

## **How Dialogic is the Online Space? A Focus on English Speaking Skills**

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### **Abstract**

*In the spring of 2020, English language teachers around the world were forced to rapidly start teaching in a completely online space, often with relatively little experience of online teaching, and with few opportunities for preparation. Recognising the centrality of speaking for learning, this study investigated affordances of teaching speaking online, a relatively unexplored area. Fifty-two language teachers in higher education contexts internationally completed a survey. Drawing on a framework of dialogic teaching, the findings show that teaching speaking online offers some unexpected affordances relating to the dialogic teaching principle of supportive teaching. In addition, teachers reported being able to use the online space for purposeful planning of online lessons. However, the online space is less conducive to enabling reciprocal, deliberative, and cumulative classroom talk, key features of higher education discourses. We end the paper with practical recommendations for how to ensure that dialogic teaching dimensions are not lost in an online space.*

**Keywords:** *Dialogic teaching; English speaking skills Online teaching; Oracy skills*

In Spring 2020 many teachers worldwide were required to move from teaching English face to face to teaching in an online environment. Whilst online teaching was not new, the way in which teachers and students had to adapt in a short space of time was unprecedented and resulted in technological and pedagogical challenges (see for example Pu, 2020 for a personal reflection on these challenges)

This paper is informed by two key concepts. As teaching spoken English requires online spaces that are conducive to promoting communication and interaction the first is a dialogic teaching approach (Alexander, 2020). We were interested in how teaching speaking skills online works in a higher education context which values affective dimensions of speaking as well as the more cognitive dimensions which support conceptual understanding (Mah, 2016).

Secondly, this paper is informed by notions of oracy – oracy as competence and oracy for learning (MacLure, 1988). The former refers to the explicit teaching of speaking skills, and the latter as speaking as a vehicle for learning. The concept of oracy is relevant to any linguistic context due to its focus on skills required for effective communication. The two views presented here highlight further the central role of speaking in developing language skills and content knowledge and demonstrate the nuances in teaching speaking.

Drawing on oracy and dialogic teaching, this paper demonstrates how these concepts are relevant to the ELT context, and in particular, to teaching speaking online. We explore teachers’ perspectives and practices of teaching speaking online and make recommendations for how teachers can make their online spaces more dialogic. We argue that an awareness of dialogic teaching principles can support teacher development of online teaching practice.

## Literature Review

### Dialogic Teaching

Dialogic teaching is an approach which positions classroom talk as a vehicle for learning and encourages students to ask questions, challenge peers, negotiate ideas and work together to construct knowledge. Alexander’s (2020) framework of dialogic teaching values both the classroom dynamics (the affective) and the cognitive dimensions of learning and teaching. Table 1 below outlines these dimensions with examples.

**Table 1. Dimensions of Dialogic Teaching (Alexander, 2020, p. 131).**

Dimension	Description	Example activities
Collective	Participants address learning tasks together.	Whole-class text analysis
Reciprocal	Participants listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints.	Agreement of ground rules for discussion
Supportive	Students express their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over ‘wrong’ answers, and they help each other to reach common understandings.	Pair work which culminates in whole class plenaries
Deliberative	Participants discuss and seek to resolve different points of view, they reason and support their positions	Students take on roles in a discussion e.g. initiator, questioner, summariser.
Cumulative	Participants build on answers and other oral contributions and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and understanding.	Teacher encourages students to agree/disagree with each other in whole class discussion.
Purposeful	Classroom talk, though open and dialogic, is also planned and structured with specific learning objectives.	Teacher shares the learning outcomes with students.

From the features above we can see that the first three (*collective*, *reciprocal* and *supportive*) all pertain to the affective aspects of learning in terms of classroom atmosphere and relationships. Arguably these are fundamental to effective learning and as such need to be in place before focusing

on the cognitive aspects of the learning environment. The second three features (*deliberative*, *cumulative* and *purposeful*) relate to intellectual and educational goals of the learning. Higher education purports to supporting and developing such cognitive skills with the expectation that students will engage in a communicative and academically productive manner.

Whilst dialogic teaching and oracy are established fields of research and practice in the school context, there is little awareness of dialogic teaching in the higher education context, and even less in a second language learning context. One exception is Chow et al., (2021) who found that students developed greater knowledge of vocabulary and greater accuracy of pronunciation following a dialogic teaching intervention. Whilst Chow et al.'s (2021) study focused on primary school children, their conclusions that dialogic teaching utilising interactive and creative strategies can enhance language development, including phonological awareness, is highly applicable to the HE context.

