

An Investigation of Fostering Dialogic Stance in Students’ Classroom Talk: Iranian EFL Teachers’ Awareness of Dialogic Inquiry Approach in Focus

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of teachers’ awareness of the dialogic inquiry approach on enhancing students’ classroom talk with a dialogic stance. To achieve this aim, an intensive in-service teachers’ development course was held for 3 EFL teachers at Mehr Language Institute, Eghlid, Fars, Iran. Afterward, they practiced the approach for a 20-session term. The researchers observed the video-recorded classes, made field notes, and applied the Increasing Progressive Differentiation and Career Points Scale and the Dialogic Inquiry Tool (D-I-T): Students’ rubric. The D-I-T students’ rubric was utilized to identify the dialogic stance of students’ classroom talk. Collected qualitative data were analyzed and interpreted by Holiday’s (2015) method. The interpretation of data, largely, pointed out that the teachers’ awareness, progressively, made teachers change their classroom practice into a dialogic inquiry approach, and this caused an enhancement of students’ dialogic stance of classroom talk.

Keywords: Classroom talk, Dialogic Inquiry Approach, Teachers’ awareness, Teachers’ development

1. Introduction

The communicative dimension of language acquisition and learning has gained significant importance in light of the requirements of the 21st century. One of the teachers’ most effective tools to foster their students’

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communicative learning is the “talk” they can enhance in their classrooms (Fisher & Frey, 2021). This talk as an essential tool in the classroom allows students to formulate their thoughts, communicate their ideas, and reflect upon their learning. It also helps teachers to understand and clarify students’ thinking (Harrison, 2006). Purposeful talk is one of the important tools by which the students construct, and refine their understandings of language (Education Department of Western Australia, 1996). Graff et al. (2006) called this “entering a conversation of ideas” (p. ix). To do so, the students must be able to engage in the classroom talk vigorously. This remains a challenge in any classroom, at any level when the teacher tells things monologically and without students’ active engagement (Fisher & Frey, 2021). Dialogic teaching is a general approach to instruction that centers on the strategic use of classroom talk to support learning (Alexander, 2006). It is consistent with the social-constructivist theory that views language as fundamental to thinking and learning (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Vygotsky, 1987; Wells, 2000). Reznitskaya (2012, p. 446) asserts that “by making their classroom interactions more dialogic, teachers can engage students in a collaborative deliberation of complex questions, and support the development of students’ thinking”. Hence, dialogic inquiry-based teaching places special focus on the core principles of cognitive and exploration learning, and its goal is developing higher-order thought. In other words, teachers do not teach everything directly or explicitly. Instead, students are expected and encouraged to discover the information, produce highlighted rules based on a set of examples and counterexamples, and be able to apply these rules or principles further to new cases, and deal with daily situations (Alexander, 2008). This style of teaching obviously challenges students more compared to the teacher-driven teaching modes. Gillies (2023, p. 1242) views this approach as “a way of galvanizing students’ curiosity and motivation to actively participate in learning”. The approach encourages students to engage in profound thinking within a framework where the instructor facilitates their comprehension through significant interactions (Dehghani, 2022; Gillies, 2020). In transforming lecturing into problem-solving, this approach facilitates deeper comprehension, and by virtue of active participation in the learning process, stimulates the cognitive potential of the students (Elbers & de Haan, 2004).

Regarding the social innate of learning (Vygotsky, 1987), effective classrooms need to have purposeful teacher and student’ talks, because the nature of social communication is the phenomenon of talk (Harrison, 2006). If the students are exposed to a monologic flow of language, they

