

## **Teach-to-Test Instruction of Dynamic Assessment: A Critical Overview**

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The present article aims to meticulously focus on the integration of the assessment and instruction which leads to a new approach, Dynamic Assessment, based on the principles of Socio-cultural Theory of Mind (SCT) developed by L. S. Vygotsky and his colleagues. A Vygotskian approach to language assessment suggests that the 'process of development' should be viewed as a predictor of the individual's or the group's future performance. Dynamic assessment has developed as an alternative to static types of assessment, i.e. standardized and/or non-dynamic assessment (SA/NDA). However, it is not regarded as a replacement for the other test types, rather as a complement. The present paper is a modest attempt to provide an overview of the literature that set the groundwork for DA, as well as current research in the field of this type of assessment.

### **Introduction**

Teachers' lack of familiarity with principles and theories of practical assessment can underlie the difference between evaluating outcomes only and using assessment as part of instruction. Too often, teachers come into their classrooms without the knowledge of how to develop useful testing instruments to monitor student progress, instead they are only able to analyze outcomes (Torrance & Pryor, 1998), supported with eclectic collections of testing types lack any deep understanding of underlying theories of assessment.

Teachers' mastery in assessing individuals can be considered as the construction of *diagnostic competence* (Edelenbos & Kubanek-German, 2004). Based on their findings, these authors claim that teachers have not all equally mastered how to realize the exact proficiency level of their students and, furthermore this is not surprising since there is very little attention paid to assessment in most teacher training programs. The bifurcation between assessment and instruction is clear when considering the seminal volume's title by Bachman and Cohen's (1998): *Interfaces between Second Language Acquisition and*

*Language Testing Research*, which focuses on the rising interaction between researchers in the two fields.

Since the publication of that volume, however, things have improved somewhat and nowadays there is more complementary research and practice between testing and teaching. One feature of this research indicates that one of the more common methods of testing in the world of second and foreign language learning is the product-oriented one. Many language teachers around the world consider final assessment tests as the framework for their assessment. The cornerstone rationale behind testing students after instructing them for a definite period of time is to observe how much of the instruction the students have received and assimilated on the subject. It is also worth mentioning that we frequently hear that a teacher acknowledges the drawbacks of any specific assessment method which leads some talented students to perform weakly on the final test, whereas, s/he performs well in the class. It is argued, then, that applying Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in assessment, dynamic assessment in language learning might offer new insights into assessment in the language classroom.

Dynamic Assessment (henceforth, DA) assumes a different perspective about assessment than that which is traditionally done by many classroom teachers. Following on L. S. Vygotsky, the famous Russian psychologist's work, DA takes an ontological perspective on human abilities. Considering development of cognitive functions, Vygotsky's study uncovered that this development is not a matter of innate abilities that evolve into a mature state but the advent of new thought, manner, and outcome derived from one's encounter in activities wherein culturally fabricated aspects have an impact on the individual, brought about through interaction with others. From this viewpoint, development is triggered due to the social environment; indeed the social environment plays a critical role in cognitive development. Continuing, then with a sociocultural perspective, within formal education, assessment and instruction are firmly integrated as part of a single activity as can be seen in DA. DA proponents present a variety of approaches in which assessment and instruction are unified as a development-oriented activity Poehner (2008).

In Europe and North America, researchers (cf. Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003; Lantolf, 2000; Wells & Claxton, 2002) are mainly focusing on the capacity of SCT

to elucidate processes of cognitive development. Other researchers (Feuerstein, Falik, Rand, & Feuerstein, 2003; Lidz & Elliott, 2000) have devised a number of methodologies that try to comprehend and promote human cognitive capabilities and that are known under the general term DA.

### **Origins of DA: Lev Vygotsky and Reuven Feuerstein**

The essential works of Vygotsky, translated from their original version in Russian, have provided an important foundation for much of the current thought on education and remediation, including that of Dynamic Assessment. Reuven Feuerstein<sup>1</sup> is widely recognized as setting the groundwork for what eventually became DA. However, according to Minick (1987) dynamic assessment studies have sought to generate quantitative outcomes. He claims that ignoring a stable baseline measure (as described by Feuerstein) may block the development on the part of the learner if scores are low or tasks are too difficult. Minick proposes that a more sure connection between tester and testee must be given, enabling the learner to perform tasks that echo both strengths and weaknesses and also supplies more individual and tailored support (which is most often not the case with other dynamic assessment measures).

