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## Dialogue and Neoliberalism: Alternative conceptions for the second language classroom

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### Dialogue and neoliberalism: alternative conceptions for the second language classroom

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### Abstract

This paper first reviews how conventionalized uses of dialogue in the language classroom have facilitated a neoliberalist agenda, mainly through a positioning of the learner in a reproductive, consumer role in the classroom, and a positioning of the teacher as a deskilled operative of scripted interactions. It then discusses three other conceptualizations of the role of dialogue which offer the promise of an alternative to the neoliberalist model. The first of these derives from a different set of assumptions about how language is most effectively acquired, by emphasizing the role of exposure to, and engagement in, natural language use. The limitations of this view, partly in relation to the role that conscious attention to language may offer, but more significantly in relation to how it similarly positions learners as consumers and teachers as managers, are then discussed. A second conceptualization of the use of dialogue, relatively unknown in language teaching thinking, derives from discussions in educational theory and emphasizes dialogic approaches involving exploratory talk as a means of helping learners construct their own understandings of language knowledge and, potentially, the language learning process itself. The paper argues, however, that neither of these two conceptualizations of the use of dialogue in the language classroom can offer effective alternatives to the increasing pressure to replicate neoliberalist thinking in language teaching. The paper then sets out some key requirements for such an alternative and argues that a third view, emphasizing participatory dialogue, may provide this. A model for this third view is outlined, emphasizing negotiated classroom work, with some examples of how this can be implemented.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, PPP, dialogue, negotiated classroom work

## **Dialogue and Neoliberalism: Alternative conceptions for the second language classroom**

Andrew Littlejohn

### **1 Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to first review how conventionalized uses of dialogue in the language classroom have facilitated a neoliberalist agenda, mainly through a positioning of the learner in a reproductive, consumer role in the classroom, and a positioning of the teacher as a deskilled operative of scripted interactions. I will then discuss three other conceptualizations of the role of dialogue which offer the promise of an alternative to the neoliberalist model. The first of these will be recognized by readers as deriving from a different set of assumptions about how language is most effectively acquired, by emphasizing the role of exposure to, and engagement in, natural language use. The limitations of this view, partly in relation to the role that conscious attention to language may offer, but more significantly in relation to how it similarly positions learners as consumers and teachers as managers will then be set out. A second conceptualization of the use of dialogue, still in its infancy in language teaching thinking, derives from discussions in educational theory and emphasizes dialogic approaches involving exploratory talk as a means of helping learners construct their own understandings of language knowledge and, potentially, the language learning process itself. The argument put forward in this paper, however, is that neither of these two conceptualizations of the use of dialogue in the language classroom can offer effective alternatives to the increasing pressure to replicate neoliberalist thinking in language teaching, and that a third view, emphasizing participatory dialogue, is required.

### **2 ‘The dialogue’ as a vehicle for Neoliberalism**

Given that language teaching is principally focused on the teaching of communication, it is perhaps not surprising that one of its central concerns has always been with dialogue in one form or another. Predominantly, this concern has manifested itself as a representation of ‘a dialogue’, most usually a fictionalized script of interactions between people in a particular situation or engaged in a particular transaction. The use of dialogue in this way has a very long history in language teaching, as Howatt (2004) demonstrates by reference to Caxton who, as early as 1483, published manuals of parallel dialogues in English and French for merchants. Since then, of course, it has become commonplace to see a dialogue used as a pedagogic device to present language as an object to be studied. Most frequently, this is then followed by explanations of the grammar, phrasing or vocabulary items found in the dialogue, which then form the focus of subsequent related practice exercises. With the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) from the 1970s onwards, however, ‘the dialogue’ has come into its own. Given its emphasis on language use, rather than language form, CLT has made extensive use of the dialogue as a means to present language functions in the initial part of a template which has become known as PPP (presentation-practice-production; Anderson, 2017). In this model, learners first meet samples of language use in a fictional or real

world dialogue, and then go on to practice elements of that dialogue in pairs or small groups. This is often then followed by a scripted outline of a skeleton dialogue which sets out the speech acts they are to accomplish, sometimes turn by turn, before being asked to achieve the same communicative aim in a less structured context. The aim in all this is to rehearse potential social encounters or uses of language, such as asking the way, agreeing or disagreeing, asking for permission, exchanging opinions, plans and experiences.

While the use of the dialogue within a PPP model may be seen as relatively anodyne, recent analyses have shown how it may also function as a platform for reproducing and legitimizing the values of neoliberalism. Copley's (2017) comparative analysis of UK ELT materials produced in the period 1975-1982 with those produced 1998-2014, has shown, for example, that whereas topics such as social issues and personal difficulties frequently occurred in materials from the earlier period, these have been almost entirely replaced in more recent materials by consumerism and individualism. The neoliberal coursebook, writes Copley, tends to "focus on individuals who are essentially unconstrained by material considerations" (2017:12). The following extract, from a coursebook for learners aged 12-16, is a good example of this, and is typical of the content of many presentation dialogues which package the teaching of some aspect of language with consumerist images and tropes. In a unit lavishly illustrated with photographs of exciting vacations in exotic places around the world, the learners listen to a recorded dialogue between two children who apparently have complete free choice in vacation destinations.

