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Dialogue in teacher qualitative inquiry: does it affect teacher-researchers and their learners or not?

ABSTRACT. The aim of this study was to explore: 1) whether the student-teachers (as researchers) enter into a dialogue with their learners (the researched) in the course of their research; 2) what is the nature of this dialogue; 3) what role this dialogue plays in the teachers' and the learners' lives. In this study I draw on teachers' narratives which were stimulated by questions which emerged after having read the research chapters of MA theses written in the field of EFL learning and teaching.

KEYWORDS: dialogue, qualitative inquiry, teacher research.

1. INTRODUCTION

The theoretical considerations and the study presented in this article are a continuation of an earlier study on dialogue in qualitative research in which foreign language teachers are involved either as researchers or co-participants or both. The first part of the research project (reported in Wiśniewska 2009) focused on EFL teachers as the subjects of qualitative research in which dialogue between the researcher and the students being researched was one of the most crucial aspects of the conducted studies. An analysis of the research examples quoted made it possible to assert that teacher participation in research based on dialogue can create opportunities for teachers to develop professionally and personally. The teachers studied fully and actively participated in research projects, which involved, first of all, their consent to take part in the research, interviews, written exchange of ideas, analysis of the results, discussion of the results and considering their

possible practical application. Although, ideally, the researcher and the researched should be relatively equal in a qualitative study (Kubinowski 2010), such a dialogic relationship in reality is difficult to achieve due to the imbalance of power – it is the researcher who has power over the researched and only by the researcher adopting a tactful approach can a space be opened for teacher development, especially since this relationship can be emotionally loaded, depending on the problem studied. This imbalance is still more visible when it is the teacher who is the researcher and the subjects of the study are her/his learners. In such a situation, building dialogic relationships is more difficult since the teacher is perceived by the learners as someone who has power over them, who does not belong to their social, and most often, to their age group. Therefore conducting research in the classroom, especially by novice teacher researchers, can appear very challenging. There are many questions a teacher researcher may want to answer: Should I inform my learners about the research project?, How much should I get involved in conversations with the learners?, How am I to use the information from the learners?, Should I present the results to my learners? The teacher may also ask at the end of the study: Am I the same person now? Are my learners the same?

In this article I will attempt to deal with these questions, first situating the concept of dialogue within qualitative research, and subsequently looking at it from the perspective of novice teacher-researchers, who reported on their relationships with learners in the course of research projects conducted for the accomplishment of their MA degrees.

2. THE CONCEPT OF DIALOGUE IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The concept of dialogue is rooted in two traditions. The first is religious in character – it makes references to the Bible, Judaism and Christianity, and the other one is a philosophical orientation stemming from the dialogues of Plato and Socrates (Szulakiewicz 2004). Since then, numerous interpretations of the concept of dialogue emerged, gaining momentum in the 20th century in the philosophy of dialogue owing to the works of such philosophers as Ferdinand Ebner and Gabriel Marcel, and later in the 1970s – Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Franz Rosenzweig, and in Poland Józef Tischner (Kłoczowski 2005).

The origins of the word dialogue are Greek, *diálogos* – conversation, and *dialégesthai* – to talk, to discuss (Kopaliński 1983), but from the philosophical perspective the meaning of dialogue is broader and deeper than a mere verbal exchange of ideas. Dialogue involves accepting the subjectivity of all

participants engaged in a dialogue, accepting the equal rights and opportunities of all participants to express their thoughts and ideas, to put forward arguments, to aspire to common goals (Baniak 2005).

