



Dynamic Assessment: A Humanistic Approach of Learners' Writing Proficiency from a Vygotskian Perspective

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Abstract. “Through others, we become ourselves”. Vygotsky (1978). Dynamic Assessment which stems from Vygotsky's ideas, challenges the conventional and traditional views on teaching and assessment by arguing that instruction and assessment should be unified. The present study is an investigation of a DA-based instruction of L2 writing proficiency. For this purpose an OPT (Oxford Placement Test) was given to a total of 80 Iranian EFL learners. Then, 40 of them who were considered as intermediate learners were selected for the purpose of the study. The participants were randomly divided into two groups i.e. an experimental group and a control group. Both groups were pretested prior to the study; the participants underwent a static and a dynamic assessment. Then, the experimental group received the treatment in the form of DA-based instruction (i.e. aided instruction such as prompting, cueing, explaining and mediating within the assessment) for ten sessions while the control group received a normal practice of writing proficiency (non-DA instruction and assessment). After ten sessions, both groups were post tested i.e. once again, the participants underwent a static and a dynamic assessment. Then the results of the posttests were subjects of statistical analysis (independent-samples t-test). The results indicated that the experimental group did better than the control group and there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group who were exposed to a DA-based instruction and the control group who received a normal practice of writing proficiency i.e. a placebo.

Keywords: Dynamic Assessment, ZPD, mediation, writing proficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of the Holocaust, many immigrant Jewish children had experienced dreadful experiences which had impaired their ability to learn. Thus, many immigrant children were incapable of learning at school. So Feuerstein began to devise ways of assessing the true potential of such children which differed from the conventional static assessment. Feuerstein believed that anyone can become a fully effective learner. At about the same time, teaching learning and testing approaches were under the influence of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. Dynamic assessment originated in the writings of Vygotsky who mentioned the notion of ZPD; the one who believed that teachers can never understand their students' potential intellectual development by employing a one-way assessment. ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) refers to the area between learners' assisted and unassisted performance i.e. the extent of assistance or help learners need today indicates their future unassisted performance. When learners and the mediator work collaboratively, learners are more likely to pool their linguistic resources in L2. When they work together, they have the opportunity to learn from each other and to produce better texts. Dynamic assessment is critical of conventional assessment procedures in which assessment and instruction are separated. So the tester acts as a mediator who cooperates with the learner and this cooperation leads to the construction of a ZPD which will finally result in development. Dynamic assessment is an interactive approach which advocates two-way assessment and it can be contrasted with the conventional / traditional or static approaches to assessment. DA involves interaction within the assessment itself during which the examiner participates and is there to provide help for the students by prompting, cueing, mediating and hinting. In other words, Dynamic assessment calls for the unity or the

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combination of instruction and assessment simultaneously which means that the tester is not just an observer or a scorer who seeks to identify deficits and weaknesses. According to Vygotsky (1978), what a learner can do today with the help of his/her teacher, represents what (s)he can do tomorrow independently. Dynamic assessment is process-oriented and it focuses on learning processes whereas SA (static assessment) focuses on the scores and results of learning. Thus, unlike DA, SA is product-oriented. In Static Assessment, assistance is regarded as cheating because it modifies the learners' performance during assessment; however, DA has a far different stance. From a Vygotskian perspective, a two-way assessment is actually the dynamic assessment of dynamic abilities. For him, abilities are dynamic because they are the result of individuals' background, history, and social interactions in the world and people in it. Therefore, through a product-based assessment only matured functions will be reported and revealed not the processes through which these functions were formed and developed. If teachers are to find out these processes, they have to turn to Dynamic Assessment in which assessment is never an isolated activity. The present study is an attempt to find out whether writing proficiency of learners can be developed through a Vygotskian or Dynamic Assessment approach. The employed enrichment program in the study aimed at remediating those areas in the learners' performance that needed attention. The initial assessments provided insights into the kinds of problems the learners had and the extent of support they needed. For example the learners had difficulty expressing themselves in the L2 because of lack of grammatical skills though they knew enough vocabulary. During the enrichment program (the treatment of the study), the researcher did not explain the grammatical rules of English in traditional way. So the participants did not have to memorize or rely on rote memorization of the rules of grammar. In DA-based classrooms, different forms of support are provided in order to reveal the scope of learners' abilities; as a result, learners get help and support from the assessor by interacting with each other. The purpose of DA is to find out how much learning can take place in the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) during designed sessions (rather than a score which is an indicator of an individual's performance at a specific point in time).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Feuerstein (1979), right from birth, a child's learning is developed and formed by the intervention of mediating adults or mediators. He refers to the experiences provided by them as mediated learning experiences. These mediators are initially parents and later adults, who promote learning, encourage children, provide feedback and intervene in the child's attempts at responding to stimuli. So, interaction with others has a central role in the cognitive development of children which is an ongoing process. Feuerstein stresses the importance and significance of mediated learning experiences in learning how to learn. Mediation refers to empowering learners by helping and scaffolding them to progress, to become autonomous and last but not least to become independent thinkers or problem solvers. Learners should take control of their learning with the support of their teacher whose function is to encourage a positive self-image and self-confidence. There is a strong relationship between having a positive self-image and performing well on learning tasks. Feuerstein argues that the teacher is responsible for learners' negative feelings, fear of failure and demotivation. This is because when learners perceive themselves as incompetent, it will be difficult to change their self-image and negative inner preconceptions.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that human child is born into a social world in which learning takes place through interactions with others. Thus, children make sense of the world around them through these interactions. Based on a communicative approach to language teaching / learning, learners learn to interact meaningfully. Vygotsky emphasized the importance of language in interaction which includes not only speech but signs and symbols also. He considered the social

