

The Implementation of a Poster Conference Activity in Thailand's EFL Classes: English and Dialogic Teaching Implications for Practice

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the use of a poster conference as a teaching methodology in EFL classes in Thailand's universities. Specifically, the study firstly examined how the poster conference was administered in Thai universities' EFL classes, and secondly examined whether or not it could promote dialogic education and students' English speaking skills. Qualitative data were collected through classroom observations and interviews among four Thai EFL lecturers and twelve of their students. It was found that in Thailand's universities the poster conference activity was adopted as group-based assignment size of groups were large, up to 9-10 students/group, and the medium language used during the process of creating a poster and presenting it at the conference was mostly Thai. Findings suggest that the poster conference activity can promote dialogic teaching as it creates multiple ranges of circumstances which require students to talk and interact with their groupmates as well as with their lecturer in a dialogic way. However, the poster conference might not be able to improve Thai students' oral English communication skills as interactions, talks, questions, and argumentations occurring while students accomplish tasks relevant to the poster are conducted in the students' native language. The study offers practical insights that lecturers should consider when designing and implementing a poster conference activity as a teaching tool in their English class.

Keywords: Dialogic Education, Thailand's EFL, Poster Conference, English Speaking, Teaching

การใช้กิจกรรมการนำเสนอผลงานแบบโปสเตอร์ ในชั้นเรียนภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทย: ข้อเสนอแนะเพื่อการสอนภาษาอังกฤษและการสอนผ่านได้อาล็อก

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยฉบับนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการใช้กิจกรรมการเสนอผลงานแบบโปสเตอร์เป็นเครื่องมือการจัดการเรียนการสอนในชั้นเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) ในมหาวิทยาลัยในประเทศไทย โดยมุ่งเน้นศึกษารูปแบบการใช้กิจกรรมการเสนอผลงานแบบโปสเตอร์และศึกษาความสามารถของกิจกรรมนี้ในการส่งเสริมการเรียนรู้ผ่านได้อาล็อกและในการพัฒนาทักษะการพูดภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนไทย เก็บข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพจากการสังเกตชั้นเรียนและการสัมภาษณ์อาจารย์ชาวไทยที่สอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ จำนวน 4 ท่านและนักศึกษา 12 ท่าน การศึกษาพบว่าการใช้กิจกรรมการเสนอผลงานแบบโปสเตอร์ในมหาวิทยาลัยในประเทศไทยนั้นมักกำหนดเป็นกิจกรรมกลุ่ม กลุ่มมีขนาดใหญ่ถึง 9 - 10 คนต่อกลุ่มและนักศึกษาไทยมักใช้ภาษาไทยในการสื่อสารกันในระหว่างการทำโปสเตอร์และระหว่างนำเสนอผลงานในการประชุมวิชาการ ผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นกิจกรรมการเสนอผลงานแบบโปสเตอร์สามารถส่งเสริมส่งเสริมการเรียนรู้ผ่านได้อาล็อกเนื่องจากประกอบไปด้วยสถานการณ์ที่หลากหลายที่กำหนดให้นักศึกษาต้องคุยหรือมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างสมาชิกในกลุ่มด้วยกันเองและกับอาจารย์ผู้สอน แต่อย่างไรก็ดีผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่ากิจกรรมการเสนอผลงานแบบโปสเตอร์ไม่สามารถช่วยพัฒนาทักษะการพูดภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาไทยหากการปฏิสัมพันธ์ การพูดคุย การตั้งคำถามหรือการถกกันอันเกิดระหว่างการทำและนำเสนอโปสเตอร์นั้นยังคงใช้ภาษาไทยเป็นหลัก ผลการวิจัยสะท้อนสิ่งข้อควรปฏิบัติสำหรับอาจารย์ผู้สอนในการออกแบบและนำกิจกรรมการนำเสนอแบบโปสเตอร์ไปใช้เป็นเครื่องมือการสอนในรายวิชาภาษาอังกฤษของตน

คำสำคัญ การศึกษาผ่านได้อาล็อก ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศของประเทศไทย การเสนอผลงานแบบโปสเตอร์ การพูดภาษาอังกฤษ การสอน

1. Introduction

Dialogic education is a teaching theory or methodology which contends that knowledge is co-constructed between the students when they are engaged in meaningful dialogue with peers (Alexander, 2017; Rungwaraphong, 2017a; Wegerif, 2011). Following Wegerif's theory of dialogic education, a dialogic teacher manages classes in ways that create opportunities for the students to engage in dialogue with peers, thus they can learn through the dialogue. Dialogue that occurs must encourage students to go

beyond telling knowledge and helps them to deepen their ideas and extend their understanding of the learning subject (Alexander, 2008).

