

## **'Building dwelling thinking' among Chinese post-graduate students: A dialogic approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper describes how Chinese students in the first semester of a Masters in Applied Linguistics course undertaken at a university in south-west China were able to become more critically reflective through the use of journals. The theoretical rationale is based on Bakhtinian notions of 'narratives of rethinking' and centripetal-centrifugal dynamics, whereby students test perspectives and recount turning points in their understanding of important concepts introduced during a semester course unit in the theory of English language teaching and learning. In essence the journals provide a contact zone of struggle between the 'authoritative voice' and the 'internally persuasive voice', a dialogic experience which is seen to be critical to learning.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This article is based on a study of Chinese post-graduate students' attempts to become critically reflective in their understanding of and

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response to EFL course unit content. The inspiration comes from a paper by philosopher Martin Heidegger (1971): *Building dwelling thinking*, based around the idea that 'dwelling' is not simply existing; dwelling means living in a place with others with an attitude of caring and attention. Building cannot take place without dwelling, for, as Heidegger suggests: "We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is because we are dwellers" (p.148). From a Bakhtinian perspective, there are useful links from Heidegger's ideas of building, dwelling, thinking to the central concept of dialogism and to the dynamic interplay of *centripetal* and *centrifugal* forces in this theory (Bakhtin, 1981; 1986). The theories play important roles in the current paper, as both are concerned with the notion of students 'dwelling' with texts in learning situations rather than just 'touring' through them.

This study was carried out in order to assess a possible alternative to existing approaches in relation to "a transmission model of teaching" (Hu, 2005: 678) in Chinese EFL teaching and learning. It should be emphasized, however, that the paper is not concerned with basic 'methodology' in language teaching, but rather with thinking and reasoning strategies linked to new concepts and ideas contributing to course unit presentation. The instructional context is developed as part of a post-graduate programme for English language teachers in a university in south-west China. The programme is conducted in the philosophical context of a Bakhtinian approach to aspects of dialogism, the related dynamics of centripetal-centrifugal juxtapositions, and 'addressivity' (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Holquist, 1981, 1990). The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study which has its origins in the writer's own dissatisfaction with conventional methods of teaching EFL and with the consequent aim of moving towards a 'post-method condition' (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2001, 2003) while focussing on current theoretical and pedagogical insights (Smith, 2007).

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## RESPONDING TO CHANGE AND DIVERSITY

There are increasing attempts by Chinese and Western scholars and teachers alike to analyse the needs of students undertaking courses in English in an era of Chinese 'opening up' and the rapid development of globalization and multiculturalism (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Holliday, 2005; Hu, 2005; Ouyang, 2000). English is the dominant international language used by people in China, and to learn to speak 'good English' and to speak like a 'native speaker' is the dream of most teachers and learners of English (Ouyang, 2000). However, the tendency to 'idolize' the native speaker as the frame of reference for various models of ELT has recently been challenged (Holliday, 2005; Hu, 2005; Li & Li, 2004). This has tended to obscure more fundamental issues relating to English for functional and communication purposes. As noted by Li and Li, (2004) "The image of the native speaker is mythicized ... very often ESL and EFL learners will try to model themselves on the native speaker, only to find themselves as deficient users or unsuccessful learners of the target language" (p.24).

Holliday (2005), talks of the "divisive 'us-them' ideology of native-speakerism" (p.6) which has tended to dominate the TESOL profession for many years.

In this context, Li and Li (2004) challenge the feasibility of the communicative approach with its native-speaker based model because the "L1 (first language) influence is omnipresent in the learner's mindset" (p.25). Therefore, disregarding or rejecting the L1 is seen as unrealistic. They consider that a 'compound' mind-set is much more rational in today's multicultural and globalized world.

In addition to the factors outlined above, there is a growing awareness of the need to change the way that teachers present EFL course units to Chinese students. Hua (2002), a recent graduate in applied linguistics, makes the point that many English major programmes in universities seem "high on investment but low in production" (p.3), that is, that despite the input of time and effort the

end result of improved English proficiency is often disappointing. He quotes the concerns expressed by a growing number of Chinese education professionals relating to the lack of thinking and creative abilities of undergraduate students undertaking English major programmes. He notes further: "This situation is quite alarming. Many English major graduates seem quite unable to operate effectively in real communication situations" (Hua, 2002: 3). This has been a continuing theme in debates relating to Chinese EFL learning over several decades.

More important in China, according to Ouyang (2000), is a "lack of in-depth ethnographic research examining the actual processes and dynamics experienced by individuals involved in, and affected by reforms" (p.397). There is a fundamental need for educators and officials to move away from attempts to superimpose a particular set of instructional practices for pre-service and in-service teachers. What is required, according to Hu (2005), are teacher education programmes designed to "raise participants' methodological awareness and familiarize them with different methodologies and perspectives on language teaching so as to enrich their repertoires of instructional options" (p.655).

## **BAKHTIN AND THE VOICE OF DIALOGISM**

Mikhail Bakhtin, regarded as "one of the leading thinkers of the twentieth century" (Holquist, 1981: xv) was a prominent Russian scholar of literature, culture, language, and philosophy. Of particular interest in relation to the current paper is Bakhtin's approach to language in use, based around 'the utterance'. He regarded the utterance as central to his theory of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). As noted by Baxter (2004: 117) "the interplay of utterances takes the interactants to places unforeseeable at the beginning of a conversation". The meaning of any utterance is never fixed, but differs in rich and complex ways according to the context and conditions within which it is used. According to Baxter (2004), the utterance can be placed along a continuum ranging from a monologic single-voicedness to dialogic double-voicedness (or 'dual' voicedness).

“Single-voiced utterances are those that recognise only one voice, whereas double-voiced utterances are multivocal in nature” (p.122). Baxter (2004) notes that because *voice* means not only the uttered talk of an embodied person but also any perspective, value, function or ideology, the intellectual task becomes that of “interrogating utterances to discern their univocal or multi-vocal quality” (p.122).

