

Inclusive philosophical dialogues: Supporting participation and learning for all students

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Around 10% of school-age children have language or communication difficulties. In philosophical dialogue, these difficulties can be an obstacle to participation and learning. If we want philosophical dialogues to include all children, it is necessary to pay attention to the language used during these activities. This article will discuss the links between students' language abilities, classroom interactions, philosophical dialogues and the development of thinking skills in children and adolescents. Strategies that support accessible and inclusive philosophical dialogues will be described.

1. The place of language in philosophical dialogues

In philosophy dialogues, language plays a triple role. First, it is a tool for accessing the concepts at stake. Indeed, it is through language that abstract ideas can be named and communicated. Language is also an object of study when words are defined or their meaning questioned (e.g., what does it mean to be generous?). Finally, in philosophical dialogues, language is also a privileged means of participation, as students participate in the activity by actively listening to what their peers say or by participating verbally.

Given the importance of language in philosophical dialogues, those who facilitate philosophical dialogues must be aware of the impact of language difficulties on children's learning.

2. Language development in school-age children

Contrary to popular belief, language continues to develop well beyond early childhood. Children and adolescents continue to build their vocabulary in many ways after they enter school (for a review of studies on language development at school age, see Nippold, 2006).

2.1. Enrich and deepen vocabulary

During their school years, students learn many new vocabulary words, including those that express nuances (Cordier & Ros, 2006). For example, children discover that the words *possible*, *probable* and *certain* have specific meanings and are not synonyms. Similarly, to be *annoyed*, *disturbed* or *upset* are several ways of being affected by a situation. As they grow older, students also deepen their vocabulary by adding new meanings to words they already know. For example, they discover that to be *curious* can mean to be interested (*very curious, she wanted to know everything*) or to be *strange* (*it*

is a curious animal). Gradually, students also better understand metaphors and idioms such as *a piece of cake (something very easy)* or *missing the boat (being too late)*.

2.2. Organize and express complex ideas

Once in school, students also develop their ability to narrate, explain and argue. For example, they organize and express their ideas more clearly and use more conjunctions (e.g., *however*, *while*) to mark the link between two ideas (Mimeau et al., 2015).

2.3. Becoming familiar with different communication situations

By experiencing different communication situations at school, in the family and the community, children and teenagers learn that each communication situation has its own rules of communication: ordering a dish in a restaurant, calling to make an appointment, attending a class, etc. These rules must be learned implicitly (through observation) or explicitly: who has the right to speak? How long should you speak? How do you ask to speak? What marks the end of the activity or exchange?

When communication rules are not explicit, it is more difficult for students to understand and respect them.

3. Language disorders: above all, a matter of understanding

When we think of language skills, we often refer to a person's ability to talk. In doing so, we forget that language also includes the ability to understand ideas expressed by others. Abstract ideas expressed in long sentences are difficult to understand, especially for children with language difficulties. To take part in the activity, participants must first understand what is being said and what is expected of them.

Unlike pronunciation difficulties, which are often audible, language difficulties are invisible and often go unnoticed. However, these difficulties are common: between 10% and 15% of children and adolescents have language or communication disorders (Norbury et al., 2016). Students with hearing problems (deafness), a developmental language disorder or autism have lifelong language difficulties (cf. Dubois et al., 2020 for a summary). Language difficulties remain even if these students no longer have pronunciation difficulties.

4. Language interaction in the classroom

When philosophical dialogues are conducted in the classroom, it is a good idea to notice how general classroom interactions usually take place (cf. Gardner, 2012 for a summary), as children will tend to repeat these habits during philosophical dialogues.

4.1. Classroom communication habits

Research indicates that students' verbal participation is necessary for their learning (Grifenhagen et al., 2022; Leopola et al., 2023). However, studies show that teachers do most of the talking in class

(Heritage, 2004; Doyen & Fisher, 2010), despite the fact that some contexts or activities tend to facilitate more balanced turn-taking between participants (Seedhouse, 2004). Furthermore, the adult has the status of privileged interlocutor, since he or she allocates speaking turns to the children (Seedhouse, 1996). Interactions with students are often based on the Initiation-Reply-Evaluation model (Mehan, 1979): the adult asks a question (*who wrote this poem?*), a student responds (*Émile Nelligan*), and the adult evaluates the student's answer (*yes, that is right*). Very often, the adult knows the answer to the question he or she is asking. These questions aim for the child to display knowledge of a topic and express the correct answer (Boyd & Rubin, 2006). Classroom exchanges are also characterized by very short periods of silence after a question (less than a second), which does not allow the child to reflect and develop his or her idea (Hindman et al., 2019). If the student does not have the expected answer, the adult sometimes turns to another student in search of the correct answer, which does not encourage children to take intellectual risks (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Gabas et al., 2022).

