Article

Enacting cultural literacy as a dialogic social practice: the role of provisional language in classroom talk

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Abstract

The concept of cultural literacy as a dialogic social practice celebrates alternative perspectives. Navigating multiple perspectives in dialogue requires high 'tolerance of ambiguity' characterised by a positive, open and flexible attitude towards uncertainty. This article aims to explore how provisional language is used in classroom dialogue to enact tolerance of ambiguity and its associated democratic behaviours. It draws on data collected as part of a larger European-funded project in which children and young people used wordless texts as springboards to engage in discussions about cultural themes. We report findings from an in-depth qualitative analysis of two lessons (for 9–10-year-olds and 13–14-year-olds) chosen due to their use of provisional language and focus on multiple perspectives. We explore how the social element of provisional language enables students to enact key democratic behaviours as they learn to navigate multiple perspectives in small peer-group learning contexts. We find that teacher modelling and

dual objectives in promoting such language are central to creating a safe dialogic space with inherent democratic potential that is not bound by solution-seeking goals. We consider the pedagogical implications of this by problematising the role of dialogue in enacting democratic behaviours through a critical exploration of the concept of 'voice'.

Keywords dialogue; cultural literacy; intercultural dialogue; provisional language; tolerating ambiguity; voice

Introduction

Cultural literacy has traditionally been seen as an acquisition of cultural knowledge necessary to function successfully and contribute to society (Hirsch, 1988). However, a reconceptualisation has recently rejected this static, one-way, transmission of knowledge model (Maine et al., 2019), instead viewing cultural literacy as a dialogic social practice. This reconceptualisation recognises that culture and heritage are both fluid and pluralistic, continually co-created through interaction between people – and thus celebrate difference, alternative perspective taking and, ultimately, multiple voices. Underpinned by a dialogic pedagogy (Alexander, 2008, 2020), in which interactions espouse plurality (Rojas-Drummond, 2020) and different perspectives are navigated (Wegerif, 2011), such a view of cultural literacy empowers intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008), as it includes 'constructive encounters about what it means to be different from each other' (Maine et al., 2019: 384). Particularly important to this notion of plurality is the creation of spaces between ideas where alternative perspectives can be encouraged. These dialogic spaces of possibility (Maine, 2015) reflect a reality where meanings are fluid and provisional, and rely on social engagement.

The Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), which aims to equip citizens with the competences required for intercultural dialogue and participation in democratic culture (Barrett, 2020), identifies 'tolerance of ambiguity' as one important democratic attitude (Barrett et al., 2018a). Characterised by a positive, open and flexible approach to thinking about the world (Barrett et al., 2018a), we argue that this democratic attitude is also foundational to a dialogic classroom ethos, which is typified by characteristics such as open-mindedness and mutual respect within a space to explore (for example, Boyd and Markarian, 2011; Shor and Freire, 1987; Matusov, 2009; Wegerif, 2020). Drawing on literature about democratic citizenship and human rights education (Barrett et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), in this article, we explicate the relationship between navigating multiple perspectives in dialogue and 'tolerating ambiguity'. We consider how, through learning to tolerate ambiguity, differences may be rebalanced, rather than resolved (Creppell, 2008), enabling individuals to see 'their commitments and beliefs as broader than they did at the beginning of the encounter' (Creppell, 2008: 322). In particular, we explore the role of hypothetical, or provisional, language (Boyd and Kong, 2017; Boyd et al., 2019; Maine, 2015, 2020; Soter et al., 2008) in opening up safe and supportive spaces for dialogue in which multiple perspectives may be negotiated and rebalanced. We argue that the social element of such language enables children to tolerate ambiguity as they engage in discussions where individuals may have differing perspectives.

