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The Model for Forming Interfacultural Competence of the Young Learners Based on Dialogical Texts

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A B S T R A C T

This study discusses how knowledge of dialogic features can inform intercultural learning. Intercultural learning is highlighted in educational policy as a means of managing cultural diversity. Furthermore, intercultural dialogue is a frequently employed term. However, the features and aims of intercultural dialogues often remain vague. To help elucidate them, secondary-school students' conversations about a picture book in the ELT class are analysed through the lens of dialogic theory. Through engaging with the pictures, a dialogic space emerged, allowing the students to display curiosity about another culture and contribute ideas. Their willingness to actively listen, explore conflicting ideas and change their minds led to joint meaning-making and the co-construction of knowledge of another culture. The study adds to the scarce empirical literature on reading for intercultural learning in English language teaching through its novel approach, applying dialogic theory to intercultural learning, mediated by picture book dialogues. I argue that knowledge of dialogic features can serve as a tool for teachers aiming to foster students' intercultural learning in ELT.

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Dialogue is a term that has gained much currency over the last decade, frequently preceded by the adjective 'intercultural'. Its usages can be divided into two strands: (a) intercultural dialogue as a response to globalization in order to manage increased cultural diversity (for example, Council of Europe, 2008; UNESCO, 2013) and (b) dialogue as an approach to intercultural learning through dialogic activities, and/or readers' dialogue with text representing the readers' own or another culture (Byram & Wagner, 2018). It is the latter usage that is of interest in this paper.

The terminology of dialogue can vary, with the word sometimes used interchangeably with words such as 'discussion', 'interaction' and 'talk' and often used loosely, leaving the specific features and aims of dialogue undefined. This paper will focus on what makes classroom talk dialogic and how dialogues can foster intercultural learning. To this end, the following research questions are addressed: 1. What features of dialogue seem to be conducive to intercultural learning? 2. How might teachers facilitate students' intercultural dialogues? These questions are explored through the lens of secondary-school students' intercultural dialogues about a picturebook in the ELT class, applying insights from dialogic theory (Alexander, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012; Vrikki et al., 2019; Wegerif, 2008, 2011; Wegerif & Mercer, 1997). I argue that knowledge about dialogic features and aims can advance our understanding of how students' intercultural learning is mediated through interaction with text and with other readers. Little empirical research has been done on reading practices for intercultural learning in ELT (Hoff, 2017, p. 2),

especially related to learners in lowersecondary education.

Hence, this study adds to the scarce literature on the topic. It can also provide support for teachers' development as intercultural educators. Theoretical Background: Intercultural Learning, Dialogue and Picturebooks Intercultural learning can be defined as the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for effective and appropriate communication and behaviour 'when interacting across difference' (Deardorff, 2019, p. 5). Some commonly agreed-upon elements include curiosity and discovery, cultural knowledge, perspective-taking skills, critical cultural awareness, listening skills, empathy and adaptability (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

According to Delanoy, dialogue encompasses interculturality. His concept of dialogic competence shares similarities with models of intercultural competence, such as curiosity, critical awareness and perspective-taking skills (Byram, 1997; Delanoy, 2008). Dialogue involves recognition of and sincere interest in the others' perspectives. Wegerif translates the Greek 'dialogic' into 'meaning emerging from the interplay of different perspectives' (2011, p. 180). We need others' perspectives on us to see ourselves more clearly and to develop perspective-taking skills and empathy (Dysthe, 2013). Through dialogue, in the Socratian sense, the participants may be moved from expressing their doxa – their beliefs and perceptions – to expressing episteme, knowledge tested through questioning and justifying (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, pp. 34-39).

Both forms of knowledge are relevant to this qualitative study. In practice, a dialogic classroom culture entails giving students agency to contribute and explore ideas and constructively challenge and build upon those of each other (Alexander, 2008). Fiction is suitable for intercultural learning, as literature may help readers engage with conflicting perspectives (Hoff, 2014). Readers engage in their own and other cultures through literature, and this engagement may foster intercultural learning (cf. Bredella, 2000; Bredella & Delanoy, 1996; Fenner, 2001; Hoff, 2017; Kramsch, 1993; Matos, 2005). Picturebooks may add another layer to the intercultural reading experience. According to Hallberg, a picturebook is a book that has a minimum of one picture per double spread (1982). The pictures can replicate, expand and contradict the verbal text (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Through readers' engagement with the semiotic meaning of the picture-text relationship (Evans, 2013), they can discover and critically analyse the multiple voices and ideologies represented in the narrative (Stephens, 2018). The Features and Aims of Dialogues Wegerif and Mercer divide student-student talk into three types: disputational, cumulative and exploratory (2013; 1997; italics mine). Disputational talk entails competing to find the correct solution in order to win an argument. In cumulative talk, students build on each other's ideas. Though all voices are heard, ideas are not challenged and explored. Differences in opinion might be glossed over or ignored in order to maintain the harmony of the group (Wegerif, 2008, 2011).