Martin Buber, in his seminal book *Ich und Du* (1923), translated later into English as *I and Thou* (1937), differentiates between relations I-It and I-Thou. The first type involves relations with everything that is not a person, in the second type *I* relates to *Thou* which is not an object but a subject, a person, a partner (Buber 1937). Hence, the nature of interpersonal relations depends on the way we treat other people. The relations with other people will be devoid of the desire to dominate or exert power over them only when it is clearly ethically marked (Kłoczowski 2005). It is important to perceive others as different from us in their unique ways, typical only of them, and to accept these people. Only such an attitude guarantees that we may address these people seriously (Buber 1937). Such an attitude obviously does not exclude the possibility of differing in our opinions, views, beliefs, but it assumes that any attempts to oppose others' views, to fight each other, or to show those differences in opinions will only be taken up in a condition of partnership. It is the decision of all partners in communication whether to take up a conversation or not. Such an approach to others has consequences which may be significant also in a research situation. First of all, it is the willingness to accept partners, their otherness, their individuality; secondly, this acceptance does not assume conformity of the views of both partners, but rather results in the ability to enter into a competent discussion. Of course, if such an attitude is not expressed by both partners then there are no grounds for setting up a discussion. A dialogue then denotes an interpersonal relationship which involves the exchange of opinions and views, but also a common search for consensus, openness, engagement, equality of persons, matter-of-factness and the subjectivity of persons. The attitude of openness involves the ability to accept truth, no matter where it comes from. In this search for truth we are ready to resign from our views when there are arguments for this. In Gadamer's (1980) words, openness is indispensable; the ability to engage in a conversation occurs only when partners are sufficiently open towards each other. Gadamer believes that conversation with another person enables us to deepen our individuality, conversation becomes a conversation because we have met in another person something that had not occured in our experience before.

Dialogue occurs only when the partners have something to say, are at the same time able to listen to each other and obey the rules during the conversation. Another important feature of a dialogue is its subsidiary role, it should support an imperative aim. A huge role in a dialogic situation is played by the conversation whose meaning belongs not to each individual

separately, but is rooted in their personified collaboration (Baniak 2005). A real conversation takes place when it involves attitudes characterictic for dialogue, such as the acceptance of a partner, acceptance of otherness, openness, but not chattering, not acting with the idea of influencing others (Buber 1937). The authenticity of conversation vanishes when a person is, or feels, that she/he is excluded from a conversation. A true conversation cannot be planned.

A dialogue, understood as conversation, discussion, communication, may serve cognitive purposes (Stachewicz 2003, Piechowiak 2005). In this case it allows us to eliminate errors in cognition, broadening our perspectives, achieving a more adequate understanding of reality. The distinctness in perceptions of reality by the participants in a discussion makes room for the creative treatment of one's own views, encourages us to look for new solutions or arguments, enables better understanding and more effective solutions to problems. Dialogue, or academic discussion, has traits that result from the equal participation of partners, that means: clear problem stating, using language understandable to all, justification of opinions, preparation for a discussion, readiness to accept the views of others, awareness of one's cognitive imperfection (Stachewicz 2003).

Dialogue first was realized in oral form, only later did dialogues begin to appear in written form, especially in religious and philosophical writings (Czeżowski 1969). Also, in research, dialogue can take these two forms, and the choice of either of them determines the specificity of interaction. Oral dialogue passes through two channels, through speech and through the way of speaking which, either intentionally or not, includes additional information about the speaker. The partners interact in a direct spontaneous relation in which listening and seeing are involved, which makes interaction easier. The participants of such a conversation have some expectations towards each other and these expectations can be communicated to the partner. Such direct contact creates the best conditions for conversation (Sawicki 1996). The written word is devoid of the presence of direct and common context, the receiver gets the message with a delay and there are no opportunities for immediate reaction, which sometimes results in the misinterpretation of the sender's message. Dialogue in a written form, which is clearly far less spontaneous, gives time for thought and presentation of arguments in extenso. In research, both forms of dialogue are employed, written and oral. It may be a conversation/discussion of the researcher with the people researched, it may be written communication between partners, a kind of a discussion or a technique of data collection.