The ‘interrogation’ task can also be linked to ideas expressed in writing – particularly in reflective journals, and this is the sense in which I apply the Bakhtinian theory in this paper. Knoeller (2004), drawing on Bakhtin’s concept of ‘dual-voicing’ describes ‘narratives of rethinking’, a powerful tool for analysing “how one’s own views have changed over time” (p.149). The procedure involves a process whereby students test perspectives and recount turning points in their understanding of topics through class discussion and through reflective writing. Narratives of rethinking can incorporate two types of voicing. One type is *textual*, “when students voice the language of authors or characters, whether read verbatim or paraphrased from memory” (Knoeller, 2004: 151). The other type is termed *interactional*: “voices of those actually present and participating in the discussion – such as when voicing recapitulates what students themselves have *already* thought and said” (p.151). This latter type is prominent in the study reported later in the current paper because of the way in which dialogue is used to express a *prior* position about a topic and in particular, the role of inner dialogue concerning *evolving* points of view.

Bakhtin (1981: 272) regarded language as the product of “a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies,” the *centripetal* (i.e., forces of unity, homogeneity, centrality) and the *centrifugal* (i.e., forces of difference, dispersion, decentring). However, an important aspect of Bakhtinian theory in relation to dialogism, is that it is “much too simple to reduce the dialectics of relationships to a series of polar oppositions like certainty versus novelty, autonomy versus connection, and openness versus closedness” (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998: 157). Taken together, it is better to think in terms of “a knot of functional and interdependent contra-

dictions that add validating depth and richness to a scholarly treatment of relational interaction". This perspective of 'interdependent contradictions' is better conceived of as "overlapping domains of *centripetal* or dominant forces juxtaposed with *centrifugal* or countervailing forces" (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998: 157). From the perspective of a person who is reading a text, it is noted that centripetal reading tends to retain the original meaning granted to a text by the author. In its extreme form this may result in a kind of "authoritarian ventriloquism" (Shumway, 1994: 163) whereby a teacher, for instance, may appropriate the 'authoritative word' of a textbook or curriculum guide and present it dogmatically and inflexibly in teaching situations. A process of centrifugal reading, on the other hand, develops beyond the original content and intention and struggles against its boundaries. This fundamental aspect of Bakhtinian dialogic theory underlays the practical implications of students 'dwelling and thinking' with text material as demonstrated later in this paper.

Another aspect is the impact of what might be termed 'new thinking'. In this sense, Bakhtin (1973) noted that "an idea does not *live* in one person's individual consciousness - if it remains there it degenerates and dies. An idea begins to live, that is, to take shape ... and to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogical relations with other, *foreign* ideas" (p.71). The process of engaging with 'foreign' ideas in thinking through providing puzzles and contradictions, is a prominent feature of the current study. Thus, the centripetal relational features of certainty are countered by several centrifugal oppositions that co-exist, such as certainty-unpredictability, certainty-novelty, certainty-mystery, certainty-excitement, and so on.

As noted by Ouyang (2000), in a Chinese TM (traditional method) classroom, the teacher "is a knowledge giver, an authority of what counts as true" (p.399) which allows very little room for expression of individual points of view. In a further complication, Cortazzi and Jin (1996) note that challenging teachers in class or in public by spontaneously raising unsolicited questions about the subject, may

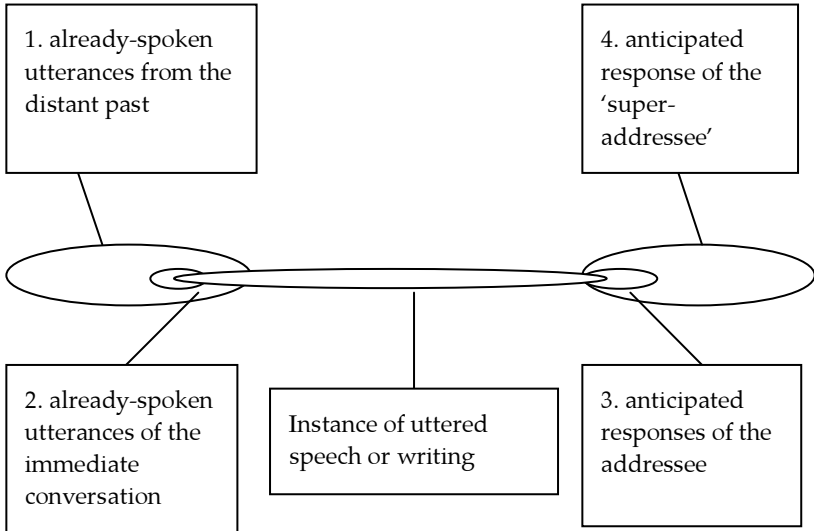
be seen as a deliberate offensive act challenging the teacher's authority and credibility.

As outlined earlier in this paper, Bakhtin (1986) regarded *the utterance* as central to his theory of dialogism. "From the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions" (p.94). In this sense, therefore, the role of the *other* for whom the utterance is constructed is extremely important. In this context, Bakhtin (1986) goes on to elaborate the importance of addressivity in its various roles. The addressee can range from an immediate participant - interlocutor in an everyday conversation - to an indefinite, unconcretized *other*. "Both the composition and particularly the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the given utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer as in an exchange of letters) senses and imagines his addressee, and the force of their effect on the utterance" (Bakhtin, 1986: 95).

In relation to Bakhtin's theory of the "utterance" Baxter and Montgomery (1996) note that it is important to emphasize the *manner* in the context of addressivity. The term invokes a meaning far more complex than the individuated act of an autonomous speaker. Instead, as Bakhtin (1986) indicated, "an utterance exists at the boundary between consciousnesses" (p.106). From this perspective, therefore, there are different kinds of boundaries in a single utterance. Figure 1 presents the four dialogues of the utterance chain. Bakhtin (1986) envisioned the utterance as a link in a chain of dialogue, a link bounded by both preceding links and the links that follow (refer to 1 in Figure 1). Part of a current utterance will have links that may be quite distant and remote from the immediate conversation. These links represent the boundary with the already-spoken of the distant past (in Figure 1). Thus, when we speak we use words that are "already populated" with our memories of other's and our own past conversations.

