

The Role of Dialogic Teaching in Enhancing Student Engagement and Understanding in Primary Chinese Reading Lessons

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Abstract: This paper explores the significant role of dialogic teaching in enhancing student engagement and deepening textual understanding within the context of primary Chinese reading lessons. In contrast to traditional monologic and transmission-based pedagogical approaches, dialogic teaching fosters a collaborative classroom culture where dialogue is central to knowledge construction. The study argues that through structured, purposeful, and reciprocal talk, students are not only more cognitively and affectively engaged but also develop higher-order comprehension skills, critical thinking, and a more nuanced appreciation of the Chinese language and literature. The paper examines the theoretical underpinnings of dialogic teaching, drawing on sociocultural theory, and delineates its core principles. It then provides a detailed analysis of how these principles can be practically implemented in primary Chinese reading classrooms, including specific strategies for teacher questioning, classroom interaction patterns, and the creation of a supportive talk environment. The discussion highlights the challenges in shifting from a teacher-centered to a dialogic paradigm, particularly within educational cultures that may prioritize silence and rote learning. The conclusion asserts that dialogic teaching is not merely a methodological choice but a transformative approach that aligns with the broader goals of contemporary Chinese language education, aiming to cultivate articulate, thoughtful, and engaged young readers.

Keywords: Dialogic Teaching; Student Engagement; Reading Comprehension; Primary Education; Chinese Language Teaching; Classroom Dialogue; Sociocultural Learning

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1. Introduction

The primary Chinese reading classroom stands as a foundational space where young learners first encounter the richness of their linguistic and literary heritage. It is here that students develop the core skills of character recognition, vocabulary acquisition, and basic comprehension, which are essential for all future learning. Traditionally, the pedagogy governing this critical space has often been characterized by a transmission model of instruction. In this model, the teacher, as the authoritative source of knowledge, imparts information about a text—its meaning, its key phrases, and its moral lessons—to students who are expected to listen, absorb, and reproduce this understanding. This approach, while efficient for covering curriculum content, frequently results in passive learning environments where student engagement is limited to compliance and where deep, personal understanding of the text is often secondary to the retrieval of predetermined answers.

In recent decades, global educational discourse has increasingly emphasized the importance of active learning, critical thinking, and communicative competence. Within the specific domain of language and literacy education, this shift has brought to the fore pedagogical approaches that prioritize student voice and collaborative meaning-making. Dialogic teaching emerges powerfully from this context as a compelling alternative to monologic instruction. Rooted in the sociocultural theories of Vygotsky and developed by educational researchers such as Robin Alexander and Neil Mercer, dialogic teaching reconceptualizes the classroom as a community of inquiry where talk is the primary tool for thinking and learning. It moves beyond simple question-and-answer routines to foster authentic, cumulative, and purposeful dialogue where ideas are shared, challenged, and elaborated collectively.

The application of dialogic teaching in primary Chinese reading lessons presents a particularly intriguing and potent opportunity. The Chinese language, with its logographic writing system, rich literary tradition, and cultural depth, offers complex texts that can be unlocked through discussion, interpretation, and connection. A dialogic approach promises to transform reading lessons from exercises in decoding and memorization into vibrant

intellectual explorations. This paper posits that the deliberate integration of dialogic teaching principles is instrumental in significantly enhancing both student engagement and the depth of textual understanding. Engagement here is understood as multidimensional, encompassing behavioral (active participation), affective (interest and enjoyment), and cognitive (sustained mental investment) components. Understanding, meanwhile, refers to the move beyond literal comprehension to inferential, evaluative, and appreciative levels of interacting with a text.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive examination of this proposition. It will commence by establishing a clear theoretical framework for dialogic teaching, followed by an in-depth exploration of its direct impact on student engagement and reading comprehension processes. Subsequently, the paper will offer a practical roadmap for its implementation in the primary Chinese classroom, acknowledging and addressing the inherent challenges. The ultimate aim is to articulate a vision for reading lessons where dialogue is the engine of learning, empowering students to become not just skilled decoders of characters, but thoughtful, critical, and enthusiastic readers of Chinese.

2.Theoretical Framework of Dialogic Teaching

Dialogic teaching is not merely a set of techniques for increasing classroom talk; it is a coherent pedagogical philosophy grounded in specific theoretical traditions and defined by a set of core principles. Understanding this foundation is crucial for its effective and authentic implementation.

