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“Listen up”: Understanding the Multidimensionality of Listening in a Dialogic Classroom

Abstract

A problem in pedagogy is that listening and speaking, as intricately interconnected interactional phenomena, are often treated separately. In classroom discussions, attention is predominantly drawn to vocalisation as the key element of dialogue. This paper aims to draw attention to intricacies and multidimensionality of listening in classroom discussions and consider how these multiple dimensions align with a dialogic ideology. Drawing on practitioner action research conducted in elementary classrooms where teachers deliberately sought to promote dialogic pedagogy, we examine transcripts to further understand how listening is connected to reciprocity, meaning-making and co-produced in interaction. Conversation analysis delineates five turn-structures constitutive of listening actively. We argue that teacher knowledge of these realms of listening will assist teachers recognise “active” listening among students.

Purpose

From the position of dialogic pedagogy, this paper problematises listening in classrooms by seeking to understand the nuances of listening as it occurs within the chains of utterances experienced in classroom discussions. Although listening is apportioned equal status with speaking in most language curriculums, what it means in classroom discussion is not as well understood. As Goodwin (1986) identified, the activity of the speaker noticeably dominates the study of language, leaving the action of hearers (or listeners) conspicuously under-researched (p. 205). Further, as Gardner points out,

in the teaching of listening in language pedagogy, there has been a tendency either to treat this skill as discrete from speaking, particularly as extended texts to be responded to after hearing them, or to focus on speaking rather than listening in the teaching of conversational skills (1998, p. 204).

Considering Gardner’s claim, this paper focuses on the ambiguity surrounding listening and speaking as it is constituted in classroom talk and interaction as something all-encompassing yet remains taken-for-granted. A further problem with listening is accentuated in many classrooms where students are constantly reminded to “listen”, “listen carefully” or to “listen to each other”. These utterances generally act as behavioural directives with a regulatory function that masks the activity of listening for responding. It is a proclivity that leaves the intricacies of demonstrating listening ‘actively’ within the flow of interactions to be neglected by teachers or at least remain not well understood. Addressing listening as a feature of talk and interaction for meaning making in classroom discussions is a central aim of this paper.

In many ways, the purposes for listening in classrooms seem simple: to receive instructions, to obtain information, to gain understandings, to learn or to enjoy a story, poem, music etc. These receptive goals imply a certain kind of passivity, where the listener is the recipient of a vocalisation, leaving implicit the notion that listening is *for* responding (Author & Author, 2017). In a rare study that focused on the listener rather than the speaker, findings reported by McGregor and White (1990) suggested that “the listener is not only more than a passive recipient, but has a crucial influence of the shaping of the discourse” (p. 1). They go on to

argue that this is “because it is hearers as receiver-responders, who are the actual arbiters of what becomes meaningfully determinant” (p. 1). This means listeners and their subsequent contributions not only display what meanings are generated from what has been heard, but that their ‘response’ determines what is said and understood by others.

From a dialogic stance, listening in classrooms is always dynamic since in every class discussion there are multiple listeners for every speaking or responding turn. A dialogic view positions listeners and speakers as equal co-participants in conversations who construct the talk and interaction together. Longstanding portrayals of dialogic teaching share a fundamental interest in the strategic interactive moves teacher make to more overtly bring students into classroom discussions (Muhonen et al., 2016). Broadly, the goals of dialogic pedagogies are participation, clarity and engagement in academically productive learning-focused conversations (e.g. Alexander, 2010; Brown, 1995; Michaels, O’Connor & Resnick, 2008; Nystrand, 1997; Skidmore & Murakami, 2016). However, most characterisations of dialogic pedagogies remain dominated by a focus on vocalisation and leave implicit what it means for listening.

Findings in this paper establish the complexity of listening in a dialogic classroom and highlights the need for teachers to develop a more fulsome understanding of the dimensions of listening.

Perspectives

The study is informed by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EM/CA). Related to sociology, ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) centrally examines the methods that people use to produce witnessable and orderly “practical action and practical reasoning” (Hester & Francis, 1997, p. 97). Conversation analysis (CA) describes and explicates the specific features of interactional encounters (Sacks, 1995) by delineating the rules for turn-taking in ordinary conversation showing how institutional talk accomplishes institutional goals and identities (Schegloff, 1992).