FIGURE 1

**The Four Dialogues of the Utterance Chain (adapted from Baxter & Montgomery, 1996: 29)**



Other links in the chain of dialogue are more proximal in nature: for example, the immediately prior utterances in the conversation that is being enacted at the moment (refer to 2 in Figure 1). These links represent the boundary with the proximal past; the already-spoken of the current conversation.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) note that despite the already-spoken echoes being ever present, a speaker always imparts something new, something unique, in the act of expressing an utterance, even if this is only in the tone or style of an individual speaker. "From Bakhtin's perspective, then, a person's spoken utterance can never be viewed as a totally autonomous act" (Baxter & Montgomery: 28). On the other hand, Sampson (1993: 106) observes: "I do not simply reflect your depiction of me, but rather adjust myself as I anticipate your responses, even while making



responses to you that help to shape the very responses you are likely to offer back to me”.

As noted above therefore, a given utterance is also situated at boundaries with the conversational links that are anticipated to *follow* (Bakhtin, 1986). In much the same way that there are proximal and distal links with the already-spoken, there are proximal and distal links in relation to the not-yet spoken. When a speaker is constructing an utterance, he or she is taking into account the listener’s possible response. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) note that the link between an utterance and the anticipated response of the listener is the proximal link in the anticipated chain of dialogue.

A further concept in the Bakhtin (1986) perspective, in addition to an audience-addressee outlined above, is the “superaddressee” whose distal response is also anticipated (refer to 4 in Figure 1). “This superaddressee and his absolutely just and responsive understanding, assume various ideological expressions (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people ... and so forth)” (Bakhtin, 1986: p.xiv). In the current paper, I consider that the impact of the superaddressee is relevant because its activation sometimes represents the discovery of a new principle – a kind of ‘absolute truth’ in thinking for teachers struggling with theory units in a course in applied linguistics and looking for ‘answers’ and ultimate principles or ‘laws’.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996), in summing up their perception of the Bakhtin theory note that any interaction between parties “is laced with a variety of dialogic reverberations” (p.29), reflecting the four kinds of linkages in the chain of utterances as presented in Figure 1.

In summing up this section of the paper, it is important to understand that Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of the *utterance* is more complex than an individualized act of a single speaker. The key to Bakhtin’s (1986) theory concerns the role of the utterance in “creat[ing] *something that never existed before*” (pp.119-120) [italics added]. The process is multivocal in nature and is at the heart of the

concept of dialogism. As a basis for reasoning about dialogism, to be developed in the next section of this paper, is a willingness on the part of 'critical friends' to take part in conversations about ideas presented in class and the flexibility of responses, enabling them to be altered given additional information or contrary points of view.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

In view of the discussions above, the identified problem for my research is linked to the concern among Chinese educators and researchers over the lack of communicative flexibility and effectiveness among English major university graduates at a time of 'opening up' in Chinese society. The research question for the purpose of the current project is as follows:

*From a Bakhtinian perspective of 'innerly persuasive discourse' what role do 'critical friends' and the reflective journal play in framing or scaffolding the dialogic thinking of students in a Chinese post-graduate EFL programme?*

The methodology is based around the single-case design of the 'case study' (Yin, 2003: 39 - 40). Within the category system for single-case designs outlined by Yin, I chose the "revelatory case" (Yin, 2003: 42) because, as far as I have been able to determine, the phenomenon being investigated (a Bakhtinian dialogic perspective) is relatively new in a Chinese EFL setting. In addition, the methodology seemed to be pertinent because of its ability to address "descriptive questions (*what* happened), or explanatory questions (*how* or *why* did something happen)" (Shavelson & Towne, 2002: 99). In terms of the research from which the current paper is derived, the case 'project' is a dialogic system of interaction based on the following data compilations: journal records and memo 'fragments' from my role as participant-observer, classroom observations of discussions between student pairs ('critical-friend' pairs) and selections from "physical artefacts" (Yin, 2005: 387) in the form of reflective journals. Thus, the data is in the form of 'case samples' with exam-

ples and linkages which attempt to explore the way that meanings and concepts presented in class sessions are developed.

The semester-based course unit from the Applied Linguistics programme, around which the research was developed, was entitled: *Contemporary Issues in EFL Learning and Teaching*. The unit was offered in the autumn semester (i.e., September – December, 2005) at a university in South-West China and consisted of twelve topics, each occupying three hours of contact time, together with ‘between-unit’ reading and reflection based on journal writing (as described later). The teachers in the programme had been selected by the university to undertake the programme in Applied Linguistics on the basis of wide experience as English teachers in Chinese middle (i.e., secondary) schools or colleges.

The participants from the programme who took part in the research were recruited through a letter of invitation given out during a normal Applied Linguistics class session at the beginning of the semester. All 25 teachers responded positively by returning a ‘tear-off’ slip to the invitation to take part in the research. Ten of these respondents also volunteered to take part in semi-structured interview sessions. For the purpose of this paper a ‘convenience sample’ of four teachers was selected. I was the teacher/researcher for the programme.

Being dissatisfied with the way that I had presented ‘Methodology’ units with similar groups of students in previous years, I was motivated to develop a different procedure, for the post-graduate programme, based on the success with a similar approach used with Chinese adult teacher returnees – teachers who had returned to the university to complete the final two years of a BA undergraduate programme, thus enabling them to become fully qualified.

I tried to create dialogic ‘tensions’ or puzzles in the way that I introduced new concepts into the course unit. I was interested in the dynamics of the centripetal-centrifugal dialogic outlined earlier in the paper, and in this regard I was concerned to provide conditions

that 'forced' students beyond being dependent on a kind of 'authoritative discourse' – or '*prior discourse*' - with which they were familiar and which does not allow for any negotiation, to instead encouraging these students to become involved in what Bakhtin terms "internally persuasive discourse" (Bakhtin, 1981: 343). 'Monologic' approaches, so common in traditional learning, "ignore the dynamic interplay of ... centripetal forces with their centrifugal counterplays" (Baxter, 2004: 111). Some of the outcomes of this process are outlined in more detail in the following sections.

