FACTORS AFFECTING THAI STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN DIALOGIC TALKS IN EFL CLASSES: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The study sought to empirically discover the factors that affect Thai students' decisions to engage in dialogic interactions with peers and lecturers. Clean verbatim transcripts of in-depth interviews of 12 Thai EFL students from three universities in Thailand were analyzed. Findings reveal the primary determinants regarding Thai students' engagement in dialogic talks with their classmates and lecturers. This study thus yields practical implications for EFL lecturers who adopt dialogic education as a pedagogical approach and for the university administrators who support these lecturers and the implementation of this approach.

Keywords: dialogic talks; EFL classes; interactions; learning environment; Thai students

INTRODUCTION

Dialogic education can be viewed as a teaching pedagogy, or educational philosophy, based on using dialogues, or interactions, to harness students' capacities to acquire knowledge through talks (Alexander, 2004). Research has shown the extensive benefits of dialogic interactions that occur among students and the close association between these interactions and students' learning proficiency. Noteworthy evidence that dialogic learning can improve students' oral language proficiency, learning skills, and reasoning skills exists (Cazden, 2001; Johnston, 2004; Johnston, Ivey & Faulkner, 2011).

In Thailand, particularly in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), the dialogic teaching approach seems to be under-researched, while other modern educational philosophies, such as autonomous learning, problem-based learning (PBL), and flip classes, have long been buzzwords and have been widely researched. To date, research pertaining to dialogic education conducted in Thailand's EFL context has been focused on lecturers' perspectives and practices (Buranapatana, 2006; Promyod, 2013; Rungwaraphong, 2017). Perspectives from students, on the other hand, have been under-researched. This indicates that, despite dialogic education being warmly welcomed by many lecturers, the students, who are the ones directly impacted by the choice of pedagogical approach and should thus be the focus of any relevant research, have never had their voices heard.

This empirical study seeks to address this paucity of research and improve its inclusiveness by identifying the factors affecting Thai students' decisions to or to not engage in dialogic talks during their EFL classes. The findings of this study may help EFL lecturers maximize student engagement in dialogic talks and help university administrators support EFL lecturers who adopt dialogic education as their pedagogical approach.

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RESEARCH AIM

The primary goal of this study was to identify the factors driving Thai university students' decisions to or to not engage in dialogic interactions with both their peers and lecturers in EFL classes. This goal was addressed through two research questions:

1. What makes Thai students willing to engage in dialogic talks in EFL classes?
2. What makes Thai students unwilling to engage in dialogic talks in EFL classes?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tenets of Dialogic Education

Wegerif's (2013) logic of dialogic education underlines the importance of students' dialogue in their learning and describes the nature of collective thinking that occurs when students engage in dialogic talks and work together to solve problems. Dialogic talks, according to Wegerif (2013), are not everyday talks or conversations; they are not simply words exchanged between students. Dialogic talks involve speakers and listeners exploring and working on understanding each other's ideas and are built upon the participants' responses to each other's questions (Alexander, 2004). As Bakhtin (1986) points out, "If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, it falls out of the dialogue" (p. 168).

When engaging in dialogic conversations with peers, students are participating in social collaboration. Learning is a "naturally social" (Gerlach, 1994) act, and a classroom's social dimensions can be enhanced through lessons that emphasize group rather than personal goals. Dialogic learning situations can be the base of group-goal-focused lessons, with students helping each other accomplish a group task, which support the idea of learning as a social endeavor. (Rungwaraphong, 2012).

Dialogic education's emphasis on collaborative talks and the social dimension of learning has been influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD). This "zone" is the gap between a learner's actual development when receiving no help from others, and the learner's potential development if assisted by collaborative interactions with adults or more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD highlights how a teacher or a more experienced peer can provide a less competent individual with guidance and act as scaffolding to support the struggling student's evolving understanding of knowledge domains and development of complex skills. Pairing or grouping students with other students holding different opinions, levels of competency, or areas of expertise/interest may challenge beliefs and established schemas as students will be confronted by situations that are not compatible with their preconceptions about learning. Such situations drive conflicts between an individual student's previously established notions and the new information that he or she is processing during such situations.