- Mia: Can you believe it? Mom and Dad are letting us pick our vacation spot this year!
- Dan: I know. Where do we want to go?
- Mia: Let's go somewhere warm.
- Dan: OK. What about going to the beach?
- Mia: No. That's boring! We went to the beach last year.
- Dan: Why don't we go to the desert?
- Mia: Hmm. . . . That's a good idea.
- Dan: Yeah. We can go hiking.
- Mia: Oh, and sandboarding!
- Dan: That sounds exciting!
- Mia: Great! We're going to the desert! I'm going to tell Mom and Dad.

(Goldstein & Jones, 2015:100)

In common with the PPP model, the dialogue between Mia and Dan is then followed by a gap-filling exercise to identify the exponents for the language function 'making suggestions' which feature in the dialogue. Learners are then asked to practice the dialogue together by taking it in turns to repeat the lines, ideally, according to the accompanying teacher's notes, "as much as they can from memory, rather than just reading their lines" (Kocienda, 2015:T-100). In the final step, the learners are to substitute the names of places and sports activities in the dialogue "with their own ideas", but always following the structure of the dialogue.

My purpose here is not to criticize this particular extract, but to point out how this model, commonly found in classrooms around the world, has facilitated the replication of neoliberalist paradigms in language teaching and learning. What is interesting about the PPP use of a dialogue

here is how it is not only the content of the images and the text which place the learner in the role of a consumer, but how the methodology itself also carries the same message. The notion of a script is present not only in the fictionalized interaction of the characters in the audio recording, but also in the way that the learners are to interact with each other and with the teacher, who is to ensure the learners stay on the planned script for the classroom as set out by the materials and the accompanying teacher's notes. Despite an instruction that learners are to use "their own ideas", there is actually very little room to do that. Acquiring a second language ability is here presented as a process involving the accumulation of language items which learners are to get into their heads, or as Popper (1972: 61-2) would describe it, the accumulation of 'thing-like entities' which they are to place into their 'bucket'. The learners are positioned as consumers of the language and exercises supplied to them, and are not asked to deviate from the classroom script or required to produce anything of significance that might alter the course of the lesson. The lesson, from this perspective, is a fully standardized, rationalized process for language learning, which (it is assumed) will produce the same classroom discourse and the same learning outcomes, regardless of who the participants in the classroom actually are. The learners thus remain anonymous, and with them, so too does the teacher who is only asked to oversee the activation of a script produced entirely externally to them all. Within the model, therefore, the teacher and the learners are fully disempowered, with the authority for their actions together located far outside the classroom, in the hands of an unknown, and probably very distant, materials designer. The classroom in this case is not the venue for a unique teaching-learning community, but simply the site for the implementation of pre-existing, standardized routines.

Together with another mainstay of the PPP model, that is, 'the reading text', the dialogue is, of course, intentionally being used here as means to carry forward a prescribed syllabus. With the advent of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages (Council of Europe, 2001) and the related mushrooming of packaged examinations linked to CEFR levels and purposes, the amount of detailed specification in many language syllabuses has increased enormously and, with it, a washback effect on the content and methodology of the classroom (Littlejohn, 2013). This has naturally led to many learners, teachers, schools and materials writers becoming engaged in a constant tick-box operation to cover the CEFR levels. The learner and the teacher are thus placed as consumers at many levels within their language learning/teaching journey. The dialogue, the related exercises, the lesson objectives, the syllabus, the exam, and the pre-specified levels of progression all aim to dictate a specific path through language learning, with relatively little chance to take on a decision-making role within that, unless they deviate from the plans as supplied to them. As a number of writers have pointed out (Block, 2004; Gray, 2012; Littlejohn, 2012, 2013), the PPP model, the blow-by-blow instructions in accompanying teachers' guides and low skills packaged training courses such as the Cambridge CELTA certificate (Gray and Block, 2012), represent one of most effective means for the delivery of neoliberalism in language teaching, through a process of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 2020), in which teachers are positioned as deskilled operatives, processing anonymized learners through a standardized experience with (assumed) predictable outcomes.

