



Informal dialogic reflections for language teachers

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Abstract

This study investigates how informal dialogic reflection (IDR)—a relational, peer-led form of reflective practice grounded in dialogue—can help language teachers in high-performing systems navigate the tension between functional demands (e.g., exams, curriculum coverage) and person-centered values (e.g., care, identity, well-being). Drawing on John Macmurray's (1961) relational philosophy and Fielding and Moss's (2010) critique of performative education, the research proposes IDR as a non-evaluative, open-ended alternative to technical or prescriptive reflection models. Through in-depth dialogic interviews with seven language teachers (English, Chinese, Malay) in a Singapore secondary school, the study used Dialogic Discourse Analysis to explore how teachers critically examine and reimagine their practice. Findings show that IDR enabled teachers to: (1) reframe the purpose of language education beyond economic utility, (2) affirm unmeasured relational work as pedagogically significant, and (3) integrate functional and person-centered aims in ways that support student and teacher well-being. In an era where global education systems risk reducing teaching to performance metrics, this study affirms the moral and relational core of the profession as essential to sustainable teaching. IDR offers a practical, peer-based approach that helps teachers in high-performing systems, like Singapore's, to balance formal accountability demands with the relational, person-centered dimensions of teaching often overlooked in structured evaluations.

Keywords: Informal dialogic reflection, relational philosophy, professional development, language education, person-centered education, high-performance systems

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Grammarly (with the GO function turned off) to check for grammar. After using this service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Informal Dialogic Reflections for Language Teachers

In high-performance education systems like Singapore's, teacher reflection is increasingly recognized as a vital component of professional development. However, prevailing models, like "technical, instrumental, and state-directed models" often emphasize technical, classroom-focused practices aligned with systemic accountability and instructional efficiency (Tan, 2008, p. 225). This orientation, shaped by top-down policies and performance management frameworks such as the Enhanced Performance Management System (EPMS), tends to position reflection as a procedural or evaluative exercise rather than a transformative, meaning-making process (Loh et al., 2017; Tay et al., 2023). As a result, teachers may engage in reflection that addresses immediate pedagogical challenges but rarely interrogates the deeper values, purposes, and relational dimensions of their work. High-performance education systems—such as those in Singapore, Estonia, Finland, the United States, and Australia—share common pressures rooted in global accountability regimes, standardized testing, and the economization of schooling (Boman, 2020; Ro, 2019; Skourdoumbis, 2016; Teng et al., 2020). While national contexts differ markedly in governance, equity commitments, and pedagogical traditions, many high-achieving systems grapple with tensions between measurable outcomes and the relational, ethical dimensions of teaching. These cross-national parallels underscore that the challenges explored in this study resonate beyond any single context. In such contexts, the functional—measurable outcomes, syllabus coverage, and assessment results—often dominates over the personal, leaving little space for educators to explore their role beyond that of curriculum implementers (Ro, 2020).

This study responds to the need for a more balanced, relational, and critically engaged form of reflection by proposing an Informal Dialogic Reflection (IDR) framework defined as a non-judgmental, peer-led reflective practice that uses open-ended dialogue to help teachers critically examine and integrate functional demands with person-centered values in their teaching. Drawing on Macmurray's (1961) relational philosophy and Bakhtinian dialogism, the framework positions education as a personal act rooted in mutual care, where the functional life exists for the sake of the personal life. It challenges the instrumentalism of neoliberal education, that of a policy paradigm that reconfigures schooling as a market-driven enterprise, prioritizing measurable outcomes, accountability, and human capital development over democratic or relational aims (Ball, 2003; Loh & Hu, 2019; Teng et al., 2020). By creating non-judgmental, peer-led dialogic spaces, this approach establishes relational environments grounded in Bakhtinian dialogism. In these environments, multiple voices interact and meaning is co-constructed through open-ended exchange. Such spaces enable teachers to critically examine the interplay between societal expectations and their own professional and ethical beliefs. Unlike structured, research-driven models of reflection, IDR emphasizes informality, self-direction, and co-construction of meaning, enabling teachers to navigate tensions between economic imperatives and humanistic values, and to reclaim agency in their professional identity.

