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Dialogue-based school practices as a means of reducing conceptual fossilisation in language learning

Summary

In language studies, fossilization is associated with the formation of permanent intermediate systems and subsystems. The interlanguage that develops between L1 and L2 (Selinker 1972) becomes embedded, rather than the learner continuing to develop increasing proficiency in the L2. As a language learner remains deficient in the target language (TL), it is important to attempt to mitigate this process and its negative effects. From this perspective, a task of the language teacher is to identify pedagogies which can prevent students from becoming lexically entrenched. In this paper, we advocate dialogic pedagogy as one which can reduce the likelihood of fossilisation occurring and which emphasises collaboration between learners, making their learning experiences meaningful. A core element of dialogic teaching and learning is the role of talk in the classroom in stimulating and advancing students' learning and understanding. We propose that prioritising the oral component of language learning through dialogic pedagogy can reduce fossilisation because misconceptions do not remain unchallenged and become ingrained. A culture of dialogue in which the voices of all learners and teachers are heard and responded to is one in which learners' exchanges contribute to extended understanding for all of those taking part in the dialogue.

Key words: dialogic education, dialogism, fossilisation, interlanguage, shared construction of meanings

Introduction

It is becoming more commonplace that pedagogical concepts become incorporated into the teaching of second/foreign languages as well as the other way round, with the gap between educational and linguistic sciences and practices becoming increasingly smaller and the two disciplines more increasingly focused on **learning from each other**. This paper constitutes an exemplification of this two-directional phenomenon and focuses predominantly on the concept of fossilisation, which, despite its nearly 50-year history, has been kept within the boundaries of linguistic studies and language teaching methods, but which can effectively serve pedagogy and general education.

How to teach a second language effectively is a key question in today's global society, not only for trade and business purposes, but also for "respect and trust" (British Council 2014: 4) between citizens of different countries. Effective language learning typically means that learners are able to attain fluency through classroom instruction, for example the European Commission Eurydice Report highlights that school curricula expect students to achieve "independent user" level by the end of their formal schooling (2017: 14). Of course, there are also adult language learners who take up an additional language past the age of formal schooling.

However, language learners frequently do not achieve desired levels of fluency (either in terms of curriculum or their own expectations). In this paper we consider language fossilisation, which broadly means that language learners become 'stuck' at a sub-fluent level of language learning. There are a number of reasons for this, ranging from incorrect but ingrained use of TL grammatical features, to a lack of confidence in ability. Following a more detailed examination of fossilisation, we subsequently consider what we claim could be a key pedagogical strategy for more effective language learning and for successful learning in general: dialogic education.

The word 'dialogic' derives from the word 'dialogue', which at a casual level might mean 'to have a conversation with someone'. However, a great deal more is implied by 'dialogic' in the educational sense. What Neil Phillipson and Rupert Wegerif associate with dialogic education is "learning how to ask better questions, how to listen better, hearing not only the words but also the implicit meanings, how to be open to new possibilities and new perspectives" (2017: 1–2). Thus, it is a pedagogy of interaction between learners and teachers in which meanings are made through interaction, and through which learners learn from one another.

Although dialogue is vital from the perspective of an individual in line with the premise that “talk truly empowers children as learners” (Alexander 2008), the element of collaboration is vital. There is not only one voice in a dialogue, and so being dialogic is a disposition as much as a skill, as it requires the ability to engage with the other in a way allowing for multiple voices (Wegerif 2006). If the teacher lacks such a disposition conducive to balanced interaction as a starting point and, instead, regards him or herself as the ‘all-knowing other’, a true dialogue will not be possible.

Since you are never ‘on your own’ in dialogue, and since dialogue involves a constantly shifting pattern of meaning, **we argue that dialogic education offers possibilities for reducing the likelihood of fossilisation occurring.** We now turn to a further examination of fossilisation and dialogue, before considering the justification for a dialogic pedagogy of language learning and what this might look like.

Fossilisation

Fossilisation is most often understood as the phenomenon of (second) language learners not developing any further or relying on “such deviant features of the second language which were thought to be eradicated in their language performance a long time ago” (Wysocka 2008: 11). It is generally associated with the concept of interlanguage (IL), introduced in the 1970s by Larry Selinker, who presented it as a language system that “has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target languages” (1974: 36). In the light of Selinker’s concept, fossilisation can be more technically defined as a cessation of interlanguage learning or, more extensively, as “a permanent cessation of IL learning before the learner has attained TL norms at all levels of linguistic structure and in all discourse domains in spite of the learner’s positive ability, opportunity, and motivation to learn and acculturate into target structure” (Selinker & Lamendella 1978: 187).

