

A Bakhtinian Understanding of Social Constructivism in Language Teaching

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that there is not a single school of thought that is called social constructivism, and ideas and assumptions from various disciplines in different fields are being incorporated into the social constructivist understanding. In this paper, a Bakhtinian perspective of social constructivism on education and language learning is discussed and studies that have explored Bakhtinian concepts in education have been reviewed. It is recommended that examining the structure of social interaction in the classroom based on the Bakhtinian concepts discussed (i.e., dialogism, monologism, recitation) can help us see the classrooms from a different perspective and provide insights that are not available from other perspectives.

Keywords: Constructivism, Bakhtin, Sociocultural Theory, Teacher Questions, Classroom Discourse.

Özet

Sosyal yapılandırmacılığın tek bir düşünce okulundan oluşmadığı genellikle kabul edilen bir gerçektir. Farklı alanlardan değişik fikirler ve varsayımlar farklı zamanlarda sosyal yapılandırmacılık anlayışına katkıda bulunmuştur. Bu çalışmada, Bakhtin'in eserlerine dayalı bir sosyal yapılandırmacılık anlayışı incelenmiştir. Bakhtin tarafından ortaya atılan kavramların genel olarak eğitime ve özellikle de dil öğrenimine olan katkılarını inceleyen çalışmalar derlenmiştir. Bakhtin'in öne sürdüğü kavramlar eşliğinde sınıf içindeki sosyal etkileşimin yapısını incelemenin bize diğer yaklaşımların veremeyeceği değişik bir bakış açısı sağlayacağı iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yapılandırmacılık, Bakhtin, Sosyal-kültürel Teori, Öğretmen Soruları, Sınıf Söylemi

1. INTRODUCTION

Social constructivism is gaining more and more ground in education, and ideas and assumptions from various disciplines in different fields are being incorporated into this school of thought. While addressing the questions about ‘the efficacy of social constructivism’, O’Connor (1998:25) acknowledges that there is not “a single coherent and identifiable ‘view’ (i.e., set of beliefs and assumptions) that goes by the name of social constructivism”. In this paper, I discuss a Bakhtinian perspective of social constructivism as it pertains to education in general and language learning in particular. Based on the discussion, I identify some research constructs that can be helpful to examine the quality of teaching in classrooms.

2. BAKHTIN AND DIALOGUE

In essence idealism knows only a single mode of cognitive interaction among consciousness: *someone who knows and posses the truth instructs someone who is ignorant of it or in error.* (Bakhtin, 1984: 81, emphasis added)

While discussing the pedagogical dialogue, Bakhtin (1984) argues that idealism stresses only one type of interaction where someone who has the truth (knowledge) passes it on to the person who is lack of it. This is similar to many lecture-based traditional classroom situations where teachers transmit the knowledge to their students. Bakhtin’s criticism clearly portrays the *mainstream* understanding of knowledge, and how it is transmitted from the more knowledgeable to the less. The statement above not only reveals the beliefs about nature of *knowledge* that are prevalent in our classrooms and everyday life, but also depicts the understanding of *language* and *learning*, and how *schooling* should be practiced. In the next section I will discuss what these beliefs are and how they are represented in the classroom context, and will try to relate them to one of the important features of the classroom talk; the structure of the classroom discussions.

Nature of Knowledge

Knowledge has been perceived in different ways by different traditions. Of particular interest in this article, there are two distinct ways affiliated with two different schools of traditions. Wells (1999b: 136) calls one of these schools as empiricism, which holds the belief that “knowledge consists of facts that are warranted by sensory perceptions and by associations established among them”. Knowledge, from this perspective, “is built up cumulatively by formulating generalizations and testing them empirically through further observation and experimentation which, if correctly carried out, are unaffected by the particular individual who conducts them” (136). In other words, knowledge is viewed independent of individuals and is not affected by the historical and cultural conditions under which it is built up and practiced.

Bakhtin (1984: 110) calls this school of thought idealism and criticizes its conception of knowledge by stating, “Truth is not born nor it is found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction”. According to Bakhtin, truth is born collectively when people are co-building it in their process of social interaction.

