

## **Dialogue and Discourse**

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### **Introduction**

This paper sets out to apply a survey of the literature on discourse and dialogue in relation to teaching and learning to the context of a pre-sessional academic English programme for international students destined for under- or postgraduate courses across a range of disciplines in a post-1992 university. 'International' students, here, are those whose first language is not English and who have undertaken most, if not all, of their previous education outside the UK in their first language. Most participants are required to complete the 12-week full-time course as a precondition for university entry, based on current English language competency at a level 0.5/1 IELTS<sup>i</sup> point below institutional entry requirements. Our multi-disciplinary programme aims to progress students' English language proficiency, to acculturate them to U.K. Higher Education and to determine their readiness to proceed, in terms of language level, to their subsequent course. This paper sets the programme in the wider HE context with reference to the literature on discourse theory and, briefly, to issues of blended learning.

### **Context**

With both the massification and growing internationalisation of Higher Education, discourse and dialogue have a role to play in opening up the 'academy' into an arena of participation where new voices bring new direction. If Higher Education is to serve a 'higher' purpose of developing critical, questioning and open-minded graduates, dialogue must surely be a priority. Employers seek graduates with not only communication and teamwork skills, but also an ability to see other perspectives and think 'creatively'. With a strong focus on employability, courses may increasingly need to induct students not only into academic discourses, but also into those associated with relevant professional fields and also to equip students with the interpersonal skills necessary to engage in authentic, productive and forward-thinking dialogue with others across a range of contexts.

At the level of language proficiency, we argue that discourse, whilst challenging, is particularly relevant for our pre-sessional students. Yet, many dispute whether students at this level should focus on academic or disciplinary language, as opposed to general English. Indeed, typically with an IELTS score of no more than 5 ('modest user'<sup>ii</sup>), even the students tend to expect a remedial English language course. Hyland (2006), however, claims that 'while students may need to attend more to sentence-level features at lower proficiencies, there is no need to ignore specific language uses at any stage' (p12), arguing that students 'acquire features of the language as they need them, rather than in the order that teachers present them' (p11). If our aim is to maximise students' chance of success in their subsequent studies, it seems sensible to do whatever we can, even if at a more basic level than may be desirable, to start to induct them into the discourses of U.K. Higher Education and their own disciplines, and also to familiarise them with an educational culture which expects them to be active, vocal and critical participants.

## Why Discourse?

Definitions of discourse and dialogue are by no means universally agreed. Beyond the more general concepts of 'speaking' or 'language', Gee (1990: p131) highlights the social function of discourse as the defining characteristic:

*"A Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts', of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role'".*

Thus discourse embodies the user's identity and affiliations, calling into play the idea of inclusion/exclusion. If Higher Education is designed to empower students by 'including' them within dominant discourse groups, then a key learning target should be to enable them to participate in knowledge communities and to master relevant discourses (Northedge, 2003). Yet discourses are not fixed, but fluid, evolving in time and overlapping (Gee, 1990) and within Higher Education, there exist a range of discourses, varying according to discipline, institution, context, purpose and audience. The challenge this presents is another reason to prioritise awareness-raising and apprenticeship into university discourses, as our programme does.

Moreover, if the socially-based nature of discourse is its key feature, it makes sense to consider our engagement in discourse with others, in dialogue. For Bakhtin, dialogue is the only way to consider discourse because "every utterance is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates" (Bakhtin 1981, p284 cited in Gravett and Henning 1998, p61). Beyond more general terms such as 'conversation' or 'discussion', which also involve an addressee, commentators have focused on the *purposefulness* of dialogue, and, so

apposite for the University context, the structured way in which it aims towards *new understandings* (Rule, 2004; Skidmore, 2006).