Whilst interlanguage per se needs to be viewed as a natural and essentially desirable achievement of language learning, fossilisation is to be regarded, in accordance with the negative-sounding label, as a phenomenon to be avoided as it characterises (a large proportion of) second language learners who never achieve native-speaker competence. In other words, fossilisation can be seen as an unwanted effect of language learning, which, being a dynamic process,

exhibits, as ZhaoHong Han notes, “paradoxes such as systematicity and fragmentality, permeability and resistance, variability and premature stability” (2004: 213). Fossilisation entails the dominance of the latter characteristics named over the former.

Most notably and relevantly for this paper, fossilisation, similarly to the development of interlanguage, proceeds through stages, with the distance between the native and target languages varying throughout the entire course of learning and with “the inability of a person to attain native-like ability in the target language” (Lowther 1983: 127) being likely to impede further language progress at any given stage. Looking at this stages-based character of fossilisation from the perspective of dialogic education, its early occurrence implies a gross limitation of language resources for the purposes of communication and arriving at shared meanings by dialogue participants.

As with dialogism, fossilisation takes many forms and can be recognised on multiple levels. Most importantly, it is recognised at the strata of cognition and performance: in the former case it is thought of as a fossilisation mechanism (Selinker 1972: 221), that is a constituent of a latent psychological structure that determines a learner’s acquisition of a second language. In the latter case, it is seen as a performance-related structural phenomenon implying “the regular reappearance in second-language performance of linguistic phenomena which were thought to be eradicated” (Selinker 1972: 211). In both cases its linguistic scope is also known to vary and to pertain to any range between fossilisable structures (only) (which is referred to as ‘local fossilisation’) to a fossilised interlanguage as a whole (which is referred to as ‘global fossilisation’). Additionally, it tends to be seen both as a process covering “features of the second language learner’s interlanguage that deviate from the native speaker norm and are not developing any further, or deviant features which – although seemingly left behind – re-emerge in the learner’s speech under certain conditions” (Hyltenstam 1988: 68), or a product manifesting itself as permanently stabilised linguistic deviance.

Dialogism and dialogic education

As Per Linell (2000) writes, “dialogism” is a name for a bundle, or combination, of theoretical and epistemological assumptions about human action, communication and collaboration. These assumptions concern more than just language or teaching styles. For example, Mishra (2015) states that there is a difference

between a pedagogically dialogic environment and an ontologically dialogic one. In the former, dialogue is used as a pedagogical tool to mean a discussion, whereas in the latter it means considering others as independent subjects with whom one dialogues without the intent of imposing one's own meanings on the other with no reciprocation.

This is an important point when considering the role of the teacher, who tends to have greater knowledge and understanding of the subject being studied than the student. Despite this, the teacher ought still to regard students as independent subjects with their own voices with whom to dialogue and make meaning. Together with their students, teachers need to embark on what Long (1981) refers to as "conversational interaction" between two (groups of) interlocutors jointly undertaking actions in support of their meanings. They negotiate the meaning (Pica 1994) and in the event of an impasse in understanding, they adjust the linguistic form ("modified input") or modify the interactional structures ("modified interaction") (Long 1983).

The opposite of dialogism – based on the recognition that the learner "is not a self-sufficient entity; it needs the other, his recognition and his formative activity" (Todorov 1984: 96) – is monologism (Linell 2000), in which cognition is the primary consideration, and communication serves the purpose of transferring privately constructed thoughts to another. This could either be the teacher transmitting knowledge to the students, or students themselves constructing thoughts and transmitting them to other students, for example in group work, but without the dialogic disposition to hear the perspectives of others and review one's own thinking to jointly construct meaning and new knowledge together. Monologism therefore tends to be deprived of key aspects of dialogism: mutual respect and exchange of the roles of sender and the addressee, which, as Śnieżyński (2001) notes, not only enables better understanding, but also leads to the interlocutors becoming closer to each other (At the same time, dialogue involves silence and listening, aiding the person speaking in articulating thoughts, ordering views, and opening the perspective of the speaker's own development (Okońska-Walkowicz 1991).

Philosophy with children is one example of a dialogic classroom practice (Kerslake 2018), in which children take part in a community of inquiry which is facilitated by teachers. The use of the word 'facilitated' is important, as it stands in opposition to transmission models of education in which the teacher is the 'all-knowing other'. The inquiry has no definitive trajectory towards an end point, but rather 'meanders' (Lipman 1998) as the inquiry is communicatively

constructed. Students are encouraged to voice their opinions and views, listen to each other, and challenge each other's utterances. In this way, students' true dialogue takes place as meaning is made collaboratively.

