Dialogic Classroom & Text Comprehension:
Towards A Pedagogy of Reading

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Abstract

Though the concept of dialogic classroom is not new, it has found many proponents in recent educational research (Sedova, 2017). It has been proposed by researchers that there should be enough opportunity for learners to take part in classroom talk as much as possible for the appropriation of existing knowledge and construction of new knowledge. In second language classroom, in Indian context, reading skill has remained one of the thrust areas of research for researchers and language practitioners. For obvious reasons, it has been emphasised how to read and interpret a text so that comprehension might take place, and discussion around the text has been found to be one of the most effective ways in achieving comprehension (Almasi, 2002). Recent research also opines that there should be a shift from 'monologic classroom' to 'dialogic classroom' for maximization of learning. This paper makes an attempt to establish a connection between a dialogic classroom and comprehension of text. Along with the possible opportunities that a dialogic classroom might provide for comprehending a text, the paper also probes into the possible problems that might arise in particular contexts and suggests implications of dialogic classroom in teaching and learning.

Keywords: dialogic classroom, reading, comprehension, second language learning.

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Introduction-

The concept of 'dialogic classroom' dates back to *Socratic Dialogue* where by using questions the fundamental beliefs of students were challenged and alternative views were presented to them to compare and construct knowledge. Similarly, when the history of language teaching is traced back to the fifteenth century England, it is found that "in the absence of grammatical and other descriptions of vernacular languages...early language teaching materials relied mainly on texts, and the dialogue form as a 'slice of linguistic life'" (How att, 2004).So, the importance of dialogue has never ceased to exist in the process of teaching and learning. The age-old approach to classroom teaching has found its relevance in the increasing debate and discussions in the last few years where it has been suggested that dialogic classroom holds greater potential for cognitive development of the learner (Lyle, 2008).

Though, on a theoretical level, the idea of dialogic classroom has richly been elaborated, it has failed to get the desired outcomes in classroom practice and the probable reason behind this is the non-convergence of teaching theories and teaching practices (Sedova, 2017). But, then, there exists some programmes which have successfully tried and achieved positive results by implementing this approach. So, if the basic mechanisms of this approach, which might have helped researchers to get the desired results, are understood and implemented in classroom practices, there are chances that more success stories would come out of the classroom.

Understanding 'dialogic' in classroom context-

The way a student participates in classroom is of immense interest to the researchers (Sedova, 2017). The involvement of students in classroom discussion can lead them towards a better understanding of the ideas and concepts discussed in class. The term, 'dialogic' can have different meaning to people concerning educational research (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). To some people, the term might convey the idea of simply 'dialogue' or the conversation that are found in the classroom context. 'Dialogic' can also mean giving students their

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voices in a teacher-dominated classroom where the teacher dominates and controls the classroom including conversation i.e. who will respond and whether the responses meet the expectations of the teacher. So, it might suggest that there should be enough opportunity to express their ideas and feel as a proud member of the classroom community who can equally contribute to the construction of knowledge. The term, 'dialogic' can also suggest that it is a collaborative process of enquiry where both teachers and students take part in an attempt to understand and comprehend an idea through dialogue. Basically, this approach of teaching is based on the communication between students and the teacher in classroom where higher cognitive processes are required on the part of learners to participate in such interaction. It is also to be kept in mind that the dialogic classroom not only involves learners in classroom learning process but also prepares them for future by offering them certain amount of autonomy in learning and empowering them to come up with thoughtful answers and influence classroom discussion.

Dialogic classroom and sociocultural theory of Vygotsky-

The concept of dialogic approach to classroom teaching and learning is grounded in the sociocultural theory as proposed by Vygotsky. He emphasized the interdependence of the individual and the society in the construction of knowledge. This theory holds the idea that "all forms of activity that occur in the human mind are the results of our interactions with other members of our society and culture and the opinions that we form are influenced by our ancestors as well as our contemporaries" (Naskar & Jha, 2018). The theory, thus, connects the individual thinking with social and cultural contexts in which it occurs. Vygotsky postulated the idea that the process of psychological interaction happens twice in the development of a child- first, on the 'societal level' and later at an 'individual level' (Sedova, 2017). However, it is very difficult to claim that the interaction at the societal level is followed by the interaction at an individual level. At an individual level, the interaction happens within the child whereas on the societal level, the child interacts with the other members of the society. These other members include their families, peers and teachers. So, it is

