From Interaction to Dialogue; Analyzing in the Context of Indian Classrooms

Garima Aggarwal

Assistant Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Corresponding author: garima2512@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Classroom interactions have been one of the most examined topic for the researchers coming from social constructivist background. In the same regard Vygotskian work can be considered meaningful and evocative in understanding the joint construction of meaning through interactions. However, from the reality of multicultural societies and their background, a closer and deeper study of interactions is required. In this context, Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher, who has presented in his work, a detailed critical account of social understanding of language and its style of dialogue, provides a valuable perspective fulfilling this objective. By studying Bakhtin's ideas related to dialogue, this essay attempts to explore their application in the context of classroom interactions. It has been attempted to analyze the social constructivist approach and its execution and implementation in Indian classrooms. Then after the same analysis has been scrutinized from the perspective of dialogue given by Bakhtin. The scrutiny has also resulted in a comprehensive comparison between Vygotskian framework of interaction and Bakhtinian understanding of discourse. At the end, the paper presents a concluding understanding of how classroom interactions should be understood and analyzed within contemporary scenario of changing curriculum, pedagogies and teacher- student relationship.

Keywords: Interaction, dialog, discourse, classroom teaching, social constructionism, Vygotsky, Bakhtin

Classroom interactions are an essential and imperative part of the teaching- leaning process. In context of changing scenario of Indian classrooms, consisting of new curriculum demands, evaluation patterns, and conceptual development in the content of text-books, the teacher- student interaction has again gained the impetus from researchers' perspectives.

But it is also important to understand that interactions have had their own trajectory of development. The presented article while considering the changing scenario, explores and analyzes the perspectives pertaining to the nature, significance and execution of classroom interactions that has been considered of importance in the field of education and gradually attempts to weave in an understanding of a 'dialogue' (Bakhtin, 1981) that may be helpful to critically analyze the present situation of interactions in Indian classrooms.

According to Barnes (1993), the process of learning takes time. It cannot be memorized by monologic rote memorization. In order to learn, the interaction between the student and the teacher is essential. This process creates a meaningful context for the student where he/she further builds on her/his already acquired repertoire of knowledge. A teacher's role is significant in the same as a facilitator and a social interactive partner. A similar view has been presented by Rogoff (1990) explaining the role of social agents in construction of meaning. According to her 'tools of thinking' are made available by the social and cultural agents during joint interactive activities. Theorists in recent times (Kuzolin, 1990; Renshaw, 1992) have also put considerable emphasis on the role of interaction and a social construction of meaning during teaching- learning activity.

'Social constructivism in learning', which has been the key approach through which classroom

interactions has been studied till now, was introduced by the pioneer work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978). He has explained the relationship between language and thought. His emphasis on role of language, specifically interaction with a learned other is the basic precursor of the understanding that learning and teaching in dependent on classroom interactions. The term of 'Social constructivism' was first presented by Berger & Luckmann (1966) in their book 'Social Construction of reality'. The primary objective of this approach is to understand the origin of the social realities, and how individuals create meaning through it. This article, with the understanding of constructive ideology, tries to understand interactions in contemporary Indian context. While re-discovering the significance of learning constructed during interactions, this article attempts to understand the important developments that the new perspective presented by Bakhtin (1981, 1984, and 1986) edifies. Finally, while observing the importance of these ideas in the Indian context, an attempt has been made to re-invent the understanding ofinteractions and chalk out their journey to become a dialogue in their own context.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERACTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Since long teachers have understood the importance of language in teaching. According to Wells & Arauz (2006), for a human being, language is the first medium, which helps him take part collectively in the social activities. Similarly, students use language to include themselves in the classroom activities. Hence, it is clear that language, which is used for communication in the classroom, is an important source for studying the relationship between learning outcomes and curriculum (Hicks, 2003). The primary principle of Social constructivism ideology also talks about language working as a major mediator between teacher and student.

But in the initial stages of the history of education, the teachers were found to be talking most of the time. The students were only expected to memorize and report the facts; they were hardly given any opportunity to speak in the classroom. In those times also, as whatever was spoken was based on the expectations of the teacher, it was not a symbol of comprehension for the students. According to this

view (specifically pertaining to behaviorism) reality exists independently of learners and knowledge is transmitted not constructed.

With time, teachers realized that if better results in learning are to be achieved then the classroom processes need to incorporate students' social and cultural backgrounds so that they are able to interact within the classrooms. In this view there is a major epistemological shift. The teachers look at themselves as a collaborator or facilitator whose primary responsibility is to let the learners construct their own knowledge for themselves through interactions with the learned other. The idea gained impetus and theorists worked on its implementation in different situations on differing social set ups.