By focusing on language teachers' lived experiences, this research explores how IDR can surface and reframe dominant discourses about the purpose of education, the nature of knowledge, and the role of relationships in teaching and learning. This research advocates for a transformative teacher development that moves beyond performative compliance toward deeper professional sensemaking while offering actionable insights for educators and policymakers in high-performing systems, demonstrating how informal, dialogic practices can foster a more holistic, person-centered approach to teaching; one that values not only academic achievement but also well-being, ethical engagement, and democratic participation. The research questions are:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do teachers use IDR to critically examine their teaching practices and beliefs about the purpose of language education? and;

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How does engaging in IDR help teachers reimagine the purpose of language education in ways that integrate both functional and person-centric perspectives?

Literature Review

To understand how teacher reflection can move beyond technical compliance toward a transformative practice, the literature review engages with relationalism and dialogism; frameworks that position meaning as co-constructed through dialogue, value multiple perspectives, and emphasize critical, collaborative inquiry as essential for professional growth.

High-Performance and Neoliberal Education

Contemporary education systems, particularly in high-performance contexts like Singapore, are increasingly shaped by neoliberal ideals that prioritize economic productivity, self-regulation, and measurable outcomes (Koh & Chong, 2014). High-performance contexts refer to education systems that consistently rank at the top of international assessments like PISA and are characterized by centralized curricula, rigorous standards, and a strong emphasis on measurable achievement in core subjects (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016; Teng et al., 2020). While often held up as global models, these systems frequently face similar tensions between accountability-driven efficiency and holistic, person-centered education; a challenge that resonates across diverse national settings grappling with the pressures of standardization, marketisation, and performativity. This paradigm aligns with human capital theory, positioning education primarily as a tool for national competitiveness and individual advancement (Engel, et al., 2023). Drawing on Ball (2003), performativity is characterized by a focus on “what works” over “what matters,” prioritizing efficiency, compliance, and quantifiable success over relational, ethical, or holistic dimensions of teaching and learning. Under this logic, schooling becomes a site of performativity, where success is defined through standardized testing, institutional rankings, and quantifiable outputs—a shift Luke (2004) describes as the convergence of economism, marketisation, and logical positivism. In Singapore, this is reflected in devolved school management models and a culture of audit, where teachers and students operate within accountability frameworks that prioritize measurable outcomes over holistic development, effectively framing education as skills training rather than personal formation. While framed as promoting both economic growth and moral development—producing the “good” neoliberal citizen who is productive and upright (Thaiyalan & Choo, 2024)—this system risks subordinating the real needs of learners to abstract, instrumental goals. As Smith (2003) cautions, childhood can become a semantic battleground for adult projections, where the idea of the child eclipses the lived reality, turning education into a form of social engineering. This raises critical tensions between education as a vehicle for equity, human rights, and democratic flourishing, and its current trajectory as a mechanism of market logic, stratification, and control (Wilkins et al., 2021).

In the Singapore education system, the EPMS is a comprehensive framework used to evaluate teachers across multiple domains, including student development, professional practice, and organizational contributions (Ro, 2020). It is structured around key result areas and a detailed set of competencies that emphasize holistic education, values-driven teaching, and professional collaboration. While the framework includes dimensions related to well-being,

character development, and emotional intelligence, its implementation relies on standardized performance indicators and formal review processes. This means that even as it incorporates broader educational goals, the system operates within a structure that prioritizes measurable outcomes, regular assessment, and accountability, aligning with wider institutional expectations of performance and quality assurance (Loh & Hu, 2019; Ng, 2025).

Relationalism Philosophy in Education

Given the pervasive influence of neoliberal education policies, which emphasize performativity, standardized measurement, and instrumental views of learning, there is a growing need to recenter teaching as a relational and ethical practice. Macmurray (1961) defines relationalism as where people are constituted through mutual, interdependent relationships where the self emerges not from isolation but through shared action, love, and community. Such relationalism positions human relationships as foundational to education, emphasizing mutuality, care, and shared personhood as central to learning and professional practice. Rooted in Macmurray's (1961) philosophy, it affirms that personal relations are not instrumental but intrinsically valuable; we engage with others not for a purpose, but because of who they are. This relational stance fosters mutual freedom and equality, where caring is enacted through attentiveness to others' expressed needs, rather than through predefined virtues (Gaskaree et al., 2025; Noddings, 2012). In educational contexts, relationalism challenges the primacy of functional outcomes by asserting that personal life is not secondary to, but the very purpose of, the functional (Fielding & Moss, 2011). As Fielding (2007) argues, mutuality is the core of human nature, and schools can become "democratic fellowships" when structured around this principle. Thus, teaching becomes a relational practice where collaboration, empathy, and ethical presence are not adjuncts to instruction, but its very foundation.