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through the interaction within oneself and also with the 'more knowledgeable others' learning takes place. It has to be kept in mind that "the interaction within the mind is influenced by the social interaction and similarly, the social interaction is influenced by intrapersonal interaction" (Naskar & Jha, 2018). So, the process of meaning making is not only confined within the learner's mind but also finds completeness in the interaction with other members of the society. This idea is also suggestive of the fact that the learner is very much 'dependent' on the 'others' in his or her community in a very positive sense of the term. It also conveys the fact that a learner cannot be ignored and treated as a mere receiver of knowledge as the traditional classroom viewed them. On the contrary, the learner forms a very significant contributor to his community and the learners' views are to be valued and appreciated to the enrichment of learning process.

The relationship between language and thought, as proposed by Vygotsky, needs some attention in this particular context. The sociocultural setting of the classroom allows the learner to observe the behaviour of their peer and how they respond and the particular strategies they use in order to interpret literature and overcome learning difficulties (Almasi, 2002). This observation enables them to learn from their peers and reflect in their own mind. This reflection by learners helps them to decide on future strategies and behaviour accordingly. So, the interpretation and taking part in classroom discussion are much influenced by the cultural and social context to which the learner belongs. Thus, the interpersonal interaction influences, to a large extent, the intrapersonal interaction and also, the intrapersonal interaction shapes interpersonal interaction.

In this discussion of socio-cultural theory, it is important to mention and contextualize what Vygotsky referred to as "the zone of proximal development" which is abbreviated as ZPD. This "zone of proximal development" refers to the gap between the learner's own ability to solve a problem and his/her potential level of development or problem solving ability with the help of more

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knowledgeable others. So, what a learner can do with the help of others is always greater than what s/he can do his/her own and this support, which is referred to as 'scaffolding', can lead to the development of the learner. However, the findings of Wood, Bruner, and Ross suggest that learners would not be able to get any benefit from scaffolding if they are unable to "recognize a solution to a particular class of problems before he is himself able to produce the steps leading to it without assistance" (1976). So, they must have the ability to recognize and comprehend the goal before it is actually achieved. However, the dependency of learners on the scaffolding is temporary and it is meant to assist them towards autonomy and not make them dependent on the scaffolding for ever. In this context, the discussion acts as the scaffolding which would perpetually lead learners towards comprehension of text.

The idea of meaning making in Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*-

The shift from an individual, isolated learner to a socio-culturally contextualized learner has drawn the researchers to look into the works of Mikhail Bakhtin (Lyle, 2008). To him, language is a social practice and hence, dialogic in nature. According to dialogism, social reality is constructed through discourse. So, this view assumes that knowledge is constructed together by a group of people. This Bakhtinian concept of meaning-making allows learners to assume the role of active contributors in the understanding of the curriculum by engaging in dialogic discourse with their teacher, peer group and others.

Bakhtin presented 'dialogic discourse' in contrast with 'monologic discourse' in his work, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Lyle, 2008). A 'monologic' classroom remains in the control of the teacher and the teacher is considered to be the only source of knowledge. So, in such classroom, the teacher assumes the role of an omniscient who transfers knowledge to learners and the learner assumes the roleof a passive recipient. This approach is instrumental in achieving the goals of a teacher, who might be looking forward to getting only predefined responses from learners and completing the syllabus. In this type of classroom talk, the responses are fixed and the exchange of dialogue is limited. It tends to

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be artificial and out of context, which create an uncomfortable and boring environment in the classroom. In contrast, dialogic classroom seeks to incorporate both learners and the teacher in authentic discourse. This type of classroom creates space for learners who have important ideas to share and their own life experiences can make the classroom talk more authentic and livelier. So, the power relationship that exists in 'monologic classroom', in a way, gets diminished in 'dialogic classroom' where learning is viewed as a collaborative effort and knowledge is constructed through the proportionate exchange of dialogue.

Wells in his book, *Dialogic Inquiry* offers an alternative view on classroom as a community drawing on Vygotsky's concept of socio-cultural theory (Yuksel, 2009). It is through collaborative practices learning takes place. This theory of collaborative learning triumphs over the traditional model and focuses on endeavour of the individual while engaging in tasks collaboratively. Wells, here, emphasizes on the teacher's role. To him, the teacher acts as a facilitator and helps learners to take responsibility of their own learning. Thus, the teacher stands as a scaffolding in the learning process and boosts learners' confidence in taking charge of learning in future also. Wells advocates a model for the process of meaning-making with four components- experience, information, knowledge building, and understanding (Yuksel, 2009). There is a constant change in these four components as the class is engaged in collaborative learning through the exchange of dialogues.