The theoretical bedrock of dialogic teaching is predominantly sociocultural, tracing its origins to the work of Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky posited that higher-order cognitive functions originate in social interaction. He famously conceptualized the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other, such as a teacher or peer. Dialogue is the primary mechanism through which this guidance, or scaffolding, occurs. In the context of reading, a child's comprehension of a complex text is mediated through the talk that surrounds it—the teacher's probing questions, the peer's alternative interpretation, or the collaborative summarization of a paragraph. Through such dialogue, the strategies used by skilled readers (making predictions, asking questions, clarifying confusion) are made explicit and gradually internalized by the novice learner. From this perspective, learning to read deeply is an apprenticeship in a community of practice, facilitated through language.

Furthermore, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on dialogism enriches this view. Bakhtin viewed all language as inherently dialogic, meaning any utterance is a response to what has been said before and an anticipation of future responses. In a classroom, this translates to seeing student contributions not as isolated right or wrong answers, but as part of an ongoing chain of thinking. A student's comment about a story character is shaped by the teacher's initial question and will, in turn, shape the next student's thought. This creates a collective, cumulative building of understanding, where the final insight is a product of the group's dialogue, not just the teacher's summation.

3.Enhancing Student Engagement Through Dialogue

Student engagement is the lifeblood of effective learning. A disengaged student is unlikely to process information deeply or retain it meaningfully. Dialogic teaching directly and powerfully addresses the multifaceted nature of engagement by transforming the social and cognitive dynamics of the classroom.

Cognitive engagement refers to the mental investment and strategic thinking a student applies to a learning task. In a traditional reading lesson, cognitive engagement may be limited to memorizing definitions or locating explicit information. Dialogic teaching, by its very nature, demands higher-level cognitive activity. When students are invited to speculate on a character's motives, predict plot developments, compare texts, or evaluate an author's craft, they must analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. They are not just finding answers; they are constructing meaning. The open-ended questions central to dialogic teaching have no single "right" answer, requiring students to think flexibly and creatively. This intellectual challenge, when appropriately scaffolded, is inherently engaging, as it

appeals to children's natural curiosity and desire to make sense of the world.

Simultaneously, affective engagement—the emotional and motivational dimension—is significantly heightened. The supportive and reciprocal principles of dialogic teaching create an emotionally safe classroom climate. When students feel their ideas are valued and that they are co-constructors of knowledge, their sense of ownership and agency increases. This autonomy is a powerful motivator. Furthermore, the social nature of dialogic learning taps into the relational aspects of engagement. The reading lesson becomes a shared intellectual journey, full of debate, discovery, and collaboration. This can transform the experience of reading from a solitary, sometimes tedious, task into a dynamic and enjoyable social activity, building a positive disposition towards Chinese literature and language learning.

4. Deepening Reading Understanding Through Dialogue

While engagement is a critical precondition for learning, the ultimate goal of a reading lesson is understanding. Dialogic teaching serves as a powerful catalyst for moving students from superficial, literal comprehension to deep, intertextual, and critical understanding.

Literal comprehension—understanding what the text explicitly states—is a necessary but insufficient level of reading. Traditional methods often stop here. Dialogic teaching, however, provides the structured talk that propels students into inferential and evaluative realms. Inferential understanding requires readers to "read between the lines," connecting clues within the text and to their own background knowledge to deduce meaning that is not directly stated. In a dialogic classroom, a teacher might facilitate this by asking, "What does the description of the character's clenched fists and averted gaze tell us about how she is feeling, even though the text doesn't say 'she was angry'?" Students then pool their observations and prior experiences to build a consensus.

Evaluative understanding involves making judgments about the text, its content, and its form. Dialogue is indispensable for this, as it allows for the articulation and testing of opinions. Students can debate the actions of a character ("Was the wise man truly wise in doing that?"), critique the author's choices ("Would the story be more effective if it ended here instead?"), or connect the text to personal experiences and societal values ("Does this fable about honesty still apply in today's world?"). Through this process, students learn that texts are not monolithic authorities but constructs that can be analyzed, appreciated, and critiqued. They develop a critical literacy that is essential for navigating the modern world.

5. Implementing Dialogic Teaching in Primary Chinese Reading Lessons

Translating the theory of dialogic teaching into daily practice requires intentional planning, strategic facilitation, and a reimagining of classroom culture. For the primary Chinese teacher, this involves adapting core strategies to the specific demands of the language and curriculum.