### **Teaching English Speaking Online**

Teaching English online is defined by Hockly (2015) as “language learning that takes place fully online via the internet, with no face-to-face component, within the context of both formal language courses and more informal learning scenarios” (p. 308). Mindful that studies such as Means et al. (2009) concluded their meta-analysis with the finding that online learning and blended learning conditions result in better performance than face-to-face, we were interested in exploring to what extent this was reflected in the experiences of teachers forced into online teaching overnight. We were particularly interested in exploring speaking online as, compared to other aspects of English language teaching, this has been largely neglected despite its importance for learning a second language (Heins et al., 2007) and for negotiation of meaning in an English as a lingua franca environment.

Research in the area of teaching speaking skills online with technology-based tools has offered a mixed picture. For example, Timpe-Laughlin et al., (2020) examined the use of conversation-based spoken dialogue systems and concluded that these tools were most beneficial as supplementary materials rather than an alternative to face to face teaching, and Tecedor and Campos-Dintrans (2019) found that video conferencing was an effective means of developing speaking skills in the absence of face-to-face teaching. Linardopoulos (2010) concluded that an online course in teaching public speaking skills was equally effective as a face-to-face version but only for students who were familiar with an online learning environment. Bashori et al., (2020) explored the role of online spaces to increase confidence in speaking and found that although students reported that the use of web-based tools decreased their anxiety in speaking, this was not confirmed by the statistical results. With respect to online teaching, Simpson (2010) found that teachers can scaffold students' dialogic interaction in the chat through probing questions which require students to evaluate and provide reasoning.

Collectively, these studies have identified several issues in supporting students' spoken English in an online environment with concerns relating to both the affective and the cognitive dimensions of teaching. So far, little attention has been paid to the study of speaking skills in a higher education context which values both oracy for learning and oracy as competence. Similarly, little is known about the opportunities for dialogic interaction in the online space with respect to teaching speaking. The research questions were:

- To what extent does the online space reflect the features of a dialogic classroom?
- How can we make online speaking classes more dialogic?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Overall, 150 teachers responded to the survey over a two-month period in late summer and early autumn of 2020 in which it was live. As teacher and student characteristics as well as the purpose of teaching differ widely between contexts, for this paper we focus only on the teachers who indicated that their main teaching context was higher education (n=52). Of these 52 teachers, the majority taught General English and / or English for academic purposes (EAP). 80% of teachers stated that all or almost all of their teaching was online, and the most common platforms used for online teaching were Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype and Google Meet.

### **Methods**

An online survey consisting of a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions was designed. The survey was then hosted on an online survey site and promoted to teachers of English, with the help of the British Council and via social media. Teachers teaching across all settings (school, university, adult education etc.) and contexts (EAP, general English etc.) were invited to take part. Quantitative questions focused on teachers' perceptions of the ease or difficulty of teaching speaking with respect to the various dimensions of oracy (Mercer, Warwick & Ahmed, 2017) and on teachers' general perceptions of teaching speaking online.

### **Ethics**

Before distributing the survey, the authors engaged in their institution's internal online review process. This indicated that no further ethical review was required as no personal data were asked for in the survey.

### **Analysis**

For the purpose of this paper, we present the results of the qualitative analysis of the follow-up questions relating to two questions on teachers' general perspectives on teaching speaking online (see Figure 1).

It is perhaps worth noting that, in line with the questions asked in the survey, teachers commented primarily on the opportunities and limitations of the online classroom and not on the interactional nature of their classes. We believe that such a reflection would have required a more data-led approach using transcripts from online classroom conversations (Walsh & Mann, 2015).

Nevertheless, our analysis revealed that the dialogic nature of the online speaking classroom is worthy of further exploration. Our analysis started with a bottom-up thematic analysis of the qualitative answers, resulting in a number of themes relating to the affordances of the online space, such as the use of technological tools, student participation and teacher development opportunities. Upon further discussion on these themes, the researchers noted that many of these themes related to Alexander's (2020) dimensions of dialogic teaching. Consequently, we conducted a follow-on content analysis using the features of dialogic teaching (see Table 1) as codes.

5. Is online teaching a positive opportunity for teaching speaking, or a limitation / constraint?

- opportunity (5)
- somewhat of an opportunity (4)
- neither an opportunity nor a limitation / constraint (3)
- somewhat of a limitation / constraint (2)
- limitation / constraint (1)

a. Please explain your answer, using specific examples where relevant.

6. To what extent does online teaching impact on students' development of speaking skills?

- big negative impact (5)
- some negative impact (4)
- hardly any impact (3)
- some positive impact (2)
- big positive impact (1)

a. Please explain your answer, using specific examples where relevant.

**Figure 1. Questions on teachers' perceptions of teaching speaking.**

## Findings

The data were quantified according to the dialogic teaching codes below and it is immediately clear that some of these features are notable through their presence in the data, and some through their absence.