are not able to get the social dimension of language classes, and they cannot learn as well as when they are socially engaging in the process of teaching and learning. In the best learning environments, dialogic inquiry-based instruction (Nystrand et al., 1997; Wells, 2000) will create a social atmosphere for learning. Nystrand et al. (1997) believe that dialogic instruction is a teacher-mediated exchange of ideas among students. According to Nystrand et al. (1997), the role of the teacher is vital in the application of such an approach. Harrison (2006, p. 70) adds “If students come to learn by building ideas and concepts through social construction, then a teacher’s role is to first set up the conditions in which this dialog can take place”. In addition, Black and Harrison (2004) proposed that teachers help to scaffold new ideas as they emerge by interaction in their classes. Also, “decisions made in her classroom may often be shared or negotiated.” (Scrivener, 2011, p. 18). Through carefully scrutinizing students’ interactions, the teacher understands what the students know, what they know in part, and what they do not know, yet. This allows teachers to present the next learning experiences more carefully, whether in the following discussion or in follow-up exercises in the same lesson or in subsequent lessons (Scrivener, 2011). In addition, teachers are more effective when they act as a facilitators of talk to assist students in their conceptual structure discovery and development, instead of a primary source of classroom talk (Bourdage & Rehark, 2009). Teachers can do this by “incorporating cooperative learning activities, peer teaching, group projects, and the use of technology” (Yamrali et al., 2023). When we look up the history of education and second or foreign language learning, in particular, we see that teachers used to talk for most of the classroom time, and, in contrast to them, the students were quiet and completed their assigned tasks (Fisher & Frey, 2021; Yaqubi & Rashidi, 2019).

Widdowson (1990) argues that classroom practice refers to theoretical principles. Brown (1997) adds teaching is an integration of theory and practice. It means that the teacher’s practice in the classroom is the actualization of theoretical principles that the teacher is aware of (Scrivener, 2011). Reznitskaya (2012, p. 447) asserts that “the reality of typical classroom practices today does not correspond to the highly advocated educational ideal of dialogic teaching”. Particularly, in Iran as an EFL context, studies indicated that the teachers are not interested in applying a dialogic inquiry approach to teach English (Yaqubi & Rashidi, 2019). The reason for this tendency is that the preference of the Iranian EFL teachers, who are viewed as sole authority must never be questioned or challenged, is to teach language forms by introducing the language

elements in systematically arranged steps (Baghoulizadeh & Nosratinia, 2023; Masoumpanah, & Talebinejad, 2013). Thus, to have dialogic inquiry-based language classrooms, the teachers should be thoroughly knowledgeable, and aware of the principles of such an approach to implement, because this kind of awareness is integral to teaching and learning. One way to develop teachers' awareness is to hold in-service workshops (Borg, 2010). Thereupon, the impetus for the present study was to make EFL teachers aware of the dialogic inquiry approach by means of in-service workshops and measure the improving role of the application of the approach by the teachers to foster students' dialogic stance of classroom talks. Accordingly, the study was about to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does awareness of the dialogic inquiry approach have an impact on shifting Iranian EFL teachers' classroom practice from monologic into dialogic?
2. How does teachers' awareness of the dialogic inquiry approach foster the Iranian EFL students' dialogic stance in their classroom talks?

2. Literature Review

The dialogical approach to teaching has both a long history stretching back to Socrates, and a contemporary relevance arising from the elaboration of social-constructivist theories derived from a variety of influences in psychology, linguistics, anthropology, and education. Social constructivism is an offshoot of constructivism whose studies, among constructivist types, have had the greatest impact on instruction, and curriculum design, because it seems to be the most conducive to integration into current educational approaches like the dialogic inquiry approach (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). At the intersection of psychology, and linguistics, Vygotsky, and Bakhtin are recognized as key influences in developing our understanding of the social foundations of learning, and thinking (Renshaw, 2004). In particular, they placed the social deployment of language at the forefront for the production of understanding. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism is the cornerstone of inquiry-based teaching. The theory of Vygotsky provides a possible framework for SLA research by recognizing the social origin of the human mind, and the dialectical interaction which transforms social processes into unique, and creative internal processes which, in turn, transform social realities. Collins (2018) argues that dialogic inquiry teaching is a cognitive educational theory as well as a teaching practice. In comparison to other hypotheses, it was first developed inductively by

reviewing transcripts and evaluating the techniques used by a variety of teachers in various fields. The studies disclosed that all those expert teachers made use of some sort of inquiry, discovery, or Socratic approach to teaching (Lee, 2014).

In her investigation, YoucefBeghoul and Chelghoum (2020) aimed to investigate how the application of the social-constructivist approach by teachers in oral classes helps university freshmen overcome their unwillingness to communicate. She found that if the teachers were aware of the approach principles to substitute the classical monotonous approach with a social-constructivist one, the students' motivation, and interest would be triggered, and as a result, they could enhance their learning strategies by being good speakers of English in and out of the classroom.