Dialogism

For philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1994), language is not merely conceptualized as abstract grammatical categories but theorized as a stratification of multiple discourses representing distinct ideological belief systems—or, in other words, heteroglossia, that of the complex interplay of various linguistic styles, social dialects, professional jargons, and ideological perspectives within a single language or text. Bakhtin argues that:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's interests; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (1994, p. 77)

Dialogism then, as conceptualized by Bakhtin (1984), offers a powerful theoretical foundation for understanding how dialogue functions not merely as conversation, but as a dynamic, meaning-making process rooted in relationality and difference. Unlike discussion, which often prioritizes information exchange and problem-solving, dialogue is a structured, generative practice characterized by guided questioning, active listening, and the co-construction of understanding (Kim & Wilkinson, 2019). It thrives on the tension between incommensurate perspectives, what Wegerif and Yang (2011) describe as the creative tension that opens a dialogic space where new possibilities emerge. This space is not neutral; it is shaped by the responsive nature of language, where every utterance is informed by and addressed to others, making dialogue inherently relational and contextually grounded (Yao et al., 2024). Within this framework, exploratory talk as a focal part of dialogue becomes a situated model

of reasoning—a form of critical yet constructive engagement where participants question, elaborate, and build on one another's ideas (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997). As Alexander (2020) argues, dialogic interaction enables learners to co-construct knowledge through mutual accountability and sustained collective inquiry. This aligns with Bakhtin's (1984) view that truth is not discovered in isolation but is born between people through collaborative search. For teacher reflection, dialogism thus provides more than a communication method; it creates a relational and intellectual space where multiple voices, values, and professional identities can interact, challenge, and transform, making it particularly suited to fostering collaborative, self-directed, and ethically grounded professional development.

Existing Dialogic Reflection

Existing research highlights dialogic reflection as a powerful tool for professional growth, often framed within collaborative, critically oriented frameworks (Alexander, 2020; Brown & Sawyer, 2016; Chung, 2022). Studies have employed methods such as duoethnography, where educators engage in reflective dialogue via email, text, or phone conversations to examine their practices and challenge assumptions, including those rooted in colonial ideologies (Sawyer, 2016; Sebok & Woods, 2016). Other work has applied conversation analysis within critical friendships to uncover misalignments between teachers' stated beliefs and classroom actions, fostering collaborative interventions (Gill & Hooper, 2020). While dialogic reflection has been used to help teachers in renegotiating pedagogical identities in transnational contexts (Hepple, 2012), its application within Singapore's high-performance system, where accountability structures shape professional practice, has received limited attention. The present study addresses this gap by examining how informal, peer-led dialogic reflection can support language teachers in integrating functional demands with person-centered dimensions of their professional identity. In the context of language teaching, dialogic approaches grounded in social constructivism have led to meaningful shifts in teacher belief and practice, particularly in high-pressure environments like Hong Kong (Chung, 2022). While existing studies highlight the value of dialogic reflection, they often take place within structured, research-led, or institutionally supported settings, which can limit their informality and spontaneity. These approaches often emphasize epistemological or ideological inquiry without fully addressing the interplay between teaching's functional demands and its person-centered, relational aspects, leaving a gap in understanding how informal, peer-led dialogic reflection can support teachers in navigating this tension and fostering self-initiated professional sensemaking.

The Informal Dialogic Reflection Framework

Building on the theoretical foundations of relationalism and dialogism, and in response to the identified gap in research on informal, person-centered reflective practices within high-performance contexts, this study proposes the IDR framework as a means to support teachers in critically examining and reimagining their professional practice. The IDR framework is grounded in a relational and emancipatory vision of teacher development, where reflection is not a solitary, technical exercise but a collaborative, critical, and transformative practice. The framework draws on two complementary theories. First, Bakhtinian dialogism (Brown & Sawyer, 2016) emphasizes meaning co-construction through open exchange among multiple voices. Second, Brookfield's (1995, 2000) concept of critical reflection provides a process for educators to examine assumptions through diverse perspectives, revealing hidden power dynamics and aligning practice with democratic values. Integrating these approaches, the framework creates invitational spaces—environments that are both safe and intellectually rigorous. Within these spaces, teachers engage in non-confrontational dialogue with peers,

students, and texts to critically interrogate the political, ethical, and cultural dimensions of their practice. These dialogues are structured around critical questions (see Appendix): What is education for? Whose interests does it serve? What do we mean by knowledge, learning, and personhood? (Fielding & Moss, 2010). Through such inquiry, teachers are encouraged to examine how dominant discourses, particularly neoliberal, performative norms, shape their assumptions and constrain their pedagogies (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011). Through iterative cycles—describing, questioning, and reimagining—participants test speculative ideas, challenge entrenched views, and broaden insights (Fielding & Moss, 2010). The process is not about arriving at fixed answers but about sustaining a state of “not yet”; an unsettled, reflective tension that opens possibilities for new ways of being, thinking, and acting in education (Hansen, 2015).