5.1 Strategies for Teacher Questioning and Interaction

The teacher's questioning is the primary lever for shifting from monologic to dialogic interaction. Instead of relying on closed, recall-based questions (e.g., "How many characters are in this paragraph?"), teachers must cultivate the use of open, authentic questions that invite thinking. These include:

Probing Questions: "Why do you think that?" "Can you find the part in the story that supports your idea?"
Speculative Questions: "What might happen next if the story continued?" "If you were the author, how would you end this tale?"
Connective Questions: "How does this part relate to what we read yesterday?" "Have we encountered a character like this in another story?"
Reflective Questions: "What was the most confusing part of this text for you?" "How did you figure out the meaning of that idiom?"

Equally important are the teacher's interactional moves following a student's response. Rather than immediately evaluating ("Good!"), the dialogic teacher uses moves that extend and connect thinking. This includes: Revoicing: "So, you're suggesting that the river in the story symbolizes life's journey?" This clarifies and amplifies the student's

idea. Asking for Elaboration: "Tell us more about that." "What makes you say so?" Prompting for Peer Response: "What does everyone else think about [student's name]'s idea?" "Does anyone want to build on that or offer a different view?" Linking Contributions: "[Student A] said the character is brave, and [Student B] pointed out he was also scared at first. How can we understand this mix of feelings?"

5.2 Structuring Dialogic Activities and Creating a Supportive Environment

Dialogic teaching should be structured through specific activities beyond whole-class discussion. Think-Pair-Share is a foundational routine: after posing a rich question, the teacher gives students individual think time, then time to discuss with a partner, before opening the discussion to the whole group. This ensures all students have a chance to formulate and rehearse an idea. For deeper textual analysis, "Literature Circles" or "Book Clubs" can be adapted for primary levels, where small groups discuss a shared text with assigned roles (e.g., summarizer, questioner, connector). Debates on an ethical dilemma from a story or hot-seating (where a student role-plays a character and answers peers' questions) are also highly engaging dialogic formats.

Creating a physically and psychologically supportive environment is non-negotiable. This involves establishing clear ground rules for talk: we listen respectfully, we build on ideas, it's okay to disagree politely, and all ideas are welcomed as part of the thinking process. The teacher must actively model these norms and consistently reinforce them. The classroom layout should facilitate eye contact and interaction, such as a U-shape or clusters of desks. Crucially, the teacher must genuinely value student contributions, showing patience for hesitant speakers and treating "wrong" or incomplete answers as valuable stepping stones in the collective thinking process, not as failures to be corrected abruptly.

6. Conclusion

The journey through the theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and inherent challenges of dialogic teaching underscores its transformative potential for primary Chinese reading lessons. This paper has argued that dialogic teaching is far more than a technique to make lessons more lively; it is a fundamental reorientation of the teaching and learning process aligned with our best understandings of how children learn language and develop literacy. By placing purposeful, collective, and cumulative dialogue at the heart of the reading classroom, we directly address the twin imperatives of modern education: to engage every student and to cultivate deep understanding.

The benefits are clear and multifaceted. Students become cognitively and affectively engaged, transitioning from passive recipients to active constructors of knowledge. Their reading comprehension is propelled beyond the literal to the inferential and evaluative, fostering critical thinking and a genuine appreciation for literary art. They develop not only as readers of Chinese but as articulate speakers, careful listeners, and collaborative thinkers. The Chinese language itself is revealed in its full richness—as a living medium for expression, debate, and cultural exploration, not just a system of characters to be decoded.

Implementing this approach requires courage, skill, and systemic support. Teachers must be equipped with the strategies and confidence to facilitate dialogue effectively. School cultures and assessment systems must value the processes of thinking as much as the products of learning. The challenges, while significant, are not insurmountable. They invite a necessary and fruitful conversation about the ultimate goals of Chinese language education in the primary years.

In conclusion, embracing dialogic teaching in primary Chinese reading lessons is an investment in developing empowered, thoughtful, and engaged young learners. It promises to cultivate a generation of students who do not merely read Chinese texts, but who can question, discuss, and delight in them, thereby preserving and revitalizing the literary heritage they carry. The classroom, filled with the vibrant sound of shared inquiry, becomes a true foundation for lifelong learning and critical citizenship.

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