A central idea of dialogic education is the students learning from others and learning with others. In this light, dialogic education emphasizes collaborative nature and mutual supports. According to Rungwaraphong (2017a), in a classroom that promotes dialogic education, the teacher and students collaboratively work to construct the knowledge. Wegerif (2011) points out group work as a way that can provide opportunities for students to learn from others and learn with others. His investigation of children working in a group indicates that the indicator of the success of children's group work is not "cognitive strategies" the children are using, but rather the quality of their relationship. He called the extent to which children are "in dialogue" with peers as the "dialogic quality", which in turns will signify their ability to think together. The idea of "Thinking Together" has been originally developed by Dawes, Mercer and Wegerif (2000) and widely used as an instructional pedagogy to promote dialogic education. The pedagogy has been used as a means to improve the quality of students' small group work, and focuses on how the students interact in group and their ability to solve problems together. The ability to solve problems together requires students to listen to other peers' ideas and be open to change their minds. Students must be able to genuinely accept that their peers might be correct and they might be wrong. All these qualities will lead to a quality dialogue (Wegerif, 2011).

But one question arising in the promotion of dialogic education is how to promote students' dialogic talks and interactions, or in other words, how to get students to be "in dialogue" and "think together" with their peers. The study of Rungwaraphong (2017a) has proposed a framework for promoting dialogic education particularly in EFL classes. The framework offers multiple activities that lecturer participants have adopted in their classes. One of them is a poster conference activity. However, the study does not provide detailed information of what it is like to use a poster conference as a dialogic teaching tool. In addition to this, findings of the study do not give an evidence of the poster activity's ability in supporting dialogic education theory as well as in improving students' English competence. Thus, the current study aims at exploring the implementation of a

poster conference and assessing its ability in supporting dialogic education and enhancing Thai students' English competence with speaking skills in particular.

2. Poster conference

The terms “poster conference” and “poster presentation” are interchangeably used in the current study. Poster conference is a presentation session in an academic or professional conference, which the presenter uses a poster as a visual communication tool to deliver the main points (Hess, Tosney and Leigel, 2009). The poster engages the presenter in conversations with a wider audience and promotes their work to a large group of audience. Handron (1994) defined a poster presentation as “an experiential learning activity that stimulates curiosity and interest, encourages exploration and integration of concepts and provides students with a novel way of demonstrating understanding”. Given this definition, the poster presentation is not merely a vital part of an academic or professional conference; it has been widely adopted as effective tools for teaching and assessment in many different subject areas. Hess and Brooks (1998), for example, implemented a poster conference as a semester project in biological science. Used as a replacement for the traditional semester paperwork, the poster presentation aimed to increase student interaction and encourage peer-learning. The study found that students perceived the poster presentation a “rewarding experience” (p.158), and suggested that teachers should spend more time talking to the students at the conference to help them deepen their knowledge. Chabeli (2002) implemented a poster presentation as a teaching tool in nursing education and found that the poster presentation facilitate nursing students' high order thinking skills and increase students' sense of ownership of their learning. However, despite the fact that numerous benefits of poster presentations were reported, Chabeli's study identified the difficulties occurring from working in group as one of the negative feedback received from the students. In the study of Koshy (2011) the poster presentation was implemented in large communication classes. Findings of the study proved that the poster presentation, if managed on a group basis, can be adopted as a viable method of instruction for large classes. In addition to addressing problems associated with large class size, Koshy's study found that students tended to prefer poster presentations to oral presentation, and they were more confident and less nervous as they presented their

ideas on the one-to-one basis (to one audience/viewer per time rather than presenting to the public).