Seen from the perspective of language teaching theory, the use of 'the dialogue' within a PPP model relates directly to a view of second language acquisition as a conscious process, in which language items can be focused on and practiced repetitively in an effort to bring about automaticity. Whilst most applications of the PPP model are probably atheoretical in design, the implied shift from conscious declarative knowledge to subconscious procedural knowledge through practice has been most recently justified from a skills-theory perspective (Criado, 2015; Dekeyser & Criado, 2012; Johnson, 1997, 2002; Johnson & Jackson, 2006). According to this view, language use fits the definition of a skill within the psychology literature, and shares many of the features of other skills, such as driving a car or playing tennis. Irrespective of the theoretical strengths of skills theory as a guide in second language teaching, there can be no doubt that the model has directly facilitated a

view of language use as composed of discrete skills or part-skills, which can be acquired in an accumulative, combinatorial fashion. It also plays into the neoliberalist notion of skills as human capital (Holborow, 2012), in which individuals are knowledge workers, trained to fit with the current needs of employers. ‘The dialogue’ as a presentation device, in this case, provides an ideal support for such a skills training view, in which language use can be objectified, broken down into identifiable elements, divided into discrete levels and purposes, complemented with designed practice and rehearsal tasks, and then packaged and sold, much as any product in a market place. The model can thus be seen as supporting a commodification of language teaching, and, in consequence, a view of learners as simultaneously consumers of a training package and potential human capital for future employers.

This analysis of how conventionalized uses of ‘the dialogue’ may form part of the neoliberalist shaping of language teaching and learning also helps us to identify what we need to be looking for in alternatives for the classroom. First and foremost, there is a need for the absence of externally dictated scripts for classroom interaction. For learners, this means the ability to engage in content and ideas which relate to their own lives and own purposes in language learning and to assume control over how and what they are learning. For teachers, as language teaching professionals, it implies the return of informed curriculum decision-making, in which they can use their knowledge and expertise to assist in fostering the classroom as a learning community, in which individuals are not anonymous members ‘learning alone in a crowd’ (Breen and Littlejohn, 2000:275), but who contribute to and share in the learning of their co-participants, and who share in decisions over what the community does together. It also suggests the rejection of a reductionist conceptualization of second language development as simply ‘training’ and instead sees second language development within a broader view of the role and value of education as a whole and as an enriching, not narrowing, process. In contrast, ‘the dialogue’, as a presentation device, set within a highly controlled, routinized methodology such as the PPP model, implies particular classroom identities for teachers and learners. Through the scripting of their classroom roles and, potentially, through the manner in which presentation dialogues are now frequently laden with consumerist values and attitudes, teachers and learners become engaged as participants in the reproduction and maintenance of neoliberalist ideologies.. As such, ‘the dialogue’ is unlikely to be able to offer any significant alternative to the impact of neoliberalism on language teaching.

### **3 Dialogue as an opportunity for natural language acquisition**

An alternative view of dialogue which eschews the objectification of language, and an atomistic view of language development as accumulation, is one which sees dialogue – that is, communicative interaction – as the principal means through which second language acquisition takes place. This view rests on the assumption that the natural human ability to acquire language is activated by a focus on meaning, particularly between two or more interlocutors, and that abilities in relation to language form – the main focus of a PPP model – are acquired naturally and subconsciously. Known as the interaction hypothesis, in practical classroom terms this has led to the design of such devices as information gap tasks (for example, describe and draw tasks for learners sitting back to back; Doughty & Pica, 1986), task-based learning (where learners are assumed to acquire language through their very participation in achieving the task set; Long, 2015), and in some forms of Content and Language Integrated Learning (where learners are assumed to acquire language by a focus on the content and methods of the curriculum subject they are studying; Gabillon, 2020). As the emphasis is on achieving genuine communication, and thereby facilitating natural language acquisition as a by-product of engagement in tasks, the intention is to replicate real-world language use and, through the negotiation of meaning between interlocutors, replicate a process of language

acquisition similar to that in childhood. In each of these cases, therefore, it seems likely that the nature of the classroom dialogue that ensues will be unique to the participants involved, in contrast to the standardized, anonymized and packaged PPP model.

As an alternative to the pressures of neoliberalism, however, an interactionist view of language teaching and learning seems unlikely to offer much potential. The reliance on an underlying nativist model of language acquisition, in fact, exposes its greatest contradiction in that first language acquisition does not proceed through pre-set task designs, but is typically characterized by the developing child's ongoing negotiation of outcomes, goals and spontaneous and repeated experiences, whether they are initiated by the child or a caregiver. In addition, whilst there is an absence of a highly specified script for interaction, such as exists in the PPP model, learners are placed within a larger script of how they are to learn, with little room to move beyond that without challenging the assumptions of the interactionist model.

