Exploring the dialogic space in teaching: A study of teacher talk in the pre-university classroom in Singapore

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Highlights:

- Teachers tend to ask more ‘display’ than ‘exploratory’ questions in class.
- They acknowledge what students say but seldom ask them to clarify or justify.
- This pattern of teacher talk discourages dialogue, discussion and debate.
- It stifles students’ critical thinking and discourages knowledge co-construction.

1. Introduction

The classroom is arguably the crucible where 21st century competencies, such as cross-cultural communication and collaboration skills and critical and creative thinking (Wan & Gut, 2011), are first forged and refined under the expert guidance of the teacher. However, there are few teacher training programs that target the teaching or development of 21st century skills and virtually no clear policy for either the formative or summative assessment of these skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Furthermore, due to the strong presence of the teacher in the classroom, students are more often than not relegated to a passive, peripheral role of listening and uncritically accepting and assimilating, rather than actively and critically engaging with, ideas and information (McInerney & Liem, 2007). Classroom researchers have also found teacher talk to lack pedagogic purpose, being used largely to assert control rather than to facilitate students’ learning and thinking (Bolhuis & Voeten, 2001; Liu & Hong, 2009; Sol & Stokking, 2009; Vaish, 2008; van den Bergh, Ros, & Beijaard, 2013). This is probably because, traditionally, teachers’ classroom management strategies have arisen from a reaction to students’ misbehavior rather than being motivated by a proactive desire to engage students (McCaslin & Good, 1992). The role of the teacher in stimulating dialogue, discussion and debate among students, especially through the structuring and directing of

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classroom talk to encourage student participation and engagement, is therefore of paramount importance (Alexander, 2008; Howe & Abedin, 2013; Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

It has been said that ‘language is the medium by which much teaching takes place, and in which students demonstrate to teachers much of what they have learned’ (Cazden, 2001, p. 2). This echoes what Vygotsky has argued about language not being just a medium for articulating ideas but an essential mechanism for forging new ways of thinking and knowing (Vygotsky, 1968). The language used in the classroom can therefore be seen not only as the medium through which teaching takes place but also where evidence of learning is located. This study casts the spotlight on the language of teacher talk, examining how teacher questions are framed and feedback formulated, and how linguistic inflections in both embed specific intentions and nuances of meaning that have a manifest impact on encouraging (or stifling) student talk and thinking. In so doing, the study seeks to shed light on the dialogic space created by teachers in the classroom to foster the development of critical thinking as a 21st century competency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher Talk

Teacher talk can be construed simply as the language employed by teachers to give directions, explain activities, and check students’ understanding (Sinclair & Brazil, 1985), including providing feedback on student learning (Wallace, Sung & Williams, 2014). While the literature on classroom talk and how it can promote productive interactions in the classroom is extensive (Alexander, 2008; Chin, 2006; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Nystrand, 1997; Walsh, 2011; Wells, 1999, inter alia), there has been little focus on the specific discursive structures or linguistic features of teacher talk that impact student talk.
In a comprehensive review, Mercer and Dawes (2014) surveyed seminal work by scholars who have contributed to our current understanding of the forms and functions of classroom talk. Notable among this interdisciplinary body of research is work by linguists Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) who identified the minimal structure of talk between teacher and students as Initiation-Response-Follow-up (IRF). This refers to the teacher’s attempt to initiate student talk by, usually but not necessarily, asking a question. This provokes some form of response from students (which can include silence), which the teacher then follows up on. This well-known acronym has sometimes been referred to as IRE (Mehan, 1979), where ‘E’ stands for Evaluation, or where the ‘F’ is changed to Feedback. Both ‘evaluation’ and ‘feedback’, however, suggest a degree of authority and power being enacted by the teacher in providing evaluative commentary on students’ responses. Moreover, both terms suggest a more restrictive scope compared to the original term ‘follow-up’, which encompasses ways of responding that include, but are not limited to, giving feedback and evaluating. For instance, teachers can get students to elaborate on or clarify, give reasons to justify their position, or even seek other students’ opinions on the matter. However, empirical evidence from classrooms suggest that the IRF/IRE structure in classroom talk tends to follow a rigid and restrictive pattern of interaction between teacher and students, stifling and stultifying student talk and thought (Cazden, 2001; Hardman, Smith, & Wall, 2003; Hiebert et al., 2003). Studies have also shown that teachers tend to cling tenaciously to their teaching script, which predisposes them to ask students for predetermined answers and evaluating their responses on the extent to which they conformed to their preferred answers, refusing to open up opportunities for students to engage in more open-ended and meaningful talk (Jurik et al., 2013; Wells & Arauz, 2006). Much work has also been done on the role of teacher feedback in promoting student learning (Harks, Rakoczy, Hattie, Besser & Klieme, 2014; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; van den Bergh, Ros & Beijaard, 2014). For instance, Hattie and Timperley

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(2007) proposed a conceptual model of feedback aimed at moving students closer towards their learning goals. Interestingly, they conceptualized the provider of feedback as ‘an agent’ (p. 81), who can be a peer, parent, book or even self (via self-reflection) and not necessarily the teacher.

This extensive body of work on classroom talk, focusing on various aspects of teacher-student interactions to advance student learning, has raised our awareness of the importance of teacher talk in student learning and offered ways of examining and enhancing its productive value in the classroom. As Mercer and Dawes (2014) observed at the end of their review, educational researchers now know considerably more about the forms and functions of classroom talk, with results strongly suggesting that ‘when teachers make regular use of certain dialogue strategies, students’ participation in class and their educational outcomes are likely to benefit’ (p. 439). However, the precise nature and impact of these discursive strategies remain under-investigated through empirical work. This present study targets the Initiation and Follow-up moves made by teachers to examine the specific ways in which teachers initiate and respond to student talk and, in particular, how linguistic inflections in both moves embed specific intentions and nuances of meaning that have a manifest impact on encouraging (or stifling) student talk and thinking.