The other school, which we shall call (social) constructivism, views knowledge as “neither fixed, autonomous, and free-floating nor contained only as propositional objects in individual minds” (Wells, 1999b: 140). Rather, from this perspective, knowledge emerges as it is “constructed and reconstructed between participants in specific situated activities, using the cultural artifacts at their disposal, as they work towards the collaborative achievement of a goal” (Wells, 1999b: 140).

Epistemologically, Nystrand (1997) distinguishes two schools of knowledge; namely objectivism (similar to empiricism that Wells (1999a) discusses, and idealism in Bakhtinian sense) and dialogism. In objectivism knowledge is given. It is fixed and static, or in Volosinov’s (1976) terms it is finished off. This type of knowledge is transmitted to the students through lecturing or recitation. Transmission is defined as “a unilateral process in which a closed and unquestioned body of information and routine skills is imposed on passive and supposedly, receptive students” (Wells, 1999a: 53). Alternatively, from a dialogical perspective, knowledge emerges from the interaction of voices (Nystrand 1997). By the same token, Witte (1992, as cited in Wells, 1999a) argues that knowledge should not be viewed as something lying in the text, but rather it is in

what writers and readers create as they exploit texts as external tools to mediate their own mental activity of representing and knowing.

Wells (1999a) concurs with other constructivist scholars stating that we should reject the static, objectified conception of knowledge on which curriculum is still so often based, and instead look for alternatives that are more dynamic and open-ended. In one of his other works Wells (1999b) highlights the importance of the teacher, in such an orientation, who is responsible for making potentially functional mediating tools and practices available.

Nature of Language

Similar to the nature of knowledge, there are two main schools of thought that hold different perspectives regarding the nature of language. In recent years, one of the schools, the formalist view of language, has been criticized because of its inadequacies in capturing the character of language (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998; Hall, Vitanova & Marchenkova, 2005; Linell, 2004). Dunn and Lantolf (1998) trace the roots of the formalist tradition extending back to the philosophers of ancient Greece. In this tradition language is considered as “a set of abstract, self-contained systems with a fixed set of structural components and a fixed set of rules for their combination” (Hall et. al., 2005: 1). Following from the distinction proposed by de Saussure (1966, as cited in Dunn & Lantolf, 1998) there is a separation between the language (thing) itself, which is called *langue*, from its use, i.e., *parole*.

An opposing view of language, in contrast to an understanding of language as a set of closed, abstract systems of normative forms, is the Bakhtinian perspective which views language “as compromising dynamic constellations of sociocultural resources that are tied to their social and historical contexts” (Hall et al. 2005: 2). Along the same lines, Volosinov (1976) states that language attains (acquires) life and historically develops specifically in concrete verbal communication and therefore separating language from its use offers a limited conceptualization of language.

Hall et al. (2005: 3) argue that the Bakhtinian language view has several key implications for current understanding of second and foreign language learning. First, it leads us perceive language as “a living tool-one that is simultaneously structured and emergent” which helps us “bring our cultural worlds into existence, maintain them, and

shape them for our own purposes”. Another key point is that it situates the learning in social interaction rather than in abstract concepts such as the head of the individual learner.

Bakhtin’s theory of language is centered around dialogic utterances as opposed to grammatical structures. Bakhtin (1986: 71) points out that the problems in the linguistic thinking that are prevalent in the formalist view of language, “result from ignoring the real unit of speech: the utterance”.

Speech can exist in reality only in the form of concrete utterances of individual speaking people, speech subjects. Speech is always cast in the form of utterance belonging to a particular speaking subject, outside this form it cannot exist. (Bakhtin, 1986: 71)

As Bakhtin (1986) argues, an utterance has expressive intonation and receives its meaning by virtue of its position in a chain of speech communication. More specifically, from a sociocultural point of view, the origin of communication is utterance (Mantero, 2001) and the most important characteristic of an utterance is that it has the potential of response which facilitates the creation of a dialogue. Linell (2004) states all utterances and texts are, at one level, dialogical because every utterance has (a) responsivity, that is, each and every utterance is a response to a situation or to somebody else’s utterance and (b) addressivity, in other words, each and every utterance is addressed to somebody who has to do something with it. Vygotsky (1986) made a similar point when he wrote that words have meaning but only speech has sense. In other words, spoken and written language acquires meaning only through social usage. Meaning in a text does not stand on its own out of context and is not unaffected by the people who use it, rather it is socially constructed.