Despite these concerns, some writers have argued that task-based language teaching stands as a direct rejection of the centralizing effect of neoliberalist intrusion into language teaching by returning curriculum decisions to the teacher and by making the language learning process an entirely localized experience. Norris (2020), for example, argues that there is "a significant disconnect ... between how a neoliberal curriculum is structured and managed compared with task-based teaching" and that "significant characteristics of task-based teaching, as it relates to curriculum design, often cannot be satisfied within the neoliberal educational environment". Yet, whilst the specific application of a task-based approach may indeed involve highly localised decisions, the model itself does not necessarily imply this. Thus, it is not surprising to find that task-based and CLIL approaches to teaching and learning have lent themselves so readily to course design for the labor market and to global textbook design, promoted, not as repositories of a body of knowledge to be presented and practiced by learners as in the PPP model, but as packaged sets of experiences which will (it is assumed) lead to the development of a second language advantage in the marketplace. Relañó Pastor and Fernández Barrera (2018), for example, have shown how neoliberalism as an ideology may be firmly embedded in the minds of CLIL teachers who see CLIL practices, particularly in English, as a way of building a market advantage for the school and for their students' future employability. Similarly, the extensive use of task-based models in ESP courses for work purposes (for example, Nepravishita & Roseni (2014) and Fazio, Isidori & Bartoll (2017) and in textbooks that offer specific training for employment (for example, Littlejohn, 2005) demonstrates how the model easily lends itself to being absorbed into the neoliberal mindset.

#### **4 Dialogue as exploratory talk**

While the PPP and interactionist models for the use of dialogue both derive from discussions within language teaching writing and research, a view of classroom dialogue as exploratory talk owes to its origins to theorists within the broader field of education, particularly with young children. Major influences on this have been Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Bruner (1983, 1996) and Bakhtin (1986), all of whom view knowledge as something that is constructed, not deposited, in our heads, as we try to make sense of what is new to us by relating it to what we already know. According to this view, this process of mental negotiation between given and new is principally accomplished socially, in interaction with others, and through language, as the child constructs their own understanding of the meaning of concepts, phenomena and experiences. In an effort to make this process explicit and more effective, educationalists such as Alexander (2017, 2020), Mercer (2000), Mercer and Littleton (2007) and others advocate what they term 'dialogic teaching' and 'exploratory talk', in which the role of the teacher is stimulate learners in the classroom to reflect on their own preconceptions and on

the concepts they meet. In this, the teacher starts from the learners' own understandings and engages in questioning strategies to encourage them to challenge, justify and refine their ideas, to collaborate in building on each other's understandings, and to, ideally, reach a classroom consensus. Dialogic teaching thus stands in direct contrast to the more familiar monologic classroom discourse in which learners typically answer the teacher's closed questions in an IRF structure (Initiate – a closed question by the teacher, Response - by the learners, and Feedback - by the teacher, typically an evaluation of the response). The overall aim is thus to shift learners from a role as individualist knowledge consumers (as in the IRF model) to one as collectivist knowledge producers.

In mainstream education, the principles of dialogic teaching have been extensively adopted in primary school classrooms around the world, particularly in curriculum areas such as science (Mercer, Dawes & Staarman, 2009) and mathematics (Bakker, Smit, & Wegerif, 2015) but the model has also been applied systematically in higher education (Simpson, 2016a, 2016b; Åberg, 2016; Hardman, 2008). In general, accounts of teaching dialogically document significant success in improving learners' capacity to understand and apply concepts, particularly when assessed through standardized tests. Dialogue in this case can be viewed as genuine communication between the teacher and learners and between learners and learners, as they share and negotiate ideas in relation to the explicit objectives of the lesson. Dialogic teaching is thus very far removed from the commodified scripts of the PPP model.

In some respects, the concept of dialogic teaching does share some of the characteristics of a view of dialogue as an opportunity for natural language acquisition, discussed in the previous section. Both derive from a socio-cultural view of learning as something that takes place in interaction with others, and see learning as involving the restructuring of the learner's existing knowledge. Within the commonly advocated application of this view in language teaching, however, this is largely something that is to take place subconsciously (that is, 'naturally'), as the emphasis is placed on meaning in language use, not on a metalinguistic understanding of form. In contrast, the concept of dialogic teaching emphasises an explicit attention to the processes of restructuring learners' knowledge through the teacher's specific moves in classroom discourse, in particular, through encouraging open classroom speculation and exploratory talk about concepts within the subject curriculum.