Erroneous implementation of Vygotskian Social Constructivism

As a result of continually increasing influence of social constructivism, teachers started to believe that it is extremely important to give to the students an opportunity to talk in the classroom. But I want to argue that the incorrect manner in which the execution of social constructivism is done in majority of Indian classrooms, is against the basic principles of the concept itself. In majority of Indian classrooms, the teacher- students' interaction which is considered as socio-constructivist dialogue remains restricted either to an agenda of reaching at a particular answer (because of which the teacher is not able to incorporate multifaceted experience of her multicultural classroom) or it remains on the superficial level of questioning and answering in name of participatory talk. Following is a discussion on an excerpt unraveling a teacher's endeavors to get her students involve in classroom discussion, whereas it is rather coercing them towards a talk which is excluding their experiences. The excerpt has been taken from one of a larger scale ongoing research attempts by me on a similar topic. The example has been taken from learning of environmental studies in class five.

Lesson – A seed tells a farmer's story (Translated transcription)

Teacher - We read about farming of Bajra in this chapter. Now the question given in your text book… "Is *roti* prepared in your homes? Is yes, then what grain you use in that?

Students 1 - Missi *roti* madam,

Student 2- *roti* using the gram flour

Students 3- *roti* using spinach also

Teacher - No, no. This has not been asked here. Spinach is not a grain. All students write, in our homes *roti* is prepared mostly using wheat or maize flour.

Teacher –Another question… What is done in your homes to protect grains and lentils from insects/pests? Anyone can answer this.

Student 4- Ma'am, my mother keeps something wrapped in a piece of cloth …

Teacher- whats that?

Students- That I don't know ma'am, I can ask.

Teacher – anybody else?

(Without waiting)

All students write, match sticks, lime stone and insecticide are used.

Other questions that were asked by the teacher to summarize the chapter:

- List down the important items used in farming
- Write, what are the important points that need to be kept in mind in the farming of millets.

The chapter of class five "A seed tells a farmer's story"has been prepared to allow students to actually experience agriculture and its processes. It also aims to discuss about students' experience and knowledge of the fruits & vegetables that are grown in their region. Then after an attempt has been made through this chapter to understand the occurrence of various types of changes in agriculture with time. A basic focus of the chapter is to let students connect their indigenous experiences and knowledge of everyday usage of seeds, remedies to keep them safe and local pesticides and other medicines that are used for them with the content of the chapter.

But a close analysis of the given excerpt unravels the following points that are needed to be scrutinized further:

- Attempts are being made by the teacher to have students answer a few questions in the middle of the chapter also.
- But questions are being asked in such a manner that the understanding evolved in all the

students is to reach towards the correct answer. This correct answer has been decided by the teacher. She has taken the content given in the textbook as the final word and expecting her students to reach at the same.

- In the same agenda of reaching towards the expected answer by the teacher, she is ignoring personal experiences of the students. She is letting them share it but isn't allowing the students to explore them further.

- In the presented episode of a classroom from Indian context, it can be seen that at one hand, the students are participating in the discussion of the classroom in an enthusiastic manner, but on the other, it should also be noticed whether this participation is remaining on a superficial level or they are able to connect their personal experiences in an in- depth manner.

- The activity in itself is appearing to be a success in including the students in the discussion. However, it is also important to understand what results are being obtained by the teacher's intentions of bringing students on a homogenous understanding.

The journey of an interaction to become a dialogue

From the above section, one can conclude two things. First, it is understood that the presence of 'interaction' in the classroom in itself is not sufficient. Social constructivist perspective of teaching and learning does not render itself in mere presence of some random questioning and answering with students. Second, the basic principle of this perspective which aims towards reaching single understanding, at times results in ignoring of personal and digressing experiences of students. Even if it takes them in consideration, the agenda is to transform the comprehension in a way that it sounds developed (developed in the sense of what the text-book or the teacher prescribes as developed).

The transformation of the consciousness becomes the ultimate objective and the process which precedes this, aims to partially (because ultimately the digressing experience would dissolve within the mainstream understanding) listen the experiences but only in order to achieve a higher consciousness.

The ways in which the participants (students in this case) express themselves diversely are then pushed to the periphery of gradual and unnoticed discussions of the mainstream understanding.

Bakhtin on the other hand explicates that any advancement in consciousness happens due to the dialogic relationship amongst various meanings and voices. The development is not a result of pushing the already acquired perspectives to the periphery of the ongoing discourse in order to achieve the joint constructed meanings, rather is a result of locating the diverse senses within the mainstream discourse with a logical understanding due to their relative situatedness.

In order to develop the understanding of communication further, it is important to understand its relationship with the society. At the social level, objective of a conversation is not to answer a question. To have a better understanding of communication, it is important to understand the basic principles of Mikhail Bakhtin, famous Russian philosopher, who helps in understanding the interaction at the level of dialogue and discourse. Bakhtin's understanding related to dialogue not only provides a robust framework to understand the interactions within asocial set-up, but it also elaborates on the impact it has on the participants (Holquist, 2002).

