Dialogism versus Monologism: A Bakhtinian Approach to Teaching

Ali Jamali Nesari* 

*Department of English Language and Literature, Ilam Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ilam, Iran

Abstract

Dialogic education is a teaching method which is in stark contrast with monologic teaching methods. Nowadays, the educational systems all around the world characterize monologic education in which the ideas and voices of the teachers are the first and last ones uttered in the classrooms, textbooks are aimed so that students learn how to speak and write “correctly” and the time extent of the class is so short that teachers are struggling to cover all the “important” points mandated in the textbooks and by educational authorities. In contrast in dialogic education, the teacher shares his or her authority with the students; the voices of the students are heard and their opinions are valuable. In a dialogic class, the students are divided into groups to practice “exploratory talk” and “think reasonably”. The aim in discussing different opinions is just that; discussing different opinions not winning or losing. The role of the teacher is to facilitate the process; he or she is not a judge or referee, he or she is simply a guide. A dialogic environment is like a carnival; to borrow from Bakhtin. There are no omnipresent powers. The current study shows that different components of Bakhtin’s dialogism concept can be a very good starting point for a modern and effective theoretical framework for learning and teaching processes.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Monologism, Dialogism, Heteroglossia, Carnival, Polyphony, Teaching.

1. Monologism

In the Problems of Dostoevsky Bakhtin states that "a monologically understood world is an objectified world, a world corresponding to a single and unified authorial consciousness" (Hays, 2005 p.9). The dictionary meaning of monology is a single voice. According to Hays "monologic discourse is a discourse in which only on point of view is represented, however diverse the means of representation" (Hays, 2005p.7). According to Mikhail Bakhtin, monologism indicates turning off the process of dialogue as well as its potentials.

* Ali Jamali Nesari. Tel.: +989181437288; Fax: +988432228202
E-mail address: jamalinesari@yahoo.com.
For Bakhtin, and his followers, Monologism emerges wherever and whenever universal truth statements, called truth-istina, do not allow any other sort of truth, as truth-Pravda, to appear. Bakhtin links this situation to the time of Renaissance Europe with its great focus on a view of aesthetics as beauty and truth as opposed to the carnivalesque state of medieval society. Bakhtin (influenced by Rabelais) argues that in this medieval era truth was put off and even condemned by popular culture when they used satiric dialogue characterized by laughter, parody and satire (Bakhtin, 1986 p.68).

Bakhtin was very much aware of the adverse consequences of Monologism because he was living in Stalinist Russia in which he saw that freedom was at a loss and whatever the government said was construed as pure truth and nobody could say anything against it. His solution for this perilous situation was to cherish the great characteristics of dialogue and dialogism since it had the capability for allowing different people to speak their minds and get out of the box in which they were trapped. We now know this because he practiced this kind of approach with his secret group, called Bakhtin Circle (Brandist, 2002, p.56). This in turn shows us that he believed that despite all the constraints, people would always find a way to express their individual frames of thoughts.

A monologic approach is probably the dominant approach in modern-looking educational situations which promote a shared and universal meaning and ignore the differences that may be present among distinct individuals. While Matusov (2009) argues that teaching can never be purely monologic because there is always another perspective present in a classroom, but the attention which governments give to education is an evident indication of monologism.

Based on the belief that monologism can lead to the demise of dialogue and freedom, Bakhtin proposes a different approach for solving this issue, namely dialogism.

2. Dialogism

In language teaching, according to the definition of dialogue in Longman Dictionary of Language teaching and Applied Linguistics, dialogue is defined as:

"A model of conversation, used to practice speaking and to provide examples of language usage. Dialogues are often specially written to practice language items, contain simplified grammar and vocabulary, and so may be rather different from real life conversation".

(Richards & Schmidt, 2002 p.167)

Bakhtin proposes different distinct meanings for dialogism, according to him “any utterance, whether spoken or written, that people use in communication with each other is internally dialogic” (Bakhtin, 1986 as cited in Marchenko, 2005 p.72). He also mentions that dialogue is a kind of speech which leads to the competition of voices.

He mentions that dialogue is:

“The nature of human life itself, in dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body” (Bakhtin, 1984 p.293).