Nature of Schooling

Understanding of knowledge as a fixed, static concept which could be transmitted to the learners is so common in our lives, especially in schools, that it is not that surprising to see a student association representing university students in Canada consider schools as places which is “first and foremost responsible for the transmission of basic and general knowledge” (FEUQ, 1996, as cited in Wells, 1999a). This view is held by many other students, teachers, educational policy makers in different settings and

countries (Wells, 1999a). Many people think that knowledge exists out there, independent of particular knowers, or can be mounted up in individual minds. Therefore it is not surprising to see people speaking about education in terms of knowledge transmission, retention, recall and transfer.

In addition, most of the current theoretical frameworks in the field of second language learning and teaching assume an information processing model of language and communication (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998) which is derived from the conduit metaphor or specifically input-output computational metaphor. Particularly, this metaphor assumes that “minds are containers and that language itself is a container, into which speakers insert meanings that they transmit to listeners who subsequently unpack the containers, extract the meanings and insert them into their own minds” (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998: 424).

In his book *Dialogic Inquiry*, Wells (1999a) argues for an alternative to the traditional conception of schooling. Rather than focusing solely on the acquisition metaphor, Wells highlights the importance of co-construction and participation, and presents an understanding of schooling of learning based on the ideas of Vygotsky, Halliday and other social constructivist scholars.

In a similar vein, Applebee (1996: 2) makes a distinction between knowledge-in-action and knowledge-out-of-context. Likewise, he calls for a change in the curriculum and argues that we should “focus on ‘knowledge in action’ rather than ‘knowledge out of context’”. He claims that the pattern of emphasis on memorization and rote learning, which is labeled as ‘knowledge out of context’, have concentrated solely on the specialized content, and ignored the discourse conventions that govern participation. He argues that the major problem in schooling is giving too much emphasis on knowing and disregarding the significance of doing. Applebee further maintains that a good curriculum should afford opportunities for conversation and he believes “the conversations that take place within these domains are the primary means of teaching and learning” (37). He views conversation as a tool of participation into the classroom community and as a way of “help[ing] students enter into culturally significant traditions of knowledge in action” (37).

When knowledge is seen as something set and a fixed objective which “exists apart from the knower and prior to class” (Nystrand, 1997: 24), students are considered as empty vessels [to be] filled by teachers” (44). In these occasions, most instruction is about what is already known and figured out, and learning and being prepared for class normally implies reliably recalling what is already known (Nystrand, 1997). The epistemic role of students under the terms of such circumstances is limited to remembering what others, particularly teachers and textbooks, have said, not figuring things out and not producing any new knowledge (Nystrand, 1997).

On the other hand, from a dialogical perspective, Nystrand (1997) argues that reading a text is no different than other classroom activities. It is virtually a meaning-making process in which students not only discover the meaning of the text but also interpret it based on their own personal experience, understandings and expectations. Therefore, classroom interaction should be used as a way of instructing and rehearsing students in the process of interpretation rather than to check whether students can correctly recall the right answers.

3. CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS OF BAKHTINIAN CONCEPTS

Structure of Discussions

Structure of discussions (i.e., interaction pattern of classroom discourse) might be a good indicator of how knowledge, language and schooling are perceived by the students, teachers and administrators. Long time ago, Mehan (1979) pointed out the significance of examining classroom interaction because he believed that educational facts are inherent in interaction and classroom interaction might be a good indicator of the quality of talk in the classroom and perception of schooling. In classrooms where interaction is teacher-dominated, and lecture and recitation scripts are used as the principal tools of teaching (Nystrand, 1997) a fixed, static understanding of knowledge and transmission model of learning are assumed (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