Bakhtin (1981, 1986), who has had a very deep influence on many subjects like ethics, cultural studies, linguistics,literary theory and on the understanding of the language used in theological reviews, provides a detailed explanation of language's social influence and its communicational form in his work. This understanding can be of significance in the field of education, specifically in understanding the interactions within the classroom within a social framework. It is impossible to present his detailed and complete theoretical inputs in one article. Therefore for the presented article I have chosen to draw my inferences from and around the construct of dialogue. I will attempt to discuss how this perspective develops the social understanding of interaction in the classroom.

According to Bakhtin, the process of understanding a society by ways of language, also embarks upon the relationship between individuals and the society. The same also results in concluding that individuals and the society together attains meaning through its complex nexus of communications. They together create a social dialogue which is the basic constituent of the discourses within a particular society. Every human being in this social dialogue with his personal meaning and by developing his personal meaning participates and creates his own different understanding. Personal meanings help individuals to relate to the ongoing discourses and attain a sense of themselves which becomes significant in their personal growth.

In this way, in a classroom context as well, every student takes part in a dialogue with his/her personal meaning. Here, it is important to understand that if the teacher would stress on reaching at an uniform answer, then there will be an interruption to personal freedom (for the development of dialogic understanding), which Bakhtin recognizes as of utmost importance.

Here, Bakhtin expands on the idea of social constructivism. His idea of dialogue plays extremely important role in the development of understanding of interactionin the classroom. According to Holquist (2002), Bakhtin's construct of dialogue stresses on the relativity of opinions. For the completeness of an opinion it is important that the informed should be aware of opinions and perspectives like those of his own as well as of others that are related to him. It is required because if a student is not aware of all the perspectives then he will not be able to develop his logical opinions. One answer and one perspective will limit the student's understanding. It also means that for the teacher it is imperative to listen to and understand the personal perspective of all the students. As personal experiences presents a diverse range of voices that she needs to incorporate in the all the ongoing discourses of a classroom.

According to Bakhtin, dialogue between the participants (students and teacher in the context of a class room) is only possible when all kinds of perspectives are allowed to enter the interaction. Hence, it is the responsibility of the teacher that he/she should try to include all perspectives in the classroom interaction. By this, it will be possible for the students to connect with the ongoing interaction at a deeper level and not only superficially. This is so because they will be allowed to share their opinions and experiences, no matter how divergent from the mainstream they are.

Now the question arises what novel is Bakhtin adding to social constructivism. According to Bakhtin (1981), participants should not only be permitted to talk about their new and different opinions but they should have the freedom to maintain them as well. It is not necessary that in the classroom a single answer would be correct. Answer to any question depends on the perspective. If perspective is different, then answers too may be different.

Simultaneous existence of multiple meanings

According to Bakhtin, it is important to present multiple meanings to the participants if their thinking is to be developed. Thereby, the teacher herself is to accept the existence of such multiple meanings. For this, it is important that the teacher create such an environment in the classroom that all the students are able to express their perspectives or experiences openly. The teacher should not only provide the students the freedom to express but also to maintain their views.

A social process in which the simultaneous existence of multiple meanings is recognized and given importance is called as heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981). According to Bakhtin, it is an idea of a social setup where the availability of multiple meanings and their co-existence is recognized. Inheteroglossia, having contrast in views is considered a catalyst for the progress of views and for making the participants even more thoughtful. Hypothesis of this social setting in itself supports the incorporation and maintenance of inherent views in a cooperative environment.

In Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (1984), Bakhtin has talked of another idea related to this - Polyphony. Polyphony means the existence of many voices in an interaction. Bakhtin considers Dostoevsky's work a good example of polyphony. He says that Dostoevsky's work has many perspectives and none of them considers the other inferior. All perspectives have their own validity and history. Bakhtin recognizes that this basic idea should be present between the participants of any social interaction.

Opposed to Bakhtin's concept of dialogue is the concept of monologism. Historically, classrooms have developed incorporating this concept. Monologism believes in monologue – one truth, one ideology and one belief. Whatever facts matchthe mainstream

thought will be accepted, everything else will be considered facetious. Thereby, in the context of a monologic classroom interaction, only one fact is exposed and spread around. Students are not given the freedom to express themselves. Consequently, students find a distinction between the classroom activities and their daily lives. Skidmore (2000) has done a research in this context. By observing the educational interactions within a classroom, he has differentiated between monologism and dialogism. Skidmore noticed that in a monologic classroom, the teacher was asking questions consistently. However, she wanted to hear only those answers, which were correct according to her opinion. As a result, students were telling only those answers and responding only as much as the teacher had taught them or that which could be verified from the book. Other than this, even if the students had something to tell in the class, they could not. Here, all the answers were either correct or incorrect. Skidmore, in his conclusion of this experience states that monologism isolated students from school and classroom and restricted their experiences. In the minds of the students, it creates aversion to education for life, which they gradually believe to be imaginary, esoteric, and unrelated to them.