The internal contradictions these conflicts generate form what Piaget (1972) calls "cognitive conflict," or "disequilibrium." According to Piaget (1972), when experiencing disequilibrium an individual will seek to resolve the perception of an incompatibility among their cognitions so that they can return to a state of equilibrium. The resolution of the inconsonance may be achieved during debate, discussion, or justification with peers, all of which require high-order thinking and reasoning skills and thus stimulate learning. Therefore, the cognitive conflicts that students experience through interactions with others during collaborative pair/group work can drive cognitive development.

The tenets of dialogic education are consistent with constructivism, which posits that people construct their own knowledge through their own experience. Cooper (1993) views the learning process described in constructivist theory as a paradigm shift. A constructivism-oriented classroom is flexible and uses less instructional control, and Cooper maintains that such a learning

environment will be more beneficial to learners. Jones (2007) emphasizes that the key to successful learning under the constructivist approach is establishing "risk-free environments" (p. 576). In such environments, according to Jones (2007), students are made aware of their own learning processes through required self-assessments and self-reflections. Jones (2007) also states that students learn best through interacting with others, and it is therefore important to maximize students' interactions with their peers and teachers as these interactions help students articulate their thoughts.

Dialogic-Supportive Pedagogy and Environment

In recent years, researchers from a variety of educational fields, including ESL and EFL, have collectively built a body of research on dialogic education. This research establishes that, for any type of class, dialogic education requires a set of strategies to enable students to engage in dialogic talks or conversations with their peers and that the important result of dialogic talks is to make a student's thoughts and ideas apparent and understandable so that other students can build upon that thinking and the class can thus collectively explore concepts more complex than the concepts that any student could have developed individually (Haneda, 2010; Zhang & Stahl, 2011).

A number of studies have been conducted to explore how using dialogic education as a pedagogical approach can stimulate the development of critical thinking skills. A study of Thai university students by Buranapatana (2006) found that learning environments encouraging social interactions promote critical thinking because these interactions enable students to draw links between the classroom and the world outside of the classroom. In another Thailand-based study, Promyod (2013) views dialogic teaching as teaching based on arguments and two-way interactions, rather than one-way input flows, and suggests that many teachers need to shift their paradigms, perceptions, and

practices regarding knowledge acquisition. The study's findings indicate factors impeding the implementation of this teaching approach. Lastly, Rungwaraphong (2017) recommended using poster conferences as tools to promote dialogic learning in EFL classrooms as the study shows that the multiple tasks that students must accomplish to create and present an academic conference poster provide multiple opportunities for students to talk and interact with their peers and lecturers in dialogic ways. Rungwaraphong (2017) also argues for the importance of opportunities for students to actively engage in interaction with peers while solving problems.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Twelve undergraduate students from three Thai public universities participated in this study. These participants were randomly selected from a pool of students registered in English courses in which tasks requiring high levels of student participation in dialogues with peers were frequently assigned. These courses included advanced English reading and English for specific purposes (e.g. science and nursing) courses. The participants were all Thai and included both English majors and non-English majors. Five participants were male and seven were female.

Data Collection

Data were collected from in-depth interviews with the student participants. A personal, in-depth interview was conducted with each participant in Thai using a list of interview questions as a guide. Questions were focused on the factors that encouraged or discouraged students to participate in classroom talks. The following are examples of questions asked to participants: "What makes your feel comfortable or uncomfortable to talk in your English class?" "Are there times that you talk more or less in class?

14

Why?" "Do you believe that we can learn through what we talk about with our peers?"

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and included spontaneous questions based on the interviewees' responses. The interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis

Clean verbatim transcripts of interviews of the twelve student participants were made for data analysis. The original transcripts in Thai were translated into English by the researcher. The transcripts capture the primary messages of the interviewees' responses, with unclear sounds and grammatical mistakes removed. The audio recordings and transcripts were then studied, and similar themes and patterns of responses were found. Participants' responses in the interviews are coded throughout the study as coming from Student 1 to Student 12.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following discusses the factors that the data analysis identified as positively or negatively influencing the degree to which Thai students talk in their EFL classes.

Encouraging Factors

1. Lecturers' use of supportive questions and language

Thai students' perceive lecturers as the primary factor determining the degree to which they will participate in dialogic talks in EFL classes. Two students elaborated on this in the interviews.