In the next section we go on to explore dialogic education within the context of the language learning classroom, and how significant this approach can be in reducing the likelihood of fossilisation occurring. It must be observed here that although the authors referred to below address fossilisation predominantly with reference to (natural) language acquisition, our considerations pertain to language learning in classroom settings, with fossilisation exerting a strong impact on students' achievements and preventing them from becoming fully fluent as well.

How a dialogic education approach can reduce fossilisation

Mari A. Haneda and Gordon Wells highlight that L1 learning takes place "through engagement in jointly undertaken activities with significant others" (2008: 115). Most probably, there will be no specific language instruction because caregivers may not have explicit language knowledge (e.g. grammar). Instead, there are numerous repeated opportunities for L1 learners to practice language acquisition in the context of meaningful social activity. In other words, L1 acquisition takes place as dialogue. The dialogic quality of L1 acquisition accompanies its three key characteristics: (1) opportunities for exposure to language modelling, (2) sufficient repetition at a learner's own pace, and (3) sharing their interests through language-based activities (Haneda & Wells 2008).

These qualities are equally important for language learning in school settings, as they help to induct the learner into wider cultural dialogue, with each specific utterance taking place as part of a chain of utterances, and also, as a consequence, leading to future utterances as part of the cultural dialogue. This, for Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) is one of the defining characteristics of dialogue: that reification of knowledge or understanding is inherently undialogic. When an utterance no longer gives rise to a question it falls out of dialogue. Hence, dialogue is always in the present and the infinite possibility (Wegerif 2007) of further dialogue is always there. Through dialogue, language functions as a shared system, engaging learners as active users of jointly-created concepts in the classroom (Kerslake & Rimmington 2017).

As the antithesis of reification, dialogism is also the antithesis of fossilisation. From the linguistic perspective, fossilisation implies the tendency towards

cessation of learning (as one of its defining components), which occurs – somewhat paradoxically – **despite continuous exposure to input**, adequate motivation and readiness to learn, and sufficient opportunity for practice (as the other defining component) (Hen 2004: 232). If these positive factors are not sufficient to forestall fossilisation, we argue that perhaps dialogic education offers an additional component. This point can be well seen through consideration of factors by which fossilisation is affected. Dialogic classroom practices rest upon the same factors, which reveals mutual reinforcement between the two concepts, meaning that:

- fossilisation can be attenuated by dialogic classroom practices, and conversely:
- dialogic classroom practices can be shaped upon knowledge concerning fossilisation.

To exemplify their reinforcement, we shall now name four selected factors bearing an influence on the occurrence of fossilisation, which are key factors for teachers and learners to deploy dialogue (in its ontological form described earlier) to forestall any breakdown of learning. (The selection of the factors below has been made on the basis of Wysocka's taxonomy of causal factors of fossilisation, as adapted from Han (2008: 18).)

Example 1.

On the cognitive level, **lack of attention** makes fossilisation likely in that it creates gaps in the learner's linguistic repertoire, causing the learner to overlook a multitude of TL features. Through dialogic practices, however, cognition is not conceived of as an individual enterprise. In any given group of learners overlooked TL features are bound to differ from learner to learner, and so by collaborating dialogically, features which have been overlooked by one group member might be brought into play by another. Conversely, the category of attention serves as one of the principles affecting fossilisation, which prompts attention on attention during dialogic practices. For example, a teacher could organise small group learning with the intent of bringing together students with different language-knowledge deficits in order to highlight the 'missing' TL elements amongst learners.

Example 2.

On the affective level, one of the fossilising factors is learners' **satisfaction of communicative needs**. The way in which it "invites" fossilisation is that learners perceive their language (oral) proficiency sufficient and, consequently, cease

to (feel the internal need to) learn. This form of learners' complacency is inevitably diminished through dialogic practices and students' joint attempt to construct meanings reaching far beyond simple communicative (survival) purposes. Conversely, by developing students' awareness of how their satisfaction with language performance in simple everyday exchanges can lead to fossilisation, teachers can boost their learners' motivation towards dialogue and meanings-oriented practices.

Example 3.

On the environmental level (in its educational sense), the fossilisation is affected by, inter alia, **absence of corrective feedback**, the logic of which rests upon the fact that the quality of language produced by learners is determined by the nature of feedback. Dialogic practices as stipulated herein prevent, by definition, such circumstances in which feedback is not offered. The dialogic approach provides learning opportunities in which meanings must be clarified, explained, or crystallised. On the other hand, the teachers' and students' awareness of how strongly language improvement rests on feedback favours situations in which opportunities to engage in dialogue are provided in the classroom.

Example 4.

