



Suspending judgement – ethical English dialogue skills for working life

It is a well-known fact that burnout at work is often the result of poor interaction in the work community. As workplaces become more multicultural with English as the most common lingua franca (ELF), workplace communication and interaction might get even more complicated. This article proposes that students in higher education be offered a chance to start preparing themselves for interaction in global work life communities already during their degree studies. Workplace communication needs to be ethical and ethical dialogue skills can be practiced in the English classroom.

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Working life, dialogue and ELF

As working life continues to become more interconnected, complex and uncertain, interaction skills are being recognized as valued skills for work (Burns, 2010; Hellström, Hämäläinen, Lahti, Cook, & Jousilahti, 2015; Hellström & Ikäheimo, 2017; Van Der Sanden & Meijman, 2008). More specifically, dialogue skills are being emphasized in many contexts, recently for instance by Olli-Pekka Heinonen in a SITRA article (Heikka 2018). At the same time, when the need for such skills has become apparent, it has also been pointed out in various contexts (Hellström & Ikäheimo, 2017; Nissi & Honkanen, 2015) that people are not being taught those skills. The challenges in working life bring about the need for wiser use of human potential (cf. Wilenius, 2017). To answer these needs, five years ago, I designed a course on dialogue in English for global work life purposes. The course, *Dialogue – Constructive Talk at Work* (<https://www10.uta.fi/opas/opintojakso.htm?id=32547&lang=en&lvv=2017&uiLang=fi>), is offered at the University of Tampere as an optional English course (2 ECTS) to be taken as part of degree studies. It is open for students from all disciplines.

Dialogue is a specific orientation to conversation (cf. Kakkuri-Knuuttila, 2015), and there are various approaches to it. The most well-known developers of dialogue theories are Mihail Bakhtin, David Bohm and Martin Buber (see e.g. Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981; Bohm, 1996; Friedman,

2002). It is my understanding that the three approaches may have slightly different emphases and perspectives, but they all see dialogue as a non-individualistic way of sharing and creating meaning that respects humanity. Bohm's conception of dialogue is quite abstract, but it has been interpreted and developed by several of his followers in such a way that it has been practiced successfully in work life contexts (cf. Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 1993; Senge, 1994). This is the reason why the *Dialogue: Constructive Talk at Work* course is based on Bohmian dialogue.

What seems to be typical in dialogue literature is that although language is considered central in dialogue, the role of foreign languages is not discussed (cf. Bohm, 1996; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999). Interaction in work communities is often challenging even when sharing the same native language. Using a lingua franca as a language of communication at work can very likely increase the challenges in interaction. Language courses tend to focus on communication with native speakers and rarely take communication with and between non-native speakers into account. The undeniable role of English as a lingua franca in the world, and therefore also in global working life, makes it important that English language education provide students with dialogue skills in English and raise their understanding and awareness of lingua franca communication. ELF perspective calls for a paradigm shift in language education: instead of traditional contents that students might expect such as word lists, grammar, and culturally acceptable ways of functioning with the language according to native-speaker cultural norms, there should be more focus on ethical aspects of human interaction. In the following, I will briefly describe the approach, contents and some feedback from the *Dialogue: Constructive Talk at Work* course, and discuss some questions that teaching dialogue has made me think about.

***Dialogue: Constructive Talk at Work* – an optional English course**

Dialogue might easily be considered simply a tool for conversation, but, in fact, raising awareness of the dialogue orientation provides the language classroom with a lot of educational content. The Bohmian dialogue approach followed in the *Dialogue: Constructive Talk at Work* course aims at raising awareness of the power of thinking together, the value of increasing understanding and equal communication in groups (cf. Bohm, 1996; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999). The course has been offered since 2013 and as it is an optional course open to all faculties, the groups are always transdisciplinary with students from various fields. From the start, students have welcomed the course and all groups have been full with students on the waiting list. The course is offered in every period, five groups per academic year. This means that almost 100 students a year take the course.