2.2 Dialogic Teaching

As a study concerned with the way in which teachers create a dialogic space for students to actively participate in and critically engage with discussion and thereby take ownership of their learning, this study is aligned with and situated within the pedagogic paradigm known as ‘dialogic teaching’ (Alexander, 2008; Burbules, 1993; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). This is an approach that draws on dialogue, with its emphasis on bi-
directionality, interactivity and, most crucially, egalitarianism, as a tool for learning.

‘Dialogic teaching’ does not simply refer to engaging students in dialogue, but opening the
space for students to question ideas and opinions from their peers, teachers or textbooks, so
that there is a greater negotiation and construction of knowledge, rather than knowledge
being transmitted unilaterally from teacher (or textbook) to student (Alexander, 2008).

The theoretical foundation of ‘dialogic teaching’ as a pedagogic paradigm arises from
the work of Bakhtin (1981) and his notion of dialogism. By demonstrating how the voices of
other people get interwoven into what we say, write and think, he theorizes that thinking and
knowing occur in and through dialogic speech which acts as an interface between a speaker
and a real or imagined audience, without which one’s utterances would not make sense. In so
doing, Bakhtin has provided an epistemological stance and perspective that highlights
meaning (and learning) as necessarily arising from the interactive act of drawing from and
rearticulating the thoughts and languages of others. It effectively decenters learning from the
cognitive processing that takes place in an individual learner to the social interaction in which
learners participate (Koschmann, 1999). According to Haworth (2010), what makes an
utterance dialogic and hence meaningful is the capacity to respond to ‘otherness’ and to
signal reciprocity in relation to, but not necessarily in agreement with, a speaker or text (p.
99-100). Hence, the contrast between monologic and dialogic utterances within a classroom
setting is that the former involve students’ accedence to and acceptance of the fixity of
meanings expressed through ‘authoritative’ texts and talk, while the latter involve students’
resistance, reshaping and re-accentuations of these meanings by populating them with their
own intentions, accents, and appropriating them by adapting them to their own semantic and
expressive intentions (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293-4). Put simply, the educative power of dialogic

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teaching lies in teaching students not what to think but *how* to think (Reznitskaya, Kuo, Clark, Miller, Jadallah, & Anderson, 2009, p. 35, my emphasis).

The pedagogic potential of Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism has been recognized by Wertsch (1991) and further developed by many others across different disciplines (see for instance, Maclean, 1994; Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013; Tappan & Mikel Brown, 1996; Wertsch & Bustamante Smolka, 1994). One significant body of empirical research, which emerged from the cross-cultural analysis of primary school classrooms in various countries including England, Russia and India, is Alexander (2001). His study produced a ‘dialogic teaching’ framework based on principles, such as collective participation, reciprocal sharing of ideas, engendering a supportive learning environment, and cumulative building of knowledge and understanding (Alexander, 2008). Crucially, Alexander's approach forces us to rethink not just the techniques we use to encourage dialogic engagement, but also the classroom relationships we foster, the balance of power between teacher and students, and the way we conceive of knowledge, all of which relate back to Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism which is premised on the principle of egalitarianism.

**2.3 Empirical Studies on Dialogic Teaching**

A significant number of empirical studies on dialogic teaching have focused on Science (Buty & Mortimer, 2008; Lehesvuori, Viiri & Rasku-Puttonen, 2011; Mercer, Dawes & Staarman, 2009; Osborne, Simon, Christodoulou, Howell-Richardson, & Richardson, 2013) and Mathematics (Kyriacou & Issitt, 2008; Rojas-Drummond & Mercer, 2004), motivated presumably, by the desire to challenge the common belief that these disciplines navigate a narrow space when it comes to encouraging divergent and critical thinking. In the language
classroom, work by Nystrand and colleagues (Nystrand, 1997; Nystrand, Wu, Garmorgan, Zeiser & Long, 2003) looked at how adolescent learners and their teachers in America, by talking together, compose shared understandings that contribute to the students’ learning process. They argue that students learn not merely by being spoken to, but by participating in communicative exchanges or ‘dialogic spells’ in which students take an active and sustained part in discussing ideas.

A number of studies have also focused on how dialogic talk can be scaffolded and systematically built up through small group interactions. For instance, Reznitskaya et al. (2009) is a review of a decade worth of research in the U.S. focused on the use of dialogic group discussions in elementary school classrooms, while Haworth (2010) is a small-scale study which attempts to untangle the monologic and dialogic threads in children’s talk in one Year 3 class in the U.K.. In both, the analytic lens is trained on the potential of small group interaction as opposed to whole class interaction for dialogic talk. The focus therefore is more on student-student talk rather than teacher-student talk. More recent studies which do focus on teacher-student interactions include Boyd & Markarian’s (2011) study on how one literature teacher in New York was able to mobilize his nine year-old students’ everyday knowledge, listen attentively as they grappled with the ideas and, crucially, anchor his questions and comments in their contributions. Rather than focus on the form of the talk per se (such as the use of closed questions), they assert that what is important in the analysis of dialogic teaching is a dialogic stance that permeates and is made visible through classroom talk. This stance is manifested through a variety of talk structures, including (1) patterns of talk: turn-taking norms, types of questioning and response, student talk time; (2) subject of talk: who gets to select and control it; and (3) illocutionary force: the degree to which the intentions of the speaker are taken up into the stream of discourse (Boyd & Markarian, 2011, p. 516-7). From their study, they conclude that ‘it is the perceived function of the talk in a

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situated, social context, not its decontextualized form that determines its effectiveness (p. 517).

While studies adopting a dialogic teaching focus are plentiful and diverse, most of them seem to focus on small group interactions among young learners rather than teacher-student interactions during whole-class discussions, where the teacher’s skills to initiate discussion and respond to and build on student contributions while creating a safe environment that encourages student participation, are being tested. Many of these studies also work in content subjects such as Science or Mathematics, with fewer focusing on language learning, where the emphasis is not on building a body of knowledge and expertise, but on raising the proficiency and confidence level of students in their communication, construal and critique of ideas and opinions. Finally, a number of these studies offer general practical strategies, principles or models that foster dialogic interactions in the classroom, without delving into the micro-discursive features of talk that actually contribute to such interactions. The primary purpose of this article is therefore to identify specific features of teacher talk that impact students’ ability to actively engage with class discussions that would, in turn, foster the development of a critical stance towards knowledge, a competency deemed vital in the 21st century.