Persistently many studies (Cazden, 2001; Lemke, 1990; Nystrand, 1997; Wells, 1999a) demonstrate that the current discourse structure of our classrooms is built on the traditional Initiation- Response- Evaluation (Feedback) –IRE (F) - exchange, as in the recitation script, which has a number of key provisions. According to Nystrand (1997),

first, the IRE exchange is an indicator of the perception that knowledge is given, and it is present outside the classroom interaction in a predetermined form. The major source of knowledge is the teacher or textbook, never students, and a central purpose of recitation is to transmit information to students and to review it with them. Because of this, students' individual voices are not heard or followed up unless they make mistakes. Second, it is the teacher who prescribes, regulates and controls all the questions and more importantly the answers; students do not have any critical role rather than trying to guess what is in teacher's mind. In this script the teacher is privileged, and she is the only source of *valued* knowledge. Finally, the teacher initiates all topics of discussion and determines what is worth knowing and what is not. Knowing something is operationalized as remembering it properly in recitation contexts.

Dialogism

Following the tradition of Bakhtin, some authors have introduced new concepts of instruction in education (Gutierrez, 1994; Nystrand 1997; Skidmore, 2000). Even though these new concepts are given different names by different authors such as 'internally persuasive discourse' and 'authoritative discourse' by Skidmore (2000), 'dialogically organized instruction' and 'monologically organized instruction' by Nystrand (1997), 'recitation' and 'discussion' by Gutierrez (1994), and even though there might be some minor differences among their understanding and operationalization of these concepts, it can be argued that all of these authors talk about very similar classroom events. In this study, I will follow Nystrand (1997) and call these concepts as monologically oriented instruction and dialogically oriented instruction. As Linell (2004: 1) acknowledges, "dialogism is not one coherent school, or theory, not even that 'dialogists' of different extractions would agree upon", therefore a room for different conceptualizations of dialogism is left open.

Bakhtin (1984: 292) contends that ultimate monologism "denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and responsibilities". We can observe the traces of monologism in the unequal distribution of social roles in the classrooms. When Bakhtin states "monologue pretends to be the ultimate word" (293), he points to a common problem in our schools. Many teachers ignore the other voices and what they want is to transmit their understanding and knowledge which is "finalized and

deaf to other's responses, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force" (292).

Similar to Bakhtin's interpretation of monologism, for some teachers, the meaning of the text is fixed and can be transmitted to the students through lecturing or recitation. In a sense, they view the meaning as it is an ultimate product independent from the students understanding (Volosinov, 1976). Students' role, in the view of these teachers, is to figure out the fixed meaning in teacher's head or accept fully what the teacher explains to them (Nystrand, 1997). Bakhtin calls (1984) this kind of discourse as 'pedagogical dialogue':

In an environment of.....monologism the genuine interaction of consciousness is impossible, and thus genuine dialogue is impossible as well. In essence idealism knows only a single mode of cognitive interaction among consciousness; someone who knows and possesses the truth instructs someone who is ignorant of it an in error; that is, it is the interaction of a teacher and a pupil, which, it follows, can only be a pedagogical dialogue. (Bakhtin, 1984: 81)

Skidmore (2000) uses Bakhtin's concept of pedagogical dialogue and further relates it with two other Bakhtinian (1981) concepts: internally persuasive discourse and authoritative discourse. Authoritative discourse can be observed in situations where forms of language use introduce themselves as unchallengeable orthodoxy, articulating a position which is not open to debate (e.g. religious dogma). As Bakhtin (1981: 343) argues, authoritative discourse "demands our unconditional allegiance". On the other hand the semantic structure of internally persuasive discourse is open in its nature and it acknowledges the primacy of dialogue. It acknowledges the impossibility of any word ever being final so newer ways to mean and newer meanings are always welcome.

