Dialogic Understanding

Steve Mann

Aston University

After describing how a group of teachers used cooperative development (CD) to further their thinking, this paper describes three kinds of dialogic understanding. Taken together, the article makes the point that what can be achieved in speech is different from what can be explored in writing. CD enables teachers to make progress with ideas that are not yet fully formed. The three kinds of dialogic understanding outlined here are results of this valuable process.

本論文では、ある教員グループにおいて思考を深めるために用いられたコーポラティブ・ディヴェロップメントの手法について、また(その)．　会話による相互理解の4つのについて報告する。重要な点として、会話より得

られるものは書くより得られるそれとは異なるということが挙げられる。コーポラティブ・ディヴェロップメントを用いることにより、教員 はまだ検討段階にあるアイデアを発展させることが可能である。この貴重な発展過程の一部を担うのが 会話による相互理解の4つである。

This paper explores the notion of dialogic understanding.[1] It starts from the premise that exploring ideas through speech is qualitatively different from exploring ideas through writing. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part contextualizes and explains the key roles and moves of the 'Speaker/Understander' process. The second part provides examples of interaction from a typical dialogic session and the final part summarises three kinds of dialogic understanding made possible as a result of this process.

The theory behind the Speaker/Understander process is based on Edge's (1992) idea of cooperative development (CD).[2] This paper represents my personal account of what is made possible by this kind of cooperative peer exploration and development and it is a process that I am sure has helped me to better understand my teaching.

Context: Creating extra space

I am one of a group of teachers and teacher educators who decided in January 1998 that we needed a different kind of space to articulate our current personal thinking on teaching and research issues. We already had regular teacher meetings but these were agenda driven; they were geared to producing outcomes at a group level. We needed a different sort of talk where we could work with something that was perhaps tentative, troubling, incomplete, partial or emergent. This

dialogic understanding between us would allow each individual a chance of constructing a view of experience and knowledge within the support of a group.

It might be worth saying a little more about why it is important for us to have *extra space* for this kind of work. It is my experience that when a group of teachers get together there are expectations that teachers, in talking about their work, will demonstrate that they 'know what they are doing'. This expectation is strong and teachers can seem more comfortable in 'information giving' than listening. A possible outcome of this state of affairs is that, in many teacher exchanges, ideas are left half-formed (i.e., someone interrupts, suggests alternatives or takes issue before the statement is fully formed). Hence, we often end up with half-articulated ideas that are half-understood.

Thus, I want to demonstrate in this paper how a process of CD has given me the space to articulate my ideas in a way which I think has a number of positive outcomes in both my thinking and my practice. In particular, I want to point to ways in which the extra space has allowed a unique kind of spoken exploration in which ideas are shaped dialogically. One version is tested against another; one articulation resonates with the next.

The speaker/understander process

The following description of the process explains the Speaker and Understander roles. As has already been pointed out, we needed a new kind of talk. We wanted the group to focus on one individual at a time and give them the benefit of undivided attention. In our case, the meeting involved between four and eight members of staff. This way of talking can be done in pairs but four or five is probably the optimum number.

Supported by the Understanders, the Speaker works 'online' with an idea. The Understanders play a supporting role and help the Speaker to work on the development of ideas in a way that is not usually possible in teacher talk. What follows adds more detail to these general statements of the two roles.

The Speaker – There is one Speaker in each meeting. Individuals within the group take turns to be Speaker. Being a Speaker is an opportunity to talk out an idea, an issue or a personal concern: the topic being determined solely by the featured Speaker. This topic may or may not have immediate relevance to the group.

It is better if the Speaker has not planned the talk, as, at its best, the dialogic process is very different to a presentation. It is much more a case of trusting that something can emerge and that the Speaker can talk himself or herself into new understandings. It is also our experience that the Speaker should not spend too much time on 'background'. It is better to get to the cutting edge of the dilemma, concern or puzzle as soon as possible.

The Understander – The supportive moves adopted by the Understanders in our meetings owed much to CD (Edge 1992) where ideas for group development are presented for colleagues who:

- already share and wish to enhance a positive working relationship;
- want to explore the potential of a non-judgmental approach to individual self-development in a group context.

