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## Dynamic Assessment in Higher Education English Language Classes: A Lecturer Perspective\*

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### ABSTRACT

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Building English language testing and assessment are one of the key functions of the UK Higher Education institutions from the early process of non-native English speaking student recruitment to the time of in-sessional and pre-sessional English language provision. There have recently been critiques of assessment practice in Higher Education (see, for example, Knight, 2002; Ball et al., 2012; Hamilton, 2014). This begs the question as to the possibility of potential alternatives for the current assessment regime. Accordingly, an interpretive qualitative study was carried out in the UK context to look into the English language lecturers' perceptions of challenges and potentials of dynamic assessment as a potential alternative. The results of the study show that despite ambivalent feelings and concerns about the challenges of implementing dynamic assessment, there are clearly lecturers who are philosophically inclined and open to the potential of dynamic assessment for enabling more personalized learning.

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One of the important aspects of Higher Education is the assessments run by HE institutions and academics, as the future of HE students is at stake by the decisions made on the results of these assessments. This necessitates designing assessments which are fit for purpose and revealing what the students can do in the future. However, there have been critiques of the assessments run at HE institutions; for example, Ball et al. (2012) write:

The National Student Survey, despite its limitations, has made more visible what researchers in the field have known for many years: assessment in our universities is far from perfect. From student satisfaction surveys to Select Committee reports, there is firm evidence that assessment is not successfully meeting the needs of students, employers, politicians or the public in general... Students have also noticed how

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\* This article is an extract from a study which has been awarded 'special commendations' by the British Council.

assessment fails to meet their needs, particularly in relation to relevance to the world of work. (p. 7)

In a similar vein, Knight (2002) argues that

It is important to insist that benchmarks, specifications, criteria and learning outcomes do not and cannot make summative assessment reliable, may limit its validity and certainly compound its costs... It is hardly surprising, then, that difficulties are reported in getting agreement on criteria and their application in a subject (Greatorex, 1999) and in a school (Price & Rust, 1999). (p. 280)

Like Ball et al. (2012) and Knight (2002), Hamilton (2014) draws on the National Student Survey which reports that the current assessment regime is not successfully meeting the needs of stakeholders and criticises the current assessment regime in Higher Education for lacking validity and authenticity.

Reading the literature on English language assessment and the works of Lev Vygotsky, in particular his socio-cultural theory, one can see that “many theoretical claims have been made about the role and effectiveness of Dynamic Assessment (DA) in L2 learning” (Rahimi et al., 2015, p. 185) and therefore they may argue that ‘dynamic assessment’ seems to have potential to replace the current assessment regime in HE in English language classes (see, for example, Lantolf & Poehner, 2004; Poehner, 2007). As one of the ways to encourage change in educational systems is to involve academics who teach on the ground (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 191) and deal with the design and administration of assessments, the present study investigated the UK HE English language lecturers’ views and perceptions of current assessment system and potential for the uptake of dynamic assessment in HE English language classes. Norton et al. (2006) point out that there is little literature on the academics’ perceptions of the value of exams. Hence, the research question put forward by this study is as follows:

What are the perceptions of lecturers in English language of the use of dynamic assessment in Higher Education in an English speaking context?

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) argue that teachers’ beliefs affect their teaching and that understanding and influencing teachers’ belief can help with promoting change in educational systems. Nazari (2012) highlights that dynamic assessment is at early stages of its growth and further research, particularly in consultation with practitioners, is required in this area. Likewise, Vafae (2011) endorses that empirical research on DA is still scarce and further research will shed more light on the benefits and limitations of this type of assessment. All of the above, and the fact that there is a scarcity of research and literature on the English language lecturers’ perceptions of the potential of dynamic assessment application (see Karimi & Shafiee, 2014) in the UK Higher Education English language classes, clearly indicate that there is a gap in English language assessment in HE that needs to be addressed. My research is an attempt to ameliorate this gap.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Dynamic Assessment*