To date, the systematic application of dialogic principles within the field of second language teaching is still in its infancy, with relatively few documented examples. Some notable exceptions, both of which are concerned with primary school language education, are Haneda and Wells (2008), who review the role that dialogic methods can play in enhancing the language abilities of learners of English as an additional language in various subjects in the curriculum, and Chow, Hui, Li and Dong (2021), who examine the effects of dialogic teaching on vocabulary knowledge and phonological awareness in an ESL class. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see how dialogic principles could be incorporated more extensively in the language classroom. Noticing, either planned or incidental, as an aspect of classroom methodology in a focus-on-form approach which aims to raise learners' awareness of how the foreign language works (Ellis, 2015), could be a context for the application of strategies for exploratory talk, as described by Alexander (2020) and others. Similarly, a focus on the processes of language learning itself could also be a context for classroom exploratory talk, with an emphasis on sharing experiences of learning and an understanding of precisely what works, and why or why not, for individual learners. This would be in contrast to a current emphasis on learner and strategy *training*, which is often incorporated in teaching materials and in the classroom in a manner not very dissimilar to traditional PPP or teacher-led transmission, in which learners are presented with a learning technique, and then asked to practise it - often resulting in little transfer to their established approaches to learning (Littlejohn, 2008).

While research on dialogic teaching promises significant gains in improving learners' understanding and their application of concepts, the focus remains on the content of the curriculum subject in which it is applied and a means to maximize learning outcomes. It is basically an approach to classroom discourse, a way of working, which aims to lead to deeper learning of the subject of study, by improving the quality of classroom talk. Indeed, the model essentially views dialogue as a means for exploring students' ideas about the topic in hand, and often mainly as a precursor to what is termed 'authoritative talk' which may be used by the teacher to summarize or conclude with the school point of view (Mercer, 2007; Scott, Mortimer & Aguiar, 2006). As such, dialogic teaching, in common with the two previously discussed views of dialogue, is not concerned with the wider context in which teaching and learning occurs, the distribution of power, authority and decision-making in the classroom and beyond, and decisions over the curriculum itself, except as incidental to the processes of exploratory talk. Dialogic teaching is thus largely agnostic to the pressures of neoliberalism, and the manner in which curriculum goals are specified in the first place, how content is chosen and how evaluation is determined.

## **5 Dialogue as emancipatory pedagogy**

In reviewing the previous models for the use of dialogue, I have been able to identify some of the problems posed by them as they facilitate or inadequately challenge the pressures of a neoliberalist mindset on language teaching. These have included the manner in which a PPP methodology has, probably unwittingly, enabled neoliberalist views to be reflected directly in the aims, content, methodology and means of evaluation of language teaching and the inability of other conceptualizations to offer a substantive alternative. At this point, therefore, I would like to draw together what I see as some of the key requirements which an alternative view of dialogue needs to meet in order to address the problems set out in my earlier analysis of a view of dialogue as a vehicle for neoliberalism. In summary we need a conceptualization of classroom dialogue as facilitating:

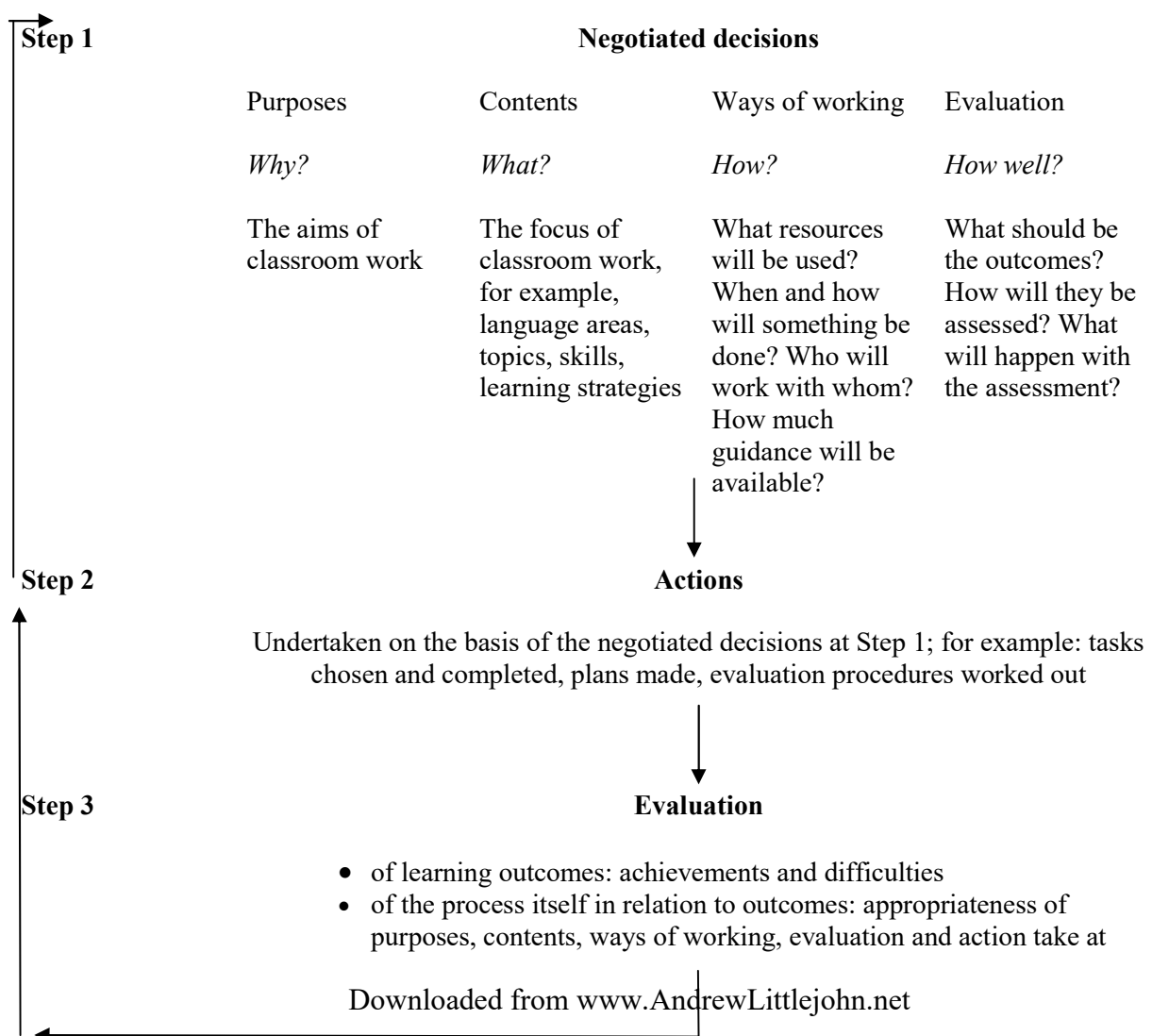
- a unique classroom event, not the reproduction of a predetermined, externally conceived script
- learners and teachers as producers of ideas and language use, not simply consumers or reproducers of ideas and language of others
- language use for genuine communication, not as simply rehearsing forms or language items to be accumulated
- in-class decision-making over the process of teaching and learning itself
- a view of the classroom as a community, in which teachers and learners are co-participants
- educational and personal growth not a narrowing, role-defining experience
- a sensitivity and responsiveness to the personal contributions of all participants