context as an influential factor in the process of learning. Teachers, learners, tasks and contexts do not exist in isolation; these factors interact with each other as part of a dynamic, ongoing process. A change in any one of these factors will change the others accordingly. Learning experiences should be meaningful for the learners. It is through 'imitation' that learners can self-regulate themselves and imitation is not a mechanical process in SCT. Imitation occurs by interaction with others.

As Williams and Burden (2000) demonstrated, humanistic approaches focus on the inner world of learners, their individual thoughts and feelings; therefore, they eventually lead to co-operative learning. Competitive situations in which learners are compared with each other cause feelings of diffidence, uneasiness and lack of trust. Teachers should foster the sense or spirit of co-operation (not competition) by creating a sense of belonging in the class and by giving their students a voice to express their individuality. "Our best preparation for an evolving society is helping children face the future with confidence in their own abilities and with a faith that they are worthwhile and important members of whatever culture they might find themselves in." (Pine and Boy 1977:47). An over emphasis on examination and test scores would stop creative behavior so there is a strong justification for the use of music, stories, games and drama in classes.

Lantolf (2000) stated that mediation in language learning can involve others either through interaction with others or through private speech i.e. the learner can talk to himself or herself. Also, mediation can be external or internal. When an individual is given assistance by a more capable person (mediator), external mediation occurs; but when an individual uses his or her own resources to perform an act, internal mediation occurs. In both cases these meditational resources are considered as social. This is because they socially interact either with others or with oneself. Internal mediation can be achieved through internal mediation. The gist of a theory of the mediated mind is that social speech becomes specialized as inner speech. In this way, the individual will eventually regulate his/her behavior/thinking. SCT views language as dialogically based i.e. acquisition occurs in interaction (not as a result of interaction). From this perspective, L2 acquisition is not totally an individual-based process. It is rather shared between individuals.

This study is an attempt to investigate empirically how learners working collaboratively perform in a writing task in comparison to those working individually. It aims at comparing the writing scripts produced by learners working in pairs with those of learners working individually to identify the discrepancies in terms of accuracy, coherence, cohesion, fluency and complexity.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q1. Is there any significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the control group (who were exposed to a placebo i.e. a non-DA instruction and assessment)?

Q2. Is there any significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group (who were exposed to DA-based instruction)?

Q3. Does a DA-based instruction, as a humanistic approach, have a significant effect on Iranian EFL Learners' writing proficiency at paragraph level?

Hypothesis

H0. Using Dynamic Assessment, as a humanistic approach, does not have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing proficiency at paragraph level.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. The Subjects

The participants of this study were 40 homogenous EFL learners (i.e. they had the same L2 proficiency level) who were studying at Comprehensive University of Applied and Practical Sciences, Karamouzan, Chalus, Iran. The participants of the study were both male and females, native speakers of Persian and in their early twenties. Also, they had not been to English speaking countries. Their average exposure to English was about 6 years during which they had received a traditional version of language learning syllabus and curriculum. Based on a placement test and an interview, they were considered intermediate learners. Since they were studying English in Iran only, they were described as foreign language learners. Most of them had received their L2 knowledge (in English language) at school; so, they were exposed to a traditional method of L2 learning. As a result, they had received a grammar-based, teacher-oriented method based on the course book in the classroom.