The article draws on data collected as part of a larger European project, Dialogue and Argumentation for Cultural Literacy Learning in Schools (DIALLS), in which children and young people were taught the skills of dialogue to engage in discussions about cultural themes around living together and social responsibility, using wordless texts as stimuli. In professional development sessions, teachers explored the ideas around 'dialogic teaching' (Alexander, 2020) with practical ideas for how language could be modelled to promote tolerant, empathetic and inclusive classrooms. Specific language prompts were discussed, and how these might promote high-order thinking (Maine and Hofmann, 2016), in addition to a proposal that the promotion and modelling of such prompts might enable children to use provisional language as a tool for tolerating ambiguity during discussions where cultural themes are explored. In particular we ask: How is provisional language used in classroom dialogue to enact tolerance of ambiguity and its associated democratic behaviours? More specifically: (1) How do teachers model and promote it? and (2) How is it used in small peer-group learning contexts?

Tolerating ambiguity: navigating multiple perspectives

The concept of tolerance of ambiguity, originally developed by Frenkel-Brunswik (1948), is a diverse concept that may variously refer to a set of attitudes or even to a biologically based trait (Furnham and Marks, 2013). Tolerating ambiguity is explicitly mentioned, but not defined, in relation to work on effective and appropriate interaction in intercultural situations, or 'intercultural competence' (Deardorff, 2006; Bertelsmann Stiftung and Fondazione Cariplo, 2008). In both cases it is referred to as a positive attitude towards cultural diversity, but with subtle differences in its use. For Bertelsmann Stiftung and Fondazione Cariplo (2008), it refers to an openness towards uncertainty, while for Deardorff (2006) it captures an attitude of curiosity and discovery. Tolerating ambiguity is implicitly referred to in Oxfam's (2015) Curriculum for Global Citizenship in relation to the skill of managing complexity, while engaging with multiple perspectives is an important part of PISA's 2018 global competence assessment (OECD, 2020).

Perhaps the clearest exploration of the concept can be found in the RFCDC that promotes the concept of tolerance of ambiguity as an attitude towards uncertain situations and issues that are subject to multiple interpretations (Barrett et al., 2018a). Such an attitude enables individuals to sit comfortably with the possibility of multiple perspectives and to accept the lack of a clear-cut resolution or 'correct' answer. According to the Council of Europe's definition, tolerance of ambiguity involves five main aspects: recognising and acknowledging that a situation or issue might be subject to multiple perspectives and interpretations; recognising and acknowledging other people's perspectives as equal to one's own; accepting complexity, contradiction and a lack of clarity; having a willingness to work with incomplete or partial information; and having a willingness to tolerate and deal constructively with uncertainty (Barrett et al., 2018a). The democratic behaviours displayed by learners exhibiting this attitude are explicated in the validated and scaled descriptors (Barrett et al., 2018b). According to this scale, those demonstrating a basic level of tolerance of ambiguity engage well with other people who have a variety of different perspectives and can temporarily suspend judgements about other people. At the intermediate level, individuals are comfortable in unfamiliar situations, deal with uncertainty positively and constructively and work well in unpredictable circumstances. At the advanced level, individuals actively wish to have their ideas and values challenged, and enjoy tackling ambiguous problems and complicated situations. This conceptualisation of tolerance of ambiguity, which celebrates difference and alternative perspectives, aligns with the idea of cultural literacy as a dialogic social practice in which multiple perspectives are navigated (Maine et al., 2019).

The notion of a 'dialogic social practice' references the important work of Street (1984), who questioned what he termed 'autonomous' models of literacy which prioritised a set, cultural notion of what it means to be 'literate'. In his work, Street (1984) considered the marginalised voices that were overlooked, as more dominant cultural norms were prioritised. Importantly he challenged the acquisition of 'literacy' as something fixed and print-based. Following a lead from Street (1984), in an earlier article (Maine et al., 2019), we applied a similar logic to the notion of 'cultural literacy', calling into question the notion that culture is fixed and monologic. Rather, we described a 'dialogic social practice', recognising that the relationships between people and their worlds are reciprocal and subjective. Further, Bakhtin (1981) argues that we are always in dialogue with what he calls the 'superaddressee', the idea of a voice and possible response which extends any argument infinitely. Theoretically useful, these ideas are challengeable when 'real' dialogues are encountered, as issues of power inevitably limit some voices and prioritise others. Furthermore, educational policies influencing subject teaching in schools, particularly in England, have more recently championed 'knowledge' over softer life-long learning skills (Young et al., 2014).

