Dialogism: An L2 Preschooler's Otherness, Voices, and Answerability

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate otherness, voices, and answerability of an L2 preschooler using Bakhtin's dialogism. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how young children are becoming the self and authoring voices in relation to others. Despite its significance, insufficient research has been conducted in the field. This case study explored a preschooler's heteroglossia of voices and varied answerability based on his consciousness and otherness. The analysis focused on language use, including embodied language acts, actions, and emotional-volitional tone and intonation, in "a contact zone" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345) where interlocutors create a dialogical conversation. The results highlighted the preschooler's unique participation in being (Bakhtin, 1993) and "endless becomings" (Morson, 2004, p. 331) by creatively interacting with others in his preschool classroom.

Keywords: dialogism, otherness, voices, answerability, young children, an English learner

1. Introduction

Bakhtin's dialogism emphasizes otherness, voices, and answerability through recognizing language use in everyday life, human action, and the interconnectedness of the self and others (Linell, 2009). The self voices and answers to others based on who they are, who they want to be, and what relations the self and others have. In dialogic interactions, there is often asymmetrical power. The self recognizes the power relations, and this affects voices and responses to others. According to Vitanova (2010), the self sees oneself not only through the self's eyes, but also through the eyes of another consciousness. This means that the self acknowledges a power difference and has a sense of how the other sees the self. Thus, it is necessary to understand others to understand the self, as the self is dialogic, and one can only truly know oneself through interactions with others (Holquist, 2002).

Despite the power relations, the self has the capacity to act (Vitanova, 2010). The self consciously makes decisions of its own answerability by choosing to act, or not to act, and how to act. Thus, Bakhtin argues, "answerability for my own uniqueness, for my own being" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 42). It is the self's conscious decision of which voices, and which answerable acts the self demonstrates in the dialogic interactions. The self populates other's voices with a particular intention and context. Thus, the self has "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.6).

Through the lens of dialogism, the complex and dynamic process of becoming the self and authoring voices can be conceptualized. Nonetheless, young children's otherness, voices, and answerability have received little attention. How young children see themselves in relation to others and exercise ways of authoring the self have been overlooked in the research field (Cohen, 2015). Dialogism provides a critical lens to view children as dynamic and fully conscious human beings who act in and upon the world – not merely as novice members of culture (White, 2021). Through this study, how a four-year-old boy, who is learning English as a second language (L2), shapes and reshapes his voices, answerability, and otherness will be explored. The research question is, *how does an L2 child portray Bakhtin's views of otherness, voices, and answerability in interaction with others in the preschool classroom?*

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Dialogism

Holquist (1990) defines dialogism as "we make sense of our existence by defining our special place in it" (p. 29). Our being, including the use of language and acts, develops through ongoing interactions between our own words and the words of others, seeking to assimilate and construct meaning (Bakhtin, 1981; Cohen, 2017). The existence of social power is inevitable; nonetheless, the self has the capacity to act and respond differently. Dialogism sees the self in the social context with others by acknowledging the uniqueness of 1) otherness, 2) voices, and 3) answerability the self creates in its own way.

2.2 Otherness

Otherness, voices, and answerability are intimately intertwined as the self always responds to others with varied voices and acts. Linell (2017) argues that our being in the world is thoroughly interdependent with the existence of others. The self selectively populates others' voices and assimilates the words of others (Bakhtin, 1981). Bakhtin also views consciousness in the same way. The self's consciousness does not exist without the other. The concept of 'the other' in this context refers not only to individuals but also to cultural and social norms (Vitanova, 2010). Voices and acts vary depending on otherness. For example, I feel confident in school and am aware of how my peers and teachers perceive me as a good student. Such self-awareness and consciousness are the essential components of my voices and acts. According to Holquist (2002), the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness. In Bakhtin's words, "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 287).

2.3 Voices

Voices are integral to dialogism, reflecting the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of the self (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011). Through participation in various social interactions, the self positions herself differently and is revealed through heterogeneous voices, such as the voice of a student, a leader in play, and a daughter at home. Such heterogeneous voices depend on whether she recognizes social relationships in different contexts, such as with teachers in school, friends, and parents at home. Her voices are multiple and can be contradictory, ever changing, and conflicting (Vitanova, 2010). Bakhtin (1986) theorizes heteroglossia as various ways of speaking in a social environment. Polyphony refers to voices that exert a harmonizing influence or narrative within the cacophony of heteroglossia, and both are characterized by both harmony and tension (Lang & Shelley, 2021).

Voices also convey emotional-volitional tone and intonation, including emotions, expressions, desires, and intentions. For example, someone's stern voice may communicate non-negotiable and firm intentions with less warmth in their emotions. Through different tones, we can uncover the potential meaning of a thought and a human act, evaluate acts and speech of others, and enhance our understanding of the self and others (Bakhtin, 1993).

2.4 Answerability

We engage in dialogue in which we answer to others, with the intention of them, and author our voices. Answerability is responsiveness to others. As the answerable agent, the self decides how to (re)act, or not, in a particular situation, considering the voices and emotional-volitional tone involved. Therefore, answerability arises from the individual's "unique center of value" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 59). Answerable acts, everyday decisions actualized in concrete acts, can be influenced by the ongoing process at the very moment of interaction (Bakhtin, 1991) depending on how interlocutors create dynamics. At the same time, they can be both a result of what came before and an anticipation of what will follow, considering the historical nature of language where multiple layers are created and transformed through its use (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011). For example, a child asserts himself over a peer using an authoritarian voice because he remembers that the peer used to let him be a leader before and expects the peer to follow his command this time. He can command like a teacher, standing tall like his grandfather. His answerable acts are influenced by how he intones his words with his own meanings and those compelled by the other (Hicks, 2000). Thus, his utterance "is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of our-own-ness" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89). His answerability, as his agentive acts, is embedded in his relationship with the peer (Bakhtin, 1993). It is also based on his consciousness that actively anticipates responses from the peer's position (Vitanova, 2010). This does not mean that his utterances and positions will not change. Language is dynamic, changing, and multi-voiced (Bakhtin 1981). Furthermore, the author's own position becomes the position of the other (Vitanova, 2010).

In sum, dialogism is based on the primacy of the social (Holquist, 2002). Otherness, voices, and answerability are key to understanding the self. It is ideological becoming 'how we develop our way of viewing the world, our system of ideas (Freedman & Ball, 2004, p. 5). It is important to note that authoring voices and the self are not seamless and straightforward. Rather, it is an ongoing struggle in which the self's voices and consciousness meet on the boundary and threshold between one's own and the other (Bakhtin, 1984). For children learning English as a second language which this study explores, their sense of selfhood and consciousness is tested by new socio-linguistic landscapes and cultural thresholds (Bakhtin, 1984). For them, the process of authoring their voices, answerability, and otherness in English is far more complicated and challenging and is continuously (re)shaped and questioned.

3. Literature Review

Despite the importance of Bakhtin's dialogic view of language and dialogism, it has been only discussed by a handful of early childhood scholars (Cohen, 2009; 2015). Through Bakhtin's lens of heteroglossia, Cohen (2009) observed preschoolers pretend play. Children's dialogue appropriated and assimilated another's words and was in conflict between

centripetal (e.g., harmony, consensus) and centrifugal (e.g., diversity, pluralism) forces. Similarly, preschoolers used double voicing to appropriate meaning during block play (Cohen, 2015). Bakhtin's carnival actions and carnivalesque discourse, including crowning and de-crowning of the king and children playing out roles of father, mother, and baby, were explored in Cohen's study (2017). In the study, preschoolers demonstrated ever changing heteroglossia of voices in exploring their identities and negotiating their relationships. Using the Bakhin's same lens, Tallant (2015) observed that children used grotesque bodies, degradation, clowning, and anti-authoritative and anti-reality discourse. According to White (2014), humor and laughter are ways that children explore their world. For example, young children's humor and laughter were significant forms of communication between themselves and with adults (Talent, 2017). Similarly, Pandya and Mills (2019) found that elementary students employed carnivalesque humor to alleviate tension and challenge the seriousness of the situation.

White (2022) explored toddlers' meaning making with Bakhtin's notion of utterances. The data found that toddlers co-constituted utterance chains through subtle, fleeting, and embodied language acts. This study highlighted the importance of sounds and body movement that toddlers created as expressions of utterance that went beyond fixed assertions of meaning. White and Redder (2017) applied Bakhtin's answerability to infant-teacher interactions and dialogues. It was found that infants were able to make meaningful connections with their peers and teachers, engage socially, and establish themselves as language partners. While this study primarily focused on the role of teachers in interactions, it is important to note that infants were seen as social and dialogic partners who had the ability to co-create utterance chains and shared meaning.

More relevant to the current study, DaSilva Iddings and McCafferty (2007) explored L2 learners' experience with Bakhtin's carnival in a kindergarten classroom. The authors focused on novel and innovative uses of language involving double-voicing. For example, children often employ multiple voices when playing or telling a story, with each voice representing a distinctive character. Despite the L2 children's limited English proficiency, they were able to invoke the imaginative, playful world of the carnival and create meaningful, responsive interactions. The authors concluded that the use of artifacts and gestures in verbal and physical contexts was important for enacting the carnival.

In sum, limited studies have explored Bakhtin's dialogic view of language and dialogism with young children. Utterances, carnival, and heteroglossia are ways in which children develop an understanding of society as a social frame of imaginary meanings (Cohen, 2017). However, there is a scarcity of studies with children learning an L2, especially with the dialogism lens. Dialogism offers a nuanced understanding of children as "fully conscious human beings" (White, 2021, p. 1283).

4. Methods

This is a case study. Stake (1995) states that a case study allows the "study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). This case study is to examine an L2 child's otherness, voices, and answerability in the preschool classroom through the Bakhtin's dialogism lens. This research was part of a larger study that investigated how an L2 child's agency emerged and changed in social interactions over time, and how the child's agency influenced his learning English as an L2.

4.1 Research Site & Participants

The fieldwork took place throughout the academic year of 2015-2016. The year-long observation included 42 times of the classroom visits and a total of 80 hours of observations. The research was carried out at a parochial preschool in the Northeastern region of the United States. The preschool comprised two classes for 3-year-olds, two classes for 4-year-olds, and one class focused on kindergarten-readiness. The central focus of this study, Han, was enrolled in a 4-year-old class. In Han's classroom, there were 17 children, nine boys and eight girls. Only Han and Christine were Korean Americans and all the children were European American background. Both Han and Christine were born and raised in the United States. While Christine's first language was English, Han's was Korean. In other words, Han was the only one child learning English as a second language in his classroom.

Han's classroom has two teachers: Ms. Amanda, who served as the lead teacher, and Ms. Kelly, who worked as the assistant teacher. Both were natives of the Northeastern United States. They were monolingual and had not received specific training to instruct children from different linguistic backgrounds other than English. Ms. Amanda held a bachelor's degree in elementary education, specializing in early childhood education. She had accumulated 20 years at the current preschool. Ms. Kelly did not possess any college degrees or teaching certificates. She joined the preschool teaching eight years ago.

4.2 Analysis

The data were analyzed regarding fit with Bakhtin's dialogism examining otherness, voices, and answerability. Everyday language use was analyzed to unfold the relations between Han and his peers and teachers. Language use included

embodied language acts, actions, emotional-volitional tone and intonation, and embodied language acts, in "a contact zone" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345) where Han and others create a dialogical conversation. According to Juzwik (2004), dialogism foregrounds the social and interactive contexts of language use, asserting that any communicative event occurs in the heteroglossic sea of conversation. The relations between Han-others unfold through the speaker's discourse in which discourse reveals positions between Han and others.

Along with classroom observations, 17 children were interviewed three times across the year. Interview questions included *'who do you want to play with, who is smart, who gets in trouble, are you a good friend, is Han, the focal child, a good friend, and why or why not?'* These interviews were used to not only investigate children's friendships and otherness, but also how Han's voices and answerability differed, or not, based on the friendships and otherness. Using the UCINET software (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002), a friendship network was generated based on date gathered from three rounds of interviews (see Figure 1). Excluding girls was necessary because the boys and the girls had distinct friendship groups.
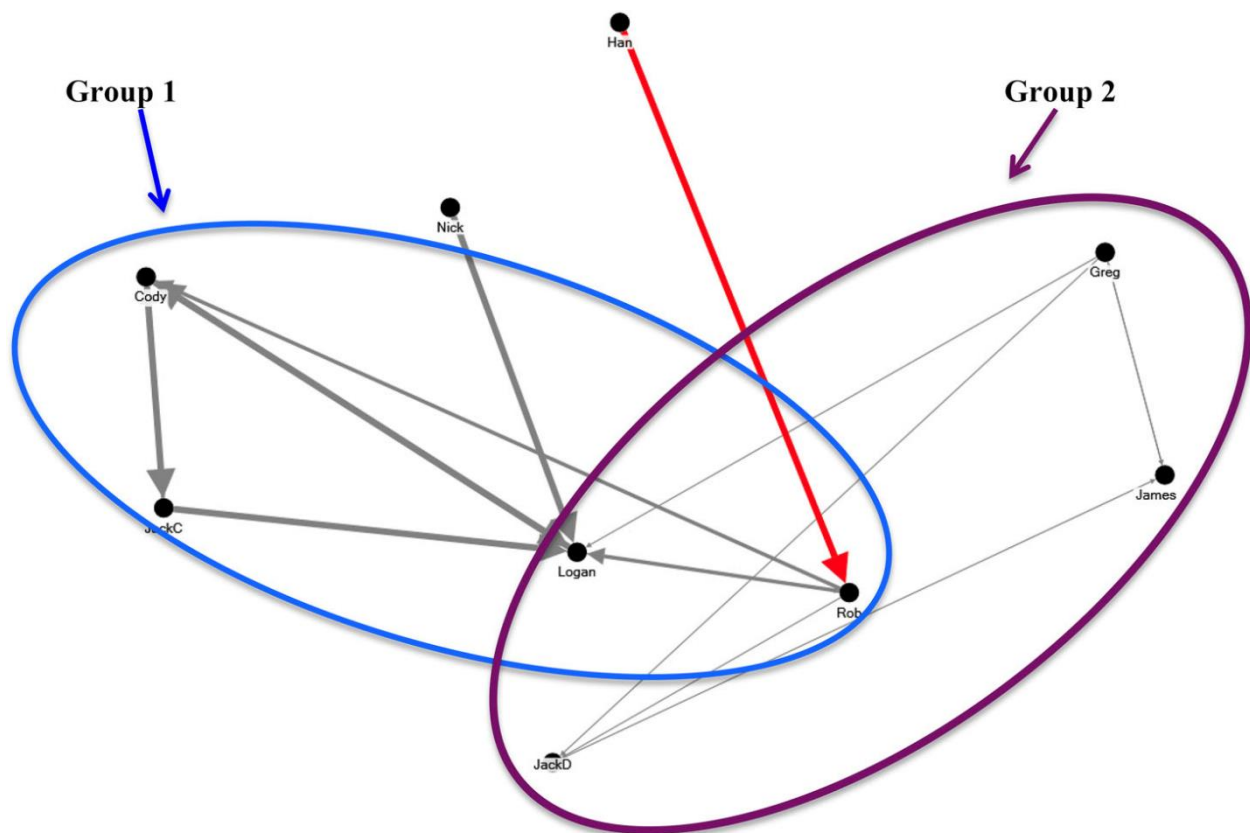

Figure 1. Friendship Network

In the following, Han's otherness will be presented first and then his voices and answerability together to portray how his voices differ based on his relations with a particular other.

Episode 1. Otherness-"I don't have anyone yet."

Two groups were found among the nine boys, one with Rob, Jack C, Logan, and Cody (Group 1), the other with Greg, James, and Jack D (Group 2). Only Han and Nick did not have mutual friendships with the boys. Group 1 was the main group that generated social cohesion and significance. Their friendships were unchanging and reciprocal (see thick lines among the members in Group 1), meaning that all four boys chose each other as their friends across the three interviews. Logan was chosen 12 times as the smartest boy in the class and selected as his peers' friend the most, nominated 11 times. Due to his popularity, Logan had social power and influence, meaning that his peers listened to him and chose him as their play partner. In contrary, boys in Group 2 exhibited weak and unstable (see thin lines among the members in Group 2). They chose different friends during each interview.

Han showed his understanding of his otherness by saying of his classmates, "Nichole, Christine, and Samantha play together. Rob, Jack C, Logan, and Cody like playing together. Greg only plays with Jake. I don't have anyone yet. Jack D likes Samantha, but Samantha doesn't like him. She likes playing with girls" (from field notes, translated from Korean).

Han knew who included in Group 1. Interestingly, Han said, "I don't have anyone yet." This statement was aligned with data that no boys identified Han as their friend. Han was aware of not only his position related to the others, but also peers' relationships and friendships, particularly those who had social power. He saw himself not only through his eyes but also through the peers' consciousness (Vitanova, 2010). His understanding of otherness is consciously involved in his decision making in the interactions. Depending on who he interacted with, his voices and answerability varied as the following three episodes illustrate.

Episode 2. Voices and Answerability- "Yeah!"

Han, Logan, and Nick found some animal figures. Logan suggested building a habitat with wooden blocks for the animals. Han and Nick brought blocks to Logan who stays close to the habitat and gives order to Han and Nick as to what kind of blocks they need to bring.

1. Logan: What put in on the top? (looking at Han and pointing the top)

2. Han: On the top? (looking at Logan, slowly putting a round block he had on the top, then looking at Logan again)

3. Logan: (Staring at the top for 3 seconds) I need a different top. I got to move it (moving the piece Han put on the top). I think bigger than that!

4. Nick: (Goes to the block shelf)

5. Han: (Quickly stands up, goes to a block shelf, and brings a bigger round piece to Logan)

6. Logan: (Takes the piece Han has) Now, we, how we put these on the top? (holding the block what Han brought)

7. Han: (Looks at Logan)

8. Nick: (Comes back from the shelf holding blocks)

9. Logan: OH! (with an excited and loud voice) How about we can be (unclear 2 seconds) and we can be these [round block pieces] off and put flat on the top like roof. We can put lot more on the top!

10. Nick: And (a loud voice) these are flat! These pieces! (showing his flat blocks)

11. Han: (Watches Nick's blocks, goes to the block shelf, and brings flat pieces)

12. Logan: OH…put that on the top! (an exciting voice and smiling)

13. Nick: Yeah!

14. Han: Yeah!

15. Han/Nick: (Go to the shelf).

16. Han: (Brings a flat piece and puts the block on the top)

17. Logan: No, no, no. Han, put that on the top, okay?

18. Han: (Holds the block for 3 seconds, then put the block like the first time and looks at Logan)

19. Nick: (Comes back from the shelf and puts his block on the top) We need more!

20. Logan More! More!

Han and Nick's voices and actions were submissive to Logan in this episode. As previously discussed, Nick and Han did not have any reciprocal friendships with others nor were they included in peer friendship groups. Logan remained at the habitat and ordered Nick and Han what blocks they needed to bring (lines 3, 6, 9, 12, and 17). Meanwhile Nick and Han brought blocks as Logan requested. Logan used the authoritative word, 'no' (line 17) as he reinforced his authoritative role and commanded Han. Logan's voice contained power and authority. Han barely made his voices; yet he demonstrated his clear intention to follow Logan's orders without challenging Logan's authority. He closely watched what Logan said and what blocks Nick brought. In addition, Han did not assert his intention to place the block on the top as Logan suggested even when Logan interrupted him (lines 16-18). Rather Han listened to Logan and let Logan order him. Han was happy to find the right flat blocks and bring them to Logan (line 14). Han co-created shared meaning through noticing, acknowledging, and valuing Logan.

Episode 3. Voices and Answerability- "It's not done yet."

Liam and Jack C start building train tracks, while Han starts building construction tracks right next to them. Construction tracks are a little wider than train tracks to fit construction vehicles.

1. James: (Approaches to Han from the Lego table and picks up one construction track)

2.   Han: No, you go there (pointing to train tracks Liam and Jack C are building)

3.   James: Han, you need to share! (with a calm but firm voice)

4.   Han: It's not done yet! (looking right at James's eyes with an angry voice)

5.   James: OK, if you are done (moving to train tracks) (Comes back in a few minutes later)

6.   Han: It's not done yet, okay? (with a gentler voice than before)

7.   James: (Looking at what Han is doing. 10 seconds later) Is it done?

8.   Han: (Pushes away James with his hands)

9.   James: Ouch! (Looking at Ms. Amanda, but she did not see what happened. Goes back to the Lego table)

As the episode displayed, Han's voices and volitational tones are completely different to the previous episode with Logan. His answerability to James was defensive, unsupportive, and unfriendly (lines 2, 4, 6, and 8). In line 6, Han's gentle answerable act seemed to allow James to play later. His internally persuasive voices seemed to be open to negotiate and accept James to his play. Therefore, James waited for Han (line 7). However, Han demonstrated authoritative acts in line 8. He could no longer justify why he did not allow James to play. Han created his authoritative voices and acts with his own intonation and intention (Bakhtin, 1990, cited from Cohen, 2009). In the utterance chains, language was infused with conflicted thoughts, feelings, and point of view between Han and James.

Episode 4. Voices and Answerability- "Ms. Amanda! Ms. Amanda!"

During snack time, three different colors of peppers are provided to the children. Ms. Amanda, the lead teacher, and Ms. Kelly, the assistant teacher, encourage children to try them even though they don't like them. Han is sitting between Carla and Samantha.

1.   Carla: Do you like peppers?

2.   Han: (Making a disgusted face) No.

3.   Carla: I like it!

4.   Samantha: I don't like it (a small voice but loud enough for Han to hear).

5.   Han: (Looking at Samantha, tries a pepper, frowning while chewing) Peppers are yummy! (to Ms. Amanda, loud enough so the whole class can hear).

6.   Ms. Amanda: (Does not answer to Han, puts peppers onto other children's plates).

7.   Han: I taste red one! (to Carla). Ms. Amanda! Ms. Amanda! I don't like peppers but I did!

8.   Ms. Amanda: Good job! (does not look at Han)

9.   Someone asks to Ms. Amanda what Han meant.

10. Ms. Amanda: He tried one and he liked it!

11. Han: Samantha didn't like pepper! (loud enough for the whole class to hear)

12. Ms. Amanda: She tried though.

13. Han: (Gives his pepper to Carla).

14. Carla: No!

15. Han: I thought you like pepper (bringing his pepper back to his plate).

16. Carla: I like it, but I don't like yours.

17. Han: (Finishing all peppers) Ms. Amanda! (loud) I eat them all! Tell my mommy!

18. Ms. Amanda: Want more?

19. Han: (Firmly shakes his head no)

In this episode, Han showed a good student's voice who willingly tried the vegetable and enthusiastically joined, more than any of his other classmates, the whole class conversations. He was the one creating utterance chains. Han's voice, "Peppers are yummy!" (line 5), was inconsistent with his frowning face (lines 2 and 5). Han actively searched for Ms. Amanda's answerability about his openness to taste food he didn't enjoy as he kept calling Ms. Amanda (lines 6 and 7). To highlight his efforts, Han brought otherness, Samantha, "Samantha didn't like pepper!" (line 11). After Han ate all his peppers, he eagerly informed Ms. Amanda, "Ms. Amanda! I eat them all. Tell my mommy!" (line 17).

5. Discussion

Dialogism is a way of becoming in the world in which the self and others are inevitably interdependent. Due to the critical roles of others in becoming the self, Vitanova (2010) argues that human consciousness itself is based on the premise of otherness (see also Holquist, 2002). In the four episodes, Han demonstrated his unique otherness, voices, and answerability, which was surprising considering he was learning English as an L2. Despite his limited English proficiency, Han demonstrated a keen awareness of others and the self. His student voices during snack time actively sought the teacher's answerability. Additionally, he was consciously aware of the classroom social and cultural norms in which everyone had the right to speak, and everyone's voices deserved to be heard. Considering that Han knew of his unpopularity among peers, he might have taken advantage of the opportunity to establish his good student identity and social status.

In the episodes with his peers, Han clearly knew the others, their friendships, power relations, and consciously showed different answerable acts and voices. His voices were the sources and the very conductor of consciousness (Vitanova, 2010). Han selected different voices, submissive and supportive versus defensive and unfriendly, based on otherness. On one hand, he was cognizant that Logan was the popular boy and had social power among boys, thus Han was submissive and supportive to Logan. Even though Han's voices were minimal, he co-created utterance chains with embodied language acts by paying attention to what Logan commended, pointing out, and what Nick brought for Logan. According to White and Redder (2017), embodied language acts, such as a simple combination of a sound (e.g., 'aaahhh') with an action (e.g., raised arms) can be regarded as co-constituting utterance chains. On the other hand, Han was defensive and unfriendly to James, with authoritative voices. His voices were full of conflicts, struggles, and disagreement. The struggles between authoritative voices and internally persuasive voices that Han portrayed align with Cohen's study (2009) in which children enacted social roles and created different situations of power.

Bakhtin's answerability is always already embedded in one's relations with others (1993). Han's answerable acts along with answerable voices portrayed his uniqueness and decision making as a student in the whole-class conversation and as a peer. As a student, Han actively created his voices and prompted the teachers' responsibility. As a peer, he was clear about his desire to associate with a socially powerful friend. His varied answerability stemmed from recognizing the importance of others. According to Bakhtin, the answerability is for one's own being through the actualization of a decision within the self and other relations (1993). L2 children, due to their limited language proficiency, often feel oppressed by their circumstances (DaSilva Iddings & McCafferty, 2007). Han's display of physical aggression during his interaction with James (Episode 3) might be attributed to his lack of effective authoritative voices, which could have redirected and rejected his peers' acts and voices as Logan, a native English speaker, demonstrated.

In sum, Han showed the uniqueness of his participation in being (Bakhtin, 1993) through his answerability, and multiplicity of ways of speaking in a social environment (Cohen & Uhry, 2007). He saw himself within the relations with others and positioned himself in ways, even contradictory and inconsistent ways. Han was conscious of himself in the peer groups and became himself while revealing himself to another, through another (Bakhtin, 1984). In Bakhtin's term, Han portrayed "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (1984, p. 6).

6. Conclusion

This study aims to portray an L2 child's otherness, voices, and answerability with Bakhtin's dialogism. This study sheds light on the complexity of the preschooler who was the only L2 child in his classroom and navigating the new linguistic and cultural norms and expectations. Han showed his "endless becomings" (Morson, 2004. p. 331) by creatively interacting with others in his preschool classroom. He developed his own way of becoming, voicing, and viewing the world.

With only one child, this study was insufficient to portray children's ideological journey. Further research is needed to examine young children's complex and dynamic process of becoming the self and authoring voices.

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