"I would talk more if what I have said previously was taken into account." (Student 3)

"The lecturer doesn't have to judge my answers, but instead needs to care why I answer with that answer. I will be more comfortable if the lecturer is *open to new understanding and receptive to different viewpoints."* (Student 5)

The importance of questions is highlighted here, as the questions that teachers pose should invite students to think and should provoke thoughtful responses (Rungwaraphong, 2014). Lecturers should use language demonstrating respect for their students' ideas and clearly indicate that they are listening closely to the students' expressions. Rather than judging the accuracy of a student's answer or idea, the teacher should investigate and understand the rationale behind the student's remarks; this may require many teachers to shift their practices and views of learning (Promyod, 2013).

2. Tasks with clear aims and expectations

As for pedagogic strategies that facilitate dialogue, this study's results suggest that Thai students are more likely to engage in activities when they know what they are expected to do.

"It is like you know the destination. This is important because you will know which track you should take. When you discuss with your group mates, you will know what you should talk about with them." (Student 2)

"I need to know the purpose of what I am told to do. Clear expectations from her [the lecturer] will give me a hint of in what I should invest my energy." (Student 12)

Lecturers need to thoroughly explain the goals of the activities or tasks and ensure that the students have a clear idea of what they are expected to learn and accomplish. The participants' reflection on their classroom activities further indicates that students tend to interact more when they work in small groups and, when it comes to working with peers, tend to learn much from better- skilled group mates.

15

"We feel safe working with friends as a group. There will be some smarter friends who can help us." (Student 3)

The quote above illustrates the concept from Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD theory that students' feel safer when surrounded by friends, and thus, when in groups, students are more likely to engage in collaborative talks and interact in ways conducive to learning and completing the task.

3. Internet-based classroom activities

Data from the interviews indicate that the Internet can be integrated into learning activities in EFL classes and aid students searching for information to contribute to group discussions and include in presentations. Being allowed to use their internet-connected smartphones or laptops as learning tools can encourage student engagement in classroom activities. When students are allowed to access the internet while they are in the classroom, they feel respected by the lecturer.

"The lecturer wanted us to use Google to find our own answer. I can consult her (lecturer) about what keywords I should use to reach the best websites." (Student 1)

"We have to do a lot of Goggle searches, and we have to discuss and make decisions in groups about which websites are best." (Student 5)

This finding supports Wegerif's (2013) proposition that dialogic education is the education for the Internet age. The use of the Internet shifts the paradigm of learning and teaching from a traditional one, in which printed materials represent the one true reality, to modern learning and teaching, in which a single true reality does not exist and in which there are multiple answers to one question. Confronting virtually limitless amounts of information and websites forces students to make decisions that stimulate

thinking and leads them to situations where their beliefs or expectations are disrupted. Piaget (1972) describes such situations as cognitive conflicts or states of disequilibrium, and returning to a state of equilibrium requires students to make reasoned arguments with other group members or partners.

4. Risk-free classroom environment

The learning environment was found to be another factor affecting the participants' willingness to engage in dialogue. The participants pointed out that they are willing to talk when they feel safe to take risks, particularly when they are allowed sufficient time to verbally present the reasoning behind their opinion.

"Once, my lecturer expressed her personal views, which contradicted mine and those of my friends. That was very challenging. It challenged me and my group mates to think deeper and required us to make reasoned arguments to explain the contradictions." (Student 1)

"In the first place, I want to make sure that the question is not limited to one answer so that it is okay if I give a wrong or different response." (Student 3)

The responses demonstrate that a student's sense of safety and sense of having their contradictory views recognized and accepted are important. The focal point in dialogue-based classes is not being correct or incorrect but instead is the process of reaching the answer, which Cooper (1993) regards as more beneficial to the learners than classes with rigid instructional control.

5. Class members' good relationships

Thailand is a high-culture context country; Thais have many communication styles, and which style a Thai person uses depends on with whom they are speaking and the level of intimacy with that person

16

(Mujtaba, 2008). Good relationships among class members, both peer–peer and lecturer–student, are reported as another factor which encourages students to talk in EFL classes. Participants reported that fear of speaking English in the front of classmates was reduced because of their lecturers.

> *"I did not talk much in any English class, particularly when the teacher asked questions. But this lecturer is so kind and we are very close to each other, so I do not feel afraid to talk. I know if I do something wrong, she will be okay with it."* (Student 8)

According to Rungwaraphong (2014), if relationships among members of the learning community are good, the students will feel secure and confident to talk, either among themselves or with the teacher. This finding supports the proposition that a dialogic classroom must feel risk-free if it is to successfully foster learning (Jones, 2007).