Within the literature of what has become broadly known as liberatory or emancipatory pedagogy, the use of classroom dialogue to meet many of the purposes listed above has been argued for and demonstrated by a number of writers, going back a very long way. Most recognized amongst these is Freire, whose work sees dialogue as not just "a mere technique to achieve some cognitive results" but rather as "a means to transform social relations in the classroom, and to raise awareness about relations in society at large" in which the teacher "is simultaneously a classroom researcher, a politician, and an artist" (Shor and Freire, 1987:11). Freire's well-known work in literacy development in Brazil (Freire, 1970, 1972) is indicative of a strategy in which ongoing dialogue



between the educator and participants aimed to shape the very substance of their learning, and sought to enable participants to raise their consciousness of their oppressed condition and thereby transform their own lives. Other related contributions in this area have come from a number of writers working in the fields of critical language pedagogy (Sacadura, 2014; Crookes, 2013; Godley and Reaser, 2018), problem-posing and resistance methodologies (Postman and Weingartner, 1969; Wallerstein & Auerbach, 2004) and notions of a ‘learning community’ (Illich, 1971; Lipman, 2003; Kuh, 2008).

In relation to the language classroom, some of the most systematically developed ideas which resonate with a Freirean-inspired view of dialogue between educators and students, and which seek to offer an entirely different structure for decision-making, have come from work in the area of negotiated syllabuses (also termed ‘process syllabuses’). Drawing on Freirean conceptions of the purposes of education as liberation, and a rejection of what Freire termed a ‘banking approach’ to pedagogy (where teachers aim to place ‘deposits’ of knowledge in students’ heads), many writers now argue for the central role of genuine dialogue in the classroom, in which learners and educators jointly negotiate the design their lessons together. A landmark collection of practical accounts of language teachers working in this way, in primary, secondary and tertiary education, has been provided by Breen and Littlejohn (2000). These accounts share a common focus on joint decision-making through dialogue as a central characteristic of the classroom. In its idealized form, this decision-making can potentially exist in all aspects of the curriculum: purposes, contents, ways of working and evaluation of outcomes. Figure X.1, from Breen and Littlejohn (2000:32), sets out what this may encompass.



step 2

Figure X.1, The negotiation cycle from Breen and Littlejohn (2000:32)

The cycle sees an agreed decision passing through the stages of implementation and then to an evaluation of the decision itself, before informing the next round of decisions. The cycle, as depicted in Figure x.1, is not intended as definitive plan for what should be negotiated, but rather as a heuristic device to indicate what could, potentially, be made available for negotiation. Similarly, there will exist many different levels at which this negotiation can be applied. Figure x.2, the curriculum pyramid, shows in graphic form how the focus of negotiation could potentially be applied simply to the 'here and now' of a particular task in the classroom, to plans for several lessons ahead, or right down to the design of the entire curriculum, as local constraints allow.