Kremer (2016) carried out a study entitled 'Giving learners a voice: A study of the dialogic 'quality' of three episodes of teacher-learner talk-in-interaction in a language classroom'. The researcher observed the class and provided appropriate feedback during a post-lesson supervisory meeting with the student teacher who participated in the study. The results of the research pointed out that creating a dialogic classroom is problematic. Nonetheless, participants need to have self-confidence before dialogic progression. In addition, the investigation revealed that both teachers and students need to actively listen to one another, pick up the cues, adjust, and largely improvise their talk in the classroom.

Northcutt's (2014) case study delved into identifying how the dialogic inquiry approach helps a teacher enhance her students' classroom talk. She coached a teacher and then observed her classes for six sessions. She found out that the approach was practical in moving the teachers' practice away from traditional monologic to dialogic. This shift also caused an enhancement in the students' classroom talk.

Lee (2014) measured the effectiveness and preference of the dialogic inquiry approach in English classes in China. The results showed that the students were encouraged to have dialogic talks while their teachers applied a dialogic inquiry approach. In addition, the study elucidated that this approach increased the students' understanding of the course material. The investigation also revealed that inquiry-based teaching fostered students' classroom engagement, made an effective, and meaningful learning experience, and enhanced dialogic classroom talk.

Ghahremani-Ghajar et al. (2012) scrutinized critical practices of teaching medical English in an Iranian university. The study indicated a contextualized instance of inquiry-based language learning in two senses: 1) student's inquiry about the content for oneself, and 2) moving away from spoon-feeding language learning to experience language

dialogically in the context of the classroom. Additionally, the study recommended that university language teaching should involve inquiry, and gain students' challenging experience, and discovery by means of dialogic talks.

In their project, Wells and Haneda (2009) studied the impact of teacher-learner's dialogic interactions to create opportunities for the students with different levels of competence in English to use the second language in real, and meaningful situations. To do so, they investigated three case studies. The researchers concluded that the dialogic approach was presented as being a much more effective approach to teaching and learning the target language than traditional approaches.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

The design of this descriptive study is qualitative. It means that qualitative methods were applied to collect and analyze data. The type of research to carry out the present study was an instrumental case study, because the researchers investigated the particular case, here, 3 teachers and their pupils, to get insight into the effectiveness of the dialogic inquiry approach on classroom talk in an EFL context. It's worth mentioning that the data were reported in a quantified way by using numbers and statistics to make them easier to interpret and more clarified to report.

3.2. Participants

Three EFL teachers took part in the present study. These participants were selected from the teachers who were teaching English to the intermediate level students at Mehr Language Institute of Eghlid, which is one of the branches of Mehr Educational Group in Fars, Iran. One of them was female, the two others were male.

Besides, these three teachers' students participated in the study. The total number of students was 28. They were young adults at ages of 19 to 25.

3.3. Sampling Method

Teachers who were interested in participating in the research were selected by convenience sampling method from Mehr Language Institute of Eghlid, one of Mehr Educational Group branches in Fars, Iran. Also, the 3 teachers' students took part in the study. There was no sampling method for selecting the students. It means that they were the participant teachers' students who were their pupils in the previous term, and they were going to continue learning English with those teachers.

3.4. Instruments

The present study applied four tools and instruments to obtain the results: 1) Snow et al.'s (2007) Increasing Progressive Differentiation and Career Points Scale, 2) The Dialogic Inquiry Tool: Students' rubric which was designed by Reznitskaya, Oyler, and Glina (2015), 3) video-recordings, and 4) field notes. The following paragraphs elaborate on the first two instruments.

Increasing Progressive Differentiation and Career Points Scale is about to discuss the growth in teachers' profession in terms of their knowledge-based, and effective implementation of literacy practices. The scale can be applied for experienced teachers to have only surface-level knowledge about a new approach or a new teaching routine. So, being a veteran teacher does not automatically correlate with the building of a usable base of knowledge for new practices (Snow et al., 2007). Snow et al. (2007) identified and described categories as follows: 1) declarative knowledge, 2) situated, can-do procedural knowledge, 3) stable procedural knowledge, 4) expert, adaptive knowledge, and 5) reflective, organized, and analyzed knowledge.