### **The reflective journal**

Reflective thinking is an important part of the programme in the current study. Schön (1983,1987) has written about reflection in relation to activity in a range of problem solving settings. 'Reflection-in-action' focuses on thinking as learners work to solve a problem and reflect on how and why a particular solution worked. Many of the 'real world' tasks in task-based learning for communication-type classroom settings are of this type (e.g., Nunan, 2004). In a study based on the use of journals, Hatton and Smith (1995) studied four types of writing related to different dimensions of reflection. The four types are:

- (a) *descriptive writing* that is non-reflective and basically outlines literature or events;
- (b) *descriptive reflection* that attempts to identify reasons from a personal or literature base;
- (c) *dialogical reflection*, that is an exploration of possible reasons for activities or events through self-discourse; and
- (d) *critical reflection*, that attempts an exploration of activities or events in a broader historical or social context.

In an analysis of their students' written journal material, Hatton and Smith (1995) reported that most displayed examples of descriptive reflection, a few dialogic and a small number gave evidence of critical reflection.

Learning journals were used by Dart *et al.* (1998) as the basis for studying four types of information in graduate diploma in education students. The authors note that in particular, the journal provided the scope for students to “recreate experiences, to analyse and evaluate these, and to integrate their thinking and experiences in the process of sense-making” (p.311).

In working with Chinese post-graduate programs over several years, I gradually introduced the reflective journal as a means to implement and manage these changing perceptions. Over time, the way that the journal was used gradually evolved. Initially, it was implemented simply as a means to summarize content material presented in class. In later years the role and function of the journal was modified to encourage students to utilize the following:

- (a) *graphic organizers*: as diagrammatical formats which function basically as a semantic network of the material (usually articles) being discussed.
- (b) *comments*: representing the developing thinking behind ideas presented in class sessions – written in such a way that is evolving and ‘internally persuasive’.
- (c) *‘critical friend’ responses*: usually in the form of brief annotations added to the comments in the journal. The purpose was to draw attention to developing ideas in the arguments and/or provide additional ideas.

In the context of Chinese learning, some aspects of this structure might seem to contradict what is ‘comfortable’. In relation to (c) above, Hu (2005) notes that “it is no small feat to critique each other’s ideas and actions openly, because it amounts to a departure from a deep-rooted view of personal learning” (p.697).

The underlying features of the programme are embodied in the basic sense of ‘tensionality’ within the Bakhtinian ‘centripetal/centrifugal’ meaning outlined in the first part of this paper and therefore, the journal as a reflective ‘tool’ is used as a means of giving voice to these concepts. The process is linked to the dynamic

notion of centrifugal forces, “closely connected to and assimilated into the writers own words, the two interwoven like the cross threads of a fabric” (Halasek, 1998: 58). An underlying principle of discourse that is internally persuasive, is that the ‘word’ is not final but, like experience itself, is ever incomplete and growing. Journals were therefore an integral part of this process and were catalysts for a procedure that Knoeller (2004), drawing on Bakhtin (1981), terms “narratives of rethinking.” As noted further by Bakhtin (1981), “[u]nderstanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other” (p.282). A further aspect is working through a process of “dialogic facilitation” (Adler *et al.*, 2004: 315), involving modelling the kinds of talk and activities we want teachers to think about in their own classrooms in particular, drawing on the Bakhtinian metaphor of centripetal and centrifugal forces.

### **Extracts from the Project**

To show how the processes of ‘rethinking’ and ‘dialogic facilitation’ developed, as students in the programme became more *interactional* in their processing of ideas, I present the following segments drawn from the data.

#### *Example No. 1*

The task used in this unit was carried out early in the post-graduate programme (Week 2) and was based on what Nunan (2004) labels an *activation rationale* (p.20). The task was concerned with activities of survival based around a ship that was sinking. Students worked in pairs (as ‘critical friends’) to carry out the task with the basic aim of retrieving a limited set of items to maximize their possibility of survival on a nearby island (a ‘salvage’ task). “The aim of the task was to encourage students to activate a range of language functions and structures including making suggestions, agreeing, disagreeing, talking about quantity (how much, how many), wh-questions etc.” (Nunan, 2004: 21). In addition, I saw it as a means of helping the ‘critical friend’ pairs to settle into their joint interaction roles and to become used to the cognitive processes in terms of the ‘struggle’

inherent in the centripetal and centrifugal process. In addition to the oral language functions outlined above, students were required to write a report of the experience in their reflective journals. In effect the work of 'dialogue' in the task is "labour" in the Bakhtinian sense, because in the process of taking up another's words (as in discussion) we are "working on them" (Holquist & Liapunov, 1990 p. xliv). Further to the initial reflective writing exercise, the student pairs wrote additional comments in each other's journals. These comments are included below.

The data from one student pair (Jenni, female, 25 years old) and Jessica, female, 27 years old) have been selected to demonstrate the process of working together to solve the 'salvage' problem outlined above. Initially, Jenni had written a 'first response' journal report as a follow-up to the discussion process. Part of her report is included below:

*We can only carry 20 kilos of items; so we choose some necessary things which will be useful for us to live on the island. Firstly, we will carry 6 cans of food. Maybe we can't find any food on the island, but we need to keep ourselves alive and wait for other ships to come and save us. The island is in the sea, all around is salty water, so we need 2 bottles of fresh water. There may be wild animals on the island, we need fire-lighting kits to frighten them, to cook food and to keep ourselves warm in cold weather. We can also use them as fire signals to attract other ships' attention.*

The second respondent (Jessica) in this paired activity had then written in Jenni's journal as follows:

*I really enjoyed your way of thinking and arrangement. You are very skilful (in) dealing with such unaccepted problems, and almost all your considerations sound reasonable. You think of food, water, fire-fighting kit, medical kit and waterproof sheets of fabric. These are all basic things helping us for survival. You neglect the heavy but less important items like axe, short-wave radio, notebook computer, and so on.*

In general terms, the second respondent (Jessica) appears to have accepted the reasoning of Jenni in relation to the need for 'essential items' for their immediate survival, basically as a centripetal response. My own observation notes taken during the dialogue process seems to confirm this. I was conscious of the need to ensure that "words put in subjects' mouths were in fact spoken by those subjects; ... that one must *be certain statements depicted as quotes were in fact made*" (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994: 578). In this sense I used the basic tool of "memoing" (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as "typically a rapid way of capturing thoughts that occur throughout data collection" (p.74). These memoed notes - "taken on the fly" are reproduced as follows:

*Jenni: I don't think we need to have some other heavy things like the axe - it weighs 8 kilos.*

*Jessica: Yes, I think you are right -but maybe we should have some rope to tie up the waterproof sheets.*

*Jenni: O.K. I still think we need some more food. I am afraid of being hungry, so let's take some flour and rice and sugar.*

*Jessica: Oh well, maybe; how much will we need?*

However, Jenni doesn't seem to have it all her own way. In her journal response to Jenni, Jessica has this to say:

*But I am afraid there are still some things I should point out. If I were you I would like to cut down (on) the waterproof sheets of fabric to two and take two more bottles of water, for just two bottles of water are not enough. It's hard to say how long you will stay on the island. What's more, we are only two people. It's not necessary to take three waterproof sheets of fabric.*

Initially Jenni appears to have appreciated the logic of Jessica's argument. In a further (and final) journal response she reports as follows:

*After reviewing this journal and Jessica's comments, I found that I had carried some useless things with me, such as too many pieces of*



*water-proof sheets. It made me know that discussion and communication with other partners also are very important.*

In terms of the Bakhtinian concept of 'work' it is worth noting the type of exchanges in the above represent a small segment of the bigger picture which is emerging in my research through an analysis of the use of reflective journals. "In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half ours and half someone else's" (Bakhtin, 1981: 345). The dialogic nature of the exchanges that occur in both oral form and through journal interactions serve to demonstrate this point.

*Example No. 2*

The material for this example is taken from Unit 9 in the post-graduate programme centred on 'Schema Theory.' Most students initially had a general understanding of the theory but their knowledge was vague and often misplaced. The activity in this segment was based on a newspaper article from the '*Bangkok Post*' (see Appendix A). Briefly, the article was chosen because of its rather novel content, its potential to challenge thinking (in the sense of Bakhtin's dialogic notion of a centripetal-centrifugal dynamic) and also because of the potential for extending the underlying concept of Schema Theory.

The instructions given to the students were as follows:

*Read the article and think about the following:*

- 1. Did you find that you had some difficulties with this article? Why?*
- 2. Were you able to develop a 'schema' for yourself as you read the article?*
- 3. Can you think of a project like this one which could be developed by a school that you know about?*

The respondents in the programme were allowed a week to work through the task. The following responses and discussions are based

on extracts from the reflective journal of one of the respondents in the course (Sophia, female, 29 years old).

In terms of Bakhtinian dialogic theory, Holquist (1990: 47) notes how the “war between the centripetal impulse of cognition and the centrifugal forces of the world are fought out. I can make sense of the world only by reducing the number of meanings ... to a restricted set”. Thus, the *centripetal* force in Bakhtin’s meaning, tends to move things towards a central point, whereas a *centrifugal* force tends to push things away and out in new and different directions. In the activity the respondent (Sophia), dealing cognitively with the ‘*Waste Not Want Not*’ article, initially found it difficult to come to grips with the article. She notes as follows:

*At first I thought the newspaper article was rather strange, because I never knew the buffalo dung had so many functions. And because of the structure of the article, I got confused in the details and could not find the theme. But then I read it carefully and drew a schema in my mind consciously, I discovered that I could totally understand it. Then the article was never strange again.*

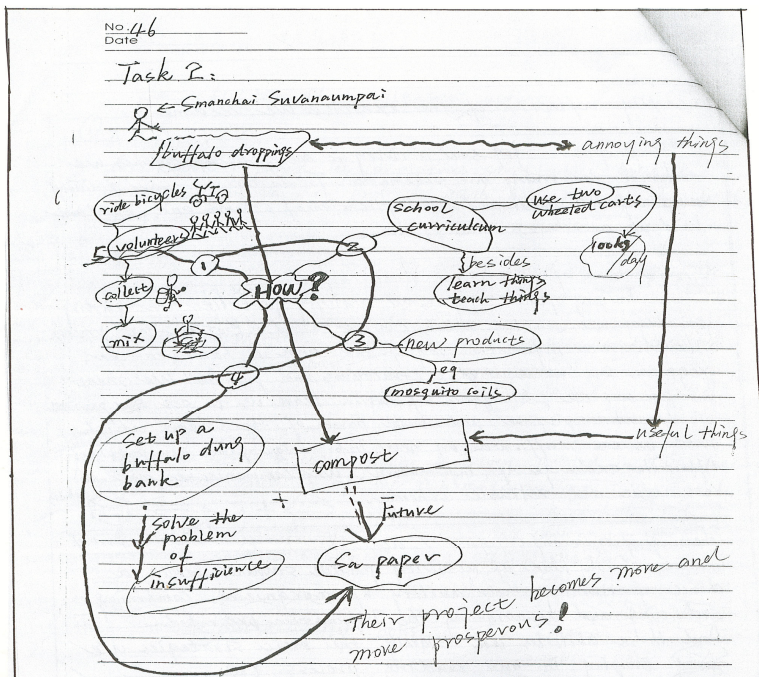
The respondent developed a semantic network (she calls it a ‘schema’) to consolidate her understanding through a centripetal process of ‘drawing together’ and relating ideas and concepts. In terms of Robert Scholes (1989) reading theory “centripetal reading conceives of a text in terms of an original intention located at the *centre of the text*” (p.8) (italics added). Figure 2 illustrates Sophia’s diagram. The central point in the diagram is the word ‘*How?*’ From this point, numbered radiating lines, arrows and text boxes, consolidate and sum up the key ideas in the article.