A qualitative orientation to the research involves an assumption about the subjective relationship between the researcher and the people re-

searched. In fact, the participants in the research and their mutual relationship will influence the course of that research since they construe together the reality under investigation. The course of the research and its results are determined to a large extent by the biographies, identities, values of the researcher and those researched (Kubinowski 2010). They both have rights to their own views, but at the same time they stay open to change. Depending on the type of research, either the researcher or the researched may adopt the point of view of the other participants, their perceptions of reality, evaluations of the results of the research. The mutual efforts of the researcher and the researched create the optimal conditions to obtain better data and enable better interpretations than those of a lone researcher (Fine 1994). These mutual efforts are expected to enrich the participants. They deepen the researchers' self-knowledge (Urbaniak-Zając, Piekarski 2003), they introduce something new and valuable in the life of the researched, may induce changes in their way of thinking, may appeal to their emotions, awaken desires, encourage to act, motivate to engage authentically in self-development (Ostrowska 2000). Consequently, a qualitative approach to research within the field of EFL teaching and learning may bear significant changes in the lives of teachers and learners.

In an earlier piece of research I focused on the dialogic relationship between the teacher and an outside researcher to show how this relationship influenced the professional and personal development of a teacher (Wiśniewska 2009). In this study I look at a different pattern in the dialogic research relationship in which the teacher adopts the role of a researcher, while her/his learners assume the role of those researched, and analyse how those two worlds intermingle in the course of the research.

3. THE STUDY

3.1. The aim of the study

It is assumed that the relationship between the participants in a qualitative inquiry exerts substantial influence on their lives, and their personal and/or professional development. However, very often the reports on qualitative research do not reflect this assumption. For example, the writing up of qualitative research conducted by EFL teachers within their MA studies resembles rather reports on a quantitative inquiry and is devoid of any reflection on the potential dialogue between the participants. Hence, the aim of this study was to explore: 1) whether the student-teachers (as researchers) enter into a dialogue with their learners (the people researched) in the course

of their research; 2) what is the nature of this dialogue; 3) what role this dialogue plays in the teachers' and the learners' lives. In order to answer these questions I focused on the factors that may provide information about the dialogic nature of research, namely the style of cooperation, co-participation, ways of stimulating those researched to participate actively and creatively in the research process, the interpersonal relationships between the researchers and those researched, any new values gained in the process of research by the researchers and those researched, encouraging others to participate in the research (Kubinowski 2010).

3.2. Participants

Six student teachers participated in the study. All of them had just completed writing up their MA dissertations in the field of learning and teaching English as a foreign language based on research projects conducted in schools where they regularly work as EFL teachers. The topics of their research (R) were as follows:

R1: The European Language Portfolio as a means of enhancing student autonomy;

R2: Adapting EFL course book materials according to teenage students' needs and interests;

R3: Teaching the skills for the gimnazjum examination in English by means of technology;

R4: Developing English language skills by means of the Internet in junior high school;

R5: Supporting young learners labelled ADHD in learning EFL;

R6: How to support dyslexic learners of English as a foreign language?

The successful completion of these projects required the cooperation of teachers and their learners. Without the learners' consent and engagement none of these studies would have been feasible. Teacher-researchers worked either with individual pupils (R5 and R6) or with groups of learners (R1–R4). The learner in R5 attended primary school, in R6 – secondary school, and the remaining subjects of the study were junior high school students.

3.3. Method

In writing up their research, the teachers tended to avoid comments on their cooperation and relationship with their pupils – the subjects of the study, hence no conclusions about the potential dialogic nature of these

research projects could be drawn on the basis of these MA thesis texts. Therefore, in order to gain some knowledge about the use of dialogue in student-teacher research, twenty questions were prepared based on the reading of their MA dissertations which were used as prompts for the narrative stories of the research relationships as well as a tool for reflection on the completed projects. The narratives were chosen as a data collection method because they could provide a basis for looking at the problem from the participants' point of view, when they reconstructed the events and their meanings, looking at their research experience from retrospect. Oral narratives would probably have yielded more results, but due to the distances involved and the teachers' complaints about lack of time, it was more convenient to request written narrations. The stories received varied in length, from one to seven pages. The reading of the stories focused on those factors which were expected to provide some insight into the nature of the dialogue between the teacher-researchers and their pupils.