Specifically, there was an almost complete lack of data pertaining to the dialogic teaching dimensions *deliberative* (Participants discuss and seek to resolve different points of view, they reason and support their positions) and *cumulative* (Participants build on answers and other oral contributions and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and understanding). One reason for this may be the proficiency level of the students since beginners may find such rhetorical moves challenging and they may lack the linguistic resources. In addition, the *reciprocal* dimension (participants listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints) also has low representation.

**Table 2. Number of mentions of features of dialogic teaching (n= 52).**

Collective	8
Reciprocal	2
Supportive	6
Deliberative	1
Cumulative	1
Purposeful	10

It is notable that two out of three of the dimensions with low representation (*deliberative* and *cumulative*), relate to intellectual and educational goals of the learning, which is perhaps not surprising in a context where teachers are focusing on the skills of speaking (oracy as competence) rather than speaking as a vehicle for learning (oracy for learning).

In contrast, the dimensions of *collective* (Participants address learning tasks together), *purposeful* (Classroom talk is planned and structured with specific learning objectives and *supportive* (Students express their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers, and they help each other to reach common understandings) are well represented, suggesting that an online environment supports affective aspects of learning. We discuss these findings in more depth below.

### **Collective**

Students working together is an aim of the dialogic classroom but not possible or appropriate at all stages of a lesson. Interestingly, the online space seemed to encourage students to interact and collaborate.

The teacher below suggests that the online space provides students with an opportunity for community building across spaces:

1. *Online interaction provides many opportunities for students from different places to get in contact with each other.*

In addition, using various online tools available in the online space also allows learners to create community through a combination of written and spoken modes:

2. *Use share screen to do online exercises together. Use chat window to write comments during the class.*

And finally, the online space encourages participants to build community by enhancing spoken communication modes through gestures and body language:

3. *They must find ways to express their ideas orally because they are not face to face where they can use lots of gestures or body language to help them get their messages across.*

In summary, the online space acts as an amplifier for the ability to address learning tasks together by utilising all the opportunities of online tools and by drawing on a wide range of communicative modes. In addition, they also help to widen the learner community beyond the immediate geographical context.

### **Reciprocal**

Despite being an important part in effective communication, listening is often ignored in teaching speaking. Both comments relating to the reciprocal dimension suggest that the online space enhances opportunities for immersion not only in speaking, but also in listening.

4. *More concentrated, listen more carefully, very useful for the real life and work videoconferencing.*
5. *It is easier to promote oral expression and active listening.*

These comments suggesting that the online space requires more concentrated listening are best seen in the context of other comments related to poor reception and internet strength, as well as the need for using non-linguistic means (body language, facial expressions). Interestingly, the teacher in (4) connects the skill of active listening, and reciprocity to learning for professional contexts beyond the immediate language learning context alone.

## Supportive

A supportive environment in which there is no fear of embarrassment, or of ‘wrong’ answers, is fundamental to a dialogic classroom. Confidence to participate and speak rests upon the classroom dynamics and relationships. We found the *supportive* dimension well supported by the data with six mentions. Many of them describe the online space as a ‘safer’ space than the physical classroom:

6. *timid/shy students have improved their performance possibly because they feel safer at home than in the actual in-presence live classroom environment. In some instances, their participation and contribution to classes has greatly improved.*

This comment highlights the relationship between the affective (safer) and the cognitive (performance) that is crucial in establishing a dialogic teaching environment online. Moreover, it also highlights the central role such a safe space can play in enhancing confidence.

This feeling of safety was also reflected not only in students’ participation but also their willingness to share ideas, crucial in an HE context:

7. *Many students seem to find it easier to express opinions online.*

The above comment suggests that the online space has great potential in enhancing the deliberative dimension of classroom talk, encompassing discussion, debate, giving opinions and supporting claims. However, as shown below, the deliberative dimension did not feature very prominently in our data, suggesting that feelings of safety and confidence in speaking centre primarily on individual self-expression rather than collaboration with others.

## Deliberative

As suggested above, there was a paucity of data which reflected the deliberative dimension. Only one teacher commented on how the online space supported them in engaging in deliberative talk.

8. *It helps them to express their feelings, ideas and opinion.*

We suggest that the ability to express feelings, ideas and opinions is underpinned by the perception of being in a safe space and the increase in confidence reported on in the supportive dimension above. The lack of references to the deliberative function in our data may be due to the specific teaching objectives of the teachers participating in this project or other factors which warrant further exploration.

## Cumulative

Given the lack of references to the deliberative dimension, it is perhaps not surprising that the cumulative dimension is also only touched upon very fleetingly in our responses.