## Literature review

The work of Vygotsky and social constructivism highlights the importance of discourse/language in learning. Russell (2002) explains how Vygotsky expanded previous behaviourist models which had focused on learning purely as an individual's response to stimuli, and stressed the importance of cultural tool mediation, particularly language and social settings, when an individual encounters any stimulus. Learning does not occur in a void, but depends on the learner constructing the process him/herself in conjunction with others and the social environment and mediated by language. For Vygotsky, problem solving with more capable others holds the potential to extend a learner's current stage of development, the zone of current development (ZCD) into the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Harland, 2003). Discourse clearly plays a key role in these collaborative problem-solving activities. Building on Vygotsky's ideas, Bruner (1975, cited in Harland 2003) highlighted the importance of 'scaffolding' to support learners' development. Examples might include critical reflection on learning to progress through the ZPD (Harland, 2003), a form of 'self-dialogue'. Scaffolding to help learners into discourse communities might also include the use of 'intermediate' discourses such as narratives and case studies, couched in everyday language and experiences as a bridge to more abstract academic concepts (Northedge, 2003).

Activity Theory, developed by Leont'ev from Vygotsky's ideas, also stresses the integrality of context and tools, including language, in the learning process. 'Learning' is viewed as expanding involvement – social as well as intellectual – with some activity system over time, rather than the internalisation of discrete information or skills. (Russell, 2002: p69). In this model, students are seen to bring different prior learning histories to the activity system (Russell, 2002) and to construct their learning from the point at which they are (Gravett and Henning, 1998). Drawing on Bakhtin's ideas, Gravett and Henning (1998) advocate the teacher as 'dialogic mediator', guide and co-learner rather than all-knowing giver of knowledge. They note, however, the challenges for the teacher in diagnosing where students are and the danger of trying to construct students' knowledge for them.

Bakhtin, like Vygotsky, emphasised the importance of language and social context in learning, developing these ideas further into 'dialogism' and contrasting 'dialogic' and 'monologic' discourse:

*'Monologic talk focuses power on the teacher; it stifles dialogue and interactions between pupils and their ideas. Dialogic talk creates a space for multiple voices and discourses that challenge asymmetrical power relations constructed by monologic practices'* (Lyle, 2008: p225).

Dialogical pedagogy sees learning as identity formation and dialogue as the process by which this takes place. Bakhtin favoured 'internally persuasive dialogue' over the 'authoritarian dialogue' of the teacher (Lillis, 2003). There is potential, however, for conflict not just between individuals in dialogue, but also within a learner, if for example, their primary discourses (that of the community, culture or religion with which they grew up) espouse or hold values that are different to their secondary discourses, such as those of UK education (Gee, 1990). However, Bakhtin sees the tension and conflict between varying voices as desirable and key to pushing the boundaries of knowledge further. Thus, rather than to be avoided or resolved (Dysthe et al, 2006), they perhaps present opportunity for an international classroom or for an individual learner to become more explicitly aware of the discourses that they may move between.

A dialogical approach is also highly relevant to situated learning, and the apprenticeship of new learners into communities of practice via legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger DATE?). According to Lave and Wenger (DATE), engaging with the community and learning with and from others enables the progressive mastery of the discourse required for membership of that community (Dysthe et al, 2006). This is consistent with the definition of discourse as social practice and also Gee's assertion that 'discourses are mastered through acquisition not learning' (1990: p146), where he maintains that acquisition comes from using the discourse rather than explicit instruction. Seeing participation in all academic fields, not just vocational studies, as an apprenticeship could require a shift in teaching approaches, but arguably this would be a worthwhile one designed to enable students to become operative in communities rather than just knowledgeable observers.

Further, dialogic approaches offer opportunity to demystify the often 'unspoken' expectations within Higher Education discourses and particularly, its assessments. Dialogue between tutors and students, including 'talkback' (Lillis, 2003) and ongoing cycles of feedback (Nicol, 2003) can increase transparency through the assignment production process, something particularly helpful for international students. Ridley (2004) identifies 'critical moments for conversation' throughout the process, with dialogue to socialise students into the community of practice, drawing both on situated learning and an academic literacies approach through which tutors and students 'collaboratively investigate the range of genres, modes, shifts, transformations, representations, meaning-making processes, and identities involved in academic learning within and across academic contexts' (Lea and Street, 2006: p376). In our drive to demystify, for pre-sessional students with relatively low levels of English proficiency, we do need to be mindful of the complexities and may need to see this as a gradual awareness-raising process.