A closer examination of the diagram reveals how this respondent was able to overcome the initial ‘confusion’ noted above. The response is quite a creative structure in the Bakhtinian centripetal-centrifugal sense and illustrates the inherent dialogism noted by Montgomery and Baxter (1998), concerning the “knot of functional and interdependent contradictions that add validating depth and richness” (p.157). One arrow cuts straight through the central theme,

linking 'buffalo droppings', 'compost' and 'future uses'. Another arrow loops its way through a centripetal process of detail from the article, and in the process of stringing together the procedures and outcomes (linked together by 'how?'). A third arrow sequence frames the article by picking up on 'buffalo droppings', then classifying these as 'annoying things' but then providing a contrasting phrase - 'useful things'. At the bottom of the diagram, the respondent indicates an opening of her thinking, showing the centrifugal 'struggle' by adding a comment that the "project become more and more prosperous."

FIGURE 2

Student's Sematic Network based on 'Waste Not Want Not'



This comment from the diagram has a parallel comment based on anecdotal experience as noted in her journal:

*This story reminded me of my own experience in primary school. At that time, the school held a flea market. In the market... we could sell our old books which were not useful...and got the books we wanted from our schoolmates. During the process, we earned money and gained knowledge. At the same time, we knew how to manage our 'business' at an early age.*

*Example No 3.*

The next example is based on an extension of Topic 9 in the topic: Schema Theory, by this stage reasonably well understood by students. A short text by Franz Kafka entitled *Before the Law* and a set of instructions were given to the students in the programme at the beginning of the session as follows:

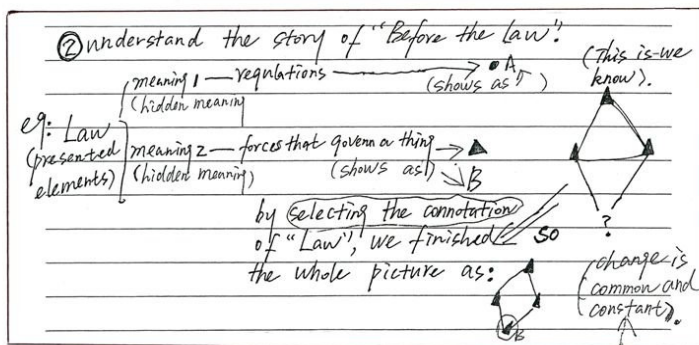
*Read the short text by Kafka: Before the Law. When you have finished reading the text, discuss it with your critical friend. Try to work out what is going on in your head as you read the text and discuss it. Can you develop a 'theory' about what is going on in your head?*

The students were allowed a week (in their own time) to carry out the instructions outlined above. Following the established procedure for the course, students worked with their 'critical friends' and wrote reflections in their journals. The particular Kafka text, although quite short, is not easy to understand. Respondents in a research project reported by Marton and Carlsson (1992), using the same text, struggled with the interpretation of the meaning. One student noted: "I cannot find the ideas behind. I keep running into contradictions. It was the author's purpose I think, to make people think, and to arrive at many different solutions when trying to solve the story" (p.7).

In the current study, the following diagram is a response by the same respondent as in the previous example. Figure 3 presents the diagram which was recorded in her reflective journal.

FIGURE 3

## Student's Semantic Network based on "Before the Law"



The use of comparison in the diagram is an interesting feature. The respondent (Sophia) attempts to process information through two parallel tracks. The first track – ‘meaning 1 – regulations (hidden meaning) – show as A’ gives a sense in which she is struggling with her prior knowledge of ‘law’ (perhaps indicating a *centripetal* approach to meaning) leading to ‘This is-we know’. However, the right side of this first track *also* shows a partially completed diamond figure representing the way she has developed her thinking; but also containing a question mark. In terms of Bakhtinian dialogic theory we gain a strong impression of internally persuasive discourse – “half ours and half someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981: 345) as she attempts to create cognitive order out of the ‘presented elements’ of the Kafka story. One might speculate that this struggle leads her to consider the need to explore wider possibilities in the story (in the Bakhtinian *centrifugal* sense) and this might be seen to be similar to the student’s response in the Marton and Carlsson (1992) research noted above.

Both tracks in this diagram seem to indicate a real struggle with ideas and thinking. As noted by Bakhtin (1981) “internally persuasive discourse is tightly interwoven with one’s own word” (p.345). It

is quite intriguing to note that this respondent finds it useful to create *two* tracks (as noted above) in coming to terms with the meaning of the text. One might speculate like Scholes (1989) that the “centrifugal is becoming *centripetal* again” (p.10). A clue to this possibility is that the diamond-shaped diagram to the right of the ‘meaning 2’ track is complete (at ‘B’), whereas in the ‘meaning 1’ track the bottom of the diamond was left open with a question mark (indicating the possibility of *centrifugal* thinking at that stage). The struggle behind the process of reaching some kind of closure – of becoming *centripetal* again – is revealed in the following journal notes attached to the diagram:

*Why didn't he get in without the admission (being admitted) of the doorkeeper? He could but didn't do it, because he thought only if he could get the permission he could get in the door. (Sophia:from her journal).*

But the real puzzle comes at the end of the story. From Sophia’s journal:

*I turned to read the last two sentences again and again: ‘No-one but you could gain admittance through this door since the door is intended only for you. I am now going to shut it’. This is what the doorkeeper said to the man at last, but I felt that this was also something the author wanted to tell us.*

One senses the respondent’s struggle to find a logical outcome, to devise a kind of compromise between her attempt to locate a logical *centripetal* solution to the story but failing this, to work through it again (Sophia: *I was deeply indulged in thinking about the story*) – to open up her thinking – to think centrifugally and thus to find some eventual solution as she shows through her writing as follows:

*Getting my own ideas about it, I turned back to dig out what the “Law” symbolizes. The “Law” may be something someone is eager to get. If he is brave enough to pursue it, he may succeed, but if he has no courage to do it, he may never achieve it.*

There is a strong sense of needing to find some closure to a story which has a puzzle at its centre. In other words, our natural tendency is to find a 'way back' from the uncertainties of centrifugal thinking to the relative 'safety' of centripetal expressions in order to leave us with a feeling of order and stability.

