer a springboard into more philosophical and potentially creative thinking. It is important that teachers are able to employ the use of rich resources that stimulate and excite children's imaginations, and thus this is also an implication for curriculum policy.

The 3 examples of dialogic exchange show the importance of a sociocultural analysis of classroom interactions, not just for researchers investigating language use and creating new theory, but also for teachers to understand how children in their classes are using language

to think together. These examples also show how provisional language, that might otherwise be considered as secondary to the language of argumentation and reasoning, plays a central role in enabling a social harmony through creating and preserving the dialogic space between speakers in an iterative and dynamic co-construction of meaning.

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Additional resources

1. The DIALLS project website. https://dialls2020.eu/

DIALLS (Dialogue and Argumentation for cultural Literacy Learning in Schools) was a three-year project working with schools across Europe teaching children the skills of dialogue underpinned by the dispositions of tolerance, empathy and inclusion. The website has a dedicated space for teachers with a teaching programme designed to enhance dialogue in the classroom through meaningful, authentic discussions in response to wordless short films.

2. The T-SEDA website. https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/programmes/tseda/

This resource developed by researchers at Cambridge University in the UK contains rich tools for teachers who want to develop their own dialogic practice in their classrooms. It offers models for professional learning, alongside observational tools for teachers to analyze the language that children use in their discussions.

3. Reznitskaya A., & Wilkinson, I. (2017). *The most reasonable answer: Helping students build better arguments together*. Harvard Education Press.

The Most Reasonable Answer is an innovative and comprehensive guide to engaging students in inquiry dialogue—a type of talk used in text-based classroom discussions. The book includes ideas for talk, and rubrics for assessing students talk.