Beyond this, critical pedagogues see dialogue as emancipatory, enabling students to challenge and overthrow existing orders. Rule (2004: p323) identifies Friere's key influence: 'Freire links dialogue, and the changed consciousness that arises from it, to

an explicit political agenda of liberation from oppression'. Importantly it is 'student-centred dialogue that problematizes generative themes from everyday life, topical issues from society, and academic subject matter from specific disciplines' (Shor, 1992, 1994 cited in Kaufmann 2010: p458) which is seen as key to raising critical consciousness for change. A pedagogy of dialogue can, however, come under criticism for not lending itself to scientifically measurable change or indeed for not necessarily changing things for the better (Rule, 2004).

A dialogic approach is compatible with the ongoing revolution in learning technologies, for example via web-based learning spaces including discussion forums. Although critics may see technology as reducing genuine face-to-face dialogue, it can be thoughtfully harnessed in a blended approach which extends and supports rather than replaces face-to-face. In on-line dialogue, students gain time for reflection before 'speaking, a written record of dialogues can be generated as can genuine student-student interaction which is compatible with their lifestyles, fitting around other commitments or simply their existing rhythms of mediating their lives via Facebook/Twitter. Further, the world is increasingly multimodal, with discourses increasingly featuring the interplay of image and word, and online spaces in which weblinks and video can be embedded offer ways of acknowledging this change and expanding the boundaries of discourse.

Online interactions show that physical co-presence and verbal articulation are not preconditions of dialogue. However, conditions for genuine dialogue have been identified in the literature and these include, as well as a real or imagined addressee/co-constructor of knowledge (which, as we have seen, for Bakhtin is inherently present in all utterances): appropriate affective conditions such as a supportive, collaborative and constructive classroom (Gravett and Henning, 1998) and the possibility for students to shape the path of the lesson (Nystrand and Alexander, cited in Lyle, 2008). Possible stumbling blocks to dialogic classrooms include the teacher-student power relation disrupting the equality of dialogic partners and teachers' lack of pedagogical know-how in implementing a dialogical approach (Lyle, 2008) as well as teachers coercing students who wish to remain silent into dialogue (Gravett and Henning, 1998). Time constraints can be a further barrier in the drive for curriculum coverage. Dialogic approaches need focus at course design stage and teachers need to remain wary of classrooms which purport to be dialogic but fall back into teacher-determined, monologic patterns (Lyle, 2008).

## **Implications for the Pre-sessional academic English programme**

The Pre-sessional course is well placed for the development of a dialogic approach, not least as all teaching staff are trained in the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. Lecture-style delivery is relatively rare, with the majority of classes taking a seminar style approach with a high focus on student participation, particularly in group/pairwork activities. This is a helpful starting point to seek to

optimise. CLT has been criticised for a lack of self-interrogation and falling into patterns of inauthentic ‘display questions’ instead of genuine interactions (Thornbury, 1996). However, we have been aware of this danger and in the process of embedding dialogic mediation within our pedagogic repertoire we sought opportunities for authentic student dialogue, for example harnessing the generative context of students’ personal experiences of the transition to UK life and Higher Education, to make explicit and begin to demystify the new culture. Encouraging comparison with and between their home countries gives recognition to their varied experiences, a familiar point from which to find their voices and scope to learn from peers. With respect to the on-line element, the *Prepare for Success*<sup>iii</sup> website is a useful possible springboard into such discussion.