We can say that, the dialogue intended by Bakhtin is formally a kind of discourse as well as a model of consciousness which is focused on communication and based in language learning.

Bakhtin also says that:

"Dialogism continues towards an answer. The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answers direction" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.280)

In dialogism there is always room for arguing since questions show everybody’s point of view rather than the universal truth. According to Bakhtin every human being likes to resist, confront and make personal meaning out of social interactions. So Bakhtin emphasizes the individual personality inside every cultural group instead of searching for unanimous agreement.

3. Heteroglossia
The term Heteroglossia is a term created by Bakhtin in the essay “Discourse in the Novel” (published in English in The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist [University of Texas Press, 1981]). The term heteroglossia focuses on the part which language plays in putting the speakers in a diversity of social situations and word views which are present in any culture.

Every meaning present inside a speech or a text arises in a social context in which a number of opposing meanings are present and develops its social meaning from its relationships with those alternative meanings.

So texts are heteroglossic in the sense that they implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the presence of a definite collection of convergent and divergent socio-semiotic realities. So as a result every meaning within a text happens in a social situation in which a number of opposing meaning could have been made and this text derives its social meaning from the degree of opposition with those alternative meanings.

Under the individualistic model a modal such as “maybe” or “I think that….,” is seen as an indication of uncertainty or lack of commitment to truth by the individual speaker. Under the heteroglossic perspective these phrases can also be seen as the indication to the idea that the meaning uttered are open to negotiation. It can have no relationship with doubt or such things from the part of the speaker; rather it can be an invitation to negotiate with those who have a different view. Of course the conditions of that negotiation will differ based on the context and circumstances as well as the social relationships between the speaker and the audience. So within an academic situation or discourse, the narrator may use these kinds of phrases to recognize that the meaning which is uttered is original and that the speaker is ready to negotiate with other positions and utterances. In some situations the speakers may use modals of probability to enable them to avoid a strong stance for the proposition and they can avoid defending the idea very harshly. In one context, a smile may act or be read as genuinely signaling a mental state of happiness or pleasure in the person smiling. In other contexts the smile is a politeness marker, exchanged between acquaintances as they pass in the corridor, for example, as an indicator of recognition or acknowledgement, and thus carrying no effective value at all. Likewise, a modal of probability may, in one context, signal genuine doubt in the speaker. Equally, it may have no connection at all with doubt, being used, rather to acknowledge the willingness or unwillingness of the speaker to negotiate with those who hold a different view, or the deference the speaker wishes to display for those alternative views.

So in this Bakhtinian concept (heteroglossia) we can consider those who think these phrases of probability are a way to escape the real facts, or as showing unreliability as narrow-minded. These phrases as an open up which in some contexts they enhance the possibility of creating a heteroglossic negotiation between two or more different opinions and positions and in other contexts as a way to avoid those negotiations.

Heteroglossia exists in a world of interactions in which a set of different voices create not only harmony but also disharmony. Bakhtin talks about the presence of different voices which together form a worldwide dialogue. These different voices already established a cultural dialogue even before each of us joined the conversation. The voices of our ancestors have formed the language and sentence structures to which we must stick so that we can contribute to the conversation. The utterances we (or any individual) make two different forces. One that binds the ideas together, for instance cohesion of the words, our devotion to grammatical structures or our recognition of cultural standards or social norms which help each person to make meaning out of other people’s utterances and speech. This binding together force is provided by language which makes the idea of communication even possible. The other force is the pulling away force that makes the creation and formation of new ideas possible, this force for example helps us make new words in order to express new ideas. The result is that each person in the population has his or her own glossary of words with their own implications which are exclusive to that individual person. Every word which is present in our own glossary generates unique meaning with is completely individualistic. My glossary is different from the glossaries of other people. Anyway, whenever and wherever those words match to a degree of precision, meanings can be exchanged and dialogue can be formed. In order to completely understand the idea of heteroglossia from the point of view of Bakhtin we should understand his ideas about self and other. The importance of the presence of the other person in a dialogue is critical to form willingness to understand one’s self. “For the other may be conceived as an individual characterized by a distinctive use of language that contributes to make the self-individual and distinct from all others in his use of language” (Danow, 1991 p. 60). The problem with heteroglossia is how to find out the terms of one’s own speech and coordinate them with the unfamiliar terms of another’s speech.