Navigating multiple perspectives within a dialogic space of possibility

The shared space within which different perspectives can be created and explored has been termed 'dialogic space' (Wegerif, 2007, 2010). Within this space, the 'dialogic gap' between different perspectives is key to meaning making (Wegerif, 2011: 182). This space allows for the exploration of possible ideas without the need for conclusion, and it can be termed a 'dialogic space of possibility', a term capturing 'the fluid and exploratory potential of the space between speakers' (Maine, 2015: 20). Viewing a dialogic space as a space for possibility thinking highlights the desirability of a metaphorical *safe space* for trying out ideas which are not bound by solution-seeking goals.

The dialogic space of possibility can also be seen as a stance reminiscent of Keats's concept of 'negative capability', which he first described in 1817 (in Keats, 2002), and clearly speaks to the idea of tolerating ambiguity. For Keats, negative capability is 'when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Keats, 2002: 41–2). Keats's idea of negative capability also points to the creative dimension of tolerating ambiguity; according to Keats, creative genius requires open-mindedness and the ability to be comfortable experiencing uncertainty as one navigates different perspectives (Wolfson, 2015). While the stance or disposition might be desirable, our observations of classroom discussion lead us to consider more closely how this is realised in actual language.

Provisional language

The role of particular linguistic markers has been a key focus of study for dialogic engagement (see, for example, Boyd and Kong, 2017; Maine, 2015; Soter et al., 2008; Mercer et al., 1999; Wegerif et al., 1999). Initially identified as language that would indicate reasoning and high levels of comprehension, more recent studies have shown the importance of hypothetical language in opening up spaces for dialogue. In their work investigating exploratory talk, Mercer et al. (1999) and Wegerif et al. (1999) identify linguistic markers that indicated that exploratory talk was happening. Initially focusing on *because*, *I think* and *I agree*, they extended this list to include modal language (such as *could* and *might*) as they noticed that it also served to introduce reasoning in student talk. In their study investigating the potential of different small reading group contexts, Soter et al. (2008) notice that certain 'reasoning words' were discourse features present where students engaged in high levels of comprehension. They include *may be*/*might*/*maybe* in addition to *could*/*would* in their list. Boyd and Kong (2017) go further in grouping these different reasoning words according to their function in reasoning, drawing out the potential of modal words. In addition to introducing reasoning, they find that these words enable students to speculate, and teachers to use them specifically to invite speculation. They describe the words *might*/*maybe*/*could* as the 'language of possibility', a term also used by Maine (2015: 60) when she describes how children used 'possibility markers' to put forward ideas that are not definite hypotheses, but more fluid and provisional. As Boyd et al. (2019: 27) find, the use of these modal words 'reduces commitment' to a hypothesis in case it is not well received by others, but it also offers ideas as hooks on which to build inter-subjectivity.

Research has shown that provisional or vague language such as *maybe*, *might*, *could* and *perhaps* can have a twofold purpose: to introduce reasoning, but to do so in a way that still allows for a possibility that the suggestion might not be supported by others (Maine, 2015, 2020; Rowland, 2007). It is the latter purpose – the imbuement of a sense of tentativeness, hesitancy and flexibility – that is of interest in this study. Similar findings emerged from Rowland (2007), where he investigates the use of 'vague language' and hedging in maths lessons. Using such words enabled a tentative movement towards hypothesis, and, echoing Boyd and Kong (2017), he also describes this vague language as 'conveying a speaker's lack of full commitment to a proposition under consideration' (Rowland, 2007: 87), or that the hypothesis is not 'complete' (Rowland, 2007: 82). These words then are not only concerned with the suggestion of ideas, but also with engagement with another person to whom they might relate. Being happy to allow ideas to be provisional and contestable is to be able to tolerate ambiguity, teasing and gently prodding at ideas as collective meaning making is achieved.

Boyd et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of the environment where this language enables rich thinking. They argue that such language needs to occur within contexts where a dialogic value orientation (Aukerman and Boyd, 2020) signals that student ideas are important. In their study, they particularly considered how teachers can signal this, but clearly such an environment also leads to a valuing of student ideas by each other, allowing for multiple perspectives to be included in the joint endeavour of co-construction.

