The Triadic Dialogue Reconsidered: Microgenetic Processes of Transfer

Commentary on Clarà and Mauri

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Appropriation · Cultural mediators · Triadic dialogue

What is the role of classroom talk in the teaching-learning process? This important question has informed the work of researchers in education, sociolinguistics, and developmental psychology for many decades. Studies of classroom discourse reveal a pervasive and predictable pattern of interaction that is teacher-directed and consists of three interactional exchanges: Initiation, Response, and Feedback or Evaluation (IRF/E). Recently, it is referred to as a “triadic dialogue” [Lemke, 1990; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975]. Research into the triadic dialogue has led to a widespread view that the IRF sequence restricts students’ active participation in the co-construction of knowledge during explicit instruction. Yet, many students do learn academic content, and they most often do this through an IRF exchange sequence. Clarà and Mauri [this issue] explain how this learning happens in their excellent article in which they contribute to the development of the general laws of exchange in sociolinguistics. However, rather than the more common emphasis on knowledge construction, these authors draw from Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of development to focus on the transfer of responsibility for using cultural mediators. They show how this transfer occurs through three mechanisms in the triadic dialogue and, in doing so, contribute to our understandings of how a common, often criticized, discourse pattern between students and teachers fosters learning.

Over the past thirty years or so, there has been a growing interest in “present-to-future” models of development that explain how processes of change emerge through the co-construction of knowledge during social interaction [Valsiner, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978]. This interest rekindled an examination of discourse practices between novices and tutors. Further, this work suggested that it made sense to look more closely at the canonical IRF exchange sequence in classrooms since it had been identified as omnipresent yet ineffective in fostering learning. Not surprisingly, this re-examination led the majority of researchers to consider more adaptive or productive

ways of engaging in academic contexts with the implicit goal of supplanting the IRF sequence [Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988]. At the same time, there were those scholars who desired a better understanding of the role of IRF in learning contexts and those who wanted to contribute to the general theory of exchange developed by Sinclair and Coulthard [1975]. These scholars went on to expand this theory and contribute to our understandings of the complex and intricate dynamics of this turn-taking sequence [e.g., Berry, 1981; Wells, 1999]. It is to this body of work that the article by Clarà and Mauri offers an important contribution.

The intriguing aspect of their contribution to the general theory of exchange is that it also makes possible an examination of the microgenetic transfer of responsibility for cultural mediators. This transfer process has not been the focus of prior investigations into classroom talk for two reasons. First, renewed interest in classroom discourse was animated, in large part, by a desire to understand how teachers create opportunities for students to participate actively in the construction of knowledge. Not unexpectedly, this focus led to a large body of research focused on those components of the triadic dialogue typically enacted by teachers, that is, the Initiation (I) and Feedback (F) moves. These investigations resulted in broad agreement that the feedback move played a significant role in structuring students' engagement. Findings from this research, however, revealed a range of subtle differences in this move [Hall & Walsh, 2002]. These differences were nontrivial in relation to how and under what circumstances students would engage in knowledge construction. A similar pattern of variance in the initiation move was also found, and it too made a significant difference for active participation [Nassaji & Wells, 2000]. While this research was aimed at better understanding the role of the IRF in student learning, the Response (R) move was not examined closely. The reason for this lack of attention is related to the view that responses were controlled and directed by teacher talk and therefore reflected a passive structuring of talk by learners. The widespread emphasis on understanding the role of teacher talk drew researchers' attention away from investigating the processes of transfer. However, it was not the only reason. The IRF as an analytical frame was not designed to capture nor make visible how transfer processes occurred over interactional time.

Clarà and Mauri's multi-dimensional approach makes possible such an analysis. They accomplish this by drawing from the work of Berry [1981] who differentiates interlocutors as primary and secondary knowers. Similar to Vygotsky, Clarà and Mauri explicitly define the primary locutor as knowing how to use a cultural mediator and the secondary interlocutor as learning how to use this mediator. They combine these knower categories along with an adaptation of Wells's [1999] more general theory of exchange, which recasts each move in the IRF as Demands (an obligatory request), Gives (an offering), and Acknowledgements (acknowledgement of what is given/known). Then, by introducing Bakhtin's notion of voice to their principled combination of prior work in sociolinguistics, Clarà and Mauri's approach allows for a very nuanced analysis of each component of the IRF sequence. In their analysis, they focus on the Give move to identify and show how three different varieties of this interactional move allow learners to use their own voice and that of the tutor to appropriate the primary knower's knowledge, that is, competency in using a mediator. Interestingly, Clarà and Mauri's analysis illustrates how Gives can be enacted in any of the IRF moves and include Repeating Gives, Sharing Gives, and Disputing Gives. Their analysis captures how a learner's creative use of Repeating Gives affords her repositioning as a primary knower. This repositioning is not simply accomplished through an indi-

vidual's utterances but rather through a dialogic process in which a learner begins to interpret the function of a cultural form to solve a future problem. Similarly, Sharing Gives illuminates how the transfer of a mediator arises from an interwoven composite of emergent and collaborative utterances in which the learner indicates knowledge of the mediator and confers authority upon its use. Finally, Clarà and Mauri's Disputing Gives brings to the forefront that the transfer of a mediator is not necessarily a seamless process but also includes the potential for challenging and/or negotiating perspectives about how or when to use a cultural mediator.