There is a further section in this respondent's journal writing which tends to emphasize a point made earlier concerning the "overlapping domains of centripetal and centrifugal forces" (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998: 157). This further section concerns *discussion with my partner* (her critical friend).

*We got to know that the "Law" could be adventures, and going over the adventures, we must be courageous to try different ways (i.e., centrifugal orientations). During discussion, we related the story to our own experiences. Sometimes, we meet some difficulties, and we just draw back and do nothing about them. We don't know that the strongest enemy is ourselves, not the difficulties. If we could overcome the barriers in our mind, we will win, and we may not be afraid of bigger problems in the future.*

There is a sense of closure in this final record in Sophia's journal, similar to the completion of the diamond diagram in Figure 3 ('B' in Figure 3) - a sense in which the "centrifugal is always becoming centripetal again" (Scholes, 1989: 10). This is reflected in the notion that "[...] reading is always a rewriting of the text of the work within the text of our lives" (p.10).

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The data presented in this paper represents a small part of the ongoing data analysis in relation to a more extensive study. However, initial procedures and responses of respondents in the data tend to support arguments related to key Bakhtinian theories of *dialogism* and *addressivity*, based on the foundation view of *the utterance*. It could be argued that these outcomes may imply processing through more traditional notions of 'depth' of thinking (as illustrated in reflective 'models' of each of the three data examples

presented), but I contend that these outcomes occur through the possibilities inherent in a 'dialogism of discourse' brought about by the use of reflective journals and the interchanges with a 'critical friend'. Further research needs to be carried out with a greater range of respondents including with undergraduate English major students as well as post-graduate students

A further aspect relates to the role of *metacognition* ("the ability to monitor one's current state of learning"; Brown *et al.*, 1986: 66) which was not explored in this study. It might seem that the age, maturity and teaching experience of students in the research cohort prepared them to be 'self-starters' in terms of general aspects of learning. Throughout the research, it was often noted that students seemed very able to respond to ideas as individuals during the journal writing phase. In other words, the ability to process new ideas might have happened *with* or *without* the intervening role of the 'critical friend' and/or reflective journal. Moon (2006) notes that some researchers "attribute positive links to journal writing and link journal writing, enhanced metacognitive capacity and the enhancement of learning" (p.32).

## CONCLUSION

An important step in undertaking the interactive style of teaching demonstrated in this paper is convincing students that what they are doing is 'making meaning' and that thinking and writing collaboratively (as 'critical friends') is a worthwhile endeavour. Hu (2005), in the conclusion of a major report on the professional development of EFL teachers in China, notes that "teachers not only should work collaboratively but also need to work together in a *constructively critical relation*" (p.697; italics added). This implies a major role for the consistent use of reflective journals where respondents (for example, teachers returning to study after some years in the field, as in the current study) develop a 'catalogue' of emerging ideas. This could include various forms of 'semantic mapping' as aids in dealing with new ideas and concepts as demonstrated in this paper. A surprising outcome in the current study (as shown in the examples)



has been the apparent effectiveness of these aids to meaning-making in the course, particularly in terms of Bakhtinian centripetal/centrifugal outcomes. Future research might extend the possibilities at the centre of this activity. As noted by Bakhtin (1981), "Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear" (p.272). This coincides with Hu's (2005) call for teachers to explore how a "constructivist orientation ... can be made an integral part of their classroom teaching to promote meaningful student-teacher interaction and students' active engagement with the learning process" (p.697).

The process involves an expanded view of conceptual understanding because respondents, through the dialogic relationships set up in the programmes described in this paper, are in what Montgomery and Baxter (1998) describe as the "era of breeding grounds for centripetal and centrifugal forces". Morson (2004), speaking within a largely American context, notes that "the range of 'authoritative' and 'innerly persuasive discourses' appear to be growing along with our cultural diversity" (p.317). This is increasingly the case in Chinese education with the diversification of trade and cultural links to the outside world. Within the Chinese post-graduate context in which my research is based, there is a developing awareness of new discourse systems in education. These discourse systems, principally those based around Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), are evolving beyond merely a change in teaching methodology. As noted by Ouyang (2000) "reform in English language teaching methods from TM (traditional methodology) to CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) in mainland China is anything but a mere pedagogical issue" (p.422). Greenleaf and Katz (2004) note that even though language itself is inherently and potentially dialogic, social situations are frequently not. They note that "[t]his monologic impulse is closely related, in Bakhtin's writings, to singularity of viewpoints, transmission and, recitation rather than meaning making, and didactic and authoritarian discourses that have ceased to be 'internally persuasive' to the think-

ing being” (p.174). The preliminary analysis of the three studies presented in this paper show the possibilities of developing programmes emphasizing internally persuasive discourses tied to the metaphor of centripetal/centrifugal processing and thinking.

A major (and perhaps controversial) point of interest in the paper is the Bakhtin notion of addressivity. Within a language curriculum context, respondents (as experienced teachers) in the Masters in Applied Linguistics programme, were able to make very clear links to past memories of language and teaching, particularly their experiences as EFL learners. Perhaps even more important in terms of viable alternatives to traditional approaches to teaching, is a need to experiment with new ‘meaning-making’ approaches. The writing/reflective processes described in the paper might be seen as a springboard for a forward development (in terms of addressivity ‘interrogation’) of theoretical ideas and puzzles. In contrast to past experiences, where I had presented ‘methodology’ units in Chinese post-graduate programmes, I was aware that there was a degree of personal satisfaction for many of the teachers in the current programme- a sense that they had achieved a level of reflective thinking - of ‘dwelling, thinking’ - that would give them a new perspective and greater flexibility in their future careers as English curriculum developers and teachers.