DA is a type of assessment inspired by the socio-cultural theory of learning, in particular by Vygotskian notions of the Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding, which seeks ways to assist learners to fulfil their potential (Daniels, 2001). The process of collaborative talk (supportive talk) that guides, directs, and prompts the novice (the learner) is called scaffolding (Mitchell et al., 2013). ZPD refers to the distance between a learner’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” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Haywood and Lidz (2007) argue that the core characteristic of dynamic assessment is its use of an interactive procedure in which the examiner

provides guidance, encouragement and feedback in an attempt to elicit the best performance. Poehner (2007) writes that dynamic assessment is based on the socio-cultural theory and that

From this perspective, assessment occurs not in isolation from instruction but as an inseparable feature of it. ... This ... calls for assessors to abandon their role as observers of learner behavior in favour of a commitment to joint problem solving aimed at supporting learner development. In DA, the traditional goal of producing generalizations from a snapshot of performance is replaced by ongoing intervention in development. (p. 323)

Lantolf and Poehner (2004), drawing on Lidz and Gindis (2003), argue that future performance will be different from current performance and that

traditional standardized assessment follows the child's cognitive performance to the point of "failure" in independent functioning, whereas DA in the Vygotskian tradition leads the child to the point of achievement of success in joint or shared activity. (p. 53)

Drawing on Valsiner (2001), they also elaborate on the past-to-future model of assessment and the present-to-future one. They argue that static assessment focuses on the role of the past learning of the learner leading to the present state of her/his functioning. The present-to-future model of assessment, on the other hand, focuses on the present inter-psychological interactions to predict the future potential of the learner. As we are gaining a perspective of the learner's future performance, we are simultaneously helping the learner to attain a future (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004, p. 53). "In other words, to fully understand the person's potential to develop (i.e., her future), it is necessary to discover her ZPD" (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004, p. 53).

In dynamic assessment, determining potential performance is more important than assessing typical performance (Ajideh & Nourdad, 2012, p. 105). The proponents of DA argue that if we take the concept of the ZPD seriously, we should assist the learner even during and/or in-between the assessment process to see what they are really capable of, which is an indication of their future independent performance. In other words, there are epistemological differences between those who support traditional assessment methods and those who promote the use of DA (Naeini & Duvall, 2012, p. 24).

## *2.2. Research findings concerning dynamic assessment*

As far as my library and online research shows, all research in the area of DA in language classes, except a couple, focuses on the design, use and marking of this assessment. For example, in a recent study, Zhang and Compernelle (2016) designed a pretest-mediation-retest dynamic assessment to measure university learners' grammatical learning potential of Chinese as an L2. The results of their study showed significant achievements of the learners due to mediation and the usefulness of dynamic assessment in measuring learning potential. Davin et al. (2014) carried out research on the design and implementation of a dynamic reading comprehension task for classroom use with second language learners. The teacher in their study used pre-scripted mediation prompts during the task and scores were calculated for each individual student. The authors concluded that the task should be used as a learning tool in second language classrooms. Hessamy and Ghaderi (2014) studied the impact of dynamic assessment on the vocabulary learning of EFL learners. They conducted an experimental study with 50 intermediate EFL Iranian learners. The experimental group received a pre-test, mediation and post-test, whereas the control group received no mediation. The experimental group outperformed the control group significantly in their test performance and vocabulary learning. Hessamy and Ghaderi conclude that "incorporation of DA as a supplementary procedure to standard testing has positive effect on both test performance and vocabulary learning of learners" (Hessamy & Ghaderi, 2014, p. 645). In another study, Compernelle and Zhang (2014) described the design, administration and scoring of a dynamically administered elicited imitation test of

L2 English morphology. They presented an analysis of an advanced L2 English speaker's scores and compared his "actual" score, which was based on first responses only, with his "mediated" score, which was weighted to account for those abilities that become possible only with support. Compernelle and Zhang found that the student's performance improved with support, as reflected by the mediated scores and gains. They also argued for the unification of teaching and testing and their complementary role, because they contended that approaches to DA were based on Vygotsky's ZPD concept.