The D-I-T students' rubric was utilized to identify to what extent the students adapt to the dialogic inquiry approach and make dialogic classroom talks. Student's indicators include a) engaging in co-reasoning, b) providing reasons, c) offering alternatives, d) reflecting on discussion processes, and e) connecting with peers. The students' D-I-T has a continuum with 6 numbers: categories 1 and 2 describe student conversations that suggest a monologic stance and categories 5 and 6 suggest a dialogic stance; numbers 3 and 4 on the continuum are considered to lie about midway between an extreme monologic and an extreme dialogic.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

All data were collected during the winter term of the 2019-2020 academic year. The teachers participated in three intensive in-service workshops to raise their awareness of the nature and functions of the social-constructivism point of view, dialogic inquiry approach, and classroom talk with a dialogic stance. They also learned how to apply practical techniques of the approach in the classroom. The workshop series encompassed three days within a week. Afterward, there were non-participant classroom observations by the researchers for a 20-session term. The researchers observed 5 sessions of each teacher's classes (viz., two sessions at the beginning, one session in the middle, and two sessions at the end of the term) in an overt non-participant manner. The sessions were digitally video-recorded to make field notes.

3.6. Data Analysis

The researchers watched the video-recorded sessions to make field notes, and as a result, to mark the D-I-T indicators, and the Increasing Progressive Differentiation and Career Points Scale. The reason for this was that the researchers were about to increase reflexivity and decrease the impact of the problematic issue of researcher bias (Denzin, 2018; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2005).

In this qualitative study, Holliday's (2015) method was applied to analyze data. Firstly, the researchers coded the field note data to keywords or phrases. Secondly, they determined the themes by grouping the codes that occurred with significant frequency. Thirdly, they constructed arguments by using the themes as the headings and subheadings. Finally, they went back to the data to reassess the codes and refine the themes. This method helped the researchers to interpret data and mark the rubric and scale.

4. Results

4.1. Answering the first research question

The focus of the first research question was on changing teachers' practices into a dialogic inquiry approach. To this end, the Increasing Progressive Differentiation and Career Points Scale provided evidence that participant teachers assimilated the dialogic inquiry approach into their teaching practices in their EFL classes. The following table will depict Teacher A's scores.

Table 1. *Teacher A's scores on the scale*

N. of Observation	Scores
Observation 1	3
Observation 2	4
Observation 3	4
Observation 4	5
Observation 5	5
Mean	4.2

As the above table shows, the average of Teacher A's score was 4.2. The following table shows the researchers' scores for Teacher B's scale for each observation.

Table 2. *Teacher B's scores on the scale*

N. of Observation	Scores
Observation 1	3
Observation 2	4
Observation 3	4
Observation 4	5
Observation 5	5
Mean	4.2

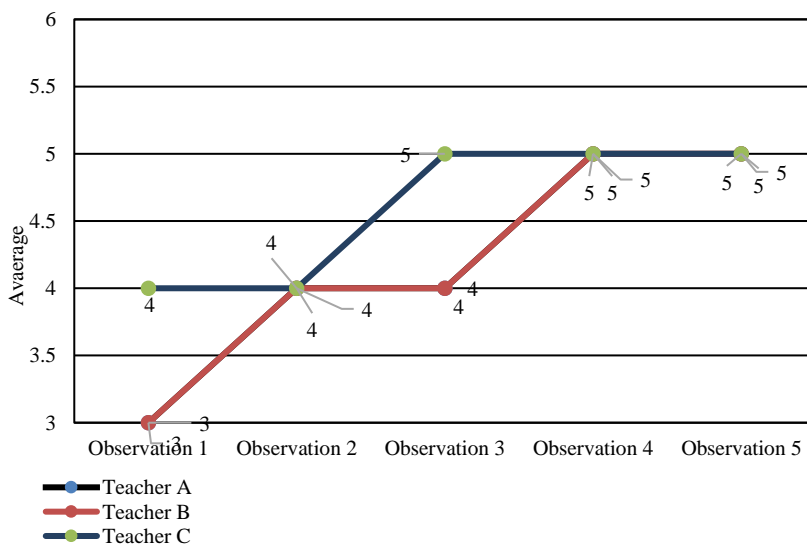
Teacher B got an average of 4.2 on the scale as Table 4 revealed. The following table depicts the observers' scores for Teacher C.

Table 3. *Teacher C's scores on the scale*

N. of Observation	Scores
Observation 1	4
Observation 2	4
Observation 3	5
Observation 4	5
Observation 5	5
Mean	4.6

Teacher C showed a little better progress as her average score was 4.6. Figure 1 shows the comparison of the case study teachers' scores on the scale.