4.2. Participation and learning: Students with language disorders

In the classroom, students with a language disorder exhibit low participation (White, 2016). Their comprehension of what is being said is often limited, and they seldom contribute to conversations (Croteau et al., 2015). In addition, studies showed that these students receive less support from their teachers than their peers (Mayer White, 2016; Zucker et al., 2010).

Several studies indicate that classroom interactions are intimately linked to learning (e.g. Connor et al., 2020). Compared to their peers, students with language difficulties achieve lower levels of learning partly due to their limited participation in class (Barnes et al., 2017). These differences in classroom interactions contribute to the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986): Students with better language skills learn more than those with poorer language skills (Johanson et al., 2016).

5. Strategies for inclusive philosophical dialogues

Philosophical dialogues combine several features that can limit the participation and the learning of students with language disorders: exchanges are mainly carried out using spoken language, speaking takes place in front of a group, which can be uncomfortable for some students, and the topics addressed are complicated (often complex and abstract). Additionally, children with better language skills can respond more quickly, leaving little chance for those with language difficulties to initiate a response.

If philosophical dialogues are to encourage participation and learning of all children, attention needs to be paid to the language used and verbal interactions during these activities. Facilitators are responsible for ensuring that the language used during philosophical dialogues does not hinder the participation of children with more limited language skills. Several practices can support the participation of all children.

In the following sections, five strategies for inclusion will be explained: 1) be explicit about the rules of communication, 2) provide a model, 3) support language comprehension, 4) encourage everyone to participate, and 5) reach all students where they are. These five strategies are well-documented in the literature as effective and are already used, intuitively and to varying degrees, by adults facilitating classroom activities. However, with greater knowledge of their benefits, these strategies can be used more intentionally, resulting in more obvious benefits.

5.1. Be explicit about communication rules

For most students, philosophical dialogue is a new communicative activity with interaction rules that differ from the regular classroom. Students with language difficulties often have difficulty grasping the rules of communication when they are implicit. Therefore, it is best to explicitly inform the students how the exchanges will take place.

For example, it is a good idea to let students know that they will have more speaking time than usual, and that the moderator has no content to teach (unlike in a history class, for example). It is also a good idea to let students know that the questions will be difficult, that answers are not already known, that students may change their minds during the dialogue, etc. Here are some other topics that could also be covered to ensure that all students can participate in the activity:

- What is the role of the adult?
- How will speaking turns be managed? Will students who did not raise their hand be invited to talk? Is everyone expected to participate? Will silences be more frequent or longer than usual?
- What should students do if they need help understanding what is being said?
- What happens if someone "gets it wrong"? If two students disagree?
- What do facilitators expect of students when they speak up and listen to others?

Not all of these topics must be addressed in the first philosophical dialogue. These explanations can be given during the first few meetings. The profile of the students (e.g. age, previous experience with philosophical dialogues) will influence the rules of communication established and the length of the explanations. If necessary, it may be helpful to add visual aids.

5.2. Give a model

After informing students about the rules of the activity, a second strategy that promotes the inclusion of all students is to provide models. For example, if a question-gathering period is included, it is best to give a model aloud before asking students to share their questions. Above all, this model should include the reflection that preceded the formulation of the question. In other words, the important thing is to give children access to the internal language that led to the question. By listening to **how**

our thinking progressed toward the question, students in need can uptake the thinking process and speak more easily.

For example, the moderator could model a question by saying, "In the story, what Naila did surprised me. When I make a drawing, I want to show it to everyone, not her. And that makes me wonder, what's the point of drawing if we're going to keep it to ourselves?" With this model, students become familiar with a way to participate more easily and frequently, for example, by comparing the characters' behaviours to theirs. Students with fewer ideas could use this model to contribute to the discussion.

In the same way, we can also provide models following the intervention of a student. For example, in a philosophical dialogue, a student might say it would be better if money did not exist because it is used to finance war and many other activities that pollute the planet. The adult could take the floor and give a model that would include not only his final "ready-to-share" reflection, but also the thoughts that led him to that final reflection: "Initially, when I heard Anna say that money was financing war, I agreed and thought it would be better if money did not exist. And then, I thought money could also be used to buy vegetables, organize a party, take a trip... So I'm wondering if taking money away is the best solution or if we could find another way to stop wars."

Models that give access to our thinking aloud are particularly important for students with difficulties, who often struggle to start thinking about abstract subjects (van Kleeck, 2008). Our models give these students examples of how they can initiate reasoning and move from individual thinking (e.g., what I like, how I would have reacted) to more abstract and universal thinking.

5.3. Supporting language comprehension

The third strategy for promoting the inclusion of all students is to support comprehension. As mentioned above, the comprehension difficulties of students with language disorders are invisible and often go unnoticed. The topics of conversation in philosophical dialogues are particularly difficult to understand because they are often abstract and decontextualized (i.e. not directly related to objects, people or events in the room). From an inclusion perspective, choosing topics with which most students are familiar is best. This will promote the understanding and participation of students with difficulties, as they can draw on their experiences to begin their reflections.