As mentioned before, there are very few studies looking into the perceptions of English language teachers regarding dynamic assessment. Es-hagi Sardrood (2011) reported on 51 Iranian EFL university and school teachers' perceptions of DA through the data collected by a structured questionnaire and a structured interview. The results showed that most of the teachers had a negative attitude to DA and believed that a complete implementation of DA in Iranian EFL classrooms would be too demanding. The teachers also questioned the feasibility of DA in Iranian EFL classrooms due to the lack of DA training, guideline and ICT resources as well as large EFL class sizes, the regular use of static tests and overdependence on the teachers' teaching and assessment abilities. Karimi and Shafiee (2014) delved into 42 Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of dynamic assessment in relation to their academic degrees and length of service. The researched were from private language institutes, schools, universities and business sectors. The researchers reported a significant difference across BA holding and MA holding teachers in their perceptions of dynamic assessment. Their findings included the following. The MA group conceptualised dynamic assessment as an ongoing, dynamic and challenging learning opportunity, expressing a preference for both interactionist and interventionist dynamic assessment. The BA group, however, had a preference for interventionist dynamic assessment. Most of the BA group considered themselves as passive agents in the application of dynamic assessment due to institutional policies, whereas most of the MA group did not hold such a view. Teachers' agency as the decision makers of classroom assessment in applying dynamic assessment was reported to achieve a gradual importance alongside increase in teaching experience. Perception of dynamic assessment as a challenging learning opportunity showed more manifestation along with an increase in years of experience of EFL teachers. Along the increase in years of service, a pattern of increase was also reported supporting application of both interventionist and interactionist dynamic assessment. Placing learners' progress as the core of application of dynamic assessment was shown to gain more weight as participants become more experienced in the career. The EFL teachers' awareness towards contextual and institutional factors increased as participants' years of experience increased. Karimi and Shafiee (2014) conclude that as the generalisability of their findings beg for caution, to increase the dependability of the findings, further research into the English language teachers' perceptions of dynamic assessment is required, which is the purpose of the current research.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Research question and the researcher's standpoint*

As was stated in the previous section, there is a gap in the literature on the use of dynamic assessment in gauging the English language skills of the HE students as far as the perceptions of English language lecturers are concerned. To research this topic, I adopted an interpretivist qualitative approach.

Ontologically and epistemologically, my study is situated in the interpretivist paradigm of research. In other words, my view of what I am researching and my interpretations of the results of the study are mediated by my world view and my values (Newby, 2014). To me, social reality is a personal construction and there can be different interpretations of the same human/education phenomenon. I am not interested in scientific measuring of phenomena but would like to capture views, experiences, feelings, thoughts and opinions of people (Newby, 2014). As Cohen et al. (2011) put it, interpretivists

begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them. Theory is emergent and must arise from particular situations; it should be grounded in data generated by the research act (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theory should not precede research but follow it. Investigators work directly with experience and understanding to build their theory on them. The data thus yielded will include the meanings and purposes of those people who are their source. (p. 18)

Methodologically, my research is situated on the qualitative end of the qualitative-quantitative continuum. Since I am going to explore, describe and explain the perspectives of the participants in their own terms and without interfering with the natural setting, the data will be in the form of words rather than numbers (Punch & Oancea, 2014, pp. 3-4). As Heigham and Croker (2009, p. 5) put it, qualitative research entails collecting textual data and examining it using interpretive analysis.

### *3.2. Materials and procedures*

To collect data, I developed a semi-structured interview guide. I chose the semi-structured interview as my data collection tool, as this type of interview suits qualitative research in that it provides the researcher with emic view and enables them to explore issues more deeply. Also, in this type of interview, respondents are fairly free in the way they deliver their responses. It also provides the opportunity to generate rich data (Newton, 2010). However, semi-structured interviews have certain limitations. For instance, they are time-consuming to carry out, transcribe and analyse. They could also be expensive if they involve travelling. In addition, the presence of the interviewer might affect the way the interviewee responds to questions (Newton, 2010). Therefore, I decided to carry out the interviews via email, as this would save me time of making appointments, travelling and transcribing the data. In addition, there is a chance that the interviewee might be more disclosing: “Nias (1991) and Miller and Cannell (1997) suggest that the very factor that interviews are not face-to-face may strengthen their reliability, as the interviewee might disclose information that may not be so readily forthcoming in a face-to-face, more intimate situation” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 206).