Figure 1. *Comparison of the Teachers' scores on the scale*



4.2. Answering the second research question

The aim of this research question was to investigate the dialogic stance of the students' classroom talks when the dialogic inquiry approach was applied by their teachers. To this end, six indicators of the D-I-T students' rubric were marked by the score range of 1 to 6. The following tables and figures will depict the results of the marked rubric for each teacher's classroom observations. Table 4 shows the observers' marks on Teacher A's students' dialogic stance.

Table 4. *Researchers' marks on the D-I-T students' rubrics indicators for Teacher A's classes*

Session	The D-I-T students' rubric indicators					Mean
	engaging in co-reasoning	providing reasons	offering alternatives	reflecting on discussion processes	connecting with peers	
1	3	3	3	4	5	3.6
2	4	4	3	5	6	4.4
3	5	4	5	6	6	5.2
4	6	5	6	6	5	5.6
5	6	6	5	6	6	5.8

The above table indicates that Teacher A's students have progressed since their average marks ranged from 3.6 to 5.8 for the first and the last sessions of the term, respectively. Teacher B's pupils' performance in dialogic classroom talks is depicted in the following table. This table pointed out that the minimum mark was for the first session (i.e., 3.8), and the maximum mark was for the last two sessions (i.e., 5.8). This range of averages showed Teacher B's progress in dialogic classroom talks.

Table 5. *Researchers' marks on the D-I-T students' rubrics indicators for Teacher B's classes*

Session	The D-I-T students' rubric indicators					Mean
	engaging in co-reasoning	providing reasons	offering alternatives	reflecting on discussion processes	connecting with peers	
1	4	4	4	3	4	3.8
2	4	5	4	4	5	4.4
3	6	6	5	5	6	5.6
4	6	5	6	6	6	5.8
5	6	5	6	6	6	5.8

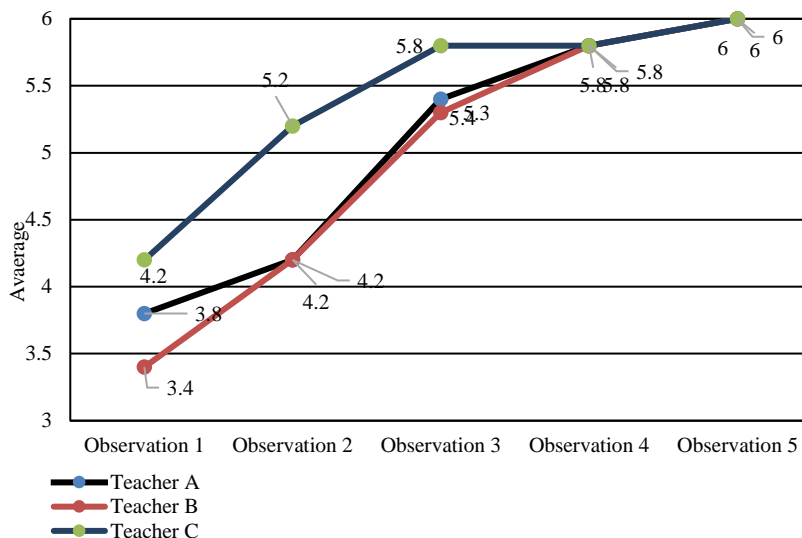
The observers marked Teacher C's students' dialogic stance for the indicators of the rubric as Table 6 shows.

Table 6. *Researchers' marks on the D-I-T students' rubrics indicators for Teacher C's classes*

Session	The D-I-T students' rubric indicators					Mean
	engaging in co-reasoning	providing reasons	offering alternatives	reflecting on discussion processes	connecting with peers	
1	4	3	4	4	5	4
2	5	5	4	5	5	4.8
3	6	5	6	6	6	5.8
4	6	6	6	6	6	5.8
5	6	6	6	6	6	6

As the above table indicated, Teacher C's students got an average score of 4 in the first session, and 6 for the last. Figure 2 illustrates a comparison of the three participant teachers' students' performance in classroom talks with a dialogic stance while the teachers applied a dialogic inquiry approach.