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## APPENDIX A

## Bangkok Post (August 23, 2001)

## Waste not, want not

When Smanchai Suvanaumpai first arrived in Songkhram district in Nakhon province five years ago, he was literally greeted by heaps of buffalo droppings wherever he went.

"It was annoying. The wheels of my car rolled over manure wherever I went. It was all over the place," said Smanchai, a Prathom Suksa 3 teacher at Ban Nong Batao School.

So he came up with an idea to turn the buffalo dung into something useful. Two years later, his school became famous for easy-to-use organic fertiliser and compost pellets made from buffalo dung.

Volunteer students, he said, are the backbone of the project. In the beginning, five boys in Prathom Suksa 5 and 6 separately rode bicycles to collect buffalo droppings in the early mornings just after the villagers let their buffaloes wander around. They got two baht for one bucketful of buffalo dung as a token incentive.

The students also helped mix the dung with dried leaves to make compost which was distributed to the villagers to try. It was a big success as villagers found it worked better than chemical fertilisers.

The small pilot project was later integrated into the school curriculum whereby students from Prathom Suksa 3 to 6 take turns each day collecting the dung.

"They are very enthusiastic but they felt that they could do better than just relying on their bicycles with only two buckets to fill. So we incorporated four saleng, or two-wheeled carts, for the children to use. And they got 10 baht a salengful of the droppings," said the 41-year-old teacher.

Now they collect 100 kilogrammes a day, which can produce as much as 9,000 kg of compost a year. The villagers can buy it for only one baht a kilogramme.

The students also gained knowledge from their one-hour dung collection journeys on the village roads.

"In maths, I use the compost to teach the students about measurement. They learn how to draw buffaloes in the art class. And I asked them to write a composition about what we owe to our buffaloes. Some students even cried when they read their compositions to the class since the buffalo, considered the farmer's best friend, is a subject close to their hearts," explained the teacher.

Smanchai and his students have also produced a new form of organic fertiliser in the form of buffalo dropping pellets. These pellets are used in off-season rice fields.

Now that the compost is widely known in the community, Smanchai is experimenting with new products such as mosquito coils made from buffalo dung to prevent villagers from getting dengue fever.

To make mosquito coils, buffalo dung is mixed with the leaves of custard apple, eucalyptus and neem trees. "I noticed these leaves are free from pests. Also, they are easily found in the area. The next step is to mix the dung with termite mould our ancestors used to burn to keep mosquitos away," Smanchai said.

His future project is to combine the dung with mulberry tree to produce *soi* paper to be used in art class.

Now, the buffalo dung products are in such great demand that the amount of droppings became insufficient.

"We solved the problem by setting up a buffalo dung bank with community support. All 46 house households which have 455 buffaloes totally take the droppings from their buffalo corrals and put them in the bank. So the school can process the dung in different kinds of fertiliser to meet the villagers' needs," said the teacher.

Thanks to its innovative idea and use of appropriate technology, the buffalo dung pellets project received the school Environment Challenge Award for its most creative environment-friendly activities.

**APPENDIX B****Kafka, Franz:** *The Complete Stories* (1971)**Publisher:** Schocken Books***“Before the Law”***

Before the law stands a door-keeper on guard. To this door-keeper comes a man from the country who begs for admittance to the Law. But the door-keeper says that he cannot admit the man at the moment. The man, on reflection, asks if he will be allowed, then, to enter later. “It is possible”, answers the doorkeeper, “but not at the moment.” Since the door leading into the Law stands open as usual and the door-keeper steps to one side, the man bends down to peer through the entrance. When the door-keeper sees that, he laughs and says: “If you are strongly tempted, try to get in without my permission. But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest door-keeper. From hall to hall, keepers stand at every door, each one more powerful than the other. Even the third of these has an aspect that even I cannot bear to look at”. These are difficulties which the man from the country has not expected to meet. The Law, he thinks, should be accessible to every man and at all times, and when he looks more closely at the door-keeper in his furred robes, with his huge pointed nose and long thin, Tartar beard, he decides that he had better wait until he gets permission to enter. The door-keeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at the side of the door. There he sits waiting for days and years. He makes many attempts to be allowed in and wears the doorkeeper with is importunity. The door-keeper often engages him in brief conversation, asking him about his home and about other matters but the questions are put quite impersonally, as great men put questions, and always conclude with the statement that the man cannot be allowed to enter yet. The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, parts with all he has, however valuable, in the hope of bribing the door-keeper. The door-keeper accepts it all, saying however, as he takes each gift: “I take this only to keep you from feeling you have left something undone”. During all these years the man watches the door-keeper almost incessantly. He forgets about the other door-keepers, and this one seems to him the only barrier between himself and the Law. In the first few years he curse his evil fate aloud; later as he grows old, he only mutters to himself. He grows childish, and since his prolonged watch he has learned to know even the fleas in the door-keeper’s fur collar, he begs the very fleas to help him to persuade the door-keeper to change his mind. Finally his eyes grow dim and he does not know whether his eyes are only deceiving him. But in the darkness he can now perceive a radiance that streams immortally from the door of the Law. Now his life is drawing to a close. Before he dies, all that he has experienced during the whole time of his sojourn condense in his mind into one question, which he has never yet put to the door-keeper. He beckons the door-keeper, since he can no longer raise his stiffening body. The door-keeper has to bend far down to hear him, for the difference in size between them has increased very much to the man’s disadvantage. “What do you want to know now?” asks the doorkeeper, you are insatiable.” “Everyone strives to attain the Law”, asks the man, “how does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has



come to seek admittance but me?" The door-keeper perceives that the man is at the end of his strength and his hearing is failing, so he bellows in his ear: "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since the door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it."

(Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir)

(Taken from Marton & Carlsson, 1992)