I adopted the convenience, purposive sampling method and selected the accessible members of the population, based on their shared characteristics, i.e. being native English lecturers teaching the English language in the UK HE, which would enable me to explore and understand the matter that I wished to study (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, pp. 78-81). I sent emails to 15 universities in the UK where the names and email addresses of their English language lecturers were accessible on their websites. Out of 65 emails that I sent out, 10 lecturers replied to me. I also sent an email to BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes) members, alas with no returns.

The interview guide was generated not only based on my knowledge and experience, but also based on the literature review and an Internet search. The draft questions were then subjected to a process of piloting where I asked two English language lecturers and one of my colleagues whose speciality was teaching and learning in Higher Education to go through the questions and let me know whether the questions were covering the research topic, whether they were clear and unambiguous and whether there were any other potential problems. The interview guide was refined accordingly.

### *3.3. Participants*

Ten lecturers and senior lecturers from six UK universities participated in this research. Seven of them were females and three were males. They held a variety of qualifications, e.g. undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (e.g. MA in Applied Linguistics and MA in TESOL), Cert in TEFL, Dip in TEFL,

CELTA, DELTA, Dip TESOL Trinity and MED in TESOL. They also had varied experiences in teaching the English language at the UK HE up to twenty years. For the number of the lecturers I emailed an invitation to take part in my research and the number of responses I received, see the above section on ‘Materials and Procedures’.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

When I started this research, my knowledge of dynamic assessment was negligible. What I read in the literature on dynamic assessment, as was mentioned before, did not include much about English language lecturers’ perspectives on this type of assessment in HE. Therefore, I had no presuppositions about their perspectives and wanted to find out what would emerge from the interview data. For this reason, to analyse the data, I adopted the procedures of grounded theory. I looked at what the participants said and highlighted key points in their answers, coded the key points (by creating my own codes, adopting them from the literature and/or deriving them from the participants’ language) and identified patterns (e.g. frequencies and recurrences) in the codes by conflating the codes and hence producing mega-codes (see the following section). This is what is referred to in the research methods literature as open coding, axial coding and selective coding (see Cohen et al., 2011, p. 600).

## 4. Analyses

### 4.1. Coding

At this stage, I went through the data line by line several times, underlined the units (words, phrases and sentences) that said the same point, was about the same point or was a key point, gave them a code, reassigned the codes, replaced the codes and refined the codes. This pulled the data together into some order and structure (Cohen et al., 2011, pp. 561-562 and p. 600). After the open coding process, I ascribed labels to the groups of the open codes which were clustered in terms of referring to the same issue, the same concept or similar/same meanings. In doing so, axial codes were generated. In other words, I connected related open codes into a larger category, i.e. axial codes, around which several open codes revolved (Cohen et al., 2011, pp. 561-562 and p. 600). The same process was carried out with the axial codes (i.e. I ascribed labels to the groups of the axial codes which were clustered in terms of referring to the same issue, the same concept or similar/same meanings) and in this way I created the selective codes which were basically at a higher level of abstraction than axial codes (Cohen et al., 2011, pp. 561-562 and p. 600). The following table not only refers to the refined open codes succinctly but also demonstrates the process of axial coding and selective coding.

Interview question number	Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
2	Limiting regulations Mixed assessment method Static assessment Limited practice Limiting requirements	Institutional requirements * <sup>2</sup>  Limited practice *  Mixed assessment	* Current situation of assessment   ^ Student-teacher collaboration on assessment

<sup>2</sup> The signs show which axial codes were clustered together to generate which selective codes.