In the context of classroom discussing the results of Bakhtin's concept of conversation (dialogism) Skidmore further states that development of thought and understanding cannot happen through one-sided interaction. Bakhtin's dialogue provides a good alternative to the one-sided interaction. In order to develop understanding in the classroom, it is imperative to allow students to argue and make arguments. It can only happen when students are allowed to participate in the dialogue and all students adopt a critical perspective towards it. It is possible only when different facts and experiences present in the world are brought in the classroom.

Social constructivism and Bakhtin's dialogue

In the field of education, under the idea of constructivism, preliminary understanding of dialogue is derived from Vygotsky's work. Bakhtin' work is wrongly considered an extension of Vygotsky's work (Wegerif, 2008; Matusov, 2011). However, both thinkers in their concepts of understanding dialogue are majorly different. Hence, it is important to understand how Bakhtin's

concept of dialogue is different from Vygotsky's concept of dialogue. In this section, I will try to understand those similarities and differences, which are helpful in the field of education.

Researchers (Bickley, 1997; Wegerif, 2008) consider Vygotskian idea dialectical and Bakhtinian idea as dialogical. The meaning of Vygotsky's dialectical ideas means that negotiators would discuss amongst themselves and reach a common understanding, which would be same for all. According to Vygotsky, the creation of shared understanding is necessary and final for any conversation. Here, it is necessary to mention that the shared understanding, which is publicized by the Vygotsky's concepts are based on participants' experiences only. However, in order to reach this shared understanding, it becomes necessary for the participants to bring some changes to their present opinions. This change may or may not be in congruence with their personal opinions.

Here, Bakhtin has a different opinion from Vygotsky because his concepts do not put so much stress on creating a shared understanding; final form of dialogue for the participants can depend on them only. Every participant can form a different understanding based on his experiences. For this, it is necessary that all participants should recognize the existence of multiple meanings and make efforts to know them. After knowing all meanings and perspectives, he/she can follow any meaning as per his/her thinking.

This idea makes an important expansion on social constructivism. In social constructivism the added development from Bakhtinian perspective of dialogue is- now by joining any interaction the participants do not try to end their differences and disagreements. On the other hand, they find out the relative existence of the differences and create their own understanding, which may be different from that of others. Matusov (2011) even says that according to Bakhtin, for reaching a shared understanding it is not necessary for the participants to imbibe the facts. On the other hand, according to their experiences,they could create a different perspective related to facts.

It is important to mention here that despite their differences Bakhtin and Vygotsky have some similar opinions on the social nature of language as well. Both believe that growth of meanings in the society is possible through conversation only. However,

it is also clear that both thinkers have different opinions on how the meanings and how the growth of meanings should occur.

Using dialogue to make classroom interaction meaningful in the Indian context

It is clear from the last section that Bakhtin adds an important perspective to the interactions that happens in the class, specifically between the teacher and the students. Historically, aim of education has been to arrive at the correct answer. However, in a modern class, in order to fulfill this objective, teachers ignore the personal experiences of students. Even after listening to students' experiences, teachers try to get them memorize the experiences told in the textbooks. Even the perspectives which inherently involves development of diverse views are dealt in a manner that they result in insensitive memorization of facts rendering themselves significant only from the point of view of examinations.

This has important implications specifically in present context of India where large scale curriculum changes (NCF 2006) has been introduced. The changed textbooks now require students to delve in diverse view-points and opinions and locate their relative understandings. But it has to be maintained that any such content should not be considered as the sole understanding to arrive at. This is just an initiation towards the need to gather and unravel many such meanings or voices which couldn't be quoted in the text book.

India's cultural diversity is a mix of a number of facets - religious, geographical, ethical, linguistic, and economic. The transmission of this diversity in customs, traditions, and opinions is also reflected in the participants. In multicultural societies like India, it becomes necessary that the education system encourages the students to bring this difference in the classroom and talk about it. Students should see the difference from their own perspective and create their understanding according to themselves. This may be a process of fusion but its trajectory may be different for every student. In order to move ahead during learning, the students need not leave behind their experiences but for themselves, but need to develop a thought that is intrinsically motivational. This idea proposed by Bakhtin (1981) gives importance to the fact that all

students should develop their ability to think and process thought. They should make efforts to know the facts and opinions, and before adopting any opinion, they should develop their own opinions by understanding its critical relevance. In context of classroom, it is also the basic responsibility of the teacher that she should not only encourage the students to bring forward their experiences during the conversation in the classroom but also to discuss them deeply. She should help the students develop the understanding that there is no single truth. The meaning of knowing for us would be to understand all these perspectives and together form a relative understanding.

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