Especially in the early sessions, the group consciously used some of the non-judgmental moves outlined in this book, particularly those termed *Reflecting*, *Focusing* and *Thematising*. You will have noticed that capital letters are used for both the roles and moves, in order to accentuate the specific nature of the terms. At all times, the Understander is consciously trying to keep all aspects of evaluation out of their contributions.

The following are the core moves:

- *Reflection* tries to give back a version of what the Speaker has just said. It does not have to be word for word. It is not a case of parroting the last thing said. Rather, the Understander is honestly trying to *reflect* back a version of what has just been said.
- *Focusing* is a move that offers something that the Speaker has previously said as a possible topic for further articulation. It might go something like, 'A few minutes ago you said X, would you like to say a little more about that?'
- *Thematising* is a move that takes two or more aspects of the Speaker's previous talk and returns them back. Our group found it helpful to see this kind of move as 'Relating'. It is often a case of saying, 'You've said A and you've said B, how are they related?'

A shorthand metaphorical representation of these three moves might be:

> reflecting – mirroring
> focusing – telescoping
> relating - mapping

In terms of timing, the Speaker usually speaks for 25-35 minutes with others acting as Understanders. During this time, the Speaker works on an emerging idea. The Understanders try to support the Speaker either by Reflecting, Focusing or Thematising. In the remainder of the meeting, the Understanders become Speakers and take turns to articulate a response (what we have come to call a 'Resonance'). The orientation of these Resonances is much more of a 'What Ellie has helped me to see is...' rather than 'I think I see this differently from Ellie...' In other words, they are meant to be non-judgmental and non-evaluative. Finally, after Understanders have shared their Resonances, the Speaker gets the chance to respond to these Resonances and make some concluding comment. To finish the session, the Speaker usually says something about what they have got out of the session.

An example of a session

In this part, I concentrate on one session in which I was a Speaker in hopes of establishing examples of the Speaker/Understander process and giving a fuller context for the three kinds of dialogic process outlined in the next part. I also hope the examples will be both indicative of the dialogic process involved and demonstrate how such a session can be useful in terms of specific outcomes. In particular, I want to highlight how this extra space allows for more opportunity to develop ideas.

In the session highlighted, I am exploring a feeling I have that the more I plan lessons or sessions, the less well I communicate. This was strongly felt but, as yet, never articulated at any length. In this session, like others, I am 'talking my way into understanding'. Looking back and listening to the tapes later, it is obvious to me that this session did provide space and time for

articulation. Additionally, it is my view that the Understanders helped me articulate my experience in ways that would not be available in other kinds of meeting and teacher talk.

Articulation and inner dialogue

For me, articulation is a key term in describing this process. Taylor provides an insightful definition of this kind of articulation:

> Articulations are not simply descriptions… articulations are attempts to formulate what is initially inchoate, or confused, or badly formulated. But this kind of formulation, or reformulation does not leave its object unchanged. To give a certain articulation is to shape our sense of what we desire or what we hold important in a certain way. (1985, p. 36)

In reviewing the tape of this session, I have a strong sense that, as the Speaker, I am being well supported by the Understanders and that a space is being created similar to the Vygotskian (1986) concept of the zone of proximal development.[3] The Speaker is protected in this developmental zone to articulate what is confused or partially formed and working at the cutting edge of their current understanding. Such articulation is often an outward expression of an inner dialogue. The articulation functions as a dialogic vehicle to help resolve tension between various elements of knowledge, experience, belief and emotion.

Stages in the session

Before giving examples of the three key dialogic processes, it is worth giving an overview of how stages emerge in a Speaker session. The Speaker (i.e., myself) started by explaining why he feels stress in a number of different situations where planning is a requirement. Early on in the session an Understander tries to Reflect back this emerging sense that a plan is a kind of imposition and inhibits communication:

037 Nick	… (.) you're saying
038	(.) that if you plan something then when you
039	start to talk you feel that
	that plan is an imposition
040	on you and constrains
	you and ties you down and
041	you feel you're not being
	as productive as you <u>could</u> be.

This early Reflection was helpful to me and I went on from this early exchange to more fully explore my ideas and preference for ways of working with a group that are not planned but prepared. In short, the great distinction (or realization) for me in this session was between *being planned* and *being prepared*. I got to this realization by working through a number of related issues and stages:

1. I opened by articulating a feeling that when I am very planned I feel stressed.

2. I related my experience as an actor and my preference for improvised theatre to scripted plays. I established that this might be a strong influence on other kinds of communicative events.