This distinction between authoritative dialogue and internally persuasive dialogue is advanced with Bakhtin's following description:

When verbal disciplines are taught in school, two basic modes are recognized for the appropriation and transmission – simultaneously – of another's words (a text, a rule, a model): 'reciting by heart' and 'retelling in one's own words. (Bakhtin, 1981: 341)

In pedagogical dialogue someone who knows the truth teaches it to someone who lacks it or who is in error (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984). It is characterized by a tendency towards the use of authoritative discourse on the part of the teacher, i.e. utterances which instruct the learner to recite from the text or to agree to the position expressed by the teacher, rather than inviting the learners to explain their own point of view. By contrast internally persuasive discourse invites learners to retell the story in their own words and voice their own evaluative judgments. Skidmore (2000: 293) argues that this form of dialogue has a semantically open structure, which does not tend to agree on a single standpoint, and encourages learners “towards a recursive process of intersubjectively accomplished understanding”.

While explaining what dialogism is Linell (2004: 3) situates dialogism as an alternative to monologism. He affirms that “dialogism is defined and must be understood in contrast to an alternative: monologism”. Monologism, according to Linell (2004: 4), “seeks to construct language and knowledge as independent of single subjects”. Dialogism, on the other hand, perceives knowledge as essentially “constructed, negotiated, and (re)contextualized... in socio-cultural traditions, and in dialogue with others” (4).

In a similar vein, Lotman (1988) proposes that there are two functions of a text (Lotman’s concept of text is parallel to Bakhtin’s concept of utterance). The first, which he calls ‘monologic’, assumes an overlap of speaker’s meaning and listener’s interpretation which in turn brings out a perfect intersubjectivity. Although, this might be practical and functional in our lives, it does not entitle a response that offers an alternative perspective. The second function, namely dialogic function, of a text facilitates the emergence of new meanings and opens the floor to the new ideas. Lotman (1988) discusses the differences between two functions of the text as follows:

In this respect a text ceases to be a passive link in conveying some constant information between input (sender) and output (receiver). Whereas in the first case a difference between the message at the input and that at the output of an information circuit can result only as a result of a defect in the communication channel, and is to be attributed to the technical imperfections of this system, in the

second case such a difference is the very essence of the text's function as 'a thinking device. (Lotman, 1988: 36-37)

In the same way, from a Bakhtinian perspective, it is only the second function of a text that can be considered to be truly dialogic, for it is only when the transmissional purpose is abandoned that there is the potential of active responsiveness and the inter-animation of voices (Wertsch, 1991). The second function, which is dialogic in nature, invites the responders to react to the text from a different perspective by adding their own meanings, interpretations, and ideas.

The type of instruction is monologic, according to Nystrand (1997), when the teacher strictly follows the recitation script and leaves no room for student ideas and voices. Alternatively, in dialogic instruction, there is more give and take between teachers and students, particularly concerning the substance of discussion. 'Reciprocity' of the dialogic instruction helps the teacher build his teaching onto the student contributions. In dialogic instruction, students not only answer questions; they also make points and contribute to discussions. In good conversations "the participants profit from their own talking..., from what others contribute, and above all from the interaction-that's to say, from enabling effect of each upon others" (Britton, 1970: 173).

Recitation and Dialogue

Based on our discussion about monologism and dialogism two new terms that are more related to classroom discourse emerge. These are recitation and dialogue scripts. Recitation is one of the most common scripts observed in our classrooms, which is also an indicator of monologism (Nystrand, 1997). On the other hand dialogue and discussions are operationalized based on the Bakhtinian understanding of dialogism. These concepts, sometime under different names, have been explored quite commonly in classrooms. The following table outlines the basic points of each concept.

Table 1

A Comparison of Monologically and Dialogically Organized Instruction according to Nystrand (1997: 19)

	Monologically organized instruction	Dialogically organized instruction
Paradigm	Recitation	Discussion
Communication model	Transmission of knowledge	Transformation of understandings
Epistemology	Objectivism: Knowledge is given	Dialogism: Knowledge emerges from the interaction of voices
Source of valued knowledge	Teacher, textbook authorities: Excludes students	Includes students' interpretations and personal experiences
Texture	Choppy	Coherent

Nystrand's (1997) summary of the monologically organized instruction and dialogically organized instruction relates back to our previous discussions on the nature of knowledge, language, schooling, and helps us situate the theory into practice. We clearly see that each model of instruction is affiliated with some general beliefs and traditions. In the next section, I will discuss how recitation is defined, and what functions it serves in the classroom. How social roles and power relations are created with this type of instruction will be another important aspect of discussion.