The most educationally productive talk occurs when groups share ideas, which are explored, constructively criticized and built upon, especially when students are willing to change their mind if they are wrong (Wegerif, 2008, 2011). These are the characteristics of exploratory talk. Considering studies of student-student and student-teacher talk, Wegerif finds that it is not merely the characteristics of exploratory talk that help groups develop their thinking, but also identification with the aims of the dialogue itself (Wegerif, 2011, p. 184). Therefore, he prefers the term dialogic talk, which entails 'an openness to the other and respect for difference' (2011, p. 184). These are also elements of intercultural learning. Summing up the most prominent research on dialogue, Vrikki et al. conclude that the 'participative ethos […] with participants respecting and listening to all ideas' (Vrikki et al., 2019, p. 86) is essential for productive classroom dialogue. These qualities are fundamental to student 'identification with the dialogue' (Wegerif, 2011), and require a supportive and inclusive classroom culture. Furthermore, the teacher plays an important part in facilitating student dialogues. This includes helping students co-ordinate and synthesize ideas, activities which are lacking in many classrooms (Vrikki et al., 2019). Intercultural Dialogue If intercultural dialogue involves 'interacti[on] across difference' (Deardorff, 2019, p. 5), what is the aim of dialogic interaction? Outlining a theoretical dichotomy, the aim of dialogue can be: 1. reaching agreement and/or mediating contrasting views or 2. learning to tolerate ambiguity and live with conflict. Littleton and Mercer hold that attempts to reach agreement are an important feature of educational dialogues, as they can push the students to explore each other's ideas more carefully even if they do not manage to reach agreement (Littleton & Mercer, 2013, p. 38).

Similarly, Byram (1997) stresses the ability to mediate different perspectives as essential for intercultural communicative competence. Wegerif, for his part, states that agreement is only one point on a fluid continuum (Wegerif, 2011, p. 182). According to Delanoy, 'irritation and contradiction' may enhance one's reflective skills (Delanoy, 2008, p. 177). Hoff (2014) takes up this thread when she criticizes Byram for focusing too strongly on harmonizing contrasting views. She reads his model as reminiscent of Hegel's dialectic: thesis – antithesis – synthesis, in which difference is overcome in a dialectic dialogue and the ultimate goal isto understand the other's position. In today's pluricultural world, we should rather learn to tolerate ambiguity, as '[c]onflict, ambiguity and difference [are] not solely […] challenging aspects of the intercultural encounter, but […] potentially fruitful conditions for profound dialogue between Self and Other' (2014, p. 208). This study will exemplify not only how exploration of conflicting views may lead to intercultural learning but also how other dialogic features serve to drive dialogues forward. I argue that this may happen when a dialogic space is created, a 'dynamic continuous emergence of meaning' in which students solve problems through listening, requesting help, 'changing their minds [and] seeing the problems as if through the eyes of others' (Wegerif, 2011, p. 180). Previous Research Studies from a range of fields have considered how dialogic education might develop students' cognitive and emotional skills, which have been seen as constituent skills of intercultural learning (Maine, 2013; Rojas-Drummond, Mazon, Fernandez, & Wegerif, 2006). However, the link between such development and intercultural learning is not necessarily targeted, and dialogic approaches to intercultural learning in primary and lower secondary ELT is an understudied field. In this section, I will comment on a few studies relevant to my own, concerned with either literary dialogues (talking around stories) and/or intercultural learning from first- and second-language classrooms. Mourão (2013), Yeom (2019) and Hoff (2017) studied secondary-school ELT classrooms. Mourão (2013) reveals the potential of discussions about multimodal texts for developing student vocabulary and critical engagement through interthinking (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). Yeom (2019) discusses visual grammar in teenagers' discussions of picturebooks. Through a thematic analysis, she shows how the teacher facilitates the discussion and how 'aspects of global awareness' are developed (2019, p. 1).

Hoff's (2017) concern is how teachers can foster intercultural readers. She offers a theoretical model to capture 'the communicative processes [of the] "intercultural reader"' (Hoff, 2017, p. 4).

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