Towards an understanding of reading comprehension-
Before the relationship between dialogic classroom and comprehen-sion of a text is established, it is important to define reading compre-hension and contextualize it. National Reading Panel Report (2005) looks at reading comprehension as "the act of understanding and interpreting the information within a text." The report also suggests that comprehension extends well beyond passive remembering of some information presented in the text; it is more about the construction of meaning. Reading is not a receptive activity but involves

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critical and dynamic thinking. It includes interpreting the written information on the text through the filters of the reader's existing beliefs and opinions. So, there is constant interaction between the reader's enormous background knowledge and the printed information presented before him/her. The above definition of reading is suggestive of the complexity involved with this activity and the higher level of cognitive engagement it demands of a reader. When the background information of the reader is involved, it automatically brings in the sociocultural context the reader belongs to and the classroom context in which it occurs (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). Moreover, reading as a dynamic activity rules out the idea of a reading text having a single interpretation. There can be multiple interpretations of a single text. The meaning is dependent on the context and if the context or the experience of a reader changes, the meaning changes accordingly. So, the process of meaning-making in this context is dependent upon the way the reader interacts with the text bringing his own world knowledge.

The National Reading Panel Report made an important distinction between 'skills' and 'strategies' which is worth mentioning in this context. Many tend to use both these terms as synonymous but the National Reading Panel Report has rightly pointed out a very subtle but important difference between these two. Skilled activities can be completed easily, quickly and without paying any or very little conscious attention. On the other hand, strategies demand the learners to be more reflective and purposeful and also require careful attention. When a learner is reading a text, s/he is involved in constant interaction with prior knowledge and also tries to understand and comprehend the text as per the purpose of the activities that are involved with it. The learner might attempt to guess the content from its title, and make predictions about the happening of events; or try to answer self-imposed questions, and change his/her idea if the prediction goes wrong, and also summarize the text to remember the overall story. These are some of the reading strategies which the learner should make use of in order to comprehend a text.

Another important distinction is made between the 'comprehension strategy' and the 'teaching strategy'. Comprehension strategies include conscious actions that a reader takes to increase the chances of understanding of a text as discussed in the last paragraph while teaching strategies are the actions taken by a teacher in order to teach something.

Michael Pressley gives an account of three waves of strategy instruction with regard to reading comprehension (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). In the first wave of strategy instruction, which began in 1970s and 1980s the focus was "on the effects of teaching student's individual comprehension strategies" and reading strategies were proved to be effective in studies related to: "activating prior knowledge, generating questions during reading, constructing mental images of the text, summarizing, and analysing stories into story grammar components". In the second wave of strategy instruction that was dominant in the 1980s, focused on the effects of teaching multiple strategies to learners. Reciprocal teaching became very popular instructional approach around this time. The strategies of "questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting" were taught to learners. All these strategies were directly instructed to learners and they were also engaged in guided and independent use of these strategies. In the third wave of strategies instruction, the researchers resorted to an approach called, 'transactional strategies instruction' which focuses on "transactions between reader and text, transactions among the participants (students and teacher), and joint construction of understanding" (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). The studies on comprehension strategy instruction have proved to be effective in improving the learners' understanding of the text and there are two important reasons that are to be mentioned in this context: first, the reading strategies help learners connect the text with their background knowledge and next, reading strategies enable learners "to engage in dialogue about text" with the teacher or the peer group.

Participation & comprehension in dialogic classroom-
With the recognition of comprehension as a flexible and context-based process, dialogic approach to reading was given importance where relative perspectives

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and discourses could be juxtaposed leaving space for unheard and sometimes conflicting voices in class. According to Alexander (2001), knowledge and understanding are results of analysing ideas, testing evidences, and exploring values. Therefore, it challenges the epistemological role and dominance of teachers and does not accept the certainties without asking questions. Also, it nurtures "the student's engagement, confidence, independence and responsibility". Thus, dialogic classroom not promotes better thinking but also holds the potential to enable learner voice to be legitimated.