3. Research questions

The current study hypothesized that the poster conference activity is feasible to promote dialogic education and to improve Thai students' English speaking skills. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. How the poster conference activity is implemented in EFL classes in Thailand's universities?
2. Is the poster conference activity able to promote dialogic education and Thai students' English speaking skills?

4. Conceptual framework

The investigation of the poster conference activity under this current research paper underlines Wegerif's theory of dialogic education, which sees education "for" dialogue as well as education "through" dialogue (Wegerif, 2011), and thus is conceptualized as follows:

Figure 1 Conceptual framework of the study

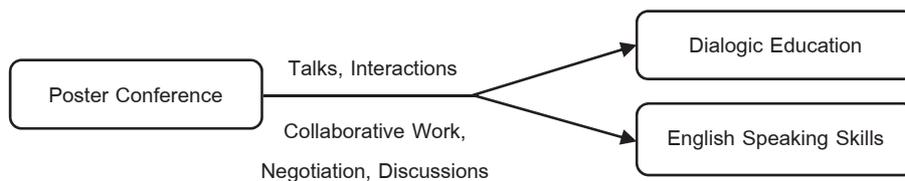


Figure 1 illustrates that the poster conference is expected to serve as a mechanism that create circumstances in which the students work collaboratively with their peers and gear them to talk, negotiate and interact with peers as well as with the lecturer, and act as scaffold to enhance students' English speaking skills.

5. Research scope

The study reported in this paper is a part of an ongoing research exploring the implementation of dialogic education among lecturers of English in Thailand's universities. The data presented in this paper are restricted on the use of poster presentations as a teaching methodology to promote dialogic teaching and students' English speaking skills.

6. Methods

6.1 Participants and Settings

This study was conducted in three government universities in Thailand. Qualitative data were collected from four Thai lecturers of English language and twelve students. All the lecturers and students were Thai. The lecturers were purposively selected to participate in this study as they facilitated and incorporated a poster conference as one of their semester assignments. They were female, aged from 35 - 40, and hereafter identified as Lecturers A, B, C, and D. Lecturers A and B were from different universities while C and D taught in the same university. Three students of each lecturer were randomly selected to participate in this study. They were called in accordance with their lecturers such as Students A1, A2, A3, B1, B2 and etcetera.

6.2 Data Collection and Instruments

Class observations and interviews were used to collect data. The lecturers had notified the author about the class sessions that they would implement tasks relevant to the poster conference. The author made three observations for each lecturer in order to observe and take notes of discussions and talks occurring in classes. Altogether, there were 12 observations among four lecturers. Each lecturer was also interviewed once and three students from each lecturer were randomly selected for interviews; in total 12 students were interviewed.

Interviews with the lecturers and the students were conducted individually and were semi-structured, using a list of interview questions as a guide. However, there was time left for spontaneous questions based on the interviewees' responses. All interviews, either with the lecturers or the students, were conducted within 3 - 7 days after the students presented their poster at the conference. Observations were

photographed and discussions and talks were audiotaped. Interviews with the lecturers and with the students were audio-recorded. All data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes.

7. Findings

The presentation of the findings is done per the questions of the research.

Research Question 1: How the poster conference activity is implemented in EFL classes in Thailand's universities?

Table 1 illustrates data collected from observations and interviews with the lecturers. It gives a picture of how poster conference activity was administered in different EFL classes in different universities in Thailand.

Table 1 Group-based Conference Activity in Thailand's EFL Classes

Lecturer	Course	Students & Group Size	Requirement on Language Use	Special Features of the conference
A	English for Science (at a science school)	40 students; from one same Science major 8 groups/ 5 each	- Students not required to speak English while working with peers	- International young scholar conference in oversea; - Financially support from the university for expenses incurred for the conference - Presentation conducted in English - International audience
B	English for Nursing (at a nursing school)	143 students from one same Nursing major 15 groups/ 9-10 each	- Students not required, but encouraged to speak English while working with peers	- A mock conference, organized as part of the course - Presented in Thai language - Peers as the audience (Thai)