The course covers such Bohmian dialogue topics as suspending judgement, checking assumptions, reflection and inquiry, listening, body language and art. In addition, I have introduced two other topics that seem to relate well to the dialogue orientation. The course starts with a dialogue on values and later students consider whether forgiveness is possible in work life contexts. Dialogue is a contemplative practice (<http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>) and therefore each session starts with a short mindfulness exercise. The course consists of 26 contact hours covered in six four-hour meetings which are conducted while sitting in a dialogue circle. In the first part of each four-hour session, one of the dialogue topics is introduced and practiced, and in the second part of the session, students work on a group project that they have defined themselves. In the introductory

practice part of the session, the teacher sits in the circle emphasizing the equal quality of the interaction. In the second part of the session, when students work on the group task, the teacher sits outside of the circle and only facilitates the group work on request or when considered necessary. The process involves practicing the dialogue orientation in developing the project. The final products are not the main objective in the process, but they are published with the group's consent in the course blog (<http://blogs.uta.fi/elfdialogue/>). In addition, the students read two articles: Schein's (1993) article introducing dialogue in organizations, and an article by Stone (2002) introducing forgiveness in organisations. After each session, the students post their reflections on the dialogue topics, exercises and the group dialogue in a blog on the course Moodle page.

Feedback on the course has basically been of two kinds: students are either very happy with what they call 'a different kind of language course', or then some of them feel that the topics are somehow too abstract and they cannot see their relevance to working life. The latter kind of feedback is in the minority and seems to be based on expectations of what a language course should be like, i.e., providing useful vocabulary, phrases and cultural norms. In addition to not complying with conventional expectations of a language course, another aspect of the course that may be challenging is the requirement to self-reflect. On the other hand, some only find that rewarding:

The conversational, unhierarchical form and developing oneself as a person instead of some detailed information were really revolutionary ways of learning. (Translated from Finnish, MH)

It was a good organized lesson which was very closed to a psychological training. During this one every participant had a great opportunity to change, develop him/herself in the best way through a very short period. Thanks!!!

Students also appreciate the focus on ELF communication:

Thank you for the course! During all my English studies, I have been a rather timid speaker, and felt that all my sentence structures are being judged. In this course, I felt for the first time that I was able to communicate in English in an academic environment and that it is really fun too. I think that in comprehensive school and high school more attention should be paid to dialogue skills rather than trying to make everybody impeccable speakers. The fear of mistakes only increases uncertainty and when you are afraid, you prefer to keep your mouth shut. (Translated from Finnish, MH)

Reflections

Teaching dialogue skills for global work life purposes in the context of a higher education English language curriculum has made me look at language education from a new perspective. English as a lingua franca raises many questions about form, function and culture, and these questions are not easy to answer. I would agree with Kostogriz and Doecke (2007) that English cannot be taught as a project of assimilating the language learners to the native English speaker culture.

Teaching English for global work life purposes therefore means considering ‘nativeness’ and ‘non-nativeness’ in regard to such issues as equality and power. These kinds of questions call for an ethical framework.

In her analysis of Bohmian dialogue, Kakkuri-Knuuttila (2015) makes the observation that although neither Bohm nor Isaacs index the words ‘values’ or ‘ethics’, their development work for dialogue has a strong ethical emphasis. The *Dialogue: Constructive Talk at Work* aims to prepare students for global work life purposes and it is not only interaction skills per se that are needed, but ethical thinking as well. Problems at work can be ‘wicked’ (cf. Yankelovich, 2014), which means that such problems make interaction challenging. Ethical dialogue skills are essential especially in multicultural work places, where English is used as the common language. There are some signals that ethical English teaching may be on the rise. At the beginning of this year, Dickey’s (2018) article on ethical guidelines for teachers was published in the TESOL (teachers of English to speakers of other languages) *Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*. In addition, articles on the ethical aspects on teaching English have started to appear in this millennium. Owaga, Johnson and Kunishige (2013) suggest that to both improve English proficiency and raise global awareness in Japan, a new discipline called ‘Ethical English’ be established. Kostogriz and Doecke (2007) discuss an ethical framework for professional practice in English education based on the ethics of dialogical recognition. Pike (2011) discusses developing as an English teacher and argues that Aristotle’s virtue ethics would be more suitable for the profession than Plato’s or Kant’s ethics.

In this article, I have presented just a few examples on how ethics could be taken into account when teaching English. Bohmian dialogue, being ethical in its orientation, guides students to start thinking about ethical questions in work life communication and in life in general. It is my contention that ethical English teaching should be taken seriously in English language education in higher education – especially in universities like the University of Tampere that “educates people who shape the future, understand the world and change it.” (<http://www.uta.fi/en/about-us/strategy>)

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