3	Student involvement Broad practice Process-oriented assessment Negative attitude to the current situation Limiting regulations Limited practice Static assessment Mixed assessment method	method * Negotiated scaffolding ^ Limited practice * Mixed assessment method *	~ Challenges and tensions # Ambivalent feeling + Receptivity to the idea of dynamic assessment
4	Teacher intervention Limited practice Broad practice Limiting regulations Context dependent Limiting requirements Enhancing student potential Negotiated scaffolding Process-oriented assessment Enhancing student abilities	Teacher intervention ^ Institutional requirements *	
5	Student involvement Positive attitude to DA Limitations of DA Lack of knowledge about DA Reasons for DA Student involvement Lack of popularity	Advantages of DA + Challenges of DA ~	
6	Ambivalent feeling Hybrid assessment Context dependent Scepticism Dynamic assessment Static assessment Lack of fairness	Ambivalent feeling # Static assessment # Dynamic assessment # Hybrid assessment #	
7	Ambivalent feeling Process-oriented assessment Lack of knowledge about DA Student centeredness Negative attitude to DA Limitations of DA	Ambivalent feeling # Willingness to learn about DA + Negative attitude to DA ~	
8	Limitations of DA Limiting regulations Student ownership	Tensions ~ Student ownership ^	



	Constraint	
	Comfort	Lack of knowledge about
	Willingness to try out DA	DA +
	Unpopularity with teachers	
	Lack of knowledge about DA	
9	Lack of knowledge about DA	Challenges of DA ~
	Teacher intervention	
	Limitations of DA	Teacher intervention ^
	Willingness to try out DA	
	Unpopularity with teachers	Willingness to try out DA
	Limiting regulations	+
10	Ambivalent feeling	Ambivalent feeling #
	Lack of knowledge about DA	
	Student-centred assessment	Lack of knowledge about
	Context dependent	DA +
	Teacher as guide	
	Scaffolding	Collaborative assessment
	Dynamic assessment	^
11	Willingness to learn about DA	Willingness to broaden practice +
	Limitations of SA	
	Teacher intervention	

## 5. Discussion

As I showed in the Literature Review Section, there are very few studies researching the views and perceptions of English language lecturers regarding DA and its potential in Higher Education, in particular in the UK Higher Education context. My research contributes to filling this gap in the literature.

The following subsections will draw on the findings of the study, i.e. the selective codes (current situation of assessment, student-teacher collaboration on assessment, challenges and tensions, ambivalent feeling and receptivity to the idea of dynamic assessment), describe the implications of the study and state the limitations of the study. We need to bear in mind that, as the research was qualitative, interpretive and subjective, the data were diverse and complex, the analysis of the data was complex and the findings of the study were sometimes contradictory. In other words, my research and findings reflect the messiness of the social life and the real world. See the Method of the Study Section above for more on this.

### 5.1. Current situation of the English language assessment in the UK

My analysis of the data indicates that the participants use assessment for both formative and summative purposes to assess the achievement and attainment of their students. For instance, the following quotation from one of the participants is noteworthy in this regard:

We use a number of formative and summative examinations and assignments. In our first semester, all student work is formative; students are given copious amounts of feedback and are talked through it in tutorials. It is hoped that this feedback will inform similar, summative assignments in semesters 2 and 3. Students are required to write

coursework essays (1200 words); are given in-class exams in which they produce short and long answer responses to questions; students also deliver oral presentations with the aid of powerpoint.

The assessment types the participants said they use include portfolios, essays, presentations, coursework and in-class written and oral/aural tests. The reasons they give for using these assessments are institutional requirements and policies regarding academic skills, covering the skill areas for HE study and approximating the types of assignments students come across on their degree programmes. One of the participants, for instance, said:

These tools (assignment types, criteria etc) are used in order to closely approximate the types of assignment students will face on their degree programmes. We are also hoping to build, through teaching-testing-feedback and teaching, students' academic skills by using these tools.

However, in spite of the fact that the participants apply a mixture of assessments to assess their students' English, their practices are similar and limited. In other words, they are required to follow the university regulations and policies and therefore do not have the liberty to apply certain types of assessment. For example, the participants reported:

For summative assessments in class, I do not intervene as these will be used as a demonstration that the student has (unaided) passed the required level for the course.