In recitation the default script is the IRE pattern (Gutierrez, 1994; Nystrand, 1997), and the teacher has the ultimate control in the classroom. S/he decides about the type of the questions s/he asks, who is going to answer the questions, and what is the answer of the question. As William (2005) asserts, quite frequently, the same conditions that characterize good classroom discussion are the same conditions that mark good questioning sequences. On a different level, Nystrand (1997) points out that teachers often strive for monologism when they prescript both the questions they ask and the

answers they accept, as well as order in which they ask the questions. Furthermore teachers control discussions by the topics they allow to be formulated and the off-topics they ignore (Eder, 1981). Other significant aspects of recitation are that teachers often change the topics abruptly as soon as they are satisfied with students' mastery of a particular topic, and that they follow up students' responses to evaluate them, not to elaborate on student ideas.

Compared with recitation, dialogic instruction involves fewer teacher questions and more conversational turns as teachers and students alike contribute their ideas to a discussion in which their understating evolve (Nystrand, 1997). Unlike recitation, dialogic instruction is less prescribed since the actual conduct, direction, and scope of discussion depend on what students as well as teachers contribute and especially on their interaction (Gutierrez, 1994). As a result, dialogic instruction is more coherent, more sustained and in-depth, and more thematic than recitations.

The teacher's role, in dialogic instruction, is to moderate, direct discussion, probe, foresee, and analyze the implications of student response. If we adopt Gutierrez's (1994) conceptions to instruction of foreign language literature, we can argue that a dialogic literature class, or in other words an effective literature instruction, operates in the premises (a) that the content of literature is not autonomous but has to be constructed by readers who engage in discussion about the text, and (b) that understandings are attenuated by struggles over meaning.

Bakhtin (1981) confirms that understanding extends only when responses are diverse, and reciprocal. In most classrooms, the established roles of the teacher and students hinder the reciprocity of the responses. Default interaction patterns (i.e., IRE) assume that only students respond to teachers, not many teachers are receptive about student contributions. Too often in recitation, the teacher moves on to the next question as soon as a student demonstrates what she knows, Nystrand (1991) argues that this aspect of monologic instruction consistently short-circuits the development of ideas.

From his observations of secondary school English classes, Nystrand (1997: 6) notes that only some of the classroom teachers "engage their students in more probing and substantive interaction", which Nystrand himself calls dialogically organized classrooms. In these classrooms the talk resembles a conversation or discussion rather

than recitation (Nystrand & Gamoran 1991), and the teacher “validates particular students’ ideas by incorporating their responses into subsequent questions” (Nystrand, 1997: 6), a process defined as teacher uptake by Collins (1982). An important feature of these interactions is the use of authentic questions which are asked to get information, not to see whether students know and do not know a particular content.

In dialogically oriented instruction the emphasis is given to the response of the students. The students’ responses are highly valued and validated. Students are active and significant contributors of the classroom discourse together with the teacher (Nystrand, 1997). Consequently, the discourse within these classrooms is less conventional and repeatable because it is jointly constructed and the floor is open to student contributions. The nature of the classroom talk demonstrates the collaboration in character, scope and direction. In these classes both teachers and students pick up on, elaborate, and question what (other) students say (Nystrand, 1991).

Thus far, how perceptions about the nature of knowledge and schooling could be affiliated with a theoretical school is discussed. Based on this review, it can be claimed that the objectivist school views knowledge as a fixed entity and favors a transmissional model of schooling. On the other hand, from a constructivist perspective knowledge is co-constructed and created by dialogical inquiry. These two perceptions have immediate effects of the distribution of social roles as well. Monologically organized instruction assumes that passive students will acquire the given knowledge; however, in dialogically organized classes both teacher and students are active participants of classroom activities and constructors of knowledge. In the next section I will focus on some other related constructs (i.e. nature of teacher questions, teacher and student uptake), as they relate to and portray the understanding of dialogism in the classrooms.