3. The Study
3.1 Context of Study

This study is situated in Singapore, a nation well positioned in the 21st century landscape and fully committed to its agenda. Its Ministry of Education (MOE) has developed a framework for 21st century competencies, which underpins the holistic education aimed at preparing students to thrive in a fast-changing and highly connected world. This framework foregrounds, among other qualities, ‘critical and inventive thinking’, which is described as
the ability to “think critically, assess options and make sound decisions [and] … a desire to learn, explore and be prepared to think out of the box” (MOE website). While there is a clear commitment to these 21st century competencies in terms of policy pronouncements, the evidence that, and specific ways in which, these competencies are being developed in the classroom are less apparent.

The study focuses on General Paper (GP), a subject offered to students at the pre-university level in Singapore. The aims of GP converge on the development of students’ cognitive and communication skills, such as maturity of thought, critical reading and creative thinking, effective communication, and the ability to evaluate arguments and opinions (General Paper Syllabus, 2014). Students are assessed on their ability to demonstrate a broad and critical understanding and interpretation of a wide range of subject matter, including mass media, crime and punishment, politics and economics. In this respect, GP would appear to be an ideal choice of subject for a study on how teachers endeavor to encourage student discussion, dialogue and debate, which can lead to the development of the sort of critical thinking skills defined and delineated in the Singapore educational framework.

3.2 Research Aim

This qualitative baseline study was aimed at investigating GP teachers’ talk to identify the ways in which they endeavored to initiate and stimulate responses from students, thereby exploring the dialogic space that teachers create for students to critically engage with material discussed in class and participate actively in the co-construction of knowledge. Specifically, the research questions the study sought to answer were:

1. What is the nature of teacher talk in the GP classroom?
2. How does teacher talk in the GP classroom promote or stifle student response?

3.3 Research Participants

The participants of the study comprised eighteen GP teachers from seven different schools, selected using a purposive sampling approach (Dörnyei, 2007). As shown in Table 1 below, the eleven female and seven male teachers had varied levels of teaching experience, ranging from one who was in her first year of teaching to one with sixteen years of experience teaching the subject. All of them, with the exception of Meng Siong and Daniel, have undergone formal teacher training. However, it should be pointed out that none had received training specific to the teaching of GP, as this training was not available in 2013 when the study was undertaken. Besides GP, a number of them also taught Project Work, a subject aimed at developing students’ research and collaboration skills.
The seven schools they represented ranged from a few which were established and had a strong reputation for achieving academic excellence to a few which had a shorter history and more modest reputations. The students they taught were 16 to 17 years of age at the time of the study. The class size averaged 25 students and comprised an equal mix of males and females. A total of 36 lessons (two per teacher) were observed and audio-recorded over a period of six months in the first year of this two-year project. For each one-hour lesson, at least two researchers, including the principal investigator, were present to record field-notes and capture board-work to supplement the recorded classroom talk. Informed consent from both teachers and students was obtained prior to lesson observations.
3.4 Method of Analysis

The recorded classroom data was transcribed using a set of conventions to capture the speech characteristics of the teacher initiation and follow-up moves, as well as verbal and non-verbal behavior deemed relevant to understanding what was going on in a lesson (see Annex 1 for transcription codes). The transcripts were then analyzed by two independent coders, focusing on the IRF sequences, to uncover the ways in which teachers initiated discussion, the types of questions they used, what responses they elicited, if any, and how they followed up on students’ responses. This initial coding was accompanied by a process of “memoing” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 254) to record the coders’ thoughts, hunches and reasons behind their interpretations as they coded. The two coders then came together to compare their analyses before arriving at a negotiated consensus. It is important to note that this initial analysis was generated through close reading of the transcripts and not by imposing predetermined categories on the data. The general patterns of teacher initiation and follow-up moves that emerged from this initial analysis led to the development of a coding scheme (see Figure 1) that allowed the coders to sort the ways in which GP teachers initiated and followed up on their students’ responses into a few main categories.

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Teacher initiation moves were categorized into three main question types: Display, Exploratory and Rhetorical. Following Cazden (2001), the distinction between ‘Display’ and ‘Exploratory’ questions is based not on the form of the question but on whether the purpose of the teacher’s question, as interpreted by the coders by looking at the context of the IRF sequence, is to get students to display prior knowledge or predetermined answers, or to explore opinions, ideas, suggestions or hypotheses which are not inherently ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Rhetorical questions are those used by teachers to advance a particular line of argument or to assert a point-of-view. The various follow-up moves made by the teachers were categorized into five main types: Acknowledgement, Evaluation, Clarification, Justification and Counter-argument, the functions of which are provided in Figure 1. The number of times each type of initiation move was made was added up and divided by the total number of initiation moves by the teacher, and the same applied to the follow-up moves.
This yielded a broad perspective of the nature of teacher talk in the GP classroom in terms of the type of initiation and follow-up moves made. Through a close examination of the teacher talk, it was possible to gain further insights into the specific ways in which teachers encouraged students’ active participation in knowledge construction as well as those which produced rehearsed responses and encouraged passive assimilation of knowledge.

The following is a detailed discussion of the findings from the classroom data analysis. For greater coherence and focus, the subsequent lesson excerpts feature only two teachers, who have been selected because they exemplify specific contrastive aspects of dialogic teaching while being fairly representative of the teaching observed in the GP classrooms as a whole.