Vygotsky's perspectives are more qualitative than quantitative and Minick (1987) states that the work of Feuerstein is closer to that of Vygotsky, or at least more so than other work that seeks to quantify the learning capacity. Vygotsky accentuated the interaction between the child and the tester, as well as the nature of the interaction (Minick, 1987), resulting in a more strong unification than when either the pre-test or interaction is assessed alone (Day, Engelhardt, Maxwell, & Bolig, 1997). This is of high importance because a pre-test, mediation and post-test methodology is the process on which much of the dynamic assessment study is.

Considering the role ascribed to the examiner in the work of Feuerstein, the emphasis on scaffolding tasks in assessing cognitive processes is greater than that on quantifiable achievements. In Vygotsky's theory of proximal development, which considers the child developing within a socio-cultural setting, the communicative nature of achievement is clarified. Developing functions are the outcome of interaction and in

order to measure these functions it is necessary to assess the child in interaction. Many pretest-posttest studies do not emphasize this key issue at all.

One of the major differences between Vygotsky's and Feuerstein's approaches lies in Feuerstein's emphasis on revising incomplete cognitive structures within the learner, whereas Vygotsky's places emphasis on social partnership in the assessment process. In Vygotsky's theory, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), identified by the autonomous performance of a child compared with his or her performance when supported by a more well-informed or mature peer, highlights the role of social collaboration in the entire process. The difference in performance is thus ascribed to the achievement manifested in the child's zone of capability when assisted by a more adapted peer (Lidz, 1991; Nell, 2000).

## **Review of Related Literature**

It was about the late nineteenth century that assessment appeared as a domain of interest for researchers and educators, and standardized assessments were initiated only in the twentieth century (Gould, 1996). The standardized test, the premier form of assessment is identified as the regularization of procedures and instruments and the statistical analysis of results. According to Gould (1996) in the 1900s when the USA started using tests of general intelligence to evaluate immigrants and to evaluate the abilities of Army new members, standardized testing became amazingly widespread. Subsequently, standardized tests have become used in other contexts such as educational settings.

Traditional summative assessment attempts to summarize students' learning at some point in time, say the end of a course, but it cannot provide the immediate, contextualized feedback useful for helping teacher and students during the learning process (Garb, n.d.). So, in summative testing, dynamic and holistic features of assessment cannot be fully exploited. As a matter of fact, assessment is becoming a big challenge for anyone engaged in the field of teaching. Bailey described assessment as an information gathering activity. McNamara (2004) referred to gaining insights into learners' level of knowledge or ability as the purpose of assessment. Inevitably, gaining insight into learnt information via assessment is of high importance and must be

considered a vital dimension of proper instruction. Different approaches such as “teaching to the test,” “narrowing of the curriculum,” and “assessment-driven instruction”, make it clear that assessment and teaching are not separate from each other but they are, possibly, at odds with one another (Linn, 2000; Lynch, 2001; McNamara, 2001; Moss, 1996).

The concept of DA does not speak of any specific way of testing. Indeed, dynamic assessment is a whole different approach, or an umbrella term (Elliott, 2003), to the issue of testing in the language classroom and this approach can be devoted to any way of testing ranging from multiple choice to essay writing, and with a great variety of student backgrounds from monolingual environments to linguistic diversities (Haney & Evans, 1999; Laing & Kamhi, 2003). Accentuating this dimension of dynamic testing, Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p. 331) mention that “what makes a procedure dynamic or not is whether or not mediation is integrated into the assessment process. In other words, fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice, open-ended essay, or even oral proficiency tests in themselves may or may not be dynamic”. Lidz and Gindis state that

DA questions traditional opinions about teaching and assessment by disputing that they should not be looked upon as discrete activities but should be quietly blended in return. This integration occurs as intervention is embedded within the assessment procedure in order to interpret individuals’ abilities and lead them to higher levels of functioning. (2003, p. 99)

The integration of assessment and instruction is founded on Vygotsky’s understanding of development. In Sociocultural Theory of Mind (SCT), the development of higher forms of consciousness, such as voluntary control of memory, perception, and attention, occurs through a process of internalization whereby these functions initially occur as interaction between human beings but are then transformed into cognitive abilities with the result that “the social nature of people comes to be their psychological nature as well” (Luria, 1979, p. 45). While working on his developmental theory, Vygotsky observed that learners able to resolve problems autonomously were able to disclose the functions that had previously been internalized but did not manifest anything about abilities that were still in the process of developing. In other word, in the case where learners have different forms of support while dealing with baffling tasks, the scope of learners’ abilities can be uncovered. Additionally, the arrangement of such support simultaneously aids development, and so assessment itself becomes an instructional intervention.