5.3.1. Use visual aids

One of the key strategies for supporting comprehension is to add visuals to leave a trace of what is being said. Various visual aids can be used. The adult can write essential words on the board, draw to illustrate certain concepts, add arrows to indicate the connection a child made between two ideas, or use natural gestures to represent certain words (e.g., *join hands* to represent that a student is proposing to *combine* two concepts).

5.3.2. Explicitly teach important vocabulary words

To promote understanding among all students, the adult should use simple words in their most common meaning. If less frequent or polysemous words are used, and they are essential to understanding the philosophical dialogue, it is best to teach their meaning explicitly.

Explicit teaching of vocabulary words requires presenting the meaning in multiple ways (Beck & McKeown, 2007): 1) a simple definition, 2) synonyms (when possible), 3) a few examples of how the word is used, and 4) an invitation for students to make connections between the new word and their experiences. For example, if we wanted to use the word "ideal" (a word with several meanings), we could teach explicitly by saying: "Ideal is something that is preferred over all other things, that is better (*definition*). Ideal means the best, the most beautiful, the most perfect (*synonyms*). For example, we might think of an ideal cake, an ideal bedroom or an ideal vacation. It would be the best cake we could imagine, a perfect room for us (*examples*). Can you tell me what an ideal school would be like for you (*link to children's experiences*)?"

Throughout the philosophical dialogue, the adult must remain vigilant to the words used by the participants. Some students with highly developed vocabulary may use rarer words that will not be understood by the other students and will limit their understanding of the exchange. Suppose the facilitator feels that all may not understand a word used by one participant. In that case, it is preferable to give a synonym to help all the children understand what the first participant is saying ("*To presume means to think. So, Pedro thinks that...*") or ask the student who used the word to define it for the rest of the group.

5.3.3. Slow down the pace of the interactions

Students with language disorders process language more slowly than others. When there are no pauses between turns and people speak fast, language is more difficult to process.

To help struggling students understand, it is a good idea to include pauses between turns (a few seconds of silence). After asking a question, the adult can also leave 5 seconds of silence to give all the students time to reflect and formulate their thoughts. Summarizing exchanges by writing keywords on the board naturally creates moments of pause that support the comprehension of children with difficulties.

5.4. Encourage everyone to speak

Scientific studies are quite clear: students who speak and actively participate in classroom verbal interactions learn more than students who do not (Leopola et al., 2023; Connor et al., 2020; Justice et al., 2018). Supporting all students to participate verbally is an attempt to counter the Matthew effect (Stanovitch, 2009). As mentioned above, this effect indicates that the most advanced students benefit most from interactions with adults in the classroom. These study results invite further reflection on time and turn management (Borella, 2016).

If the adult believes that all students have something to share and wants to hear from everyone, he or she needs to state this expectation clearly and support everyone to take the floor. It is worth remembering that regular classroom exchanges tend to reward students who give "the right answers." So, conversely, if the adult informs the students that they can choose not to speak, some students (especially those with difficulties) may tend to exclude themselves from the exchanges as they might feel that the adult is not interested in their answers.

Encouraging everyone to participate may require that, on occasion, the adult protect the speaking turns of students with language difficulties: giving them more time to express themselves, making sure that other students do not cut them off, etc. (McMahon-Morin et al., 2019).

5.5. Reach all students where they are by adjusting to their abilities

It is through the exchanges in which students take part and the feedback they receive that they can develop their judgment and argumentation skills. To give feedback to everyone, all students must first have expressed themselves (Gagnon, 2008).

Most classes are made up of students with different abstraction skills. In this context, the adult will have to adjust his/her support according to the student's abilities to reach them where they are. The concept of scaffolding is central to the support the adult offers (e.g. Pentimonti et al., 2017). Scaffolding means doing with the student what he or she cannot yet do alone. Students with language difficulties may have difficulty answering complex open-ended questions. For example, to support, the facilitator could simplify the question, make a link with the student's experience or give an example. So, depending on the student's needs, it may be necessary to provide strong support by momentarily limiting his or her degree of freedom (e.g., by suggesting answers or asking a choice question).

The aim of getting students to think for themselves should not be an excuse for not offering significant support to those students who need it most. The goal is not to think for them, but to recognize that some students may need to think "with the adult" before doing it on their own later.

Conclusion

Philosophical dialogue workshops place significant demands on students' language and communication skills. Given the high percentage of students with language difficulties, it is a good idea for adults to use strategies that make philosophical dialogue more inclusive.

By paying particular attention to the support offered to everyone (e.g. by making communication rules explicit), it is possible to support students' understanding and participation and, in so doing, contribute to the development of thinking skills for all.

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