4. The Findings

4.1 Teacher Initiation Moves

Figure 2 shows the relative frequency of the various initiation moves made by the 18 participating teachers across the 36 lessons observed.
What is evident is that there is a wide disparity in the type of questions used by the teachers to initiate discussion. While some used very few Display questions (Janine did not use any at all), others used them rather liberally (over 86% for Fauziah). Not surprisingly, Rhetorical questions were less common than either Display or Exploratory questions, although Janine seemed to buck the trend with 41.2% of Rhetorical questions. What is noteworthy is that the teachers generally favored Display questions (54.1%) over Exploratory questions (32.9%) to get students to respond during class discussions. This implies that the nature and substance of the teacher talk had a strong focus on getting students to recall and discuss existing knowledge, rather than eliciting their opinions or encouraging them to question ideas in order to develop alternative perspectives, interpretations and understandings. This creates a somewhat monologic and transmissive pattern of interaction between the teachers and students, as teachers tended to present or position ideas and issues as fixed and not open to

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question or contestation. For a subject that purportedly seeks to develop students’ thinking, there seemed to be a heavy reliance on “feeding” students with information, such as facts, examples and ideas or arguments gleaned from prescribed readings, deemed essential for students to perform well in high-stakes examinations. We see this mode of teaching being enacted in Excerpt 1 below, which is taken from a lesson on crime and punishment taught by Jeannette. She began the lesson by getting her students to focus on the essay question, “Is it ever acceptable to break the law?”. The excerpt begins when Jeannette senses her students’ inability to respond to the question and decides to help them.

*Excerpt 1 (taken from Lesson 1 by Jeannette)*

| Teacher | So firstly in order to, to understand why it is never acceptable to break the law or why it is largely unacceptable to break the law right? You must understand the basis for laws. What do laws exist for? [turns omitted] Okay, it is an agreed social code, okay, or conduct or behavior. Okay. It is an agreed code of social oh uh like conduct and behavior, right? To influence uh the masses or the citizens in a country. Okay. So we should all aspire towards this. So the laws exist, so that we must all be like that. Okay, so with that in mind, right, now understanding what law exists for, you switch them around, and tell me why it is unacceptable to break them? Okay. So it is that easy. Okay, so SV1* has to do with how, okay, firstly okay, since laws exist to maintain order. Okay in societies. Okay fill in the sentence for me. Breaking them will therefore lead to what? Gary? Breaking them will therefore? Create disorder.

| Gary | Create disorder.

| Teacher | Create disorder and chaos. Okay? And chaos. Alright? So anything you say about how laws cannot be broken. Okay cannot be broken, so as to maintain...? (3) uh, another word for “order”? What are we trying to maintain? We are actually trying to maintain normalcy.

* SV1* stands for Supporting View 1, an acronym used by GP teachers in the school as part of a template for teaching the argument.

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Jeannette attempts to help by establishing the basis of laws as a code of conduct that governs society, a point that students can use as a *Supporting View* (“SV1”) in response to the essay question. What is significant is the use of words like “we should” and “we must”, which might create in students a sense of fixity or incontestability of the knowledge being presented. This is reinforced when she subsequently said “so with that in mind right, now understanding what law exists for ….”. This presents the “understanding” (of the purpose of laws in a society) as background knowledge which students are meant to imbibe and not to question. What is even more significant is the way in which the teacher frames her subsequent question: *Okay fill in the sentence for me. Breaking them will therefore lead to what? Gary? Breaking them will therefore?* This happens again a few lines later: *Okay cannot be broken, so as to maintain..? uh, another word for “order”?*. Such a mode of questioning tends to elicit short, unelaborated answers, as it suggests that just one or two words are needed to fill in the blanks and complete the sentence. Moreover, it signals to the students that the teacher has a fixed answer in mind, which discourages them from volunteering unless they think they have the ‘correct’ answer. This mode of questioning, especially if used repeatedly, might lead to the suppression of dialogue, often leaving the teacher having to answer her own questions, as seen in the excerpt: *What are we trying to maintain? We are actually trying to maintain normalcy.*

These ‘fill-in-the-blanks’ questions are an example of Display questions which elicit what appear to students as fixed, predetermined answers that the teacher is looking for, thereby constricting the space for reflection, question and dialogue. Furthermore, it does not help when Jeannette explicitly states that the task at hand is “that easy” and modifies her students’ responses (*Create disorder and chaos. Okay. And chaos.*), without explaining how it enhances the answer or contributes to students’ learning. This only serves to widen the gulf between the teacher and

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students by making students feel inadequate and insecure about their own knowledge and competence, which would work against any attempt to promote co-construction of learning.

In Excerpt 2 below taken from the same lesson, there is further evidence of this suppression of student talk and, more crucially, student thought.

Excerpt 2 (taken from Lesson 1 by Jeannette)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Uhm, so now the examples are important. What kind of examples do you give?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Maybe laws that already broken are not (…)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>What do you think?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Do you give uh examples of laws or crimes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Hmm….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Do you give examples of both?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Laws and crime?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Okay, laws that are there and laws that are broken and therefore lead to either normalcy or the lack of normalcy because of the lack of, because of people not abiding by the laws.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jeannette begins by asking a seemingly open-ended question that could potentially open up the dialogic space, *What kind of examples do you give?*, with reference to laws instituted to maintain order. The follow up question, *What do you think?*, seems to confirm her intention to elicit opinions rather than facts. However, before the student has a chance to respond, the teacher, as if in anticipation of the student’s inability to respond, decides to reformulate the question into a much more narrow Yes/No question: *Do you give uh examples of laws or crimes?* When the student hesitated, she repeats the question and decides to answer the question herself without waiting for the student’s response. Instead of helping students to engage with and contribute to the discussion, Jeannette’s over eager intervention is likely to have the effect of disengaging students by shutting them out of the discussion. It also betrays the fact that she is not really interested in her students’ opinions.

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despite apparently asking for them. What appears as an Exploratory question in form (*What do you think?*) may thus be interpreted as a Display question in effect. What is noteworthy also is the use of ‘do’ in the initial question, *What kind of examples do you give?*. The use of ‘do’, as opposed to ‘can’, betrays the teacher’s prescriptive stance. It is tantamount to asking: what kind of examples *should* you give?, which imposes on the students an expectation of the kind of answers they are *supposed* to provide. As such, rather than encouraging students to come up with their own examples which they think are appropriate and to explain or justify them, such a question subtly hints at certain pre-established answers (perhaps based on what the students had been taught before), thereby taking on a more Display rather than Exploratory tenor.