The framework integrates multiple layers of reflection: personal, professional, political, and philosophical. Teachers are supported by *critical friends* who offer alternative perspectives, emotional sustenance, and conceptual tools (Brookfield, 2000; Mälkki et al., 2022), enabling them to surface and challenge authoritative discourses (Britzman, 1991) and reimagine their roles beyond functional compliance. Using dialogic processes, participants compare incidents, test assumptions, explore contingencies, and co-construct meaning through spoken and written utterances (Nystrand, 2002; Skaftun, 2019). This collaborative inquiry fosters reflexivity, where critical thinking leads not only to insight but to action. By centering teachers as whole persons—emotional, moral, intellectual, and social (Ball, 2013; Buchanan, 2015)—the framework affirms their agency and dignity, positioning them as co-creators of a democratic, relational, and justice-oriented educational practice (Sachs, 2001). Ultimately, it is a living, contested process; one that resists closure and embraces dialogue as a continuous, transformative journey.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design centered on IDR interviews—a specific form of semi-structured, pair-based reflective dialogue grounded in Bakhtinian dialogism (Hallman, 2011; Pedersen et al., 2022). The researcher acknowledged the inherent risks of the dual role as both a facilitator and investigator. To mitigate potential bias and influence on participants’ expression, several strategies were implemented: the use of dialogic interviewing techniques (e.g., probing, mirroring, counterfactual prompting; Way et al., 2015); ongoing investigator reflexivity documented in field notes; and an enhanced dialogic member checking process (Harvey, 2015; McKim, 2023) in Session 2 to collaboratively interrogate interpretations. Rather than conducting conventional interviews, the researcher engaged as an *informal dialogic peer*, co-thinking and co-constructing meaning through the generative power of dialogue, not co-reflecting in an evaluative sense. This approach was deliberately positioned outside Singapore’s EPMS to create a relational, person-centered space where teachers could surface discourses often absent from formal appraisal settings (Lafortune et al., 2016; Swain & King, 2022).

Participants and Procedure

Seven experienced secondary language teachers (with 5–16 years of experience) were purposively recruited based on their interest in reflective practice and diversity in gender, language discipline, and teaching context. All taught at a government school serving students aged 13–17, with 40% receiving financial aid and higher-than-average minority enrollment. Following institutional ethics approval and school authorization, participants provided formal

Table 1. *Language teacher participants and demographics*

Teacher code	Subject	Years of experience	Gender
T1	English	5	Male
T2	Malay	5	Female
T3	English	5	Male
T4	Chinese	7	Female
T5	Malay	16	Female
T6	Chinese	6	Female
T7	English	8	Male

written consent, with strict confidentiality and anonymity maintained throughout. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Each participant engaged in two one-hour audio-recorded dialogic sessions, spaced one week apart. In this study, the researcher acted as a dialogic peer, guiding but not dictating the exchange, enabling teachers to surface tensions (e.g., economic utility vs. holistic aims) and arrive at nuanced syntheses through iterative questioning and summation. The first session used open-ended prompts (e.g., “How do exam pressures shape your interactions with students?”) to explore tensions between functional demands (e.g., syllabus coverage, assessment outcomes) and person-centered priorities (e.g., student well-being, ethical care). The second session functioned as an enhanced, dialogic form of member checking (Harvey, 2015; McKim, 2023). Instead of verifying transcripts, the researcher shared preliminary thematic interpretations and invited participants to clarify, contest, or expand on emerging discourses, transforming validation into a collaborative space for deeper inquiry. The one-week interval was intentionally chosen to balance conversational freshness with sufficient time for the researcher to reflect on initial data, enabling nuanced re-examination of discursive patterns while retaining the immediacy of participants’ lived experiences.