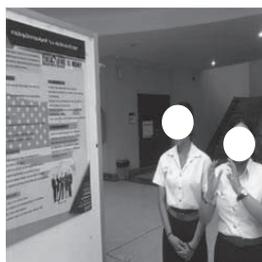
Lecturer	Course	Students & Group Size	Requirement on Language Use	Special Features of the conference
C	Advance English Reading (at a business school)	59 students from English majors 6 groups/ 8-10 each	- Students required to speak English while working with peers - Every task conducted in English language	- An undergrad cross-discipline conference organized by the university - Required to be presented in English, but most students switched into Thai - Peers and young scholars from nearby area (Thai)
D	Advance English Reading (at a business school)	68 from different majors (most were English majors) 7 groups/ 8-10 each	- Students not required, but encouraged to speak English while working with peers	Same as Lecturer C

According to Table 1, Lecturers C and D were from the same university, teaching the same English advance reading course. While all Lecturer C's students were English majors, Lecturer D's students were mixed majors with the majority of English majors. Students of Lecturers A and B were all non-English majors. Table 1 further illustrates the language used to conduct talks and interactions during poster-related activities. Only Lecturer C required students to conduct all talks and interactions in English, while all the other lecturers did not make English as a compulsory language of speaking; their students were allowed to use Thai language in classes.

When presenting the poster at the conference, only students of Lecturer A had to present their posters in English language, while students under other lecturers' supervision were encouraged to present in English, but most students switched into Thai language. As for the conference events, the one that Lecturer B's students participated in was a mock-up event, and the audience was 143 students registered in

the course. Students of Lecturers A, C and D presented at real conferences. It is important to note that only students of Lecturer A that presented in the international conference organized overseas. This can be an explanation why Lecturer A' students presented their poster in English and met international audience. Noteworthy, students of Lecturer A were financially supported from the university for expenses incurred for the conference. The conference that the students of Lecturers C and D participated in, even though a real one, was organized by their university and most of the audience were university staff, including peers and lecturers. Figure 2 shows Lecturer C's students presenting their poster at the university's conference.

Figure 2 A photograph taken during poster presentations at an in-house conference



As for the size of group work, data from the class observations indicate that the size of the group was similar among all lecturers except Lecturer A, who had only 40 students and made 5-students group size. Figure 3 gives an example of the class size of one lecturer (Lecturer D), which resulting in a big group size (9-10 students/group)

Figure 3 Sample of a large EFL class



Figure 3 further illustrates that EFL classes in many universities in Thailand are managed in auditorium lecture halls, with row seating and immobile chairs.

Research Question 2: Is the poster conference activity able to promote dialogic education and Thai students' English speaking skills?

Table 2 summarizes responses reported by 12 students regarding benefits gained from tasks relevant to the poster conference activity.

Table 2 A Summary of the Students' Report of Benefits of Poster Conference Activity

Student	Making a Poster	Consulting with Lecturer	Presenting a Poster
A1	- Researching skill - Reading skills	- Reasoning skill - Voicing opinion	- Presentation skill - Exchange of knowledge with scholar in the field
A2	- Time-management skill - Argumentative skill	- Presenting data in a scientific genre - Deepening understanding	- Exchange of knowledge with scholar in the field - Recognition of linkage of knowledge and real world
A3	- Confidence to voice personal opinions - Reading and Vocabulary	- Organization of ideas - Defending claims in reasoned discussion (Reasoning skill)	- Exchange of knowledge with scholar in the field - Recognition of linkage of knowledge and to the real world
B1	- Teamwork - Computer graphic skills	- Reasoning skill - Voicing opinion	- Reasoning skill - Confidence to voice personal opinions
B2	- Different style of writing - Reasoning skill	- Defending claims in reasoned discussion (Reasoning skill) - Presenting data in a scientific genre	- Defending claims in reasoned discussion (Reasoning skill) - Research experience
B3	- Read better, read faster - Confidence to voice personal opinions	- Objection & augmentation skills - Deepening understanding	- Practice in oral communication skill - Presentation skill
C1	- Confidence to voice personal opinions - Reasoning skill	- Objection & augmentation skills - Defending claims in reasoned discussion (Reasoning skill)	- Presentation skill - English communication skills

Student	Making a Poster	Consulting with Lecturer	Presenting a Poster
C2	- Teamwork - Researching/Data management skill	- Defending claims in reasoned discussion (Reasoning skill) - Self confidence	- Presentation skill - English communication skills
C3	- Self-directed learning - Read better, read faster	- Self confidence - Deepening understanding	- Self confidence - English communication skills
D1	- Argumentative skill - Computer graphic skills	- Self confidence - Research experience	- Problem-solving skill - Research experience
D2	- Confidence to voice personal opinions - Read better, read faster	- Defending claims in reasoned discussion (Reasoning skill) - Research experience	- Defending claims in reasoned discussion (Reasoning skill) - Problem-solving skill
D3	- Teamwork - Speed reading	- Defending claims in reasoned discussion (Reasoning skill) - Deepening understanding	- Defending claims in reasoned discussion (Reasoning skill) - English communication skills

As shown in Table 2, English reading improvement was the most listed skills that improved as a result of creating a poster; even in students from class not relevant to English reading, such as Students A1, A3, and B3. Student A1, explained in the interviews that:

...I have to read a lot and read a variety of texts. It is not just creating a poster; it is what you have to write on the poster.

This might be explained by the fact that the process of a poster conference involves extensive reading as Student B said:

....it is not just making a poster, but we have to read, get the main idea, and weigh what we should present in a limited space of a poster size....

In contrast, Table 2 seems to suggest that a poster conference activity might not be able to improve the students' English speaking skills as only four students –C1, C2, C3, and D3- reported that their English oral communication skill, which is one of the expected goals of implementing the poster conference, was improved. Student A, a non-English major, did not report an improvement in the oral skill. She explained:

...it impossible for my friends and I to discuss in English. Our English is so poor that we do not know how to articulate our ideas in English.

Student B commented that:

It is faster and easier to use Thai language when working with friends

Lecturer B's responses in the interview gives an explanation to this, as Lecturer B remarked:

Actually I would prefer my students to use English in all their talks and conversations that occur in the class, but as you see, they are not English-majors.I did try once in the previous semester to force students to speak English, but what happened was that all were quiet and they could not finish the task.

As for the dialogic goal, all four lecturers reported that the poster conference can be an effective means of promoting dialogic education. Although each of them implemented tasks relevant to the poster in a slightly different way, the process of creating a poster and presenting it at a conference provides rich opportunities for students to engage in dialogic interactions with peers as well as larger audiences, in the form of questions, discussion, objection, augmentation and problem-solving together to reach consensus on an agreed topic. Students' reports of their improved skills as a result of collaboratively carrying out a poster conference with peers confirm this. According to Table 2, skills that were most reported as improved from running the poster conference include reasoning skill, voicing opinion, argumentation, understanding deepening, recognition of linkage of knowledge and to the real world, and reasoned

discussion. These skills are high-order thinking skills and are supportive to the dialogic learning nature. The dialogic-supportive quality of the poster conference is obvious in classes of all four lecturers, regardless of what language was used in communication. Data from the author's observations support this claim, as noted in the observation field note:

... students [of Lecturer A] were really engaged in the topic they were discussing. They enjoyed listening to their peers' ideas and if they did not agree, they would let their peer know. However, they had some evidence to support their different point of views

One of the lecturers mentioned that:

At first I was quite disappointed that none of them [students] speak English. This is English class; they have to speak English. But when I look at how they talk to their friends, go to library, or explain their idea to me, even totally in Thai language, I am proud of them. I believe there is something changing deeply in my students, but they just do not do it in English language (Lecturer C).

8. Discussion and conclusion

Findings of the current study has shown that the poster conference has gained popularity in serving as teaching methodology in Thailand's EFL classes. Thai EFL lecturers in higher education are more likely to incorporate it as a group-based semester assignment. Thai students in general enjoy a group-based poster conference and perceive the process of creating a poster and presenting it at a conference as a valuable learning experience, providing them with a mechanism to promote teamwork, build confidence, develop their academic voice and enhance their critical thinking and analysis skills. This finding echoes the definition and benefits of poster presentations given by Handron (1994), who views poster presentations as a learning activity that encourages exploration and integration of concepts and provides students with an innovative way of deepening their understanding. All the four lecturers participated in this study agreed that dialogue which occurs while the students collaboratively work in group could help

establish a sense of community, reflecting the idea of mutual supports and collaborative nature of dialogic education (Alexander, 2008). The requirement to accomplishing tasks in group opens chances for students to “think together”, which according to Dawes, Mercer and Wegerif (2000), significantly contributes to the development of their knowledge and understanding.

Findings of the study signify the importance of physical arrangement for EFL classroom. A classroom that has a well-organized physical arrangement will promote a positive learning environment and facilitate students’ participation and engagement (Rungwaraphong, 2012). For group-based activities, the current study has shown that the mobility of seats and room space are crucial. EFL lecturers need to select the classroom that will enable their students to move around or sit together with their group members. EFL classrooms also need to permit enough space for the lecturer to walk around and gain easy access to students when they need help. Fixed chairs, auditorium seating, lecture hall seating should be avoided in EFL classes (Rungwaraphong, 2017b). In addition to this, the size of group is an important issue that lecturers need to take into considerations when implementing a group-based poster conference activity. EFL classes in Thailand, particularly in government universities, tend to have large class size (Rungwaraphong, 2012). The current study found that some EFL classes can be up to 140 students per class. Given such a large size, the group size is also big, up to 9 - 10 students per group. As for the use of languages, although the posters are written in English, talks and interactions among students are mostly conducted in Thai language even among English-major students. Noteworthy, at the conferences students tend to present their English-written posters in Thai language, except the students who present the posters at international conferences in which audience are from other countries.

In conclusion, findings of the current study have shown that the poster conference activity supports Wegerif’s theory of dialogic education on one end: educating students through “dialogue”, as it creates multiple ranges of circumstances, which require students to deepen their understanding and construct their knowledge by talking and interacting with their peers as well as with their lecturer in a dialogic way. Presenting the poster at the conference provide opportunities for students to gain confidence in voicing their personal opinions and to meet and exchange knowledge with scholars in the field.

However, the poster conference might not be able to improve Thai students' English speaking skills as long as interactions, talks, questions, or argumentations that occur among the students and between the students and their lecturers are conducted in the students' native language.

9. Practical implications

To leverage the poster conference's capability in improving Thai students English speaking skills, talks and interactions occurring while accomplishing tasks relevant to the poster must be conducted in the English language. As English competence background of Thai students, particularly speaking skills, might be low, EFL lecturers should provide students with intensive practice in particular terms, phrases or sentences that are commonly used for dialogic interactions such as objection, reasoned discussion, argumentation, and etcetera. This intensive practice might be offered as a complementary training session and the lecturer can act as the language coach for those low students.

As for the size of group, the ideal one recommended by this study is four to five students. This size is more likely to minimize chances of group conflicts and maximize the students' manageability regarding time and decision making. However, the group size depends on the class size and the availability of resource; therefore, lecturers might have no option but making large groups, which can be up to ten students. When the class situation does not permit a small group size, students need guidance from the lecturers in helping them to manage group diversity, sequential structure of interactions, group fragmentation, and other issues arising with large group members. The lecturer can assist students in performing a poster task with a large group, for example, introducing students to the rationale for group work; prompting them to set and review ground rules for group work; facilitating a discussion on how they will allocate different roles; or working out procedures for dealing with group conflict.

The authenticity of the conference is an influential factor on students' motivation and engagement with the tasks relevant to the poster activity. A conference mock-up lacks real world challenges. The international conference is the most recommended learning activity particularly for EFL students; they are given real world opportunities, students meet real scholars and wider audiences from the international level. The

international conference, either organized in Thailand or overseas, will become an authentic language class where the students are required to use English while presenting, which is one of the aims of implementing the poster conference in an EFL class. This echoes pivotal role of audience in increasing the effectiveness of the poster presentation activity, as Hess, Tosney and Leigel (2009) suggest, "Audience dictates your language" (p.6).

Lastly, another pivotal feature of dialogic education that dialogic lecturers need to keep in mind is that process of reaching the common knowledge does not necessary signify the unanimous consensus among the class members. According to Kremer (2016), such a disharmony of voices may result from the "independent, dissenting nature" of the class members. This disharmony of voices leads to the "process of to the negation and construction of meaning" (p.137). Therefore, what really matters in a dialogic lesson is how much opportunity that the students can afford to participate in that process of negotiation and knowledge construction.

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