Apart from Display and Exploratory questions, the teachers in the study also tended to use Rhetorical questions. As this type of questions presupposes a certain preconceived standpoint, their use has the effect of asserting and even imposing this point-of-view on its listeners. A good example of this is Excerpt 3 taken from another lesson taught by Jeannette.
Excerpt 3 (taken from Lesson 2 by Jeannette)

Teacher: So we can’t for example, uh arrest the Swiss national who, who vandalized our MRT trains.
       He used graffiti on our MRT trains.  Do you think he deserved it?

Students: No
Teacher: No uh?
       You know the, the guy who spray-painted our MRT trains.

Student1: Actually it’s quite nice eh.
Teacher: Huh?
Student1: Actually very nice.
Teacher: And it was quite nice, right?
Students: Ya lor [a colloquial expression to signal emphasis].
Teacher: But he was arrested.
       Do you think he deserved it?

Student2: Not so serious what.
Teacher: Huh?
       Not so serious.
       He got caning you know.
       Got caned for it.
       Serious or not serious?

Students: Very serious.
Teacher: It’s quite serious.
       I think he deserved it.

When Jeannette first asked the class whether they thought the person who was caught spray-painting the MRT trains (Singapore’s subway system) deserved being arrested, she seemed somewhat surprised by her students’ response in the negative. However, instead of getting them to explain the basis for their view (that the graffiti was ‘quite nice’ and hence the person did not deserve to get arrested), she repeated the question *Do you think he deserved it?* with the counter-argument *But he was arrested.* When her students stood their ground and insisted that the crime was *Not so serious what,* she further countered by saying *He got caning you know. Got caned for it. Serious or not serious?* By then, the students finally saw where their teacher was leading them and conceded with a response, *Very serious,* to which Jeannette said, perhaps in self-satisfaction that the students finally agreed with her, *It’s quite serious. I think he deserved it.* Instead of getting students to interrogate

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the basis of their view (why the visual appeal of the graffiti would lessen the severity of the crime), Jeannette merely wanted them to see her own (flawed) logic that the severity of the punishment reflects the severity of the crime. In other words, as long as the punishment is serious, the crime must be deemed serious. When she first asked the question, *Do you think he deserved it?*, the question was interpreted as an Exploratory question asking for students’ opinion. However, by the time she repeated the same question towards the middle of the extract, it has become a Rhetorical question, a vehicle to assert and impose the teacher’s preconceived opinion on the students.

Besides showing how Rhetorical questions can have the effect of narrowing the dialogic space for students to voice their opinions and engage in the co-construction of knowledge, this excerpt also illustrates how an Exploratory question could morph and evolve into something else depending on how a teacher follows up on students’ initial contributions. This echoes Boyd and Markarian’s (2011) argument about the need to look at ‘the perceived function of the talk in a situated, social context, not its decontextualized form’ (p. 516-7). Through the unfolding of this excerpt, we also see how the intention of the teacher was initially resisted by the students who held a contrary view, but was eventually taken up and accepted by them due to the teacher’s persistence in pursuing her own agenda. It therefore illustrates the “illocutionary force” through which the (monologic) stance and intentions of the teacher are taken up into the stream of discourse by her students.

### 4.2 Teacher Follow-up Moves

Besides the way teachers initiate discussion, what is equally important for teachers to bear in mind is the way they respond to student contributions, which has a palpable effect on
whether students are encouraged to think more deeply and to envisage alternative perspectives and possibilities. Figure 3 below shows the relative frequency of the various follow-up moves made by teachers in response to student contributions.

![Figure 3](image-url)

**Figure 3 Relative Frequency of Follow-up Moves**

From the figure, it is apparent that by far the most common follow-up move teachers made was to acknowledge what students said (58.3%). This does not have any manifest effect on getting students to probe more deeply into an issue or examine the basis of their claim or argument; it merely signals that their contributions have been heard. What is more crucial is the subsequent follow-up move teachers make which determines whether students are invited to clarify, elaborate on, justify their point-of-view or otherwise contribute to the joint construction of knowledge. In this regard, it is significant to note that the next most common follow-up move was Clarification which only has a frequency of 18.5%. Following closely after Clarification in terms of frequency was Evaluation (17.5%). For this move, it is important to note that it is the *nature* and *timing* of teacher evaluation that have a greater
impact on the dialogic space than the act of evaluation per se. For instance, if the teacher gives a strong and categorical evaluation of what a student says, whether positively or negatively, chances are that such a move would lead to a foreclosure of the discussion since students would very rarely want (or dare) to re-open the discussion with either a question or remark when the teacher has seemingly given a conclusive ‘judgement’ on the matter under discussion. A premature evaluation of student contributions, given before students are offered a chance to engage with and offer their views, would also produce a similar effect. Students’ attempts to participate in the discussion are more often than not thwarted, especially if the teacher is overly hasty in evaluating their contributions, giving them the impression that their contributions are erroneous, irrelevant or otherwise of little value. A case in point is found in Excerpt 4.

**Excerpt 4 (taken from Lesson 2 by Jeannette)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Okay, so you can begin with the easiest.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You can talk about traffic laws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why do traffic laws exist?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why do red lights and green lights… what do they do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student1</td>
<td>To protect pedestrians.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>No, no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They maintain order, right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>So I know when to go and when to stop and mine won’t collide into your car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s just you know, order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>…… [several turns omitted]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alright, traffic laws, uh, okay, so moving on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We can actually think of more examples for this later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Okay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uh sorry?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student2</td>
<td>They said some law … [inaudible]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uh, here, okay, a counter example, or a more serious example that I can give, I can also talk about Somalia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Okay why Somalia?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somalia is considered as the world’s most chaotic or anarchic state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Okay they are in a stage of anarchy, meaning chaos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Because the government of the country is only in control of the capital right now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Okay and the various parts of Somalia are actually controlled by other warlords.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This has been going on for the last two, two decades or so….</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This is a pre-print version of the manuscript published in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 56 (2016), 47-60.
In trying to help her students with examples they could use in the essay question being discussed, Jeannette cited the ‘easiest’ example of traffic laws. When she asked the question, *Why do red lights and green lights... what do they do?*, a student’s answer, *To protect pedestrians*, was summarily and categorically dismissed: *No, no. They maintain order, right.* The tag at the end of the utterance, said with a falling intonation, reinforces the sense of finality and fixity of the teacher’s response. Without asking the student to justify his answer and without explaining why it was not acceptable and providing her own answer instead, Jeannette was sending a message to the student, and the rest of the class, that she had a preconceived answer in mind to advance her argument that laws exist in order to maintain social order. This probably left the student bewildered as to why his answer to a supposedly easy question, which might have seemed perfectly sensible and plausible to him, was deemed wrong or unacceptable. This would discourage him from further attempts to participate in the classroom talk, causing it to sink deeper into a monologue. The same pattern is repeated a few lines down when another student’s contribution was rejected as the teacher launched into an extended monologue on her own example of Somalia. In so doing, Jeannette probably thought she was helping her students without realizing that she was effectively cutting them off from the discussion, thereby depriving them of the opportunity to participate in the valuable process of knowledge co-construction.