3. I realized that my preference for improvisation might be connected to my teaching because I feel that through improvisation the students are more involved (i.e., they help to direct the process).

The following is an extract where the Understanders (Ellie and Helen) help me to articulate an understanding of how planning can make me less responsive as a teacher. It builds on the idea of involvement and noticing and responding to signals from the students:

```
075 Ellie    you feel that- do you feel that you've had some
076          sort of signals and been unable to change your response
077          to it?
078 Steve    I think it's partly that and partly the fact that
079          I don't feel open to any signals=
080 Ellie    =so you don't feel you see them
081 Steve    .hhh (0.6) I see the two things in opposition
082          >you know< this driving force to get through
083          this plan (0.4) does mean that perhaps I don't even
084          see the signals
085 Helen    so it's as if you're looking back into your
086          head all the time rather than looking out
087          and communicating with
```

Through analysis of this extract, I move to the next two stages in my thinking:

4. I think this 'connection' with the students helps facilitate a more 'in the moment' communicative event.

5. I make the distinction between planning time for students in order to help facilitate on-task communication and planning done by the teacher before the session.

In the next extract you can see how stage 5 leads me to consider the relationship between planning and communicative event. Here I can make a clear distinction between the way my preferred classroom methodology has evolved and the role for planning time within a task-based methodology:

```
132 Steve   I think it's obviously a personal thing because
133         you look around and you see people do plan
134         to a greater or lesser extent (.) and it- methodologically
135         is interesting with that article in Jane Willis'
136         collection (.) the planning time for tasks (.)
137         is it Martin Bygate?
138 Mary    Mmm
139 Steve   do we want students to plan things and what
140         sort of effect does that have on the language
141         (.) it's perceived as being a good thing (.) a
142         benefit to allow students to- to plan (1.4)
```

6. I remember a distinction I have heard between task tension that can help and tenseness, which does not. In my case, there is a helpful amount of tension for me in not over-planning a session; there is tenseness if I do plan to high degree.

7. There is an outcome for me in that I clarify a distinction between *being prepared* which gives me things I could do and *being planned* which directs and often inhibits the communicative event.

Through similar stages, a Speaker, in this kind of session, shapes experiential knowledge by making distinctions, connections, extensions and clarifications. The extracts above provide examples of how Understanders support the Speaker's articulation. The motivation for this kind of Understander move (particularly Reflection) is twofold:

- It is a chance for the Understander to confirm that she is on the same wavelength. This motivation is to enable the Speaker to hear a version of what has been said.
- The Understander may not be sure that she is on the same wavelength. Here the motivation is to enable the Understander to carry on properly understanding.

In the early sessions of this kind of working together, it was very difficult not to offer an opinion or a suggestion or to evaluate (either positively or negatively). We have been successful in stripping these elements out of the moves that the Understanders make in the sessions. However this does not mean that all Understander moves are successful for the Speaker. Sometimes the Understander *is* on a different or slightly different wavelength and therefore, the understood version or elements are not close enough. In the following exchange it is clear that Robert's emphasis is not a fully acceptable version or element of what I have been saying:

167 Robert	Is it the case that you don't know where to go
168	until someone has made a contribution?
169 Steve	I think there are plenty of places I <u>could go</u>,
170	(.) I'm not talking about knowing nothing
171	about the area you've allotted to talk about.
172	I'm not talking about no prepar<u>ati</u>on, (.) no
173	<u>read</u>ing no <u>think</u>ing around the area ...

Clearly, while it is not an acceptable understanding move, it does help clarify what I am *not* talking about. In retrospect I think 'you don't know' on line 167 is too strong. It touches the same nerve as when I referred earlier to the pressure to 'know what you are doing'. However it does help me to further my emerging distinction between prepared and planned. Indeed, a

few moments later Nick is able to 'understand' this distinction:

180 Nick	and that's the big distinction I hear now
181	in what you're saying, (.) between being
182	<u>prepared</u> to enter the arena (.) and the idea
183	of having a <u>plan</u> which you think will
184	ride roughshod over the various possibilities
185	that could have occurred in that arena
186 Steve	yes <u>yes</u> (.) and another thought hits me from
187	that, (.) from the preparation planning distinction...