So, Heteroglossia is a term describing the notion which emphasizes the role of the other person present in the conversation. That is very important in every conversation, especially in a classroom, to understand that two people
are significant at the same time; namely the speaker and the listener.

4. Polyphony

Polyphony literally means “multi-voicedness”. Polyphony is a state which arises in fiction when the particular position of the author allows a great deal of freedom for interaction among the characters of the story. The characters in a polyphonic novel are allowed maximum freedom so that they could argue with each other and even with their author. It means that in a polyphonic novel different ideologies are allowed to interact.

According to David Lodge, a polyphonic novel is a "novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice" (Lodge, 1990 p.86). The nature of fiction allows the author to incorporate different ideological perspectives into the story.

Bakhtin's theory is sometimes called "dialogics". Dialogics or dialogism, according to Bakhtin, means the process which meaning is evolved out of interactions among the author, the work and the reader or listener. Also these elements are affected by the contexts in which they are placed, namely by social and political forces. The following excerpt is from Bakhtin explaining how meaning is created in Dostoevsky's dialogic novel:

“It is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other; this interaction provides no support for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category (thematically, lyrically or cognitively) - and this consequently makes the viewer also a participant” (Bakhtin, 1973:18).

Moreover Bakhtin believes in a very important link between a polyphonic novel and a dialogic novel when he says "the polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through" (Bakhtin, 1973 p. 40).

Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist write: "the phenomenon that Bakhtin calls 'polyphony' is simply another name for dialogism" (Clark, Holquist 1984 p.242). David Lodge also talks about synonymy between the two terms. He writes: "in Bakhtin's theory, 'polyphonic' is virtually synonymous with 'dialogic'” (Lodge, 1990 p.86). Lynne Pearce makes a subtle distinction between the two terms when she writes: "polyphony' is associated with the macrocosmic structure of the text (literally, its 'many voices') and 'dialogue' with reciprocating mechanisms within the smaller units of exchange, down to the individual word" (Pearce, 1994 p.21). Hence, "polyphony" and "dialogue" are interchangeable terms and a polyphonic text should be necessarily dialogic.

5. Carnival

Bakhtinian ideas of dialogue an authority are rooted in the medieval carnival. Carnivals were unusual events which were completely against the daily life routines. In these events there was a confusion of status. The power classes of the society were ignored in these carnivals:

"Authority is decrowned, we become aware of the laughing side of things, apart from fear, and there is a profound and collective engagement with alternative truths' to the officious, the convention, and the
tradition – e.g. to see such monolithic concepts as death or religion as serious as well as humorous and open to parody”. (Sullivan, et al., 2009 p. 329)

The rotating of power in the classroom neutralizes the teacher as the authority. As an alternative students are permitted to be in control of their learning, collecting information from each other and criticizing each other's work and ideas. The old-fashioned “teacher-role” is substituted with a lesser amount of hierarchical role of tutor, or even “tour-guide”. But does this mean that power is displaced by mob rule in the class? It is true that medieval carnivals endangered the weak people, which is not at all appropriate in a classroom. The carnival metaphor as a substitute for the all-powerful teacher situation offers us a link to move from authoritarian monologism to internally persuasive dialogism.

The fullest exploration of carnival in Bakhtin's work is *Rabelais and His World* (1968). In this book, Bakhtin argues that Rabelais' 16th-century novel Gargantua and Pantagruel is based on, and can only be understood through, late medieval-early Renaissance "popular-festive forms.

*Rabelais and His World* describes the medieval peasant culture defined against the official world of civil and religious authority. Bakhtin says that the readers can understand the philosophical importance of Rabelais' book only by listening with the ears of the 16th century. The ideals that exist in folk images of feasting (carnival) cannot be understood by the limited and narrow view of convention. These festivals indicate a reversal of moral and logical expectations.