Clarà and Mauri's contribution captures two very important elements in a microgenetic process of transfer. First, they show how communicative processes in collaborative goal-directed activity highlight the pragmatic relevance of a cultural mediator. Then, by capturing the contingent and, at times, unpredictable interactions of dyadic talk, they show how teachers and learners utilize linguistic resources opportunistically and agentively to co-participate in the transfer of cultural mediators. Their approach to transfer, similar to Bakhtin's [1986] notion of appropriation, helps us better understand how seemingly ritual-like regularities in teaching-learning talk need not constrain agential actions of meaning-making. In doing so, they show how reformulating the neglected Response move of the IRF as different varieties of a Give allows us to see a learner's active appropriation of a mediational tool.

The treatment of transfer in sociocultural development theory is not new. Cole and his colleagues at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition [1983] argued for a cultural-practice approach in which transfer "is arranged by the social and cultural environment" and, therefore, is related to local communities of practice (p. 341). The goal of this cultural-practice approach was to illuminate how individuals and the social context are mutually active. This work resulted in the emergence of two inter-related metaphors to describe how learning and transfer occurred through engagement in a practice – participation and appropriation. For example, Rogoff [1991] uses "guided participation" to study the active interpersonal processes of engagement in a local context and shows how, through these processes, individuals appropriate (transfer, take on) new roles and responsibilities. Similarly, Lave and Wenger [1991] and Greeno [1998] utilize the metaphor of "situated participation" to document transfer as shifts in the nature of participation to become a central participant (or not) in a community of practice. The point is that transfer from a sociocultural perspective is not viewed as a passive unidirectional transmission of knowledge but rather involves a transactional process that results in improved or more competent participation in a local community. An important part of this improved participation, of course, is the transfer or appropriation of cultural mediators.

In the past, the micro processes of how such a transfer occurs in classroom contexts have not been the focus of research utilizing the participation metaphor. This may be due to the emphasis on *shifts* in participation during learning rather than the negotiated transfer of a particular mediator. Although analysis of these shifts is used to make implicit inferences about what knowledge a student has appropriated to participate more competently, the analytical focus is the nature of participation through roles and responsibilities. Another reason for few studies on how transfer occurs through the IRF may be related to the way in which mediation tends to be conceptualized in research. That is, one's experiences, thoughts, and ideas are mediated by tools and signs that are embedded in and emerge from practices. From a practice perspective, the triadic dialogue of classrooms would be examined to determine how it

mediates (reorganizes) the moment-to-moment unfolding of joint activity. According to Bruner [1996], however, learning is always “dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources,” which are collaboratively acquired and made available, in part, through “education” (p. 4). Clarà and Mauri’s nuanced approach makes it possible to analyze the dynamic and complex intersubjective processes through which participants actively interpret, negotiate, and/or renegotiate interactional sequences to appropriate cultural resources. Their work also has the potential to refocus our attention on cultural mediators because they provide new methodological tools to capture how these resources are transferred through the triadic dialogue.

Clarà and Mauri’s work is part of a larger body of emerging research that is re-evaluating the interactional architecture of classroom talk and finding it to be more complex than once thought [e.g., Hellermann, 2003; Park, 2013; Waring, 2011]. Despite this growing body of research, Clarà and Mauri have highlighted an area of research that remains at the margins: conceptualizations of transfer and their analysis from a cultural practice perspective [for an exception, see Saxe, 1987]. Transmission, or the handing over of existing cultural knowledge for learners to use in new problems, is the focus in more traditional views of transfer. And, as Newman, Griffin, and Cole [1989] pointed out, the tripartite structure of the IRF is well suited for this view. Nonetheless, the IRF sequence has been shown to be a significant part of learning practices cross-culturally. Cultural practices, however, are not simply about the transmission of knowledge but also about the construction or invention of new knowledge, new cultural mediators. Even in the relatively ritualized structure of the triadic dialogue, what gets constructed is not uniform. This is because situated social interactions are always contingent, unpredictable, and embedded in circumstances with different goals, different values, and different interests. When situations of development are viewed as practices, their potential for transmission as well as their potential for the invention of new knowledge comes into relief. This suggests that future research into the IRF as part of teaching-learning practices may reveal what role it plays in the creative aspects of knowledge construction. Clarà and Mauri’s contribution to the general theory of exchange offers analytical tools that can help make such analyses possible.

Although we are coming to a better understanding of the complexity of the triadic dialogue and how variation in its structure leads to very different forms of engagement, it is but one of many possible ways of interacting in educational arenas. The constraints of this form of dialogue are not trivial. It tends to take our attention away from the dynamic shifts of competency that occur over interactional time as learners begin to create their own future. And, in so doing, teachers or tutors invariably see themselves rather than students in a more agential position for directing learning. Consequently, how positioning processes unfold in the IRF plays an important role in how and under what circumstances students regulate their engagement [Stone, Kerrick, & Stoeckl, 2013]. Not unexpectedly, this positioning process also has implications for students’ and teachers’ views about knowledge construction. There is a large body of evidence that shows those students who engage in learning activity recurrently through the triadic dialogue tend to have a passive, transmission view of knowledge construction rather than an active, co-constructed view. These and other less than desirable implications of the IRF sequence suggest that we continue to search for more innovative and creative ways of interacting in educational activity. This search, as Clarà and Mauri’s work points out so clearly, should also include a better understanding of the triadic dialogue in teaching and learning and ways to adapt it to meet our educational goals.

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