The study also provided evidence that oftentimes teachers merely acknowledged students’ contributions with “ok”, “yes”, or “ah huh” without any explicit evaluation. This was frequently followed by the teacher’s extended explanation or protracted elaboration of his or her own viewpoint which seemed to diminish, derogate or even erase what the students had offered, not dissimilar from what was just seen in Excerpt 4. Seldom did the teachers

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probe for the basis of, or reasons behind, what their students had said or extend the dialogue by inviting other students in the class to comment on their peers’ contributions, thereby validating and building on their contributions. Over time, this would effectively constrict the discursive space for students to contribute spontaneously or substantively to class discussions, as they wait nervously to be called upon by their teacher to give the ‘correct’ answer to ‘easy’ questions. More significantly, by devaluing student contributions in relation to what the teacher has to offer, the teacher is in fact reinforcing an epistemological structure that is heavily centered on the teacher as the main, if not sole, proprietor of knowledge.

To be fair, the evidence from the data does not speak unequivocally of the narrowing of dialogic space in the classroom. There were glimpses of attempts by some teachers to encourage and prod students to think more deeply to develop a more critical understanding of issues discussed. In Excerpt 5 below, we witness one such teacher’s attempts to get his students to clarify and justify their responses. The lesson began with the teacher (Paul) getting the students to work in groups to decide on what they would do with a sum of money given to them to invest in a worthwhile cause. The excerpt begins with Mr Paul inviting one group of students to present.

Excerpt 5 (taken from Lesson 1 by Paul)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Let’s go.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student1</td>
<td>Er we are going to give money to the poor and train them to start a small business on their own so that they can sustain themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Okay so some sort of entrepreneurship er project. Is this, where is this located?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student1</td>
<td>Er, (6 seconds) The…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>There must be a reason. If you have no reason, don’t suggest anything yet. If you don’t know where you are going to invest your project in, you must have a context okay. For now Joshua’s group, what do you hear um in (…) and Joshua’s project for his group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student2</td>
<td>Er donate money to the poor to train them in something.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It can be seen that there was some hesitation when Paul asked Student1 for the context of his group’s project. However, instead of coming to his rescue immediately by offering his own suggestions, Paul turned his attention to the rest of the class by asking them what they thought the project was about and the purpose behind it. This shifted the attention away from him and opened up another avenue of discussion before Paul returned to the initial question of where the project would be situated and why. This was achieved mainly through questions that probed for clarification and justifications: Some sort of business venture for them to? and What’s the reason er for teaching them how to be entrepreneurs?. More significantly, Paul also asked higher-order metacognitive questions, why am I asking about context? Everybody, why am I asking you all to identify a country?, which made the whole class think about not just what he was asking them but why. In this way, it could be said that he was apprenticing them to become critical thinkers who can ask the right questions and not just give the right answers. This instantiates or at least approximates what Reznitskaya et al. (2009) call the educative power of dialogic teaching which lies in teaching students not what to think but how to think.
In another lesson, Paul was seen asking the class, *Are we happy with that?*, to invite them to comment on what their peers say. This follow-up move not only draws the class into the discussion but, more importantly, also empowers them to evaluate what students say, a privilege typically restricted to the teacher by virtue of his authoritative position in the classroom. Such moves, which exemplify what van Zee and Minstrell (1997) call a “reflective toss”, in which the teacher “tosses” the responsibility of thinking back to the students with another question, go a long way in establishing a more egalitarian class structure where the teacher is no longer positioned or perceived as the sole or even main proprietor/evaluator of knowledge. In this case, Paul’s choice of *Are we happy with that?*, as opposed to more common formulations like “Do you agree with that?”, is interesting because he might be seen as appealing to his students’ affective rather than cognitive domain, thereby making the question appear less daunting and cognitively demanding. More significantly, by using the inclusive ‘we’, he linguistically co-constructs his students together with him, thereby creating a sense of solidarity and shared responsibility, making the ground fertile for the co-construction of knowledge to take root and flourish.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

By examining the minutiae of classroom talk to excavate the various micro-discursive structures and features of teacher talk used to initiate discussion and follow-up on students’ responses, the study contributes to the existing research on the role of teacher talk in shaping the substance and quality of student contributions and participation in class. The findings, based on the 18 teachers’ observed lessons, reinforce what has been found in previous studies, which reported teachers’ rigid and restrictive adherence to their teaching script (Cazden, 2001; Hardman, Smith, & Wall, 2003; Jurik et al., 2013). They suggest a
predominantly monologic and transmissive orientation in their classroom talk, indicated by a preponderance of initiation moves that elicited pre-established knowledge or led students to preconceived conclusions, as well as follow-up moves that did little to probe for opinions, perspectives, positions and their underlying thinking. Instead of opening the classroom discursive space to engender dialogue, discussion and debate by getting students to critically evaluate or interrogate ideas and positions, they seemed more intent on helping them fill in factual knowledge blanks or adhere to template-filling procedures. There was as little evidence of teachers honing the reasoning skills of students, by either getting them to justify or explain their position, as there was of teachers making explicit and visible their own thinking process and reasoning. Such a discursive classroom culture, whilst possibly elevating students’ level of factual and procedural knowledge, would ultimately debilitate the development of their conceptual knowledge and metacognitive abilities (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In a dialogic classroom, the teacher has the important role of modeling, and guiding students in, metacognitive thinking, so that they can gradually learn to monitor and hone their own reasoning skills and quality of argumentation (Gregory, 2007; Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013). However, evidence from the study suggests an anti-dialogical structure of teacher talk that debilitates and stifles student discussion, dialogue and debate.