This gets an enthusiastic endorsement in line 186 and once this distinction is resolved it leads immediately to another related idea, which is explicitly signaled by 'another thought hits me'. This is a good example of the real time thinking that is inherent in the term articulation.

3 Kinds of dialogic understanding

This section describes three kinds of dialogic understanding: knowledge, interaction and metaphor. We reach these understandings by realizing how one thing relates to another, by arriving at clarifications, and by having breakthrough moments. The relationship between speech and understanding is a complex one but it is undoubtedly the case that vocalising thoughts allows us to reach understandings.

It is an essential feature of our human existence that we constantly need to try to understand. We struggle to resolve conflicts, inconsistencies and contradictions. As teachers we are on the receiving end of a huge amount of knowledge, facts and opinions. What are we meant to do with it all? In short, we try to develop a sense of plausibility from it (Prabhu 1990) or what

could be called a personal understanding. The following three features of the dialogic understanding process can help to reach understandings.

Knowledge

The first dialogic process I want to highlight is best captured by Wallace's (1991, p.15) distinction between *received knowledge* and *experiential knowledge*.[4] In fact, the process is not quite as simple as this distinction but it is a good starting point. In our daily life, we are constantly grappling with a whole jumble of things we believe, have read, have heard, thought or have decided we value. The kind of session I have described above, however, allows the Speaker to integrate some of these disparate and sometimes contradictory elements. Articulation is the vehicle through which a better dialogic understanding of our knowledge is reached.

This is essentially an inner process. In the session I am highlighting, there is an inner tension between prepared and planned. In short, then, according to Wallace, received knowledge foregrounds planning as an integral part of successful language teaching. Yet, my experiential knowledge does not match this assumption. I have the feeling that my communication is better when I plan less. This emerging issue has become important in my teaching. Here is how I introduced the topic:

```
024 Steve   as soon as I enter into a planning world (.) in
025              terms of talking (0.4) it seems to cause some
026              kind of stress,
027 Nick    Mmm
028 Steve   which I- which I feel imposing on me.
029              and this imposition, (.) this structure that I've
030              pre-planned, (0.4) I find is- is a saddle (.) a
```

```
031              chain (.) something which inhibits me.
032 Nick    so can we just clarify where we are now?
033              you're now into (.) what may not be a
034              continuing topic but the first area
035              of topic focus is what you're working on now
036              and that is this preference of yours for off-the-cuff
037              talk as opposed to planned talk. (.) you're saying
038              (.) that if you plan something then when you
039              start to talk you feel that that plan is an imposition
040              on you and constrains you and ties you down and
041              you feel you're not being as productive as you could be.
```

There is a clear sense of the tension between 'the planning world' that is received knowledge and is in conflict with classroom experiential knowledge, which are exploratory, improvised and spontaneously feel more comfortable.

Interaction

If we look at the example above, we can see that the Understander (Nick) is engaged in supporting me as Speaker. He picks out the key elements and gives me a chance to 'hear back' a version of where I am in my emerging focus. This interaction is the second dialogic process in the pursuit of greater understanding. It is an interactive process. The Understander (Nick) 'reflects' back a version of what the Speaker (Steve) has said. The Speaker then uses the Understander's version to further articulate. The Understander version will either be accurate (in which case the Speaker gets a kind of confirmation of being understood) or will be in some way inaccurate. It is, of course, the gap between the two versions that fuels further clarification and articulation.

Metaphor

A third kind of dialogic process is where the Speaker uses an extended metaphor in order to explore an idea. For the group, metaphors act as a heuristic, which run through subsequent meetings. However, some individual Speakers also use metaphor construction in this extended way as an, 'introspective and reflective tool … tapping the kinds of meanings practitioners create about their own professional actions, practices and personal theories' (Burns 1999, p. 147).

Trying a metaphor on for size is an important tool that an individual can use to create extra space in this kind of speaking. Metaphors can help clarify and shape personal meanings. Block (1992, p. 51-53) also talks about metaphors as 'explanatory vehicles'. Sometimes an extended metaphor will seem powerful and suitable for expressing our emerging meaning.