Figure 2. Comparing the Teachers' students' average marks on the D-I-T students' Rubric



5. Discussion

The results of the first instrument indicated that Teacher A got 3 in the first observation. It means that he was at the level of stable procedural knowledge of the dialogic inquiry approach. For observations 2 and 3, the observers scored 4, meaning that the teacher had expert, adaptive knowledge. Since Teacher A had reflective, organized, and analyzed knowledge of the dialogic inquiry approach, the researchers scored 5 for observations 4 and 5. As Table 2 shows, Teacher B was akin to Teacher A in terms of getting the scores: stable procedural knowledge, with a score of 3 for the first observation, reflective, organized, and analyzed knowledge for the second and third observations, and reflective, organized, and analyzed knowledge of the approach, with the score of 5 for the fourth and fifth observations. Table 3 pointed out that Teacher C was at level 4 (i.e., expert, adaptive knowledge) in the first and second observations. The researchers observed that the teacher had reflective,

organized, and analyzed knowledge of the approach in the third, fourth, and fifth observations.

In light of the results of the instrument, it can be concluded that the case study teachers were in progress in applying the dialogic inquiry approach. In an overall view, the study witnessed that the teachers' awareness of the dialogic inquiry approach was positively influential in shifting their classroom practices into a dialogic inquiry approach. The results of the present study pointed out correspondence with YoucefBeghou and Chelghoum (2020) and Northcutt's (2014) research as in their studies the teachers showed gradual adaptation to the approach.

The second research question was about to find out the enhancement in the students' classroom talk, and the amount of its progress in dialogic stance. In this study, the researchers investigated the teachers' practice, and the student's behavior toward the dialogic inquiry approach to foster dialogic classroom talks, separately. The reason was that it is possible that the teachers adapt to the principles of the approach and apply it in the classroom, but the students do not show progress as expected (Reznitskaya, 2012, Wells, 2000). Hence, the indicators of the D-I-T students' rubric were marked by the observers to stake out that the student's classroom talks moved towards a dialogic stance.

The observers' marks for Teacher A's classes showed that his students' overall use of dialogic classroom talk ranged from an average of 3.6 in the first session to 5.8 in the last session of the term. Teacher B's students' performance in using dialogic talk ranged from 3.8 to 5.8. The researchers found out that Teacher C's students' average marks showed progress session by session from 4 to 6. According to the results and as illustrated by Figure 2 the students' dialogic classroom talks enhanced, and had progress session by session. Generally speaking, the results of the students' rubric correspond with the results of the scale discussed above. It means that the more the teachers were able to apply the dialogic inquiry approach, the more the students' classroom talks had a dialogic stance. However, in some cases, the observers witnessed that the teachers used a dialogic inquiry approach, but the students could not match their classroom behaviors with the approach, particularly, in the first sessions of the observations. The researchers found out that the students, gradually, adapted to the approach and, also, the enhancement in their dialogic stance of their talks was observed. The findings of the present study indicate correspondence with Kremer's (2016), Lee's (2014), Northcutt's (2014), and Ghahremani-Ghajar et al.'s (2012) research studies.

6. Conclusion

Learning English in an EFL context like Iran is a challenging social experience that is made and progressed in the classroom with the help of the teacher (Aghari et. al, 2022; Erfanian Jalali, & Zarei, 2012). Social-constructivist approaches like dialogic inquiry can be a choice for teachers whose concern is to foster their students' classroom talk with a dialogic stance (Lemke, 1990). EFL teachers can make opportunities for the students to have dialogic classroom talks. The prerequisite for this is that the teachers are aware of the approach. The present qualitative case study focused on the influence of the teachers' awareness of the dialogic inquiry approach on the EFL students' classroom talks with a dialogic stance. The researchers hypothesized that if the EFL teachers are aware of the principles, assumptions, and techniques of the dialogic inquiry approach, the students' classroom talks will be fostered dialogically. By and large, the results of the study revealed that teachers' awareness of the approach caused the participant teachers to change their practices to a dialogic inquiry approach. In addition, the study pointed out that the more dialogic teachers practice, the more dialogic students' classroom talk. However, it was observed that, in some cases, the teachers' practices matched the approach, but, surprisingly, the classroom talk of some of the students was not as dialogic as the D-I-T students' rubric expected. It means that other factors should be considered, the factors related to the student's side. Wells (2000) argues that if the students are trained for some years applying an approach, the effect of their attitudes toward EFL classes will have some impact on their behaviors in classes administered by a new approach. According to this, much extended time studies should be done to investigate the issue of the influence of the educational system, in which the students are being trained, on the students' adaptation to new approaches like the dialogic inquiry approach (Yaqubi & Rashidi, 2019).

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