4.2. The Procedure

First an OPT test (Oxford Placement Test) was administered to 80 junior students. After scoring the papers, 40 out of 80 students were selected for the purpose of the study. The participants of this study were randomly assigned into two different groups: an experimental group and a control group. Each group consisted of 20 students who were taking English as a second language during an educational year. The participants were all given a pretest. The control group underwent a static assessment while the experimental group underwent a dynamic assessment. The results of these assessments were used to structure the enrichment program because the results revealed the kinds of problems learners has while completing the task into which the researcher gained insights. Then the treatment group received the treatment in the form of being exposed to Dynamic Assessment (aided learning i.e. the teacher scaffold the learners' performance) during ten sessions. The classes were held once a week and two hours were scheduled for each session. This study covers a whole term and finally, the participants were given a posttest (i.e. DA and SA accordingly). Then, the result of a paired samples t-test and paired-samples t-test and independent-samples t-test became the subject of data analysis.

4.3. Research design

This study utilizes a quasi-experimental design. The design of the study was based on a pre-posttest design. The schematic representation of the design of the study is as follows:

Week 1: pretest (DA and SA).

Week 2-9: application of two types of L2 writing practices. (DA-based vs. non-DA –based instruction)

Week 10: posttest (DA and SA).

4.4. Materials and Instruments

The materials used in the current study were of four sorts: the OPT material for proficiency, (Participants’ proficiency test scores i.e. OPT), the material for the pretest of the study (IELTS writing sample tests), the material for the treatment of the study (IELTS writing sample tests while the teacher aided and provided support in the form of prompting, cueing and mediating the process of writing), and finally the material for the posttest of the study (IELTS writing sample tests). The mediation that was used included dictionary use, sample writings, as well as the interactions between the teacher and the students. The mediator gave suggestions, provided feedback, and interrupted to hint and prompt. The writing tasks were collected by the teacher at the end of each and every session. In this way, the teacher could prepare herself for the kinds of support she needed to give during the next sessions. To handle the current study, the data was analyzed on the basis of SPSS (version 21), paired samples t-test and Independent samples t-test. A t-test was run between the scores of the post test of the two groups. Paired samples t-test was run between the scores of the pretest and posttest of the experimental and separately with those of the control group.

5. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

As it is noted earlier in the previous sections, the present study aimed at investigating the impact of DA-based versus non DA-based instruction and assessment on Iranian EFL learners’ L2 writing skill. So this section is concerned with data analysis in which the following terms such as group statistic, Paired Samples t-test and Independent-Samples t-test have been used. The main objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of Dynamic Assessment on L2 writing proficiency. The obtained data of this study were analyzed by utilizing SPSS (version 21) software. To reject or accept the aforementioned research hypothesis, the following procedures were taken into account and the obtained data were analyzed by T-Test (Paired Samples t-test and Independent-Samples).

Table1. Paired-Samples T-Test (Experimental Group: DA-based)

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	PostEx	6.1000	20	.91191	.20391
	PreEx	2.6000	20	.88258	.19735

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	PostEx - PreEx	3.50000	1.23544	.27625	2.92180	4.07820	12.670	19	.000

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of Dynamic instruction and assessment on students’ scores on L2 writing proficiency. As Table1 indicates, the mean score of the posttest of the experimental group (M = 6.1000) is higher than the mean scores of the pretest (M = 2.6000). Also, $t_{obs}=12.670$ is more than the critical t. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected.

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Table2. Paired-Samples T-Test (Control Group: non-DA-based).

Paired Samples Statistics									
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean				
Pair 1	PostCntr	4.1000	20	.85224	.19057				
	PreCntr	2.3500	20	.87509	.19568				
Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	PostCntr - PreCntr	1.75000	.44426	.09934	1.54208	1.95792	17.616	19	.000

Table2 indicates that a paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of a non DA-based instruction i.e. Static Assessment on students' scores on L2 writing proficiency. According to Table 2, the observed t value is calculated to be 17.616 and the degree of freedom is 19 (the $t_{obs}=17.616$, $df=19$). Thus t_{obs} is more than the critical t which is 2.093.