Based on Lidz and Elliott (2000), there is a robust body of literature on DA in psychology and general education. In the realm of DA, applied linguists have concentrated on L2 and have paid great attention to Vygotskian theory to recognize the role of DA principles in L2 context (e.g., Kozulin & Garb, 2002; Antón, 2003).

Vygotsky in his book, *Thought and Language*, (1986) coined the term ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (ZPD) which is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. One of Vygotsky’s followers, Jerome Bruner, put great emphasis on appropriate social interactional situations. According to Bruner, teachers are supposed to cultivate or scaffold preparation in learners’ mind by accentuating the learners’ powers at the level where you find them and not by waiting for that readiness.

Dynamic assessment, which considers cognitive development within the context of social interactions with others who are more qualified, is based on the work of Vygotsky. In fact, language and culture influenced these experiences. Vygotsky argues that learning happens within the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD); that is, what learners can do at this time with help and support, they can do in the near future, autonomously. In DA, the aim is to engage with the learner’s ZPD, by introducing the amount of change that can be prompted during interactions with the examiner –while the assessment is taking place.

DA deems that a valid source for assessing different stages of learners’ progress during any specific course of instruction (ZPD) is through pinpointing learners’ innate capability. Thus, dynamic assessment assumes that instruction and assessment should be inseparable from each another. In other words, if teachers want to observe how their students really progress in their classes, their assessment should not focus on testing the students’ performance with a final achievement test per se. The actual focus should be on what students can accomplish through help by the teacher or peers during the class activities because what is brought about with the help of others represents the latent development for successful accomplishment of the same task without any help in the future. Assessing students’ real progress after some periods of instruction and deciding on the achievement by checking the results is what teachers generally do in language

courses. This process, however, is completely against the sociocultural perspective: “the latent achievement differs autonomously from actual progress that is the latter, in and of itself, cannot be used to anticipate the former” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p.328).

To understand how DA procedures could be performed in L2 contexts and how the outcomes could be interpreted in a parallel manner with Vygotsky’s (1986, 1998) understanding of development, Lantolf and Poehner (2004; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005) proposed a framework. For the time being, several researchers are continuing projects following this approach to L2 DA. Over the last few years, Lantolf and Poehner have together and individually presented a number of lectures and presentations on DA at universities, conferences, and professional development workshops and their work has generated much discussion from both applied linguistics researchers and language teachers.

Based on the reactions to the DA, it seems clear that DA’s attraction cannot simply be attributed to its recent advent. The question raised here is: What makes DA of such great importance among people with widely different interests? Poehner, to answer the driving question, believes that DA provides positive input for teachers and learners, assessment specialists, and educational researchers. The famous psychologist, R.J. Sternberg, and his colleague, Grigorenko, take a similar stance in the introduction to their precise overview of DA (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002). They believe that a dynamic procedure covers more information than any other type of assessment can provide. They argue that DA develops learners’ insight of both their knowledge and abilities. Furthermore, it provides more valid and proper analysis and uses of assessment outcomes.

Sternberg and Grigorenko, moreover, deem that DA principles have thrown new light on the “new origination of tests” that “differ in both slight ways, from what we now have, and “substantial ways” (2002: p. ix). They also claim that DA presents a theoretically triggered approach to unifying assessment and instruction. From this view point, it can be argued that DA plays a crucial way in providing teachers scores and grades while at the same time, yielding deeper insight into learners’ abilities, areas of weakness and specific means of promoting further development.

Since the beginning of the twenty first century, many L2 researchers have attempted to outline a monistic view of language instruction and assessment, culminating in DA (Ableeva, 2008; Anton, 2009; Birjandi & Ebadi, 2009, 2010; Jacobs, 2001; Kozulin & Garb, 2002; Lantolf, 2009; Poehner, 2007, 2008; Summers, 2008). As a direct attack on the traditional psychometric views this post-psychometric view of assessment support an integrated view of instruction and assessment. This is supported by Antón (2009), who came to a conclusion that teachers will misrepresent learners' abilities if they consider only the results of traditional tests

Poehner (2008) differentiates DA from non-dynamic assessments (NDA) in that he looks at the assessment from an ontologically and epistemologically different viewpoint, that is, the integration of instruction and assessment through intervention in order to develop the abilities being assessed. He also points out that DA and NDA refer to administration procedures rather than assessment instruments, so he claims that any assessment instrument can be used in a dynamic or non-dynamic fashion. Three paramount features can distinguish between DA and NDA according to Poehner (2008):

1. The view of the abilities underlying the procedures
2. The purpose of conducting the assessment
3. The role of the assessor

### **Critical Issues Related to Dynamic Assessment**

Admittedly, there are limitations to the application of DA and a critical stance is necessary. Firstly, finding proper mediation or treatment that is operative for a large number of students is one of the notable challenges of DA whose goal is to integrate instruction and assessment (Haywood & Lidz, 2003). Also, in what concerns research, date, nearly all studies done in DA are case studies in which a limited number of participants have taken part (Lantolf & Pohner, 2008; Ableeva, 2008, Anton, 2009; Birjandi & Ebadi, 2009; Kozulin & Garb, 2002).