From the perspective of EM/CA, listening is accomplished through sequential actions and exhibit recognizable and methodic features used by interactive participants (both hearers and speakers). Conversation analysts McGregor and White (1990) suggest that in any interaction “the notion of reciprocity is inextricably tied to the notion of response since reception is response, and response is reception” (p. 1). Gardiner’s (1998) CA work develops core understandings of the ways that listening is produced in ordinary conversation and how it is accomplished in classrooms.

Method

Data are drawn from Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) projects (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014) involving 12 teachers aiming to develop dialogic pedagogies for literacy learning. Each teacher developed and refined their particular interaction focus using cycles of CPAR. Researchers facilitated professional learning related to talk, dialogic pedagogies and action research. Data included interviews, teacher produced written reflections, and video/audio recordings of lessons. Phase 1 of the study encompassed thematic analysis across the 12 projects. Phase 2 involved analyses of selected recordings, using EM/CA, to provide rigorous description and explication of classroom interaction. Here lesson recordings were examined numerous times and transcribed using Jefferson notation

(Atkinson & Heritage, 1999) to represent different interactional features present in the talk. Pseudonyms were used for the teachers and students; all participants provided informed consent. Transcription symbols can be found in Table 1 (below).

Data

This paper focuses on transcribed classroom recordings of lessons conducted in two elementary classrooms in two school sites; the first, a Kindergarten (5-year-old students in their first year of school), and the second a Year 3 class (students aged 8 years). Teachers were experienced (7 and 14 years respectively). Both schools are located in inland Australia, one is a small rural school (approximately 200 students), the other is in a mid-sized regional city (approx. 406 students).

Results and conclusions

Conversation analysis establishes more dynamic understandings of listening as a participatory function in classroom interactions by delineating five turn-structures constitutive of listening actively. The first extract from a Kindergarten class establishes participant methods for demonstrating listening.

Extract 1: Kindergarten - noticing

- 13 Tch: what you noticing?
14 Mat: both talking at the same time
15 Tch: hard for us to hear isn't it?
16 St1: [mm hm
17 St2: [hard for us to understand
18 St3: he hasta stop talking (0.4) and wait for the quiet
19 moment
20 Tch: yep

Listening in this sequence was evident in the ways students' contributions were not only topically relevant but interactionally relevant. At a very basic interactional level the teacher's questioning turn (line 13) is followed by Matilda's 'appropriate' response that indicated she was listening. The teacher's next turn (line 15) not only clarified Matilda's response (line 14), but simultaneously provoked S1's turn (line 16). Although minimal, interactionally S1's turn could be considered to be of equal status to turns offered by S2 (line 17) and S3 (lines 18-19). That is, *mm hm* does the same interactional work as "hard for us to understand" (line 17) and "he hasta stop talking and wait for the quiet moment" (lines 18-19).

Here, students' responses directly relate to what was heard in a prior turn, sometimes offered as a minimal feedback marker (among others - *yeah, right, uh huh, okay, nah, mm, mm hm*) "that ha[s] some interactional meaning" (Gardner, 1998, p. 206). These markers are interaction resources that draw attention to listening, meaning making and participation, "provid[ing] ways in which conversationalists express their understanding of what another is saying, and as such are an example par excellence of co-construction in action" (Gardner, 2001). As argued by Gardner (1998) it might be profitable for teachers to also have some knowledge of the different kinds of listening markers vocalised by hearers and the relevance of their place in responding in classroom conversations.

To illustrate the multidimensionality of listening further, consider this next transcript of a small group of Year 3 students, who were sharing their “The Minpins” stories.

Extract 2: The Minpins

- 01 Cal: <R>Little Billy got knocked out unconscious by the
02 horneywogger .<R> (0.4) does anyone know what that,
03 what knocked out unconscious means?
04 (0.5)
05 Jam: [uh huh
06 Sam: [u::m:::
07 Jam: not responding
08 Mik: ((raises hand)) yeah (0.4) not responding
09 Sam: [he’s just been knocked out
10 Cal: like=
11 Sam: =like he’s not awake (0.4) not [breathing
12 Cal: [like as Sam
13 his vitals are (0.4) he’s not not breathing (0.4) his
14 vitals are okay (0.4) it’s just like in a deep sleep
15 Sam: he’s [just like asleep
16 Mik: [but no not asleep=
17 Sam: =just like going to sleep (0.4) but the brain
18 is not thinking
19 Tch: what were you going to say Mika?
20 Mik: um:: (0.4) not asleep but unconscious (0.4) um
21 he’s not responding (0.4) not thinking, but alive
(Year 3, Classroom recording)