Table3. Independent-Samples T-Test (between the posttests only)

Group Statistics										
		Assessment Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean				
Writing		1.00 (DA)	20	6.1000	.91191	.20391				
		2.00 (SA)	20	4.1000	.85224	.19057				
Independent Samples Test (between the posttests only)										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Writing	Equal variances assumed	.003	.957	7.166	38	.000	2.0000	.27910	1.43500	2.56500
	Equal variances not assumed			7.166	37.82	.000	2.0000	.27910	1.43491	2.56509

According to Table3, there were two groups each containing twenty students. The two groups received two different types of L2 assessment (i.e. Dynamic Assessment=1, Static Assessment =2). The experimental group was exposed to Dynamic Assessment of writing proficiency while the control group was exposed to Static Assessment i.e. a placebo. Sig (2-tailed) is .000 which is less than 5 so the null hypothesis is rejected. Also, the mean scores of the experimental group who received a DA (mean=6.1000) is higher than the mean scores of the control group who received SA (mean = 4.1000). Also the critical t is 2.21 which is less than the t_{obs} ($t_{obs}=6.166$).

6. DISCUSSION

Humanistic approaches sheds lights on the idea that learners are different individuals and it aims at helping learners become more like themselves and less like each other. A DA-based instruction which has its roots in Humanism minimizes anxiety and maximizes the sense of security. DA extends and increases the interactive aspect of learning. The analysis of this study reveals that the participants gained more proficiency than did the ones who were in the control

group being exposed to a static and standardized practice of L2 writing instruction and assessment. As the results indicate, a DA approach of writing proficiency to Iranian EFL learners proves to be useful in uncovering the underlying traits.

This study was an attempt to provide an analysis of L2 learners writing performance quantitatively. The quantitative method provided a product view of the participants' performance. In the present study, first of all, an OPT (Oxford Placement Test) was administered among 80 subjects 40 of whom were selected for the aim of this study. The subjects were randomly divided in two groups i.e. an experimental group and a control group. For ten sessions, the experimental group received the treatment in the form of being exposed to the humanistic approach i.e. Dynamic Assessment of L2 writing (e.g. DA-based instruction, prompting, interacting, hinting, providing support and scaffolding) while the control group received a placebo i.e. a normal static practice of L2 writing proficiency. Two types of pretests (DA and SA) were administered prior to the application of the treatment and placebo. Then, two subsequent posttests (SA and DA) were administered at the end of the duration of the teaching. Thus, in the present research, the participants underwent the DAs and SAs that preceded and followed the treatment. Then the scores were analyzed through SPSS (version 21) using a Paired-sample t-test, Independent-samples t-test and Descriptive Analysis. The results demonstrated that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of EFL learners' writing test as a result of exposure to Dynamic Assessment of L2 writing. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected which indicates that the treatment of the study was effective and the subjects in the experimental group outperformed the ones in the control group. The findings of the present study are in line with many studies investigating the impact of Dynamic Assessment on L2 writing proficiency. The dominant teaching method in Iran has been the traditional approaches in which the tester is only an observer and any form of help during the exam would be regarded as teaching. However through Dynamic Assessment as a humanistic approach, L2 learners will be exposed to far different learning experiences. The learners control over grammatical rules and the kinds of support they needed and their responses to the mediator proved to be signs of development. The extent and degree to which DA and non-DA learners changed their behavior or performance indicate the effectiveness of the treatment of the present study to promote development. One of the implications of this study is that it places interactions at the center of L2 teaching and testing which sheds lights on the theoretical contributions of Vygotsky's notion of the ZPD i.e. the unification of instruction and assessment as a single activity in which individuals' dynamic abilities are simultaneously evaluated and developed. Thus, the amount of guidance and mediation learners require during their ZPD will foretell the extent and the amount of task they can independently do in their future ZAD (Zone of Actual Development). In order to mediate effectively, teachers should create a sense of belonging in their classes and focus on teaching finished writing rather than teaching unfinished writing. Teachers should respect their students not for the written output they produce but for what the students are engaged in i.e. truth (the words they use to express themselves and their voice). Students are different individuals who explore the path in writing in their own unique ways. So what they need is a teacher who respects and honors each and every one of them not for what they have produced or what they have done but for what they may produce and may do. Base on the results, it does appear that the pooling of resources in collaboration leads to produce significantly better texts rather than working individually. After all, two heads are better than one. Based on the results of this study, DA-based instruction and aided learning in carrying out L2 activities can help to reach promising results. The findings suggest that Dynamic Assessment is an effective way of understanding learners' abilities and helping them to overcome L2 writing problems. Dynamic assessment, as an interactive approach, adds to our understanding of the individuals' knowledge of the L2.

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