Nonetheless, while it may be a case study only, Lin (2009) conducted an interactive DA study in an EFL context. He concludes that administering a set of pre-formulated supportive hints and mediations during a test would provide teachers with information



about students' needs and their potential responses to mediation. The author then claims that a successful interactive DA program should meet three factors:

1. It should have clear objectives
2. It should include meaningful tasks that are in the learner's ZPD and that accommodate to pre-formulated hints and mediations.
3. It should enjoy an appropriate rating scale an appropriate analytic approach

So while there are admittedly limitations not only to its application, but also in the research conducted thus far, DA can still be seen as a step in the right direction for achieving assessment that takes place not in isolation from instruction but as an inseparable feature of it. Furthermore, a pedagogical approach of DA can provide a sound basis for instruction-based assessment.

### **Suggestion for Further Research**

In order to progress within the field of dynamic assessment –a field which, comparatively speaking, is quite young in many countries– further research must be grounded in previous findings in the field. Unfortunately, researchers and practitioners in this field are generally not aware of the large pool of data that is available on the topic. Early research in this field was often conducted in isolation and has been somewhat fragmented. Consolidation of dynamic assessment research results would provide a solid foundation for dynamic assessment to be implemented and used on a much wider scale. Additionally, research conducted without consultation or collaboration with other practitioners in the field may prove to actually detract from already established benefits of dynamic assessment research.

As world populations become more and more diverse, there is a growing need for more targeted research in this area. It would also be recommendable to carry out more research studies the effect of DA on different levels of language proficiency and to scrutinize the role of DA in different skills. Researchers should also implement studies at different institutes and cities in order to focus on the effect of first language, if any, on the results of DA studies. When working with diverse populations, practitioners can utilize DA, which focuses on the learning process and utilizes meditational approaches that are more closely related to learning processes in school and other life contexts

(Haywood & Lidz, 2007), thus reaching further understanding of the interaction between learning and context. Research in DA in diverse populations can also help to determine how specific the target stimuli and the level of difficulty need to be for students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Hwa-Froelich & Matsuo, 2005). Although the research on DA thus far appears to firmly support the positive role of dynamic assessment-based intervention, clearly there is a need for further studies to be commissioned at all language skills and sub skills, with learners of different ages, genders, sociocultural backgrounds and proficiency levels to better reveal the precise role of DA-based instruction in the accomplishment of the most important concern in education –learning.

## **Conclusion**

After revising the main literature on Dynamic Assessment, the implication is that learners can greatly benefit from DA-based mediation and that teacher intervention, including within the domain of assessment, can be very instrumental in the process of instruction. Dynamic Assessment attaches ultimate importance to the whole process of learning and promotes continual development. By interpreting the potential of learners, punctual and precise assistance can be made via teaching and assessing in order raise the learners' skills.

Another important instructional value of the dynamic EFL assessment lies in the fact that its results can be used for the development of individual learning plans for students with different learning needs. At the same time, the review of current literature revealed that dynamic assessment is a useful framework to be used in language classrooms of all sizes, as it focuses on potential rather than final achievement. Based on the review, the general suggestion can be made that language teachers should include more forms of dynamic assessment into their curricula if they want to assess the real development of their students. However, almost at the same breath we also have to admit that this is easier in theory than practice. First of all, dynamic assessment is a relatively new concept in the field of language learning, and research on dynamic assessment in the language classroom is limited. This prevents language teachers from having practical guidelines about how to incorporate dynamic assessment into their curricula. Secondly,

many countries around the world use standardized high-stakes language tests. These challenges must be confronted and answered by researchers in the field. DA holds great potential for dynamic teaching and assessing and for promoting richer learning processes; the future will let us know if this promise is fulfilled.

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<sup>1</sup>Reuven Feuerstein is a developmental, and cognitive psychologist, renowned for his theory of 'modifiable intelligence', which proposes that intelligence is not fixed but rather can be modified through mediated interventions.