Data Analysis

All dialogues were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Dialogic Discourse Analysis (Skaftun, 2019), a Bakhtinian-based methodology that treats utterances as dynamic, context-bound acts shaped by multiple voices, power relations, and ideological tensions—viewing meaning not as fixed but as co-constructed through responsive, relational dialogue. DDA enabled close examination of how teachers navigated competing discourses, particularly the interplay between neoliberal accountability and relational professionalism, through their linguistic and interactional choices. Themes were generated through iterative analysis where the researcher first identified salient utterances marked by thematic coherence, dialogical address (e.g., to policy, students, or self), and relational positioning. These were then grouped into recurring discursive events such as genre shifts (Hallman, 2011), heteroglossic tensions (e.g., quoting EPMS language while expressing personal doubt), or rhetorical strategies like contrastive conjunctions (“but,” “however”), across all transcripts. Provisional themes were refined through dialogic interrogation: preliminary interpretations were shared with participants in the second session (Harvey, 2015), who clarified, contested, or expanded meanings, ensuring themes remained grounded in participants’ lived discourse. Final themes were selected for both internal coherence and *fruitfulness*; their capacity to illuminate systemic

tensions and engage critically with theories of neoliberal education (Ball, 2012) and relational philosophy (Macmurray, 1961).

Trustworthiness

To address methodological risks associated with the researcher's dual role—including potential influence on participants' expression and interpretive bias—multiple trustworthiness strategies were implemented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement (two dialogic sessions), investigator reflexivity (documented in field notes regarding the researcher's peer stance), and thick contextual description (e.g., EPMS structure, school demographics). Dependability and confirmability were ensured via a clear audit trail: transcripts preserved researcher prompts to show co-construction, and analytical decisions were logged in a reflexive journal. Transferability is supported through rich contextual detail, enabling readers to assess relevance to other high-performance educational settings shaped by neoliberal accountability regimes.

Findings

This section presents the results of dialogic interviews with seven language teachers (T1–T7) in a Singapore secondary school who engaged in IDR. Each teacher participated in two semi-structured, audio-recorded sessions, spaced one week apart, co-facilitated by the researcher acting as a co-reflective peer. The researcher used open-ended prompts adapted from Fielding and Moss (2010) to invite reflection on: (a) the purpose of education, (b) the nature of knowledge, and (c) the role of relationships in teaching. All dialogues were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Dialogic Discourse Analysis (Skaftun, 2019) to identify how meaning emerged through interaction.

The findings are organized around four recurring patterns observed across the dataset. In each pattern, teachers articulated tensions between functional perspectives (e.g., exam preparation, syllabus coverage, accountability metrics) and person-centered perspectives (e.g., student well-being, identity, moral development). These tensions were not static but evolved within individual dialogues, often in response to follow-up questions from the researcher. The researcher's utterances (e.g., probing questions, paraphrases) are included as part of the data because they shaped how teachers articulated, revised, or deepened their reflections. This approach directly addresses RQ1: *How do teachers use IDR to critically examine their teaching practices and beliefs about the purpose of language education?* The findings also show how, through this process, teachers began to integrate functional and person-centered aims, which addresses RQ2. Each theme below begins with a cross-case observation (i.e., a pattern observed in multiple participants), followed by illustrative excerpts from individual teachers.

Redefining the Purpose of Language Education

All seven teachers initially described language education in functional terms tied to economic mobility or national development. However, when prompted to consider students who do not benefit from these pathways, most articulated alternative purposes centered on well-being, community, or personal meaning. For example, T1 began by stating: "My hope is that through education, students from less well-off families—like I was—can get better jobs, climb the corporate ladder, and uplift their families from economic hardship." The researcher then asked: "And what happens to students who don't climb that ladder? What else might school offer them?" T1 responded: "Even as teachers want to explore new pedagogies, we're chasing time—to cover the syllabus and prepare students for exams... Students focus on what's tested, not on trying different things."

Later in the same session, when asked, “What really matters in education, beyond exams?”, T1 added: “But different people have different aspirations—what matters is happiness, well-being, helping others, and benefiting the community.”

Similar sequences occurred with T3, T4, and T7, who each moved from instrumental justifications to relational or ethical ones after being invited to consider alternative student trajectories.

Contrasting Measured Practices with Valued (but Unmeasured) Outcomes

All teachers described how their work is formally evaluated through observable, quantifiable indicators. In the same dialogues, they consistently identified important aspects of their practice that are not captured in these metrics. T6, for instance, listed her evaluation criteria as: “Number one, the quality of the work assignments... Is it just from the workbook or do you create your own? Number two, how do you deliver the lesson—do you use ICT or is it 80% teacher talk? The third one is results. That’s how we’re being assessed.” When the researcher asked: “And when you think about what you hope your students gain—especially in lower secondary—does that match what’s being measured?” T6 replied:

“For lower secondary, I don’t expect good results. It’s about creating interest, instilling passion. They need to find meaning, purpose... Something they aspire to be. It’s the small, achievable achievements that matter.”