3.4. Results

3.4.1. The style of teacher-researcher cooperation with learners

Four of the teachers, before they started their research, informed their learners about the research and asked for consent. This stage of the research depended on the age of the learners and their former relations with the teacher, and, as one may expect, on the researcher's personality. For example, in the case of R4 the learners were first aquainted with the idea of a self-access centre and introduced to this new way of learning English, and only then were they informed about the research. R5 project involved lessons with a very young learner, but still the teacher first asked the mother of the girl for consent to describe the lessons with her daughter in an MA dissertation, and then told the girl about this idea. This fact increased the interest of the little girl in the English classes since she was curious what would happen in the lessons.

In the remaining projects the learners were first informed about the research and then asked for consent, sometimes in written form. The teachers appeared to have been sensitive to the learners' reactions to the idea of the research. They wrote about the learners' enthusiasm and curiosity. What is evident from the narratives is that it was very important for the teachers that their learners benefit from the research: *they could benefit from research most and use the attained skills during the exam, / the use of 'technological tools' may appear to be a beneficial and attractive form of learning, which consequently may*

improve exam results (R3); *I decided to look for ways which might interest the little girl* (R5); *I hoped that the research would help the girl get interested in English, and in learning in general. My fears concerned possible failure, that I would not be able to awaken her interest* (R5); *the research was to influence the learners positively* (R1).

In the course of the research some of the teacher-researchers discussed the project with their learners. In the case of R4 the introductory discussion had a huge impact on the research, the researcher gained some confidence about how to prepare the learners for the research, how to encourage them to engage actively, which resulted in the learners' eager involvement in all the activities. The teacher was also encouraging and motivating the learners to further work. Similarly, in R2 the teacher was ready to answer the learners' questions, provided the necessary explanations and was encouraging them to make autonomous decisions. Occassionally teachers informed the learners about the results of particular stages of the research or asked for feedback concerning classroom activities (R3).

The conduct of the research and relationship with learners was not devoid of feelings. The teachers in their narratives report these feelings on different occassions. For example: *all these factors imbued me with anxiety ..., I was curious (R3); I was happy when she was interested... (R1).* But they also took into consideration the learners' feelings: *I wanted her to feel relaxed, not as a guinea pig. I tried to make her feel that I do care about her interests... (R1).* The teachers observed the learners and responded to their feelings : *they felt depressed... I tried to turn it into positive experience and encourage them to work with the 'experimental' material (R3); I took into consideration their feelings... (R1); I knew when she was not satisfied... in this case I tried not to engage in certain type of activities (R5); I tried to identify with them (R4).*

3.4.2. Learners' involvement in research

As is visible in the teachers' stories, these research projects created opportunities for learners to become actively involved in the learning process. If they were not able or reluctant to learn on their own, the teachers encouraged them to work more actively, creatively and responsibly. The learners might ask questions or need more thorough explanations (R1, R4). They sometimes made suggestions considering the classes or took up decisions together with the teacher (R1). Quite often the learners wanted to talk with the teacher about the tasks, learning English, problems and difficulties. Very often they themselves initiated the discussions (R1). Such discussions and learner suggestions sometimes influenced and verified the lesson plans and the teacher's choice of materials, and helped better understand their needs

and interests (R2). The learners also informed the teacher about their feelings about the classes (R2). They willingly talked about the research project which helped the teacher prepare the further stages of research. In R3 the discussions with the learners did not influence the research process much but still the teacher tried to consider their points of view. Even the youngest participant asked questions or wanted the teacher to repeat certain activities. However, it is clear that learner involvement throughout the research first of all concerned what happened in the classroom, language learning activities and not the actual process of research.

3.4.3. Encouragement

The initial impulse to get the active engagement of the learners in the research came at the introductory stage when the teachers tried to show the potential benefits of taking part in the project for their learning achievement. For example, one of the teachers made it clear that he cares very much whether the learners are successful at their final exam or not and tried to convince them that if they worked hard it would bear fruit in the future (R3). The teachers were motivating and encouraging, persuading pupils to overcome their weaknesses and to make independent decissions.