This extract opens with Caleb reading part of his story aloud. As other students listened, Caleb paused to ask a question about the meaning of “knocked out unconscious”. At a fundamental interactive level, any response to his question “Does anyone know what knocked out unconscious means?” signals listening since responders were responding in the position-relevant place. For instance, Jamie’s utterance “Uh huh” (in line 05) was a minimal response to Caleb’s preceding question; it had the important interactional function of showing acknowledgement that the question was heard or received. A more considered examination, reveals other realms of listening:

- listening that produced reflection (where, for example, Mika (line 08) repeated back Jamie’s response “not responding”, and in the instance Sami (line 09) repeated back “he’s just been knocked out”),
- listening that produced integration (where, for example, Sami in her own words (line 11) reframed Caleb’s turn about being “in a deep sleep”, by stating “not awake”, “asleep”, “like going to sleep”), and
- listening that produced interpretation (where, for example, Caleb (line 13) added “he’s not not breathing, his vitals are okay”, “it’s just like in a deep sleep”, and Sami extended the point further by adding “but the brain is not thinking”).

Mika’s turn (line 16) “but no, not asleep”, challenged the meanings offered by other students, demonstrating a more critical realm of listening. His response displayed listening that

produced criticality. In the flow of this segment of conversation these realms of listening are not discrete or hierarchical; they are pragmatically entwined through the course of exchanges.

To summarise, closely analysing classroom transcripts revealed the multidimensionality of listening experienced in classroom discussions. CA delineated *five listening structures* that demonstrate activeness in listening in the realms of:

- i) Interactivity, whereby responders acknowledge the speaker, and to provide feedback (extended or minimal) to the preceding speaker's turn
- ii) Reflectivity, whereby responders retell, repeat, or revoice what was heard (reflecting back to the speaker)
- iii) Integration, whereby responders say it back in their own words, rephrase, integrate the substance across multiple preceding turns
- iv) Interpretation, whereby responders build on and extend the ideas by interpreting and accommodating preceding utterances and prior experiences or knowledge into their own newly formed idea
- v) Criticality, whereby responders comment critically on, question, critique, evaluate, agree or disagree with.

In interaction, these different realms of listening show different turn structures that ask for different kinds of interactional responses or actions from teachers *and* students.

Significance

This paper contributes understandings about activeness in listening. Listening (by teachers and students alike) requires recognising and attending to the local exigencies at work in the moment, including how it works and displayed in the turn-taking organisation of classroom conversations. Studying student responses in classroom discussions delineates the multidimensionality of this. We argue it is important for proponents of dialogic teaching to foreground listening as participatory action, demonstrated through different turn structures that display listening to interact, to reflect, to integrate, to interpret, to critique. Results raise the matter of teacher's knowledge and understandings about listening and its role in classroom meaning making. A focus on its scope, functionality and practical enactment in a dialogic classroom highlights more nuanced understandings and practices among teachers.

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Table 1: <i>Transcription conventions</i>	
[[Utterances that begin at the same time
[Overlap in speakers' talk
]	Point where simultaneous talk finishes
=	Talk between speakers latches or follows without a break
()	Indicates length of silence e.g. (0.2)
:::	Indicates that a prior sound is prolonged e.g. li::ke
-	Word is cut off e.g. ta-
> <	Words enclosed within are said at a faster pace than surrounding talk
?	Rising inflection
¿	Rising inflection but weaker than ?
.	Stopping fall in tone
,	Continuing intonation
!	Animated tone

↑	Marked rising intonation
↓	Marked falling intonation
<u>no</u>	Underline indicating greater emphasis
CA	Upper case indicates loudness
°	Softness e.g. It's a °secret°
hhh	Aspiration or strong out-breath
(it is)	Words within are uncertain
()	Indicates that some word/s could not be worked out
(())	Verbal descriptions e.g. ((sits down))
(adapted from Atkinson and Heritage, 1999)	