Discouraging Factors

1. Thai concept of "losing face"

Responses from the interviews indicate that Thai students' reluctance to speak during English classes may be at least partially attributable to the strongly rooted Thai cultural concept of "losing face." According to Persons (2008), "face" is regarded as an abstract social concept and maintaining face is important, even critical, for existing in Thai society. Puzzled visitors to Thailand often witness behaviors and words that can be explained only as efforts to "save face." The need to avoid losing face has a strong influence on the perceptions of self and others, upon which a Thai individual's social strategies are based.

> *"Even though all the classmates are my friends, they will make jokes when I pronounce English words incorrectly. I don't want anyone to make fun of me."* (Student 9)

> *"I don't want to talk much in class because I do not know most of the students in the class. I don't want to lose face in front of strangers."* (Student 12)

These two students associate talking in English class with feeling embarrassed. Thus, assuming that other students feel similarly, remaining silent during classes is a strategy that a number of Thai students adopt to avoid potentially embarrassing situations. In other words, being passive, or silent, can effectively protect a student from ridicule and losing face.

2. Students' perceptions of knowledge as a "buyable" product

The students' frequent references to tuition fees suggests that the idea that knowledge can be simply bought and sold is pervasive and strong. Three students reported this idea in the interviews.

> *"I come to study here because I want to get knowledge. My parents pay a lot of money for my tuition fees. I don't understand why I have to do a lot of things in class or answer a lot of questions."* (Student 1)

> *"I just want know what I am supposed to know. Just tell me the answer. I don't understand why she (the lecturer) wastes time by having us do a lot of Google searches."* (Student 5)

> *"Is it not the function of the lecturer to teach me? She wants us to do self-study, but I already paid."* (Student 9)

According to this view, knowledge is a transmittable good and the lecturer is just like anyone else at a market transmitting a product in exchange for money (Rungwaraphong, 2012). This view of knowledge is radically contrary to the philosophy of dialogic learning, which embraces constructivism and views gaining knowledge, or learning, as "the

process of constructing meaning by establishing relationships between new information and old information and experience" (Alesandrini & Larson, 2002).

3. Students' perceptions of the lecturer as the sole source of knowledge

Statements also indicate that perceptions of the lecturer as the sole source of knowledge are still prevalent amongst Thai students and likely prevalent throughout the Thai education system in general.

"I think it is easier and faster if the lecturer just tells us how past tense is different from present perfect tense. But she wants us to use Google and make our own conclusions. I think it is just a waste of time." (Student 8)

"She (the lecturer) holds a doctoral degree. Just listen to her." (Student 11)

"I believe everything my lecturer says. She knows best." (Student 12)

Learning environments shaped by traditional pedagogies, where learning is centered on the teacher and the students learn passively with their voices largely suppressed, contrast with environments shaped by dialogic conversation (Rungwaraphong, 2014). The traditional and still evidently pervasive view of the teacher as the sole source of knowledge impedes efforts to encourage students to take initiative and play active and significant roles in completing learning tasks and develop greater senses of responsibility for their overall education. Presently, there is a growing number of EFL lecturers who recognize that students acquire knowledge of and competence in English by themselves and that the teacher's role is that of a guide, coach, or stimulator instead of a transmitter of knowledge (Rungwaraphong, 2014). Yet, the success of lecturers' efforts to act on this recognition by implementing new teaching methodologies or educational

philosophies, such as dialogic learning, in EFL classes depends on how well Thai EFL students understand the changes resulting from these efforts and how well, and how quickly, these students accordingly adapt their mentalities and expectations.

4. Traditional classroom layout

An EFL classroom's physical setup can impede effective student interaction, according to the students. The students described attending classes in classrooms and lecture halls with fixed, immobile seating arranged in straight-rows. Seating arrangements like these, according to Rands & Gansemer-Topf (2017), do not facilitate student collaboration, participation, or overall engagement. The students told the research in the interviews:

"This (EFL) course takes place in a lecture hall where it is difficult for me to reach the lecturer and all the chairs are fixed into place. The lecturer likes us to work and discuss things in groups, but we cannot arrange the seats into circles." (Student 4)

"The lecturer is very active, and her activities are very interesting and require us to play active roles. But the class takes place in a huge lecture theater." (Student 5)

Two students pointed to the importance of seat size, which affects their physical comfort and, in turn, has an impact on their interactions with peers.