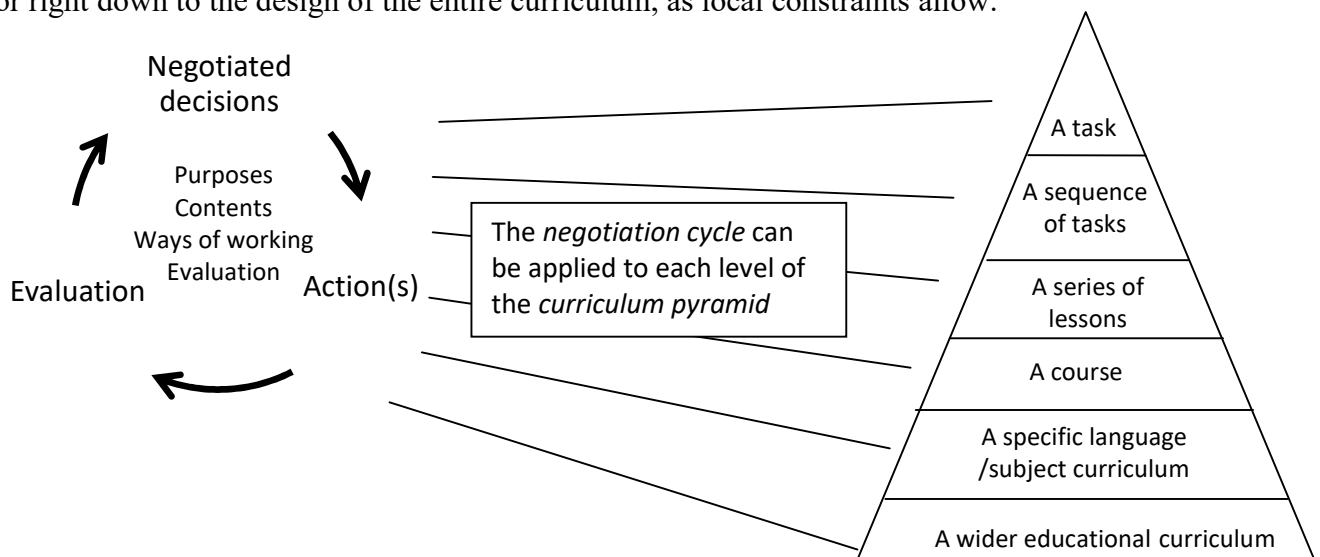


Figure X.2 The negotiation cycle and the curriculum pyramid (Breen and Littlejohn, 2000:38)

Practical accounts describing how this form of negotiation can be implemented show how the model allows joint decision-making through dialogue to take account of local constraints, teachers' and learners' prior experiences, time availability, cultural considerations and so on. Sampedro-Serrano (2000:108-132), for example, describes how negotiation in Spanish government secondary school English classes, with students aged 14-15 years old in class sizes of around 30 students, can be implemented with considerable success. Learners became involved in designing their own classroom rules, tasks, entire lesson plans, and end tests. Her account shows how negotiation could be successfully achieved in a gradualist manner, in which a greater scope of decisions (that is, an increasing range of areas in the negotiation cycle) could be carried out to an increasing depth (that is, to deeper levels in the curriculum pyramid), in a situation where certain aspects of the overall curriculum and its implementation were dictated by a national policy and where external examinations dictated end targets, and were therefore unavailable for negotiation.

Looking back at the requirements listed above, it is not difficult to see how the concept of negotiated work can provide a strong alternative conceptualization for the role of dialogue in the language classroom as a resistance to neoliberal pressures for standardization and commodification. Working within the constraints such as they are in any local situation, a process of negotiating classroom decisions at whatever level, implementing those decisions and reviewing them, can generate unique classroom events, and unique outcomes, and position teachers and students as producers of ideas. With the focus of their work being on precisely what and how they will work, dialogue between the teacher and learners, and between learners and learners, can involve an exchange of ideas and genuine, not fabricated communication. Within this model, of course, a PPP approach (in which ‘a dialogue’ may be a resource for learning), tasks (in which dialogue is a means to provide opportunities for language use and acquisition) and exploratory talk (in which dialogue is a means to explore the workings of language and learning) all remain options, but now within significant changes in the structure of teaching and learning.