T3 and T7 expressed comparable views, noting that student engagement, voice, and emotional safety were central to their practice but absent from formal review criteria.

Revising Understandings of Moral and Relational Teaching

Several teachers initially described moral education in terms of behavioral compliance or resilience within academic routines. Through dialogue, they revisited these views in light of personal experiences or student realities. T5 first said: “I will teach them about being respectful, being responsible... Daily routines, handing in homework... promote resilience, grit... it’s okay to get it wrong, but face it cheerfully and courageously.” After the researcher asked: “What has changed for you in how you think about what’s important in life?” T5 shared: “COVID was a blessing in disguise... I got to spend the last days with my dad... we were focusing on parents, loved ones, mental health... Health is most important. There’s a change in priorities.”

T3 similarly shifted from emphasizing academic pathways (“getting good grades so they can move on to better schools”) to acknowledging that many students disengage when pressured: “Many are not going to university... If I stress so much on ‘You have to get an A’... they’ll just tune out and stop coming to school.” He then added: “They want to be heard, they want people to know that they do have dreams, and it is more than just earning money.”

Reconsidering Subject Discipline

Teachers who initially justified their subject through national or economic utility later questioned its everyday relevance based on their observations of students’ post-school lives. T4 stated: “Students know that because China is getting more powerful... they need to use Chinese in their daily life... Another area I think is important... is to equip them with another language so they can use when they go into society.” When the researcher asked: “And in your experience, do they actually use it after school?” T4 replied: “A lot of my students... once they graduate, proceed to polytechnic... they don’t touch mother tongue anymore. Nobody calls them by their Chinese name. They don’t use Chinese in their daily life.”

T7, though not initially focused on utility, described his classroom dialogues as “just organic” but, when prompted to reflect on their purpose, recalled specific exchanges: “Why is this person

going through poverty? ... Is a thief who steals food to feed his hungry family still a bad person?" He added: "It's not one big thing... but really an accumulation of smaller actions."

In response to RQ1, the data shows that teachers engaged in critical examination of their beliefs through dialogic exchange, not in monologue. Their reflections deepened when the researcher asked follow-up questions that disrupted habitual narratives, leading them to articulate tensions between systemic demands and personal values. In response to RQ2, the findings reveal that teachers did not reject functional aims but began to reposition them in service of person-centered goals. This reimagining occurred iteratively, often within a single dialogue session, as teachers moved between perspectives in response to prompts.

Discussion

The aim of this discussion is to interpret how IDR enabled language teachers in a high-performance system to critically examine and reimagine their professional practice. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1994) concept of dialogic consciousness, this study demonstrates that IDR functions as a relational space where competing educational discourses—particularly the functional (e.g., accountability, economic utility) and the person-centered (e.g., well-being, identity, care)—are not only surfaced but held in productive tension. As Bakhtin (1994) observed, critical thought begins when individuals distinguish between "internally persuasive discourse" and "authoritarian enforced discourse" (p. 79). The data show that IDR facilitated precisely this separation: teachers began to recognize which aspects of their practice were shaped by external mandates (e.g., EPMS metrics, syllabus coverage) and which emerged from their own ethical commitments (e.g., fostering student voice, affirming cultural identity). This directly addresses RQ1, revealing that critical examination occurred not through solitary introspection but through dialogic co-inquiry with a peer facilitator.

IDR as a Counterweight to Neoliberal Instrumentalism

A key contribution of this study is showing how IDR disrupts the instrumental logic dominant in high-performance systems like Singapore's. Across the dataset, teachers initially framed language education in functional terms aligned with human capital theory—emphasizing employability, national competitiveness, and social mobility (e.g., T1, T4). This reflects what Fielding and Moss (2010) describe as the "end logic" (p. 24) of neoliberal education, where schooling is reduced to a mechanism for economic output. In such contexts, language becomes instrumentalized: valued not for its capacity to cultivate voice, identity, or intercultural understanding, but for its utility in enhancing test scores or global market readiness.

However, through IDR, teachers began to question these assumptions. When prompted to consider students who do not benefit from economic mobility (e.g., "What happens to students who don't climb that ladder?"), they articulated alternative visions grounded in human flourishing; well-being, community, moral purpose. This shift did not reject functional aims outright but repositioned them in service of personhood. As Macmurray (1961) argued, the functional life exists *for* the personal life, not as an end in itself. IDR created conditions for teachers to enact this dialectic, directly supporting RQ2 by showing how integration—not opposition—between functional and person-centered perspectives is possible.