With logistics currently preventing a discipline-specific approach to our class groupings, seeing the course as an induction into the discourses and practices of UK Higher Education is currently the most practical approach. Whilst this makes it difficult to fully mimic the authentic tasks students will meet in their disciplinary studies, we can focus on building awareness for example of the stringencies of academic reading at this level; providing opportunities for text processing and developing critical response to text. These are approaches of value, even if somewhat differently applied, across a range of disciplines. Helping students to identify patterns in academic writing and represent these visually can build confidence with seemingly impenetrable texts. Students might start with articles related to the integration of international students into UK education, including case studies, as a bridge into theory. Scaffolding via questions from the tutor might focus students on aspects of the text such as the writer’s purpose or how they situate their work, or elicit a critical response to the content or comparison of viewpoint between articles. For students at IELTS 5, vocabulary support and time ahead to prepare texts can mitigate the notable challenges academic texts present.

The course focuses students on the need to develop incursions into their disciplinary communities through supported independent study. Course tutors prompt students to enter multiple learning spaces to get this exposure, for example, via online open access lecture material or Weblearn modules, a meeting with the relevant subject librarian or course leader, pre-course reading lists and external sources such as public talks, debates and newspapers. Students can be encouraged to create informal ‘study groups’ within disciplinary areas which meet outside class. As an assessment component, students keep a portfolio in which they document, diarise and reflect on these efforts. Ultimately, we seek to forge closer links with the departments our students will subsequently join, for example inviting lecturers from a range of disciplines to deliver a guest lecture on the course or meet students to suggest preparatory tasks or provide sample material such as handbooks or assignments.

One of the greatest challenges our students face is finding and having the confidence to use their own 'voice', particularly if this is a culturally new approach for them. Exploring genres other than the written essay can help students, particularly at the stage of formulating ideas. Incorporating the production of a narrative, or a digital narrative (McGeoch, 2010), documenting from where students' disciplinary interest developed is something we seek to include as coursework in the future. Our assessment tasks aim to cover a range of skills with some, such as presentations and seminar contributions, focusing on spoken interaction with others, including the ability to argue and respond. Tasks are also designed with a view to enabling learners to tailor them towards their own fields of interest and to produce original discourse, for example through a group research project in which students collaboratively design questionnaires, implement the survey and present their findings.

Our approach to written tasks attempts to embed a dialogic and scaffolded element through feedback/feedforward procedures throughout the writing process, with intermediary stages at which titles and marking criteria are discussed and learners share drafts with peers and the tutor. Students can struggle to understand and act upon feedback suggestions. Peer feedback can also be conceptually, linguistically and socially challenging. Adequate time and support therefore needs to be devoted to this. We are also looking to trial some of the suggestions in the literature on dialogue and assessment, such as asking students to write a letter to the tutor accompanying their assignment submission or responding to their feedback (Nicol, 2010) in effort to better engage with their knowledge construction process.

## **Discussion**

Adopting a dialogic approach is not without tensions. A possible source on the pre-session course is that between using dialogue to guide the learner through assessment production, and yet not wanting to create unrealistic expectations about the challenges and demands to study independently that may lie ahead. Whilst the 'inducting' and confidence-boosting potential of the course is essential, if we neglect the 'gatekeeping' function, we risk students proceeding to under/postgraduate courses which they do not realistically apprehend and on which they may not succeed. We also need to balance our focus on inducting students into academic communities of practice with students' needs or demands for explicit language practice work, something which they do voice in end of course feedback. Further, whilst we may want to use dialogue to 'demystify' for our students, we also need to be aware of losing them in the complexities of the discourses or equally of oversimplifying and again misleading them. Resolving such tensions is not easy in an increasingly marketised HE environment, in which international students frequently express an economic preference for shorter and cheaper pre-session courses. Yet many international students are attracted to UK Higher Education because of its dialogic, participatory and critical approach, so foregrounding this in the pre-

sessional course might be viewed as upholding this strength and maximising the students' chance of success in their subsequent studies, which is our ultimate aim.

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<sup>i</sup> IELTS is the International English Language Testing System jointly administered by the British Council and Cambridge ESOL and commonly used for setting English language entry requirements for universities

<sup>ii</sup> IELTS 5 band descriptor: 'Modest User: Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.' (Cambridge ESOL)

<sup>iii</sup> The Prepare for Success website was developed by the University of Southampton and UKCISA for international students preparing to study in the UK: [www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk](http://www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk)