

A STUDY ON THE EFFECT OF DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT ON EFL WRITING

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Abstract

This paper attempted to explore the effect of Dynamic Assessment (DA) on EFL learners' writing ability. In order to do the research, 18 university students from Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch, majoring in Civil Engineering was chosen. DA intervention based on a regulatory scale by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) was exercised for instrumentation purpose. The students were required to write a composition and compare concrete structures with each other as a pretest. The next step was applying DA intervention. At last, a posttest was run. Applying the regulatory scale revealed that students were different in their developmental levels, implying that DA approach can be considered to be useful for the students' writing ability.

Key Words: Dynamic Assessment, Mediation, Writing, Zone of Proximal Development.

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1 Introduction

Vygotsky has influenced the educational psychology and education fields with his ideas. According to him, while biological factors provide the essential pre-requisite for elementary processes to appear, sociocultural factors are the necessary elements for elementary natural processes to develop. He talks about the distinctiveness of the social milieu and considers sociocultural settings as the main and influential element in the development of higher forms of human mental activity; logical thought, voluntary attention, intentional memory, planning, and problem solving are among the examples. Nevertheless, his most remarkable work is the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is considered as a significant contribution to the educational field and the process of learning.

2 Sociocultural Theory and Language Learning

Lantolf (2002) believed that one of the primary concepts of sociocultural theory is that the human mind is mediated. Lantolf states that Vygotsky finds an important role for what he calls “tools” in humans ‘realization of the world and of themselves. He maintains, Vygotsky believes that human beings do not act upon the physical world directly and without the using of mediating tools. Whether symbolic or signs, Vygotsky considers tools as artifacts produced by human beings under certain cultural and historical conditions, and they carry with them the characteristics of the culture. They are utilized as aids in solving problems that cannot be solved in the same way if they are not present. In turn, they also have an impact on the individuals who make use of them since they increase the previously unknown activities and previously unknown manners of conceptualizing phenomena in the world. So, they are continually modified while they are passed from one generation to the next, and each generation modifies them with the aim of meeting the needs and aspirations of its individuals and communities. Vygotsky states that the role of a psychologist should be to recognize how human social and mental activities are organized through culturally created artifacts.

Vygotsky (1978 cited Lantolf, 2002) believes that the sociocultural environment provides the child with various tasks and demands, and engages the child in his world by the tools. According to Vygotsky, in the early stages, the child is totally dependent on other people, typically the parents, who initiate what the child’s do by teaching him/her what to do, how to do it, and also

what not to do. While parents are the representatives of the culture and the medium through which the culture passes into the child, they also actualize these instructions chiefly through language. Vygotsky (1978, cited Wertsch, 1985) answers the question of how do children then make these cultural and social heritages internal, by asserting that the child obtains knowledge through contacts and relationships with people as the first step (inter-psychological plane), and after that absorbs and internalizes this knowledge besides including his personal value to it (intra-psychological plane).

Vygotsky (1978, cited in Lantolf, 2000) believes that this transition from social to personal property is not simply a copy; it is a transformation of what had been learnt into personal values through interaction. Vygotsky states that this is what takes place in schools as well. Students do not simply copy Teachers' abilities, but they transform what teachers present to them throughout the processes of appropriation. According to him, the field of psychology has left out crucial information when started to comprehend the complex aspects of human behavior by rejecting the study of consciousness. He believed that the aforementioned rejection has limited the role of psychology. Human behavior is discriminated from other living creatures by consciousness and individual's knowledge is related to his/her behavior. He maintains that socially meaningful activity should be taken into account for comprehending consciousness as the explanatory principle and he refuses any kind of attempt to dissociate the aforementioned consciousness from behavior.

Lantolf et al. (1994) show that the last understanding of consciousness in the field of teaching is represented in the concept of metacognition, which, as he believes, includes functions such as planning, voluntary attention, logical memory, problem solving and evaluation. According to Williams and Burden (2002), sociocultural theory supports the view that in education the concentration should be not only on the theories of instruction, but also on learning to learn, developing skills and strategies to continue to learn, with making learning experiences meaningful and suitable to the individual, with developing and growing as a whole person. They maintain that the theory states that education can never be without value; it must be strengthened by a set of beliefs about the kind of society that is being created and the kinds of explicit and

implicit messages that will best transmit those beliefs. Additionally, these beliefs should be apparent in the ways in which teachers cooperate with students.

Sociocultural theory looks upon the act of learning holistically. Williams and Burden (2002) assert that the theory is against the idea of the teaching skills separately and discusses that meaning should comprise the central aspects of any unit of study. Any unit of study should be presented in all its complexity instead of presenting skills and knowledge separately. The theory insists on the significance of what the learner brings to any learning situation as an active meaning-maker and problem-solver. It admits the dynamic nature of the relationship among teachers, learners and tasks and brings about view of learning as arising from interactions with others.

According to Ellis (2000), sociocultural theory presumes that learning takes place not through interaction but in interaction. Learners first accomplish a new task with the help of another person and after that internalize this task and consequently they can do it on their own. Like this, social interaction is supported to mediate learning. Ellis states that the theory goes further to note interactions that effectively mediate learning are those in which the learners scaffold the new tasks. Yet, one of the most significant parts of the theory is the distinction Vygotsky made between the child's actual and potential levels of improvement or what he calls Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Then, what is ZPD?

3 The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

According to Lantolf (2002), Wertsch (1985) and Shayer (2002), Vygotsky's introduction of the notion of the ZPD was the result of his dissatisfaction with two major issues in educational psychology: the first is the assessment of a child's rational capabilities and the second is the evaluation of the instructional practices. Regarding the first issue, Vygotsky states that the recognized techniques of testing only specify the actual level of development, but do not measure the possible ability of the child. He believes that psychology should deal with the issue of predicting a child's future development, "what he/she not yet is".

Due to the value Vygotsky attributed to the significance of predicting a child's future abilities, he formulated the concept of ZPD and defines it as "the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving, and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Wertsch, 1985, P. 60). He asserted that ZPD helps in specifying a child's mental functions that have not yet fully-grown but are in the process of maturation, functions that are in a developing state now, but will mature tomorrow.

Vygotsky in Shayer (2002) argues that good instruction should proceed prior to development and should stimulate and rouse to life a complete set of functions, which are in the maturation stage and lie in the ZPD. According to him, it is in this fashion that instruction can play a very significant role in development. According to Shayer, this implies that the "natural or spontaneous" thinking delays behind to the intellectual challenge of education. While at the same time this natural thinking presents children new tools for thinking in order to meet the learning requirements of the school. In addition, it implies that teachers are responsible for providing learning contexts in which the instruction goes ahead of the development and directs it. Shayer's report points to the statement of Vygotsky's that good instruction must always be concentrated more on developing functions and not so much on the developed ones.

4 Mediation

According to the Feuerstein's theory (Williams and Burden, 2002), mediation is the fundamental element of the Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky defines mediation as the part played by other important people in the learners' lives, people who improve their learning by choosing and shaping the learning experiences offered to them. Vygotsky (1978 cited Wertsch, 1985) asserts that the secret of successful learning is in the nature of the social interaction between two or more people with different ability levels and knowledge. This constitutes helping the learner to move into and through the subsequent layer of knowledge or perception. According to Vygotsky, tools are mediators and one of the significant tools is language. Using language in order to help learners move into and through their ZPD is of great importance to sociocultural theory.

4.1 Mediation and writing

Writing is a complex process due to reflective nature of writer's communicative skills which involves three stages. The first stage is planning in which the writer determine and gather information and organize different aspects. The next stage is translating the plan into products. The final stage is modification and reviewing the text produced. According to Chanquoy and Alamargot (2001) there are two models of writing that have an effective role in research on writing. One is a developmental model and the other is model of cognitive process through the process of writing. There has been a shift of the views on writing during the last years. Traditionally writing was a series of surface rules which is a series of mechanics of writing such as spelling, grammar and punctuation. But recently the view to writing is the cognitive one and emphasis of the process instead of product. As a result there has been a shift from language based writing to the strategies implied in writing and errors are considered as developmental and productive.

There are some problematic components of writing such as mechanics of writing which includes capitalization punctuation and grammar. The other problems related to writing relates to cohesion and coherence. The writing produced may be confusing, unclear or incoherent text. Another problem found in the writing of individuals is the knowledge of revision. Revision happens when the text is being created and also after the first draft is completed.

There are also some main approaches to teaching writing which are process approach, genre based approach and product approach. Process approaches includes writing activities which moves each learner from generation of the ideas and also collection of the data (Tribble, 1996). The emphasis on this approach is what the writer do during writing and focus is not on the textual structure.

According to Pincas (1982) writing is primarily the knowledge of linguistics and the focus is on usage of syntax, cohesive devices and vocabulary. Finally, genre based approach is the framework which support students in a special genre systematically on how to produce a meaningful text.

Hamp-Lyons and Kroll (1996) believed that as writing happens in a context designed for a particular audience, writing encompasses a certain purpose. Hence, writing shall not only be considered as a product but as the set of social and cultural issues.

Through mediation and dynamic assessment the teacher can identify the weak points of the writing abilities of the students and more attention can be paid to those parts. Throughout mediation the students are supported on their problems. The assessment and mediation in dynamic assessment is not separate from instruction and by integration one can achieve better results.

5 Dynamic Assessment

Dynamic assessment is the process of integration of teaching-testing and learning representing the learner development in a collection and mediation provided by the assessor that is the teacher and guide us on the learner's potentials. It is the application of a collaborative teaching-learning framework within that conceptual site of the child's cognitive and affective readiness to develop that creates the ZPD and provides us with the means of understanding the child's development at the microgenetic and ontogenetic level.

5.1 Models of Dynamic Assessment

Dynamic assessment models which may differ from each other to a great extent, engage with an element of teaching and testing and there is consensus among scholars that this is in line with Vygotskian theory. Learner's cognitive and affective development and their focusing on details of potential learning skills are of high importance. Brown, Ash, Rutherford, Nakagawa, Gordon, & Campione (1993) propose four principles and features of dynamic assessment as follows:

- (1) Understanding procedures rather than fluency and accuracy are among the focuses of instruction and assessment.
- (2) Guidance of an expert is needed for promotion of independent competence.
- (3) Microgenetic analysis allows an estimation of learning occurring over time.
- (4) Proleptic teaching (Stone & Wertsch, 1984) is involved "in both assessment and instruction, for both aim at one stage beyond current performance, in anticipation of levels of competence not yet achieved individually but possible within supportive learning environments" (Brown et al, 1993: p. 218).

Brown et al. argue that dynamic assessments are considered as an individual assessment's strategies and knowledge (Brown et al, 1993: p. 219).

Vygotsky's learning theory which has theoretical and practical orientations holds a wide range of methodologies and evaluative models. For example, five models of dynamic assessment are suggested by Jitendra and Kameenui (1993): test-train-test (e.g., Budoff & Friedman 1964), learning potential assessment device (e.g., Feuerstein, 1979), testing-the-limits approaches (e.g., Carlson & Weidl 1978, 1979), graduated prompting procedure (e.g., Campione, Brown, Ferrera & Bryant, 1984; Brown & Ferrera, 1985; Palincsar, Brown & Campione, 1991), and continuum of assessment: mediated and graduated (e.g., Bransford et al, 1987). Recently, Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002) concentrated on the term which is known as four distinguishing 'clusters' of dynamic testing. Metacognitive interventions used for teaching concepts and principles (i.e., Feuerstein), learning approaches involved in the test (Guthke 1982; Brown et al), methods which aim at restructuring the test situation (Budoff; Carlson & Weidl), and instances involving training a single cognitive function (Spector 1992; Peña 1992, 2000). It is worth mentioning that the clusters are to some extent in line with what is identified by Jitendra and Kameenui (1993). Lidz (1991), based on her studies in dominating models of dynamic assessment, believes that we need

“... to be careful in our descriptions to note which type of dynamic assessment procedure relates to which type of criterion. We must avoid lumping all procedures under the one term and then attributing research findings to a generic concept of “dynamic assessment.” The procedures differ considerably in regard to content, domains, sequencing of tasks, standardization, time involvement, and populations involved.” (Lidz, 1991, p.57)

Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994) study deals with ESL learners aiming to control grammatical mistakes on a specific composition. A mediator met three students in the writing class individually and focused on the use of some grammatical points such as articles, tense, modal verbs, determiners, and prepositions following a clinical methodology. The students had this opportunity to prepare the composition for their class and to interact with the mediator to make revisions for them. Each session lasted one hour for a period of eight weeks.

6 Methodology

6.1 Participants

There were 18 university students majoring in Civil Engineering. They were between 18-20 years old.

6.2 Instrumentations

As a pretest, the students were required to write a composition (about 80 words) about the concrete structures. A posttest was run after the treatment, too. The topic of the composition was in relation to the major of the participants.

6.3 Procedure

The treatment of this study was interventionist approach which was conducted for ten sessions; each session lasted about thirty minutes. The procedure included a pretest, posttest and the DA intervention. Pretest and posttest were almost the same in terms of the nature. After running the pretest, some regulatory steps were done one by one. The teacher gave clues to the mistakes and if the learner still didn't get the point, the teacher narrowed down the location of the error. At the next step, the teacher identified the error, that is to say that "You need an infinitive here). And finally, after supplying the correct form, some further mediation-based explanations for using the correct form were given. As there existed different approaches regarding DA, based on the purpose of the present study, the regulatory scale was used in this study. DA intervention was as the treatment and based on a regulatory scale by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994). Moreover, the stages of scaffolding were introduced to the students individually, except the last two stages that were considered collectively to all the students. Regulatory Scale- Implicit to Explicit by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) which is used in this study includes thirteen forms of mediation ranging from implicit to explicit. Regarding the implicit part of the scale, the learner is supposed to read a specific sentence having an error without revealing the error. In some cases, this minimal level was enough for the learner to identify the error and make corrections. If this doesn't work, the teacher may give hints regarding to the error. When this was not again enough, the teacher provides a more explicit mediation till the learner identifies the error by himself/herself. Finally, the teacher identifies the error explicitly and gives a more detailed explanation concerning that error.

There were some steps taken during the intervention stage and they are as follows: after analyzing their compositions, they were asked to take a look at their papers and check whether they can recognize any mistake or not. Neither feedback nor any hint was given to them. This time, after collecting their papers, some of them had corrected some of the spelling mistakes that they had. The teacher underlined the whole sentence that had a mistake without pointing directly to the mistake and they had to find the exact location of the errors. Again at this stage, they could find some of the mistakes and corrected them. The next step was identifying the exact location and students were more aware of their mistakes and this helped them to correct their papers. The last sessions of the treatment included lots of examples of lexical, grammatical and spelling hints related to the topic of their composition. After finishing the treatment, a posttest was run. The students were asked again to write a composition on the same topic in the pretest. Based on the analysis of their second composition, it was clear that there were definitely improvements in students' writing ability.

Having the pretest done, once can interpret their ZAD, which is their zone of actual development. This is the time when DA intervention is applied to them. By this, the researcher meant that 13 steps of scaffolding were run. As the last step, they are required again to write on the same topic to see the effect of the treatment on the first and the second composition.

7 Data Analysis

After gathering the data in the pretest, they were analyzed. Analysis of the compositions in the pretest phase showed that lots of spelling, grammatical and lexical problems. Before analyzing of the results, the scores of the pretest and posttest were compared and an independent samples t-test was run.

Table 1

Independent Samples t-test Concerning the Pretest and Posttest Scores

Levene's Test fort-test for Equality of Means
Equality of
Variances

	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
								Lower Upper
Equal variances assumed	7.62	.60	5.2988	.00	1.20	.22	.75	1.66
Equal variances not assumed			4.6542	44.00	1.20	.25	.68	1.73

At first, equal variance was calculated and it equaled 7.62 and as the level of the significance of the test equaled 0.60 and it is more than 0.05, the variance between the scores of pretest and posttest isn't different. As a result, the level of the t-test equaled 42.44 and the level of the significance is less than 0.05, which means there is no level of significance between the scores.

Mistakes

- *Structural concrete has been an economic and often used building material for fasade constructions and load-bearing structures in recent decades. The insufficient architectural design range, the clumzy appearance and corrosion damages have led to a decreasing acceptance of the material in regard to fasades for clients and architects.*
- *The application of sandwich panels off facades of factory and industrial buildings have gained importance at the past 50 years due in the prefabricatings irrespective the weather conditions well as the reducing time effort during mounting.*
- *The last (ultimate) load in the exams was choosed by a brittle shear failure of the core rather for panel P3 with a hard density core which failed by tensile rupture of the texture reinforcement in the bottom facing.*

8 Discussions and Conclusion

Although most of the students have problems in writing, they can perform much better with the help of some one as a mediator. As the mistakes and errors of the student differ in this study from each other, as a result various types of mediation is needed to be done. These differences revealed that the students had different ZPDs which necessities the mediator to react differently to each of them. One can conclude that their performance in the pretest did not necessarily show students' ZPDs. Since their mistakes in the pretest were different from those in the posttest. It is worth mentioning that in spite of correcting the spelling mistakes by the students, the spelling mistakes were not that much different between the pretest and posttest, since spelling is an unlimited domain in any language. Based on the fact that mediated learning provides students with so many benefits, participant's progress is expected. Furthermore, writing practices and mediation applied independently helped learners to correct the mistakes and apply feedbacks.

Focusing on the vocabulary and grammatical points in the sessions of the treatment helped learners to make use of the technical terms in relation to their major of study, too. There were some technical terms regarding their major that was taught by the teacher were used to some extent in the posttest and this shows that treatment can be a great help for them. Concerning grammar, there are always some frequent mistakes in any type of writing. For example, the use of "the" is one of the items that most students have problems with it, especially Iranian learners generalize it to a great extent. The same happens in the case of pluralization. However, most of the learners have still problems in writing since its nature is complicated. And, this implies that mediation is required and helps them have improvements in their writings. As it is proved that the learners differ from each other in terms of their ZPSs and developmental differences, different forms of mediation is required by the teacher to be taken account. Development of the learners in writing shows that writing is within the individual's ZPD context. Moreover, mediation can be considered as a building block of the confidence.

Feuerstein (1988) argues that "human beings are open rather than closed systems, meaning that cognitiveabilities can be developed in a variety of ways, depending on the presence and the quality of appropriate forms of interaction and instruction". In this study, learners' ZPD was established through the interaction cooperatively (p.8).

The study showed that the dynamic assessment greatly improves the learners' writing abilities by mediation on writing strategies, encouraging remarks, and giving reference materials by the teacher. These factors not only bring out creativity for the learners, but also lead to harmonious collaboration and cooperation between them.

The findings of the study assure us that dynamic assessment intermingled with EFL writing can improve learners' writing competence and promote their writing confidence. In learners' ZPD, the mediation of the instructor stimulates students' responsiveness through engagement which raises more integration in the process of writing. At this stage, ZPD occurs; as a result there is an improvement from the cognitive ability of the learners at present to a future level. Learners' face to face cooperation with their instructor reveals a clear learners' progress, so their confidence is strengthened for future activities, and transferring their knowledge and what they have learnt is much easier for them.

This paper paves the way for uniting dynamic assessment and EFL writing skill, and highlights integration of dynamic assessment into other skills, too. It is worth mentioning that dynamic assessment is marked by being useful in teaching for the learners' benefit.

As the participants of the study were about 18 university students specifically majoring in Civil Engineering, the effect of dynamic assessment on writing skill of the learners might require further investigations. The level of mediation may be different from one learner to another, since they have different degrees of responsiveness to help. But it is totally obvious that dynamic assessment has a significant role in both teaching and learning and it has its own promising results in any educational fields.

As a conclusion, the findings of the study showed that DA approach can play a significant role in improving the students' writing ability and Aljaafreh and Lantolf's regulatory scale improved writing skills of EFL learners. Moreover, DA approach helps the teacher to evaluate his/her students better. As the nature of their errors is identified, the required help is given to them to improve their writing ability. However, the framework of dynamic assessment gives great importance to the writing process, particularly in the first stages that are ignored by EFL

instructors. In instruction of the writing, promoting of the writing skill is neither static nor separate for the learners and the teachers; rather it is considered as a mutual and dynamic effort. Other assessments set their objective in evaluating the level of students or providing feedback, in contrast; the final purpose of dynamic assessment is focusing on development. By interpreting the potential of learners, assistance is made through cooperation of learners and mediators with the help of mediational devices. Since the mediation occurs in the zone of proximal development of learners, significant development is made.

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Appendix A:Regulatory Scale- Implicit to Explicit by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994)

0. The tutor asks the learner to read, find the errors, and correct them independently, prior to the tutorial.
1. Construction of a collaborative frame prompted by the presence of the tutor as a potential dialogic partner.
2. Prompted or focused reading of the sentence that contains the error by the learner or the tutor.
3. Tutor indicates that something may be wrong in a segment (e.g. sentence, clause, line) "Is there anything wrong in this sentence?"
4. Tutor rejects unsuccessful attempts at recognizing the error.
5. Tutor narrows down the location of the error (e.g. tutor repeats or points to the specific segment which contains the error).
6. Tutor indicates the nature of the error, but does not identify the error (e.g. "There is something wrong with the tense marking here").
7. Tutor identifies the error ("You can use an auxiliary here").
8. Tutor rejects learner's unsuccessful attempts at correcting the error.
9. Tutor provides clues to help the learner arrive at the correct form (e.g. "It is not really past but something that is still going on").
10. Tutor provides the correct form.
11. Tutor provides some explanation for use of the correct form.
12. Tutor provides examples of the correct pattern when the other forms of help fail to produce an appropriate responsive action.