Reclaiming Relational and Affective Labor

IDR also enabled teachers to articulate the significance of dimensions of their work that are not captured in formal evaluation systems. While the EPMS emphasizes observable and measurable indicators such as lesson delivery, assignment design, and student examination results, relational aspects of teaching, including listening, affirming student identity, and

fostering curiosity, are not formally assessed or documented. Yet through IDR, teachers named and valued these “small, achievable achievements” (T6) as pedagogically significant. T7, for instance, initially described his moral dialogues as “just organic,” but through reflection came to recognize them as deliberate acts of linguistic and ethical socialization. Similarly, T5’s reflection on her father’s passing led her to reframe moral education away from compliance-focused tasks like homework submission. Instead, she prioritized relational presence. This perspective aligns with Noddings’ (2012) distinction between “virtue caring” (p. 774), which treats morality as performance, and “caring for” (p. 775), which embodies authentic relational ethics. Noddings defines this ethics as attentive responsiveness to others’ expressed needs. Here, moral action emerges not from abstract principles but through dialogic relationships grounded in listening, presence, and mutual engagement. These insights emerged only because IDR provided a non-evaluative space to reflect on life beyond official accountability systems. This speaks to RQ1, illustrating how IDR supports critical self-examination by validating dimensions of practice excluded from institutional metrics.

Challenging Disciplinarity and Reimagining Purpose

Finally, IDR supported teachers in re-evaluating the disciplinarity of their subjects. T4’s initial justification for Chinese language—geopolitical utility—mirrored state-level narratives that position mother tongue as a strategic asset. But when asked, “Do students actually use it after school?” she confronted a dissonance between policy rhetoric and lived reality. This moment of ideological rupture led her to reimagine language not as a tool for global markets but as a medium for cultural belonging and personal naming, even if used infrequently. This reflects Macmurray’s (1961) insistence that function must serve personhood, not the reverse.

Such reimagining is especially significant in high-performance systems where curriculum is tightly aligned with economic imperatives. IDR did not discard functional goals (e.g., language proficiency) but reframed them within broader human aspirations: purpose, identity, community. This integrative stance directly answers RQ2, demonstrating that IDR fosters both/and orientation: teachers can uphold academic standards while affirming students as whole persons.

The Role of IDR

Crucially, these shifts were not self-generated in isolation but co-constructed through dialogic exchange. The researcher’s role as a co-reflective peer—posing open-ended, invitational questions—was instrumental in disrupting habitual narratives and creating space for alternative perspectives to emerge. Unlike structured reflection models tied to appraisal or research agendas, IDR’s informality, peer-led structure, and lack of closure allowed teachers to explore tensions without pressure to resolve them. This aligns with Hansen’s (2015) notion of sustaining a state of “not yet”—an unsettled, reflective openness that enables transformation.

In sum, IDR functions not as a critique of systemic accountability but as a practical, teacher-centered method for navigating it ethically. It supports teachers in critically examining their beliefs (RQ1) and reimagining their practice as integrating functional competence with person-centered care (RQ2)—not as a final destination, but as an ongoing, relational negotiation.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The IDR framework was intentionally designed to explore the interplay between functional and person-centered discourses in language teaching, which may have foregrounded these perspectives while potentially overlooking other relevant educational worldviews. As such, the scope of the inquiry may not capture the full

range of ideological positions teachers hold. This study relied on semi-structured interviews, providing depth but limiting the breadth and triangulation of perspectives. Self-reported interview data reflects beliefs rather than observed behavior, limiting its ability to capture some nuances of teaching complexities. Future research could incorporate multiple data sources such as classroom observations, document analysis, and reflective journals, to enable methodological triangulation for more understanding of how IDR shapes professional practice. Additionally, some participants may not readily distinguish between functional and person-centered orientations or may be deeply aligned with a particular ideological stance, limiting their openness to alternative interpretations. The small sample size of seven teachers also restricts the generalizability of the findings. Purposive sampling may also be susceptible to researcher bias and its lack of statistical generalizability. To mitigate these limitations, future studies can combine purposive sampling with other methods to strengthen validity. However, the strength of the present research lies in depth rather than breadth, offering rich, qualitative proof of concept for how dialogic reflection can support critical engagement with the values and purposes of language teaching. To extend the approach, future applications could adapt the framework to examine other contextualized discourses, and the use of recorded and transcribed dialogues—supported by tools such as speech-to-text software—could enhance teachers' ability to revisit and analyze their own reflective discourse. Despite its scale, this study demonstrates the potential of IDR as a meaningful, teacher-centered method for professional inquiry.