Carnivals imply a change from principles of stability. Bakhtin notes that folktales usually end not with death-the order that life imposes-but with a feast, for "the end must contain the potentialities of the new beginning, just as death leads to a new birth" (Bakhtin, 1968 p.283).

The carnival focuses on the absence of individual boundaries in the medieval imagination. Mouths, for instance, are always open, eating and drinking, laughing, shouting: they take in and commune with the outer world and never shut it out. This openness corresponds to a cosmic openness: nothing is fixed in Bakhtin's carnival world, and everything is in a state of becoming. The official authority is ignored mainly through laughter. But it is not the objects of laughter that interests Bakhtin; it is rather the perspective which laughter creates.

The world of the peasants is a second world which resists the official authority and it is aware of the value of high and low, death and life, rich and poor. Bakhtin suggests that the carnival images of inconsistency were strong enough to put off the official powers at least the internalization of those powers.

So the ultimate implication of the carnival metaphor is that in a dialogic situation the authority, particularly in a classroom, is altered and during this time the students will have the opportunity to exercise authority for themselves and make their voices heard.

6. Research Question

This study is an attempt to answer questions concerning dialogism and teaching which include the following:

1- Is Bakhtin's concept of dialogism applicable to teaching? How?
2- How does dialogism bear upon the process of teaching in general, and teaching language in particular and how can the process of teaching benefit from Bakhtin's concepts?
3- How can teaching challenge or support and enrich the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism?
4- Can Bakhtin's concept of dialogism be used as a tool in teaching and learning?

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the material presented, we can state some summarizing conclusions regarding the research questions. The first question of the study was if Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism applicable to teaching and how. Regarding this question we should state that the Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism and its related concepts are all applicable to teaching and even some studies as well as institutions and language learning and teaching centers have used the concept and its components effectively in English teaching classroom environments.

In order to effectively and successfully implement these concepts and ideas in modern teaching situations, the traditional concepts of classroom, the four skills of language teaching and the roles of the teachers as well as the
students should be revisited and restructured. An estimated framework for implementing the above-mentioned concepts in English classrooms has been proposed in chapter four of the current study. Interested readers are referred to this chapter in order to obtain more information regarding the shape and structure of a dialogic teaching and learning environment.

The second question of the study was how the teaching and learning process can benefit from dialogic concepts. This aspect of dialogic framework is very interesting since by studying the previous literature on the subject it becomes clear that in modern world and novel teaching and learning environments considering the usage of traditional monologic methods of teaching and learning is somewhat impossible.

The modern day student is presented with a lot of information and communication tools which can be used for learning any and all material. Hence, regarding the benefits of dialogic concepts for learning and teaching environments it can be said that the learning process cannot simply go on using traditional methods since these bore the students rapidly and decrease the efficiency of the teaching process. Teaching can be transformed into a fun and open atmosphere in which learning happens involuntarily and while the students participate eagerly in the teaching and learning process. There is no more need for hard chairs and black and white boards in order to realize the learning process.

Nowadays, students can eagerly participate in the learning process and view themselves and their classmates as equal people with the teacher, which helps them go about the learning tasks more freely and without any boredom or negligence. In a nutshell, the learning process benefits from dialogic concepts enormously.

The third question was whether the teaching process can challenge or support dialogism. Regarding this question and based upon the concepts presented in the previous chapters, it can be said that the teacher and the concept of dialogism can have a mutual relationship; namely the teacher can implement these concepts in his or her classroom and facilitate the learning process and on the other hand his or her experiences regarding the utilization of these concepts can enhance and improve the concepts and integrate them with the context of modern learning environments.

Hence it is recommended that teachers use these concepts and at the same time record their experiences in order to better understand and implement these concepts by the other teachers and learning institutions.

The fourth and last question was if the dialogism can be used as a tool in teaching and learning. It is worth mentioning that the current study has shown exactly that; namely the dialogism and its components are undoubtedly the most appropriate method of teaching in the modern world. After reviewing the concept of dialogism, it can be very difficult to imagine a classroom using monologic methods to be successful as an effective and efficient learning environment.

References

Sullivan, Paul, Mark Smith, Eugene Matusov. (2009). Bakhtin, Socrates and the Carnivalesque in Education; Elsevier Ltd.