"I am so frustrated with the chairs in the lecture hall. They are very small." (Student 7)

"Mostly, I enjoy the activities in the class, but the chairs are too small. Look at me! I a man at the age of 21. I am too big for that kind of chair." (Student10)

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Awareness of the student perspectives reported in this study can help EFL lecturers, educators, and university administrators better understand what influences a student's willingness to talk dialogically in EFL classes. The following discusses some practical implications for those currently using or wishing to use dialogic education as a pedagogical approach and are thus seeking ways to maximize student engagement.

According to this study's findings, more patience from the instructor is required when he or she poses complex questions because students need more time to think of meaningful responses to such questions. Dialogue-enabling questions are built around students' answers to previously posed questions, as dialogic learning is, by its nature, reciprocal. As Bakhtin (1986) noted, conversations in dialogic genre are crafted by each participant forming statements in anticipation of encountering the other's response.

Zhang & Stahl (2011) suggest that a teacher must help each student voice his or her thoughts and ideas so that others students can build upon that student's thinking. Teachers must organize learning activities that rely on a series of questions rather than on one individual question. In this regard, the students are able to build more complex ideas through considering and responding to the ideas of others. Haneda (2010) concurs with this view, and states that a teacher's core function is to facilitate interactions in which students make their thinking visible to their peers. In line with the tenets of Vygotsky's ZPD theory, another core teacher function is to provide individual students with opportunities to learn with and learn from more advanced peers.

The findings of this study also illustrate several ways for lecturers to create a dialogue-supporting learning environment. These include, but are not limited to, respecting all student contributions and making this respect known, employing a range of questioning techniques aimed at facilitating discussion rather than quickly getting to an easy and "right" answer, building student–teacher relationships, and encouraging healthy student–student relationships. In line with this, it is imperative for lecturers to convince students that making a mistake in an English class is not losing face and that being passive or silent by no means improves English skills. Good rapport among class members is a good way to minimize students' fear of losing face and maximize their tolerance of the risk of making errors in front of their friends. Lecturers also need to act in ways conducive to students feeling safe to push their boundaries and possibly make errors. Jones (2007) notes how a risk-free environment is essential for fostering student willingness to participate in classroom activities and how this environment helps students recognize the importance of not only the results of the learning process but also the learning processes itself. Recognition of the importance of the learning process is further promoted by learning activities providing students with opportunities for debate, discussion, or justification with peers, which happen to be the activities in which learning is optimized (Piaget, 1972).

Furthermore, findings of the current study suggest that changing Thai student perceptions of learning and knowledge is imperative. Lecturers' efforts to elicit more dialogic interactions in their EFL classes are being hampered by the conditioning that made students generally regard classrooms as places where lecturers simply lecture and students simply sit and take notes. Such conditioning can be at least partially reversed by educational institutions addressing students' concerns about classroom design and workstation comfort. Sustaining student attention, facilitating learning, and encouraging both student–student and student–teacher interaction should be the goals of classroom design and furnishing. As an initial step, institutions could move towards these goals by equipping classrooms, and perhaps lecture halls, with movable chairs and roundtables or with pair/group pod

setups; both seating systems create adaptable physical learning environments conducive to a variety of active, collaborative, and effective learning activities (Callahan, 2004; Harvey & Kenyon, 2013; Rungwaraphong, 2017). Finally, this study's findings indicate the importance of helping learners understand and tackle the changes that they are experiencing as education systems transition from a reliance on traditional ways of teaching to modern teaching and learning methodologies (Jacobs & Farrell 2001).

RECOMMENDAIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Future studies should consider using larger and broader samples and more data collection tools in order to enable data triangulation and to produce a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the state of dialogic learning in Thailand's EFL education system.

2. This current study indicates that both lecturers and students must shift paradigms. Future research should be conducted to examine how this needed paradigm shift in Thailand's EFL education culture could proceed with lecturers and students. Findings of the research will help all involved parties understand and tackle the changes arising from the implementation of dialogic teaching approach.

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21