3.4.4. Relationship between the researchers
and the pupils researched

The relationship between the researcher and the pupils researched was of great concern for the teachers. As one of the teachers wrote: *Undoubtedly the relationship with the learner was a strong point of the research (R6).* Sometimes this mutual engagement in the research turned into friendship. The learners willingly talked not only about the lessons and the research but also about their interests, problems and other matters. The teachers, on the other hand, became very sensitive to the learners' feelings and could appreciate their contribution to the research project, and consequently the successful completion of their MA dissertations. As the author of R6 wrote: *As the study had been completed I was immensely grateful to the learner for the time we shared – his patience, conscientiousness, and engagement.* The teachers reported that the relations with the learners in the research were very good or even got better with time (R1, R4). As the author of R1 was convinced , the research influenced teacher-learner relations very positively, building mutual trust and removing barriers. The learners were not anxious, on the contrary, they often

smiled and joked. The teacher of the little girl emphasized that the girl was cooperative and not embarrassed in front of the teacher. She also talked about the events she experienced because the teacher always listened patiently and aswered her questions. It all resulted in her quite good behaviour, in spite of her ADHD diagnosis.

3.4.5. Others in research

The role of other people in the research process was not very visible in the narratives. Mostly, these were parents or carers of those learners who suffered from such impairments as ADHD or dyslexia and therefore required special care. In these two cases the teachers cooperated with parents or carers from the very beginning to the very end of the research, asking for consent and informing about the results. Not all the teachers had an opportunity to inform parents about the research and its results, especially as some of them were not interested in their children's involvement in the project.

3.4.6. Benefits of research dialogue for learners

The teachers observed that the learners worked more readily than usual during classes. The learners taking part in R4 started to ask questions, talk about their achievements, ask for help, share learning materials which they found on their own. In the final interview the learners were more open than at the beginning of the research, willingly expressed their views and opinions, talked about problems and could compare the initial stages of their work on the Internet with the final stages. Other learners also became more interested in learning English, were more actively and creatively involved in the classes and their grades improved. It was important for some learners to see that only regular learning can bring satisfactory results. For many learners, participation in the research revealed various new, less conventional ways of learning English and encouraged them to learn more.

3.4.7. Benefits of research dialogue for teachers

The teachers reported that the dialogue was a good way to get to know the learners better, including their needs and interests, and their preferred ways of learning English. They also developed the willingness to help the learners further in learning English. Some would also like to continue their

research in the future. The teacher who worked with a dyslexic learner observed that his awareness of the problems involved in teaching dyslexic learners had increased substantially. Another teacher felt that, owing to the research process, she became a better teacher, more aware of the learners' needs, which she started to consider while lesson planning and creatively adapting coursebooks. The success of the innovations introduced in the classroom contributed to the teacher's greater self-esteem, increased classroom experience and knowledge.

On the whole, the teachers developed very positive attitudes and displayed readiness to make more thoughtful choices concerning learning materials, to encourage learners with their own attitudes towards learning English, creativity and positive behaviour. Some teachers became aware of the usefulness of teacher research in the classroom and believed that in the future they might undertake at least small scale projects to get to know their learners better. They were also very pleased that the research was successful in making learners satisfied with the classes and that the learners appreciated this fact. The teachers whose research involved learners with impairment became still more interested in these problems and in teaching impaired learners.

4. FINAL REMARKS

The narrative study on the role of research based on dialogue between a teacher as researcher and learners as co-participants in the research confirms the assumption that dialogue bears great potential for the conduct of research and results in building relationships between people, empathic thinking about others, increasing the learners' active and creative engagement in learning, the teachers' personal and professional development and building the knowledge base about teaching and learning foreign languages. However, it should also be taken into consideration that the conduct and results of qualitative studies are influenced by human nature, subjectivity, weaknesses, emotions and biases, limitations of perception and understanding (Kubinowski 2010) and therefore teachers need very careful training and instruction about how to conduct qualitative inquiry as well as an awareness of the potential of dialogue and how to enter into a research dialogue with their learners.

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