Types of Teacher Questions

Questioning is an integral part of teaching, and above all “school is a place where teachers ask questions” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988: 58). As I have mentioned previously, the type of questions the teacher asks reveals many features about the nature of the classroom discourse. We would not be mistaken, as William (2005) claims, if we proposed that the conditions that characterize good classroom discussion are the same conditions that denote good questioning sequences. In a similar vein, Nystrand (2004)

states that question-answer exchanges dominate classroom interactions in many classroom settings. Therefore the questions that are asked during a class period efficiently represent the entire discussion while doing classroom analysis, and consequently profiles of instruction can be built by focusing on the questions. Regarding questions as fundamental discursive tools McCormick and Donato (2000) argue that the teachers use to questions mainly in three ways: (1) to engage in instructional interactions, (2) to check comprehension and (3) build understanding of complex concepts. In their study, they focus on the mediational quality of questions, that is, their ability to assist learning in the classroom context.

In their study, Nystrand and Gamoran (1997) focus on the types of the questions that teachers ask, and how they function in the classroom context. They distinguish between two types of questions. The first group of questions, which they call test questions, is to review basic information which has generally only one correct answer. Mehan (1979) calls this type of questions as known information questions. These questions require students to recall what others think or say, rather than to articulate, examine, elaborate or revise what they themselves think. They serve three main functions; (1) assessing how much students know and do not know, as well as (2) checking completion of assigned work and (3) reinforcing key points (Nystrand, 1997). Students responses, to these questions, are often short and tentative, because they mostly try to figure out what teacher is thinking or what someone else thought, not what they themselves think (Nystrand, 1991).

On the other hand, authentic questions, which are generally observed quite less frequently in classrooms compared to test questions (Nystrand, 1997), are “questions for which the asker has not pre-specified an answer and include requests for information as well as open-ended questions with indeterminate answers” (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997: 38). These questions promote ownership because “they show that the teacher takes students’ ideas seriously” (Nystrand, Gamoran & Heck, 1993: 15). Dialogically, they also indicate the teacher’s interest in what students think and know, and not just whether they can report what someone else thinks or has said. Moreover, they allow indeterminate number of acceptable answers, and by this means open the floor to the students’ ideas and voices.

Questioning is viewed as one of the tools that is used to facilitate or impede dialogue in the classroom. Carlsen (1991), for example, claims that teachers control discourse topics and student participation by skillfully maneuvering the pace of questioning and the time they wait before asking subsequent questions, keeping discussions on target, for example through fast-paced questioning. Similarly, Nystrand (1997) argues that teachers use (test) questions to create a monologic environment in the classroom as they prescribe the questions they ask and the answers they accept, as well as order in which they ask the questions. He further argues that test questions give emphasis to the univocal function of the text (Lotman, 1988); therefore the main concern is reviewing basic information with students, who will need to remember it later in an exam or at another checkpoint. As I have stated before, the questioning patterns of teachers help us understand the dynamics of classroom discourse. Based on the findings of the previous classroom research, one can assume that it is difficult to create dialogical situations by using test questions frequently. Alternately, one can hold the belief that the abundance of authentic questions is an indicator of attention given to student voices and comments, and viewing learners as thinking devices (Lotman, 1988).

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have presented a Bakhtinian perspective on social constructivism. I have discussed the Bakhtinian concepts of monologism, dialogism and reviewed the previous studies that have incorporated these constructs into educational settings. I have also tried to demonstrate that Bakhtin's ideas on text and literature are applicable to the educational practices. I believe that examining the structure of social interaction in the classroom based on the Bakhtinian concepts discussed (i.e., dialogism, monologism, recitation, etc.) can help us see the classrooms from a different perspective and provide insights that are not available otherwise.

For example studies about the nature of classroom discourse by focusing on concepts such as internally persuasive discourse and authoritative discourse might help us see the classroom dialogue from a different angle. The characteristics of these two discourse types and common practices are well portrayed in Skidmore' (2000) work, and further studies on this topic can shed more light on the benefits of following one of these

practices and avoiding the other. Other topics that have been studied quite extensive (e.g., teacher questions) can be studied from a Bakhtinian perspective with a fresh outlook.

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