9. *Students rely on the teacher to start a conversation. Less student-student interactions. It can be intimidating to shy/unconfident students.*

This comment suggests that, in the online space, class interaction may be reliant on the teacher as a central hinge-point, mirroring our findings relating to the deliberative dimension. However, this teacher-centred description of teaching in an online space is somewhat at odds with collaborative perspectives on speaking.

## Purposeful

The need for teachers to start teaching online quickly had unexpected consequences in terms of professional development. Teachers talked about having to extend repertoires and learn new ways of teaching. Developing pedagogy, we argue is part of planning and designing learning in a way

which most encourages dialogue and participation. The dimension of *purposeful* can also be seen in how teachers plan their teaching and are mindful of providing opportunities for students to practice spoken English, as well as fulfil educational goals. For example, the affordances of teaching online provided teachers with the opportunity to integrate new material.

10. *I have the opportunity to incorporate different web material that I don't have access to in face-to-face classes.*

In addition, some answers show that focused error correction suggested a sense of purpose and teacher scaffolding.

11. *Depending on the age of the student and their course of study and/or needs, I can correct immediately, work on issues specific to them.*

These responses reveal that the online environment provides a space which affords a more personal focus, perhaps because, when providing feedback and correcting errors, the lack of physical immediacy somewhat removes the potential for face threat. Again though, these opportunities for 'personalisation' are somewhat at odds with the dimensions which describe group thinking or action (deliberative, cumulative).

## Discussion

### To what extent does the online space reflect the features of a dialogic classroom?

The online space seems to provide a sense of community (*collective*) and a safer environment (*supportive*) for teaching speaking, as well as an opportunity for focused planning and scaffolding (*purposeful*). Our data, which did not include a question about the level of students taught, do not allow us to decide conclusively whether this is at the cost of intellectual debate (*deliberative*) and an opportunity to build on ideas (*cumulative*). The latter are important skills in HE contexts where critical thinking and disciplinary understanding are often the learning outcomes and highly valued but may be more likely to emerge at higher levels of proficiency.

In summary, while the online space can provide an opportunity for shyer students to participate more, and for all students to engage in more concentrated listening, some students are reluctant to turn on their camera. This lack of visual cues (body language, facial expression) creates challenges in building on each other's answers and co-constructing understanding through speaking. Consequently, it is not surprising that the interaction has been described as centring around the teacher as controller. The potential of the online space for providing a safe, supportive environment to support argumentation and critical thinking can therefore not be fully exploited.

### How can we make online speaking classes more dialogic?

A central question, going forward into a new era of teaching in which a completely online space may well be the norm rather than the exception, we need to ask how online classes focusing on developing speaking skills can be made more dialogic. Below we present some practical suggestions emerging from our data.

- Start the sequence of teaching by establishing the *supportive / reciprocal / collective* features first, including, for example, how to compensate for the lack of visual cues, how to manipulate the technology for optimal engagement, e.g. how to use chat etc.
- Utilise the dialogic framework as a way to plan speaking in an online environment, in particular how to use the technological affordances of the space to encourage more *deliberative and cumulative* talk (e.g. pair work / group work in break out rooms, recordings etc.)



- Allow for speaking to be supported by written modes, e.g. in chat and Q&A (if available) to encourage more interaction and participation. This can incorporate the features of dialogic teaching (Simpson, 2010).
- Take conscious steps to ensure that the teacher is not the central hinge-point of all interaction and is dominating the space (Heins et al, 2007). Use the affordances of the technology to alter roles, e.g. by giving teacher privileges to students who take turns ‘teaching’ elements of the lesson.
- Harness the potential of the online space to develop individual confidence and willingness to participate by providing opportunities for individual work (e. g. presentation of one central idea per student), upon which *deliberative* and *cumulative* work is then built in further structured tasks which also draw on the written mode within the online platform e.g., chats.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to provide a discussion on the teaching of speaking skills and the role of speaking skills in teaching English with respect to dialogic features of the online environment. Whilst these findings are preliminary, we believe that they point to a need to explore further the quality of the interaction in an online space.

Further research could usefully explore a number of different themes which have emerged from this study. One is to examine how dialogic the online discourse is by focusing on the type of classroom talk, the questions, the student responses, and the cumulative building of answers through use of all modes of the online space. Research instruments and approaches centring on authentic data from the online space, combined with teacher reflections on this space would provide a significant contribution to our understanding of online discourse (Simpson, 2010). A second area would be to examine the connections between students’ and teachers’ familiarity with technology and the opportunities for dialogic interaction. Finally, future studies may link the dimensions of dialogic teaching in an online space to different levels of language proficiency.

In addition, although not the focus of this paper, there are also implications for teacher training which can be derived from this exploration. Raising awareness of the theoretical framework behind a dialogic approach might allow teachers to arrive at both evidence (data)-led and theory-led insights into their practice and support reflections on how to adapt their practice to the online environment.

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