Recommendations

In Singapore and other high-performing education systems, there is growing recognition that effective teaching involves both instructional competence and attention to students' personal and social development. To support this balance, evaluation frameworks like Singapore's EPMS could be expanded to include qualitative indicators that reflect teachers' efforts in fostering student well-being, ethical reasoning, and relational engagement. Such indicators might include evidence of dialogic classroom practices, student voice in learning processes, and the integration of values into subject teaching, aligning with calls to broaden accountability beyond examination outcomes (Ro, 2020).

Policymakers in Singapore and comparable systems could consider complementing existing performance metrics with formative, narrative-based feedback mechanisms, similar to approaches used in some Nordic contexts, where professional dialogue and peer review support continuous improvement without relying solely on norm-referenced rankings. This would provide teachers with more nuanced recognition of their professional contributions while maintaining system-wide coherence.

At the school level, IDR could be adapted across subject areas and extended to include students, supporting a school-wide culture of reflective inquiry. Given that many high-performing systems face similar tensions between curriculum coverage and deeper learning, IDR offers a practical, low-cost approach to professional development that can be contextualized to local priorities.

Finally, as Singapore and similar high-performance systems refine their policies, they should create structured opportunities for teacher reflection on balancing functional goals with person-centered aims. Such deliberate integration can ensure educational reforms sustain both academic rigor and the development of thoughtful, capable learners. By integrating reflective practices like IDR into existing professional learning structures, schools can strengthen teachers' capacity to navigate complex educational demands in ways that are responsive to both system expectations and student needs.

Conclusion

This study underscores the transformative potential of IDR in enabling language teachers to navigate the persistent tension between functional and person-centered perspectives within high-performance education systems. While the functional dimension—focused on academic achievement, curriculum delivery, and measurable outcomes—remains a necessary and valued aspect of teaching, this research argues for a critical rebalancing. IDR provides a vital space for teachers to move beyond performative compliance and instrumental views of language as merely a tool for economic advancement. By engaging in non-judgmental, peer-led dialogue, teachers can recenter the deeply human aspects of their profession, recognizing language as a fundamental medium for identity formation, cultural understanding, personal expression, and building authentic relationships. It is through this relational, person-centered lens that education can fulfil its broader purpose of nurturing holistic well-being and democratic values. Therefore, fostering such reflective practices is not a rejection of accountability, but a call to elevate the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching, empowering educators to reimagine their role as cultivators of both knowledge and humanity.

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Appendix

DR Interview Prompts

Session 1: Functional Dimensions of Language Teaching

(Focused on systemic demands, policy, assessment, and accountability)

1. Tell me a little about yourself and what led you to become a language teacher.
2. What are your biggest hopes and concerns for your students in today's educational context?
3. How do national policies or school-level expectations—such as EPMS, syllabus coverage, or exam outcomes—shape your daily teaching practice?
4. In your experience, how are language teachers evaluated, and what aspects of your work are most visible in formal appraisal systems?
5. How do exam pressures (e.g., O-Levels, PSLE) influence your interactions with students or your instructional choices?
6. What do you consider the most important purpose of language education in Singapore's current system?

Session 2: Person-Centred Dimensions & Dialogic Member Checking

(Focused on *well-being, identity, ethics, and relationality*; includes sharing of preliminary interpretations)

Part A: Preliminary Thematic Feedback (Harvey, 2015; McKim, 2023)

The researcher begins by sharing a brief, written summary of emerging themes from Session 1 (e.g., “You described a tension between preparing students for exams and nurturing their sense of self-worth”). Then asks:

1. After reading this summary, what are your general thoughts?
2. How accurately does this capture your views or experiences?
3. Is there anything important that's missing or misrepresented?
4. Is there anything you'd like to remove or rephrase for clarity or comfort?

Part B: Person-Centred Reflection Prompts

5. Beyond academic performance, what matters most to you in your relationships with students?
6. Can you recall a moment when you felt you made a meaningful difference in a student's life—not because of grades, but because of who they are?
7. How do you think language education can affirm students' cultural identities or personal values?
8. In your view, what would “good” language teaching look like if exams and accountability systems were not the primary focus?
9. What gives you a sense of purpose or satisfaction in teaching—even on difficult days?