It has been said that the authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who want to learn. In asserting her authority and performing her identity as a teacher to help students answer an essay question, Jeannette ends up answering questions for them, speaking for them, thinking for them. In revoicing, ignoring or outright rejecting what they say, she ends up devoicing them. Such moves are fundamentally anti-dialogical as they deny the existence of the “other” which forms the very basis of Bakhtinian dialogism: ‘the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness … in dialogism consciousness is
otherness’ (Holquist, 1991, p.18, emphasis in original). In Bakhtin’s worldview, what gives meaning to one’s utterance, indeed existence itself, is the acknowledgment of an “other” in a relationship based on “difference”. This stems from the dialogical principle, which ‘unfolds from the notions of Self and Other as mutually constituting’ (Maranhão, 1990, p. 4) and acknowledges that interlocutors in a dialogue are always different from each other and speak a different language (even if they use the same words). To assume this “otherness”, teachers need to stand outside of themselves, both spatially and temporally, in order to perceive themselves as others do to understand their own identity and existence as others do. For instance, when Jeannette asks her students, What kind of examples do you give? or Do you think he deserved it?, she needs to see how they would interpret this as asking for predetermined and non-negotiable responses and how her questioning stance would shape their perception of the role and identity of the teacher vis-à-vis the students. As Holquist (1991) puts it, in order to be perceived as being complete, ‘a person or object must be shaped in the time/space categories of the other, and that is possible only when the person or object is perceived from the position of outsideness’ (p. 31).

Bakhtin’s work on dialogism can be read as a critique on the ‘monologization of the human experience’, being critical as he was of efforts to ‘reduce the unfinalizable, open, and multivocal process of meaning-making in determinate, closed, totalizing ways’ (Baxter, 2006, p. 102). To avoid the sort of deleterious repercussions seen in some of the excerpts above, teachers need to move away from the anti-dialogical discursive structures that force-fit the intrinsically ambivalent, divergent and indeterminate into ‘correct answers’ and rigid (and rigidifying) templates, and corral the polyphonic thoughts, opinions and perspectives of students into a unitary convergent voice. But this is easier said than done. The classroom is a microcosm of the life-world envisaged by Bakhtin, in which every utterance ‘participates in

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the “unitary language” (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of the social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272). The teacher therefore needs to reconcile the competing centripetal and centrifugal forces at work to resolve the tension between what instruction entails and what dialogue involves. Instruction implies a sequence of pre-determined, systematic and carefully orchestrated moves that seek to scaffold student learning. Dialogue, on the other hand, results from a spontaneous, emergent process of give-and-take, through which bona fide co-construction of knowledge is achieved. ‘Dialogic teaching’, which can be construed as a hybrid of instruction and dialogue, can only be enacted by blurring the boundaries between the two, so that instruction can merge with dialogue to increase interactivity and exchange of ideas, and the tributaries of spontaneous dialogue can flow into and contribute to mainstream, systematic instruction. This requires teachers to imbue instruction with dialogue to open the discursive space for student participation. At the same time, they need to keep a sharp focus and firm grip on the lesson and its objectives in order to steer the resultant student talk in a purposeful and productive direction, while allowing any spontaneous student insight, which the teacher might not have imagined, to enrich the consequent discussion. All this would mean moving the talk along a monologic-dialogic continuum. After all, pedagogic practices cannot be construed in dichotomous monologic/dialogic terms (Lefstein & Snell, 2014); rather, they might be viewed as waves that rise and fall, as the teacher decides to present or problematize content, to focus or expand student thinking, to relinquish or resume control, depending on what the teacher has envisioned the learning outcomes to be at which stage of the lesson. Above all, the teacher must resist the temptation to unify, converge and thereby reduce the polyglot student voices and consciousness into a ‘correct language’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 270). To enable student co-construction of knowledge, the teacher must allow the student’s word to break through to its own meaning and expression ‘across an environment

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full of alien words and variously evaluating accents, harmonizing with some of the elements in this environment and striking a dissonance with others… to shape its own stylistic profile and tone’ (ibid p. 277). A question like *Are we happy with that?* might just lead the way.

### 5.2 Pedagogical Implications

Aside from theoretical issues, this study also holds some useful implications for teachers, teacher educators and policy-makers, not only in Singapore but in educational contexts where there is an interest in developing critical thinking as a 21st century competency.

The findings of the study suggest that teachers need to be more conscious of the discursive moves they make in class to initiate discussion and follow-up on student responses. Specifically, teachers can reflect on the extent to which their talk is directed at getting students to demonstrate predetermined knowledge, or aimed at encouraging the sort of reasoning, reflection and evaluation that might produce multiple perspectives and a deepened understanding of a concept or issue. For a subject that explicitly espouses the value of critical thinking and reasoning skills, it is somewhat surprising that the GP teachers who participated in the study seldom encouraged students to articulate the reasoning process behind their views, nor did they model this process by making their own thinking and reasoning visible to students. This was seen in Excerpt 3 where Jeannette not only failed to interrogate her students’ reasoning but also failed to explain her own logic of equating the severity of the punishment with the severity of the crime.

The findings therefore constitute fodder for GP teachers to reflect on their teacher talk. Research, however, has shown that teachers rarely reflect on their classroom discursive

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practices or focus only on superficial reflection (Smyth, 1992; Yost, Sentner & Forenza-Bailey, 2000). Teachers are often not conscious of the particular initiation or follow-up moves they make amidst the vagaries of classroom talk and hence not ‘interactionally aware’ (Rex & Schiller, 2009, p. 155). One way of raising this awareness is for them to be confronted with a recording of their own teaching, which they can use to reflect, with proper guidance, on their discursive practices and the interaction structures they engender (see for instance, Pehmer, Gröschner & Seidel, 2015; Rosaen, Lundeberg, Cooper, Fritzen & Terpstra, 2008; Sherwin & van Es, 2009; Wilkinson, Reninger & Soter, 2010). Of particular interest is the work of Schieble, Vetter and Meacham (2015) who use discourse analysis to help teachers understand what they call the ‘everyday identity work’ (p. 246) they perform in class, as they subscribe to the belief that the identities or positions that teachers construct and enact for themselves and their students are realized in and through their classroom discursive behaviors. Another study by van den Bergh, Ros & Beijaard (2014) demonstrated the value of using video-recordings in a professional development program designed to improve the quality of teacher feedback. More importantly, they argued that it is difficult to change teacher behavior or practices in a sustained manner unless professional development programs make use of authentic tasks and materials embedded within the professional practice of teachers.