In Indian context, all teaching learning activities mainly centre around the text and teachers and learners are constantly engaged in the meaning making process as readers or classroom participants. The understanding and interpretation of the same text by students as novice readers could differ from the teacher who is an experienced reader; however, this engagement by learners in meaning making process needs to be nurtured and celebrated (Aukerman, 2013). Dialogic classroom also extends the scope for learners in engaging in dialogue about the text and exploring the plethora of possibilities. However, depending on the approach towards comprehension, the scope and possibilities of dialogic classroom can vary. If reading comprehension is viewed as a product-based activity, there is hardly any scope for multiple voices in classroom which favours only a readymade supply of information from the authoritative figure whereas if reading comprehension is considered as a process-based activity, it allows room for others to engage with text and contribute to meaning in diverse ways.

Maximizing the learner participation in classroom discourse is the target that the teacher aims at in such classroom. However, the ways in which students participate differ in contexts. Open discussion draws student engagement more than any other forms of communication, for example, the prevalent situation where the teacher indicates a particular student to respond. Moreover, the willingness of participation of learners contributes significantly towards classroom communication while engaging with the text. The teacher plays the

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most significant role in engaging the learners. The engagement of the teacher as an equal participant alleviates the learner anxiety whereas the image of the teacher as a dominant figure acts as a barrier to participation.

The theories on improving text comprehension derive from myriad perspectives on teaching and learning- cognitive, dialogic, sociocultural and socio cognitive perspectives. The cognitive perspective advocates that a dialogic class promotes the process of meaning making from a text by actively engaging the classroom participants. The dialogic perspective on learning suggests that competing voices about a text in the classroom shape the discourse and comprehension of learners. The sociocultural perspective views dialogic classroom as an effective means of co-constructing knowledge and comprehending a text where the previous skills and knowledge play a pivotal role in analysing a new text. This view is strongly supported by 'schema theory' which suggests that readers from various cultural backgrounds bring different meanings to a text which itself assets the active role of readers in the comprehension of a text. So, the idea of reading as a simple meaning making process, thus, gets problematized. Lastly, the socio cognitive perspective presents the usefulness of discussion as a platform where the learner presents his/her point of view, accommodates the opinions from the peer group and tries to reconcile those conflicting opinions in constructing knowledge (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). The creative and critical thinking of learners can be achieved through the mechanism of collaborative talk in classroom discourse unlike the traditional classroom setting where the teacher mostly talks in the classroom and student participants respond minimally.

Concluding remarks & implications for teaching learning-

The incorporation of dialogic practices in classroom setting provides numerous implications for reading comprehension within the framework of teaching and learning; however, the establishment of such dialogic approaches will not be an easy task. Dialogic classes pose a serious challenge to monologic class which has exercised its influence since the beginning of teaching learning process. If learner

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participation in classroom discourse can improve the quality of learning, the teacher should take the following responsibilities in class-

- Invite students to read and talk about the portion of the text where there are chances of divergent interpretations which challenge the understanding of learners.
- Put learners in a situation where they are forced to exercise their creative faculty rather than looking at the teacher as the sole interpreter and epitome of all knowledge.
- Encourage learners to accept and respond logically to other interpretations with an open mind and be aware of the agreements and disagreements.
- Include an element of intertextuality, juxtaposition of a text in relation to other texts, while discussing a text. It can be used as an effective instrument in motivating learners in participating in classroom discourse and make use of the information they already possess.
- Make use of additional resources (social or cultural) in a creative manner and contextualise those in classroom discourse.
- Ask open ended questions so that the possibilities remain open for multiple responses. (Aukerman,2013)

However, it is to be remembered that dialogic practices for reading pedagogy do not represent an educational utopia where all problems related to reading comprehension are solved. Even if the situation permits the teacher to implement this kind of reading pedagogy, such approach will invite its own set of difficulties. As a result, the teacher needs to make changes in his/her strategies while implanting dialogic practices in class.

The teacher may have to remain contend with a small group of students who inevitably dominate every class with their enthusiastic participation while others might feel isolated in classroom discussion. In other situations, learners may not be interested in participating in such discourses. Yet, all these complexities should not stop the teacher from implementing dialogic practices in the classroom, facing a new set of challenges and then finding ways to come

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up with possible solutions so that difficulties related to reading comprehension can be minimised and comprehension instruction might become more sustainable in the classroom.

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