Clearly, the role of the teacher in a classroom which is based on ideas of an emancipatory pedagogy is quite different from that found in each of the other three models outlined here. The starting point for the teacher will not be a reductive, deficit view of classroom participants as ‘just learners’, but rather a view of everyone as an individual social actor with their own preferences, experiences, personalities and contributions. Thus, in addition to having knowledge of the language and knowledge of language pedagogy, assumed in the previous models, the teacher in an emancipatory pedagogy will need to adopt a quite different management role in enabling the process of shared decision-making to happen in the classroom. As Figure X.1 suggests, this will involve the teacher in raising for discussion the proposed aims, content, ways of working and means and standards of evaluation at whichever level of the curriculum pyramid the teacher and students are working. Breen and Littlejohn (2000:294) lists some of practical devices and procedures used by teachers to facilitate this negotiation, such as initial questionnaires, draft proposals for classroom work, documents for planning, guidance on student-designed tests and student-designed classroom activities, record sheets, Freire-inspired visual codifications of language use, and so on. As the language knower and as a person with pedagogic experience, the role of the teacher shifts from directing or orchestrating classroom events, towards advising, suggesting and guiding students in making appropriate decisions and evaluating those decisions as input to future decisions.

Dialogue, in this model, also takes on a quite different meaning and status. Distinct from a view of dialogue as simply an object to be mimicked, or dialogue as a means to generate language data for acquisition, or dialogue as a means to achieve a deeper understanding of a predetermined teaching objective, an emancipatory pedagogy sees dialogue as both a means and a goal. The process of engaging in dialogue is seen as a means of giving a voice to *everyone* in the classroom and of enabling students to identify the most appropriate content and best ways of working for them individually, and, simultaneously, as means to learn from each other. At the same time, the ability to engage in dialogue is seen as the foundation of building a community of interdependence, not only within the classroom but within the wider society, as a rejection of the cult of the competitive individual upon which neoliberalism rests.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have aimed to show how the conventionalized use of ‘a dialogue’ as a pedagogic device for presenting language to learners has the potential to act as a ‘Trojan horse’ for neoliberal practices to enter into the language classroom by reproducing and enabling the naturalization of images and practices from the marketplace, and a mindset of individualism and accumulation,. While other conceptions of the use of dialogue, particularly in the form of genuine

communication through tasks and through the use of exploratory talk to discuss learning and language, may not share these problems, their potential ability to offer a genuine, viable and practical alternative to neoliberalist pressures on the classroom seems weak. I have argued that it is only by making significant structural changes to the teaching-learning relationship through the introduction of negotiated decision-making over the ‘why, what, how and how well’ of language teaching that we can adequately provide a sustainable and practical alternative.

This is not to say that the application of this alternative model for classroom dialogue is free of difficulties. Depending on the context of implementation, one can expect significant challenges and resistance to this way of working. One of the hallmark features of neoliberalism is just how it has managed to naturalize itself into our expectations, in which it seems entirely natural that we should expect the classroom to offer commercially packaged and standardized ways of working dictated by unknown persons, that teaching/learning materials should feature extensive product placement and aspirations from the marketplace, and that success and failure in learning are entirely an individual’s responsibility. Given that these expectations are often shared by institutions, students, teachers, and other stakeholders such as parents, employers and sponsors, we can assume that greater dialogue around how language teaching and learning is to be accomplished may be seen as an abdication of professional responsibility on the part of the teacher and, essentially, a waste of time as a means of getting learning done. Slembrouck (2000) details precisely these kinds of difficulties in his account of attempts to introduce dialogue as a basis for classroom decision-making in a university language course and how those attempts clashed with the dominant educational culture of both students and staff. Persistent methodological student conservatism in their demands for the classroom work, driven by their concern with a final gate-keeping formal examination and their individual achievement in that, severely impacted the extent to which they were willing to engage in dialogue as a defining characteristic of a jointly constructed course design. Somewhat pessimistically, Slembrouck (2000:146) concludes that “some students in a negotiated course will try to see it that courses remain not only manageable, but conventional to a degree that accords with the kind of course contents, structure and assessment they are already familiar with and can routinely deal with.”

The challenges which Slembrouck faced are indeed very real but they are also ones encountered in any major innovation that involves moving away from established, naturalized models for the teaching-learning relationship, whether they are derived from current neoliberalist ideologies or from locally-adopted traditional models. Yet the many documented accounts of successful engagement in shared classroom decision-making in a range of classroom contexts (see, for example, Abdelmalak (2015), Boon (2011), Bovill, Morss, & Bulley (2009), Brown (2012), Hudd (2003), and Gourlay (2005)) demonstrate that dialogue as a systematic means of co-constructing course design with students is viable and achievable as a means of meeting the requirements for an alternative to neoliberal conceptions of the classroom, as set out earlier. In this regard, Figure x.2 sets out how far shared decision-making can proceed down levels of the curriculum pyramid, depending on what is contextually feasible, bearing in mind factors such as local constraints and predetermined policies, examinations, teacher and student prior experiences, time, and so on. The key factor here, and perhaps the one which was the source of Slembrouck’s difficulties, is the rate and extent at which this changes occurs, something that must be considered when introducing any kind of innovation in education.

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