Another implication of the findings, which corroborate what other researchers in Singapore such as Hogan et al. (2006) have found, is that the authoritative and monologic style of teaching could just be a bold front which belies an inner insecurity and lack of confidence. Dialogic teaching is, after all, an approach that not only challenges and stretches students’ understanding, but also demands teachers to have a firm enough grasp of the subject matter in order to remain unfazed by students’ questions (Hogan et al., 2006). It is this confidence in subject knowledge which allows them to step back and relinquish their
authority from time to time in order to give more freedom and discursive space for students to maneuver and explore the topic under discussion, without fear of their ignorance being exposed and their authority undermined.

This therefore suggests a need for teacher education programs to channel more resources towards building teachers’ capacity for dialogic teaching. This capacity-building should focus not only on developing teachers’ subject knowledge competency but also their pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987), which includes harnessing classroom talk to foster dialogue (Burbules & Bruce, 2001). In this regard, we can profit from work by various researchers who have designed particular pedagogic models or approaches aimed at stimulating student thinking through talk. ‘Accountable Talk’ is one such model, which promotes equity and access to rigorous academic learning by cultivating a sense of accountability to the community, to knowledge, and to accepted standards of reasoning in students (Michaels, O’Connor & Resnick, 2008). This notion of accountability can be linked to Bakhtin’s (1993) concept of ‘answerability’, which construes dialogic engagement among interlocutors as an ethical responsibility, but as Vadeboncoeur and Luke (2012) argue this is not just for students but a responsibility that teachers should have towards students.

Originating in Cambridge University, ‘CamTalk’ is a project that seeks to harness the power of talk to stimulate student thinking by drawing on dialogic teaching principles (see CamTalk). ‘Quality Talk’ is another research project adopting an approach to conducting discussions that promote students’ critical-reflective thinking and epistemic cognition (see Quality Talk). These projects appear to converge on a pedagogy of teacher-led discussions that encourages students’ active engagement with ideas, through agreement/disagreement and robust reasoning, so that it is the premises and not just the ideas themselves that are being scrutinized. These approaches to produce quality student talk and thinking seem especially pertinent to a subject like GP, which explicitly seeks to develop critical thinking and the

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ability to express informed opinions and evaluate arguments in students. Evidence from the present study, however, suggest that teachers are more concerned with strengthening students’ knowledge base rather than cultivating a critical stance that would allow them to interrogate, challenge and, thereby, construct knowledge. For teachers to embrace dialogic teaching, it seems then that there needs to be a fundamental re-imagining of the role of classroom teachers in relation to their students. Teachers can no longer be ‘the sage on the stage’ or even ‘guide by the side’, but need to be ‘meddler[s] in the middle’ (McWilliam, 2009, p. 287-291), prodding and probing students to question, to envision alternative perspectives and, ultimately, to think critically about the knowledge that surrounds them.

Finally, the persistent dominance of a product-centered approach to teaching and learning means that more often than not it is examination results that are scrutinized for evidence of learning rather than the process of verbal interactions between teacher and students which, arguably, constitute the locus of the sort of learning and knowledge-building purportedly needed in the 21st century. One important implication arising from this study is therefore to harness classroom talk as a medium in and through which students learn to think critically. Doing so would create a veritable paradigm shift where the evidence, and indeed source of learning, is relocated from test scores to classroom talk. In the present 21st century landscape, which places a premium on communication, collaboration and criticality, it is important to examine the talk through which these competencies are being developed and enacted. While Singapore has invested considerable resources in creating a technologically-enabled learning environment in schools, it is vital to have the ‘software’ of classroom talk and teacher-student interaction to lubricate the hardware in order to drive teaching and learning forward. This calls for policy-makers to rethink and re-envisage the ways in which student learning is being appraised to move away from the products to the processes of learning (Author, 2015). Assessment redesign should focus on developing student learning

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and informing teaching not in student mastery of specific subject knowledge per se, but in areas linked to mental capacities and processes like logical reasoning, critical evaluation, deep understanding and application of this knowledge to practical issues and problems (Baker & Gordon, 2014).

6. Conclusion

Bakhtin’s dialogic imagination is fundamentally about the recognition of the social nature of human discourse, of human existence. The traditional hierarchical structures that define teacher-student roles and relationships in a way that hamper communication and interaction would therefore need to be dismantled to make way for a more egalitarian structure, not just as a means to produce better learning but as an end in itself. After all, ‘we engage in dialogical approaches not because they are methods guaranteed to succeed, but fundamentally because we are drawn to the spirit of equality, mutuality, and cooperation that animates them’ (Burbules, 1993, p. 143). Ultimately, the pedagogical approach and interactive pattern a teacher adopts necessarily reflects his or her assumptions of the primary role or identity assumed by teachers vis-à-vis their students, whether this is to impart knowledge or facilitate knowledge (co-) construction. More fundamentally, it has to do with one’s epistemological convictions of whether knowledge is fixed, static and resides in books, teachers and other traditional symbols of authority, or whether it is fluid, dynamic and resides in the hitherto unexplored recesses and untapped imaginations of the human mind. Equally, it has to do with whether the true value of learning lies in the acquisition of knowledge structures or the cultivation of a dialogic stance, which acknowledges the multiplicity of perspectives and multifaceted nature of knowledge and values an open-mindedness to not only accept and accommodate, but embrace and celebrate, ‘otherness’ and ‘outsideness’. 
difference and ambivalence. That perhaps is what teaching, learning and living in the 21st century is all about.

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