However, dialogue occurs within classroom spaces that are both messy and contradictory. As such, dialogue may be viewed as a problem space, riven with tensions, dilemmas and struggle (Gurevitch, 2000; Lefstein, 2010; Lefstein and Snell, 2014). In particular, inequalities around 'voice' make the concept of democratic and dialogical pedagogies far from straightforward. The realisation of voice is central to dialogue that is rich in perspectives. Problematising idealistic approaches to dialogic pedagogy, Lefstein et al. (2020) discuss the particular conditions and struggles associated with the realisation of voice. They identify four conditions for exercising voice: '(a) opportunity to speak; (b) expressing one's own ideas; (c)

on one's own terms; and (d) being heeded by others' (Lefstein et al., 2020: 111). Underpinning each of these is an element of struggle: 'the struggle to capture and maintain the floor, the struggle between student and classroom language, and the struggle to have one's ideas recognized and addressed, among the sea of competing voices' (Lefstein et al., 2020: 112). In our analysis, we illustrate the processes involved in the struggle for voice, and analyse the conditions that facilitate it as students learn to navigate multiple perspectives in dialogue.

Data and methodology

The UK data set in this article consists of 18 recorded and transcribed lessons from schools in England from primary (*n* = 10) and secondary (*n* = 8) classrooms. These lessons come from a sequence taught in schools over several months in each age group. The lessons formed part of a Cultural Literacy Learning Programme designed to develop students' cultural literacy learning, using wordless picture books and films as springboards for classroom discussions about cultural themes (DIALLS, 2021). Promoting tolerance, empathy and inclusion as core cultural literacy dispositions, the ambiguity of the wordless texts was used to stimulate discussions, encouraging readers to actively engage with the texts as they co-constructed meaning (Arizpe, 2014). Amid the rich heterogeneity of our classrooms, the children were encouraged to explore their own responses, and to think about personal and shared values. Each lesson in the sequence had a lesson plan and dual objectives: one focusing on the dialogue learning and the other focusing on the cultural topic under discussion. The lesson plans included activities to stimulate thinking, ideas for whole class discussion and a reflection activity. Classroom discussions were a mixture of whole class discussions and small group discussions, usually of four children. Lessons were typically planned to last for 40 minutes, although in primary classes they often lasted longer.

The extracts used in this article are examples of actual classroom interactions, employed to illustrate the discussion. Two criteria were used to select these samples: first, lesson transcripts were reviewed to identify lessons rich in provisional language. Based on the literature cited previously, we identified transcripts where the following words occurred very frequently: *maybe*, *perhaps*, *possibly*, *probably*, *might*, *could* and *wonder*. Further selection occurred at this stage, when lessons focusing on the navigation of multiple perspectives were chosen. Using this criterion, two lessons out of the 18 were identified for further in-depth qualitative analysis: one lesson from School A (13–14-year-olds) and one from School B (9–10-year-olds). Both Schools A and B are co-educational state schools situated in rural towns in southern England, with predominantly first-language English speakers. In both lessons, the students discussed the short wordless film *Baboon on the Moon* (Duriez, 2002), a story where a baboon living on the Moon goes about his daily task of keeping the Moon in working order, but is shown to be homesick as he serenades Earth with a wistful tune played on a trumpet. Using the film narrative as a starting point, the cultural theme of the lesson was to discuss the concepts of 'home' and 'belonging'. Extracts are from whole lesson recordings, and line numbers correspond to the whole lesson transcript.

Analysis

In the first example from School A (13–14-year-olds), the teacher is discussing the dialogue objective for the lesson: to listen to what others have to say and to empathise with divergent viewpoints. The teacher clearly explains the importance of suspending judgements – first, when listening to what each other has to say and, second, in relation to empathising with the character in the film by suspending judgements about them:

| 64 | Teacher | *We're trying* to PUT ourselves in *somebody* else's situation, not JUDGE them, not say, 'Oh well actually you know, you're OK. You've got a job. You've got this, you've got that.' *Try* and put yourself in that person's situation and understand where they're coming from, and that's what we're going to do when we look at this next film, OK? So today we're focusing ON LISTENING to what *others* have said and respecting their ideas, and empathising with different viewpoints – that it's fine to disagree with *somebody*, you're just listening to what they say and you *try* and get some value out of that. You don't need to judge *somebody* else. If |

they've told you something, that's good, and when we watch the FILM we're not going to JUDGE the character, we're going to *try* and understand that character by maybe making some connections with *our own life.*

The teacher uses the verb *try* several times. The first use is in progressive tense in the first-person plural, emphasising the collective effort that is being made. The next use is in imperative, appealing to the whole class, but also to the individual effort of each student. The last use is again in the first-person plural, signalling the collective ethos that needs to be achieved. By switching the agency from the collective 'we' to 'you', to the vague *others* and *somebody*, the teacher uses a powerful rhetoric which shows the students how perspectives can be switched. The instructions are ended with the possessive phrase *our own life*, which connects the thinking process with the students' own experiences.

Later in the lesson, the teacher encourages one student to suspend his judgement about the baboon during a whole class discussion about the film:

100	Teacher	Is he a gentle soul? Is he cultured?
101	Connor	*Probably not.*
102	Teacher	Have you heard him playing the trumpet?
103	Connor	He's not cultured, is he? He doesn't know what's going on, on Earth.
104	Teacher	Can he play the trumpet?
105	Connor	Yeah.
106	Teacher	You've got to suspend your sort of understanding of baboons here a little bit. Be empathetic. If somebody can play the trumpet that well, has he got a heart? Has he got a soul?
107	Connor	*Maybe.*

The provisional nature of this interaction is evident in both the teacher's questioning and the student's responses. Using provisional language enables Connor to respectfully engage with the teacher's alternative point of view, while reducing his commitment to the idea. The provisional *probably* that Connor uses in response to the teacher's question is negated by *not*, but it still leaves a space open to change one's mind. The question tag 'is he?', which the student uses to defend his original position, is further introducing uncertainty and provisionality. Throughout the extract, the teacher is using questions, which, in essence, are provisional in their nature. In the teacher's last turn, she uses two consecutive imperatives to guide the student. The first imperative, 'You've got to suspend', clearly suggests a temporary suspension of normative thinking based upon acquired knowledge, while the second imperative, 'Be empathetic', focuses on how to achieve this temporary knowledge and, consequently, judgement suspension. This is again followed by questions inviting the student to consider such an empathetic attitude. Connor answers *maybe*, leaving space to recognise the different perspectives on this issue. Throughout the exchange, both parties instinctively use provisional language to facilitate respectful interaction with each other's ideas, rebalancing rather than resolving their differences, leaving the space open to alternative interpretations.

The next example explores how provisional language is both actively encouraged and modelled by the teacher during a whole class discussion in School B (9–10-year-olds). At this point in the lesson, the class are making sense of the film narrative before moving on to discuss the cultural theme of 'belonging':

5	Teacher	So WHY do you think the baboon's there, and you *could* also think about how that *might* have happened. And the second thing to think about IS how the baboon is feeling through that film and then being able to justify that with these from what we've watched to support that, OK? Can we think about using some of that language we've talked about when you're *possibility thinking*? So the '*perhaps*', the '*maybe*', the '*might*', playing around with different ideas and trying to come to some kind of agreement together, negotiating meaning that way, OK? Off you go.

During the small group discussion that follows this instruction, the students take up a range of this provisional vocabulary to introduce new ideas within a metaphorical safe space (note: square brackets denote overlapping speech):

6	Norah	Who wants to start? Owen, do you want to start?
7	Owen	(Shakes head)
8	Norah	Maddox, do you have an idea?
9	Maddox	So are we thinking about – what are we talking about?
10	Norah	Well like what we think about like his feelings and [{unclear}].
11	Maddox	[Well his feelings], he was obviously depressed as he was crying.
12	Rachel	*But just wonder why*, because he was looking at the Earth – at Earth –
13	Maddox	*Maybe* –
14	Rachel	[at planet Earth].
15	Norah	[*I think* I have] an idea: because *maybe* he had a baboon family, 'cos you saw, when he woke up, there was like a picture [of *like*] –
16	Rachel	[That's so sad].
17	Norah	another baboon. And then *maybe* someone took him away and like put him, put him on the Moon and then left him there.
18	Maddox	Or *maybe* –
19	Norah	And then he's calling for – that *might be like* a call for his baboon *like* wife *or something*. [And then] –
20	Rachel	[That's so sad].
21	Norah	[he's made] he's made a house and like waiting for them to come so they don't get – so then when he comes back, he'll get captured again. So he *might* be waiting for them to come to him and then they can live in that house together.
22	Maddox	*Maybe* there were – astronauts were doing an experiment and then … uhm … they decided they're gonna take a baboon to the Moon, but they didn't think about the baboon. So they just took him to the Moon and left him there and made him build a house and go to work, but he didn't want to.
23	Owen	But how *would* he build a house when there's no supplies on the Moon?
24	Rachel	I just think he –
25	Norah	Yeah, [that is a good point].
26	Rachel	[that] –
27	Maddox	Or *maybe* [he {unclear} build the house] –
28	Rachel	[Why was] –
29	Maddox	for him.
30	Owen	[Yeah].
31	Rachel	[Why] was he like (demonstrating trumpet playing) –
32	Norah	Playing the cornet.
33	Rachel	playing the cornet for the Earth to come –
34	Norah	It was 'cos he –
35	Rachel	'cos like the Earth [was trying to come to him].
36	Norah	[That *might* be a call] – that *might be like* a – his wife's, let's say, favourite tune and like calling to her.
37	Owen	But … but they *could*'ve sent him with a big box full of supplies.
38	Maddox	Yeah. And when you think about it, where's [he got his briefcase from]?
39	Rachel	[So he can like] build.
40	Maddox	Where's he got a [alarm clock from]?
41	Norah	[*Maybe*] *maybe* the people left it on the Moon.
42	Owen	And how how –
43	Rachel	Yeah.
44	Owen	did he learn to use the cornet?
45	Norah	He's just like (makes trumpet sound).
46	Rachel	He's a magic baboon. I mean, it's just an animated film.
47	Maddox	Exactly. But –
48	Norah	I know but we're still thinking about what – how he feels. [Like he might be a bit] –
49	Rachel	[Yeah, and connecting] it to like real life.
50	Maddox	Well, he obviously feels sad. That's quite clear.
51	Owen	Yeah.
52	Rachel	Yeah, since he was like crying and he went (wipes pretend tear).

53	Norah	Yeah.
54	Maddox	Yeah, like he was crying [because he wanted to go back to Earth].

At the start of the extract, Norah's commitment to empowering voice is evident as she encourages participation by an open question, 'Who wants to start?', which is immediately followed by directly inviting Owen to start (6). However, at this juncture, Owen does not wish to participate, and he exercises his right to remain silent. Norah then invites Maddox to contribute (8), and he asks a question to clarify the task (9). Inviting others to contribute reflects the underlying democratic ethos of the classroom, which is supported by agreed rules and procedures for talk. Here we see how their group talk is remotely mediated by their teacher as they appropriate and use these rules and procedures.

The use of provisional language enables students to respectfully challenge ideas while engaging with people who have a variety of points of view and to deal with uncertainty in a positive and constructive manner. Maddox starts with a definite statement containing *obviously* (11), which Rachel powerfully contradicts with 'But just wonder why' (12). Using this language enables Rachel to respectfully challenge Maddox's alternative point of view. This is immediately taken up by Maddox, who responds with *maybe*, one of the key words suggested by the teacher, transforming the whole mode of this conversation into the possibility mode. However, his idea is not picked up by the group, and Rachel and Norah both speak at the same time, overlapping with Maddox. Norah then successfully gains the floor (15), opening up the space further for reflection. She introduces a new perspective with 'I think I have an idea', which is followed by *maybe*, framing the proposition as an alternative. Maddox again tries to offer an alternative idea with 'But maybe', which is not picked up by the rest of the group (18). Here we find a basic struggle for voice, namely the right to speak, as both Maddox and Norah compete for the floor. Norah takes leadership of the group at this point, supported by Rachel's back-channelling (16, 20), and she continues her idea, once again overlapping with Maddox without directly addressing him (19). Norah continues exploring this idea in a provisional manner, and she uses the modal *might*, and the vague *like* and *or something* (19, 21).

Maddox finally gains the floor and expresses his idea (22). The use of *maybe* expands the dialogic space, allowing Maddox to express his own idea on his own terms. However, in so doing, Maddox does not refer to Norah's previous idea; he simply adds another possibility into the dialogic space for the group to consider. The result is that Norah's voice falls out of the conversation. Owen then speaks for the first time (23), politely challenging Maddox's idea through questioning by using modal *would*. Rachel starts to elaborate, but Norah overlaps with Rachel to acknowledge Owen's idea (25). Underpinned by a democratic classroom culture that empowers voice, Norah's response provides encouragement to Owen to participate. Being heeded by others is an important condition for exercising voice.

Rachel continues to struggle to gain the floor (26) as Maddox interjects using the provisional *maybe* to develop Owen's idea (27). In the turns that follow, the struggle to be heard and taken seriously by the rest of the group is evident, as Rachel continues to vie for the floor, until she eventually succeeds and introduces a new question about why the baboon was playing the cornet (28–33). Norah interrupts Rachel (36) to offer a possible answer to her question using the provisional *might*. Owen respectfully challenges this idea using the provisional *could* when he suggests that 'they could've sent him with a big box full of supplies' (37), before Maddox invites further elaboration on Owen's idea (38). In the turns that follow, Rachel, Maddox and Norah compete for the floor, before Owen asks another question that drives the dialogue forwards, exploring the idea of the cornet introduced by Rachel (44). Rachel answers this question (46) before Norah, sensing that the group are moving off-task, refocuses the conversation on the task at hand (48). At this juncture, their language is no longer provisional, as Maddox then returns to his original point that he made at the beginning (50), and, in the turns that follow, the group converge, agreeing that the baboon is sad because he is lonely and misses Earth (51–4).

In a subsequent whole class discussion, the teacher models advanced democratic behaviour as she demonstrates her enjoyment of tackling this ambiguous question using possibility thinking:

141	Teacher	There are some interesting *possibilities* coming out about why the baboon's there, and, I'll be honest, there were a couple coming up that I hadn't thought of myself. So, you've extended my thinking, which is brilliant.

At the same time, the teacher is celebrating the importance of alternative perspectives by highlighting their role in extending her own thinking.

Later in the lesson, following small group discussions about where 'home' is for the baboon, students feedback their ideas to the whole class:

460	Maddox	So Norah said that *maybe* he was born on the Moon. Yes, *maybe* he was, but how does a baboon just appear on the Moon? Like [unless it's] –
461	Teacher	[That's the] question of the day.
462	Maddox	Un – unless it's a magical baboon that's got wings hidden under its skin, then I don't know how it just appeared there. That's what I think, but Norah's saying it's born on the Moon.
463	Norah	I don't know. [I'm just guessing].
464	Teacher	[She – well], just be careful. She didn't say it was born. She was saying it's a *possibility*. So, she was – Just going to wait for quiet {unclear}. I know some of you have got something to say. When I – Norah said when I came over, and she said 'I'm just going to challenge what we've been saying so far' and she said to make it a more amazing discussion, but I know what she – she just was trying to throw it out there. But actually it's opened thinking up.

In stating what he thinks, Maddox compares his idea to Norah's idea, albeit in a slightly misinterpreted way. The teacher defends Norah's idea as a valid possibility by highlighting how she dealt with uncertainty in a positive and constructive manner using the language of possibility.

Summarising the whole class discussion, the teacher links back to the use of provisional language, and demonstrates how this has enabled the sharing of ideas:

| 479 | Teacher | [So just to summarise] – just to summarise, Owen has just pointed out that there are lots and lots of *possibilities*. If we're *possibility – thinking* about how the – that baboon *could*'ve ended on the Moon. So we don't – like, you don't know but they're all *possibilities*. And I have to say those of you who've shared these *possibilities* have all grounded them in some kind of evidence while you're thinking that too, which is brilliant. |

Grounding these ideas in evidence – see the 'reasoning' words *because*, *'cos*, *so*, *so then*, *and then*, *unless* used by the students in connection with the provisional language in the above extracts – enables the students to deal with uncertainty in a positive and constructive manner.

Discussion

Our examples, albeit based on a limited data set, illustrate the democratic potential of provisional language in enacting cultural literacy as a dialogic social practice. It encourages students to express their own ideas on their own terms, and in so doing helps to counter 'exuberant, voice-less participation' (Segal and Lefstein, 2016: 2) as students move beyond the official voice of the teacher or the curriculum. The social element of provisional language enables both teachers and students to enact key democratic behaviours of tolerance of ambiguity as they learn to navigate multiple perspectives in classroom talk. In these classes, the dialogue does not just happen incidentally. The use of dual objectives directs the children's attention not just to the content of their discussion, but also to how they use dialogic social actions as they interact together.

Teacher modelling and promotion of provisional language is central to this endeavour. As Barrett et al. (2018c: 29) note: 'The way teachers communicate and interact with students has a major influence on the values, attitudes and skills acquired by learners. Democratic values, attitudes and skills cannot be acquired through formal teaching about democracy alone but need to be practiced.' Such language enables space for negotiation and less definite thinking, creating a safe dialogic space with inherent democratic potential that is not bound by solution-seeking goals. As Barrett et al. (2018c) argue, such open, safe spaces are particularly important when discussing difficult or emotive issues to ensure that learners feel confident contributing their ideas. The fluid and provisional nature of ideas within a dialogic space of possibility encourages the inclusion of alternative perspectives that might not be supported by others. Furthermore, the use of such language may serve to introduce reasoning in student talk

(Mercer et al., 1999; Wegerif et al., 1999), helping to ground possibilities in evidence that further enables uncertainty to be dealt with in a positive and constructive manner.

However, our analysis also reveals that the use of provisional language is far from a universal panacea. First, its use is context-dependent and cyclical. Provisional language is used when ideas are opened up, but sometimes such language is not appropriate if and when the group want to move towards agreement. Students may cycle between phases of convergence and divergence within any given dialogue. Indeed, as our analysis of the small group discussion demonstrates, group talk is a complex and messy business, full of overlapping turns and interruptions. A key struggle in the realisation of voice is the struggle to capture and maintain the floor (Lefstein et al., 2020; Segal et al., 2017). The underlying ethos of the classroom is an important means of countering this messiness. As we saw in Norah's interactions with Owen, a democratic classroom ethos that values every voice is important to ensuring that voices are heard and heeded. It is important, however, that this ethos and the rules associated with it are respected by, and applied equally to, all members of the group, not just to some.

Our analysis also revealed some struggles to make independent voices heard and heeded. Much of the time, the students engaged in collective exploration of the film. The students question, support and elaborate their ideas as they consider the baboon's feelings, enabling more authentic dialogic sequences to emerge in which students chain ideas into coherent lines of enquiry (Alexander, 2008). However, as students expressed their provisional ideas, sometimes these were not picked up by the rest of the group. Their voices were therefore unheeded and fell out of the dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986). As Segal and Lefstein (2016: 6) argue, 'Dismissing, ignoring or otherwise not engaging with someone's voice is another way of silencing it.' It is imperative that voices are not silenced if the democratic behaviours of engaging well with others, dealing with uncertainty positively and constructively, and challenging ideas and values are to be realised. Holding students accountable to standards of reasoning (Wolf et al., 2006) when learning to navigate multiple perspectives in small peer-group learning contexts is key to ensuring that all voices are heard.

In the quest to equip citizens with the competences required for intercultural dialogue and participation in democratic culture, these examples demonstrate that provisional language may play a key role in enacting democratic behaviours associated with tolerance of ambiguity. Consistent and explicit modelling, and promotion of such language through the use of dual objectives, is central to this endeavour. Through such an approach, students may become increasingly comfortable experiencing uncertainty as they learn to navigate multiple perspectives, something that the very notion of cultural literacy as a dialogic social practice seeks to celebrate.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

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Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication. Consents were obtained from all students and teachers for their discussions to be recorded, stored, analysed and used for academic purposes. All student names used in this article have been anonymised.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the authors during peer review of this article have been made.

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