On the neuro-biological level, fossilisation is triggered by differently-named sorts of maturational constraints related to aging, one of which is the so-called **neural entrenchment** implying the resistance of the L1 neural system to that of L2 and accounting for the learners' failure to acquire certain TL features. It can be argued, however, that dialogic dispositions, particularly if developed from an early age, help retain brain plasticity known to accompany the neural entrenchment by making learners constantly question what they have already learnt and go beyond any stage of cognitive development. Conversely, if dialogue-based practices serve mental flexibility, then classroom activities meant to match students' stage of development need to incorporate dialogic practices.

Implications for language classrooms

The above implies that there is a specific set of **personal characteristics** that helps forestall the powerful effect of fossilisation. Considered jointly, these characteristics form a desirable approach to language learning, with their com-

mon denominator being the position that the learning of language cannot be considered in terms of the endpoint of fluency. The learner's profile, comprising the four aforementioned traits – attentiveness, lack of complacency, the need for feedback and dialogic orientation – can be viewed as contrary to an authoritative, conceptually limited, and over-linear attitude to language use, which are qualities blocking learners' speech and leading to its fossilisation. Whilst among strategies recommended for reducing fossilisation is that, inter alia, learning motivation be intensified, foreign language input be accumulated, language output be augmented (Li 2009: 76–77), or learners be exposed to TL and TL culture (Wei 2008: 130), it appears that dialogic education bears many of the characteristics deemed necessary for language fossilisation to be successfully reduced.

Furthermore, the above also needs to be considered through the prism of **linguistic characteristics**, which by themselves may either act negatively and encourage fossilisation or have a positive impact and help reduce the process in question. As Catherine J. Doughty and John Williams show, susceptibility to fossilisation is coincident with language infrequency, irregularity, semantic non-transparency, and communicative redundancy (1998), in relation to which Wysocka notes that “perceptually non-salient language forms constitute the source of fossilisation as many learners [...] consider them as unimportant” (2008: 42). Such a perception appears to be alien to dialogic education, where every single word or meaning counts, which is vital in raising learners' level of attention or esteem to what is being uttered.

The above being the case, the personal and linguistic facets can be taken jointly as **benchmarks of such an approach to language learning that is conducive to the development of dialogic disposition and unfavourable to fossilisation at the same time**. Dialogically-poised language learning prompts a search for increasingly better forms of expression and more precise words, which acts against fossilisation manifested through such lexical simplification that Shoshana Blum-Kulka and Edward A. Levenston refer to as “making do with less words” (1983: 121). As Wysocka also notes, the simplification in question (consisting in replacing difficult words with simple ones, avoiding certain topics, abandoning message delivery due to the lack of linguistic means etc.) brings about discourse incoherence responsible for incomprehensibility and misinterpretations experienced by interlocutors (Wysocka 2008: 34). In dialogic education such conceptually detrimental phenomena are reduced, with such corresponding categories as “equitable participation”, “negotiation of perspectives” allows “analysis, transformation and reconciliation of underlying points of view”, and “reasoning

[that] can be made visible” (Hennessy et al 2016: 18). This criterion of dialogic teaching and learning renders it necessary for learners to reach beyond the simple and the fossilised).

Conclusion

The need for binding dialogic education with thinking about (the reduction of) fossilisation proves to have solid **theoretical grounds**. To complete our consideration, it is worth referring to Wells (1986), who has shown that the frequency of dialogic interaction is one of the best predictors of the rate of language development. This is because true dialogue is more than words functionally communicated to each other, but instead a part of a social system through which thought and identity are jointly created. What this implies also for second language classrooms is clear: if words are considered as the means to a communicative end (i.e. TL fluency), then there are a number of factors – given as examples in the paper – which may prevent this from taking place.

Additional, **practical support** for the dialogism-anti-fossilisation reasoning is provided by specific educational realities. To exemplify them, we can refer to Finland, where pre-school children learn TL (English) through engagement in activities known as “playing in English” (Moate 2015: 19), whereby children participate actively and have repeated exposure to the language being learnt. This sort of activity is dialogic in nature, with language learning as their key objective and with the learners’ involvement contributing to the reduction of fossilisation. By being part of a learning community which takes place in dialogic practices (Hennessy et al, *ibid*), learners have an opportunity to hear not only the perspectives but also the language modelling of other learners, thereby providing them with individualised language uses of language, the variety of which acts against the fossilisation of language forms.

Looking at the learning of language through the prism of dialogism and (anti-) fossilisation has far-reaching implications and benefits. Forestalling reification of language development taking the form of fossilisation, the dialogic approach implies a search for shared meanings, construction of shared knowledge and ensuing advancement of the linguistic repertoire of an individual. These processes turn the language learning classroom into a collaborative space in which learners are interactive participants and together form a community whose members contribute to the reduction of each other’s conceptual fossilisation.

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