If we look at this example, the Speaker (Steve) has been using the metaphor of an athlete preparing for an event. Ellie (Understander) Reflects this back and this prompts the Speaker to further the metaphor:

```
278 Ellie    You talked just now about preparation
279          as like being an athlete
280 Steve    =yeah
281 Ellie    do you want to say so-
282 Steve    [ yeah I guess if you're preparing
283          for 100 meters, you don't just do endless 100 meter
284          runs – you exercise in different ways – you limber up
285          (.) you do weights (.) you stretch (.) maybe do yoga
286          and get yourself in the right frame of mind
```

In this example the Speaker is talking about giving presentations and exploring what kind of preparation is best for him. He does not like practicing by developing a rigid plan and planning the whole presentation. The metaphor of the athlete's preparation is being used as a tool to explore in what ways being prepared for an athletic event is similar to being prepared for a presentation. In this case the metaphor works. It has a close dialogic fit. On other occasions a Speaker may decide that a metaphor is not quite right. When it is not quite right, there is still the possibility of an important dialogic process. There is what we could call 'dialogic slippage'. It is the gap between the two versions (hence, the term 'slippage'), which nonetheless has the potential for the Speaker to get further in his or her thinking.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined three kinds of dialogic understanding extracted from a process of cooperative development. These three kinds of dialogic process are evident in many of the sessions I have recorded. This paper has also outlined my experience of working with a group of TESOL professionals. One outcome of this work has been to seriously evaluate the talk we create in our professional lives. About six months after we started this work, Deborah Tannen's book *The Argument Culture* appeared in which she says:

> 'We need to use our imaginations and ingenuity to
> find different ways to seek truth and gain knowledge,
> and add them to our arsenal – or, should I say, the
> ingredients for our stew.'(1998, p. 298)

We feel that this project is a step forward in meeting this kind of challenge. The benefits in shaping group identity, support and

communication are already tangible and there is a unanimous feeling that this experimentation with our way of speaking to each other is a valuable addition to existing professional talk. In the meetings in which I have been the Speaker, I am sure I have made significant movements forwards in the development of my experiential knowledge through this process of articulation.

Acknowledgements

If you are interested in comparing ideas on discourse choices in teacher meetings, please contact Dr Steve Mann at the Language Studies Unit, Aston University, Birmingham B4 7ET. Fax: 00 44 121 359 2725. Tel: 00 44 121 359 3611. Email: s.j.mann@aston.ac.uk

Endnotes

[1] The idea for dialogic understanding is a development of Bakhtin's (cited in Farmer 1995) idea of 'dialogic threads': 'The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape from a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as rejoinder to it - it does not approach the object from the sidelines'.

[2] Cooperative Development involves regular sessions working with a colleague or colleagues operating according to new rules where abandon the elements of evaluation and exchange are deliberately abandoned. What is gained is a new experience of a space into which one's ideas can expand in the search for a discovery that may not be made in the cut and thrust of argument (Edge 2002: 32).

[3] The zone of proximal development is a condition by which an individual who could not attain solutions can attain them through the help of others (Vygotsky 1986).

[4] Wallace (1991: 13-14) makes a distinction between received knowledge and experiential knowledge. Received knowledge is similar to research-based theories and techniques. This might include the key terms and lexis of TESOL, research findings and related theories. Experiential knowledge entails the development of knowledge-in-action. This includes the opportunity to reflect on this action or practice. Wallace includes in this category the 'observation of practice' but also suggests that this knowledge is of a different order from knowledge-in-action.

References

Block, D., 1996. Metaphors we teach and learn by. *Prospect.* 73: 42-55.

Burns, A. 1999. *Collaborative action research for English language learners*. Cambridge: CUP.

Edge, J. 1992. *Cooperative Development*. Harlow: Longman.

Edge, J. 2002. *Continuing Cooperative Development*. Michigan: Michigan University Press.

Farmer, F. 1995. Voice Reprised: Three "Etudes" for a Dialogic Understanding. *Rhetoric Review.* 13/2: 304-20

Prabhu, N. 1990. There is no best method – Why? *TESOL Quarterly.* 24/2: 161-176.

Tannen, D. 1998. *The Argument Culture*. London: Virago.

Taylor, C. 1985. *Human Agency and Language*. Cambridge: CUP.

Vygotsky, L. 1986. *Thought and Language.* (A. Kozulin, Trans) Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Wallace, M. 1991. Training Foreign Language Teachers; A Reflective Approach. Cambridge: CUP.