I cannot intervene in attainment assessment. I can intervene in achievement tests by discussing errors and correcting written work and the results are normally positive.

Students are assessed formally in accordance with University regulations covering the skill areas for HE study. Informally, students are encouraged to use their language skills to build confidence to communicate in English and encouraged to set their own targets.

There also seems to be a negative attitude to the current situation of the English language assessment in the UK HE, as according to the participants, the current assessment methods are outmoded, not that fair and not sufficiently challenging for some students. The following excerpts testify to this:

Too many of our students who come in with good language skills can cruise through the course with a minimum of effort, and get undeserved high or decent grades. A greater emphasis on hard-work, reflective understanding and "distance travelled" would seem to be fairer and offer more encouragement to those students with less linguistic ability but better attitudes.

HE institutions – UK educational institutions as a whole - are also still imbedded in outdated modes of teaching and testing (e.g. lectures and exams) which are easy to implement, but may be of limited educational value. This love affair with the easy to administer, standardised exam dies hard.

Discussing some of the disadvantages of exams in the UK HE, Norton et al. (2006) refer to the current assessment regime as being unreal and inauthentic, having adverse effect on students and provoking student anxiety. My interpretation of the above is that the participants apply the assessment types that they mentioned in the interviews because of the institutional requirements and constraints, they feel more comfortable with those types of assessment and they probably lack enough knowledge of other types of assessment. As Hamilton (2014) endorses, "Programme teams are finding it challenging to move away from examination based practices, constrained by institutional culture, lengthy regulatory frameworks and lack of training" (no page number). The first two interpretations made above are supported by the

quotations from the participants' interviews cited in this section. The third interpretation will be looked at in the section entitled 'Receptivity to the idea of dynamic assessment'.

### 5.2. Student-teacher collaboration on assessment

In spite of the fact that there are institutional requirements and constraints regarding the English language assessment in the UK HE, some lecturers and their students collaborate with each other on assessment or at least there is a tendency towards student-teacher collaboration. One of the findings of the study shows that negotiated scaffolding is sometimes provided to students in the course of their assessment and/or some of the lecturers would like to negotiate support, guidance and direction with their students in assessing them. In this regard, one of the participants said:

During coursework assignments, I work with students in the planning and drafting stages, giving feedback to support their redrafting before final submission. I feel that this increases their awareness of the task requirements and ways they can improve their work, their awareness of writing as a process rather than just final product, their confidence and their independent learning skills for the future.

Another participant reported:

[I would like to] work with students to set their own aims and their own means of assessing how to measure success. Students need the language skills but also the confidence to use the skills.

He also said:

Personally, I would say 'dynamic' suits my philosophy to teaching, working alongside the student as a guide, for them to achieve their personal goals. This, of course, would mean adapt to student demands and if that is the static approach, so be it!

These participants seem to have a tendency towards the interactionist type of DA in that the assistance procedures emerge from the interaction of the assessee and the assessor (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004, p. 54).

Currently, there is also some teacher intervention, though limited, in the course of assessment. As one of the participants said, "Intervention in terms of feedback and students build on their existing skills and apply the feedback to the subsequent work is used." However, it seems that some lecturers would like to expand this to promote their students' ownership of assessment as learning:

EAP classes are pretty much formulaic but some students attend with differing skills and requirements. They could be used to allow students take some ownership, say, to set their own agenda for intervention; after all, it is their course, to support them.

I would like to see a move towards more dynamic based assessment esp. process/folio writing. This form of assessment treats learning as a process rather than an outcome, and encourages a much more reflective, personalised form of learning on the part of the student. This approach towards assessment is essential, I feel, in such a complex area as academic writing in which students are having to master multiple skills (e.g. control of sentence construction; logical development of ideas; vocabulary choice), and have problems and deficiencies particular to themselves.

Some of the lecturers go even further and say that some ownership of the assessment could be given to students to enable them to experiment with language and to accommodate their students' different learning styles; for instance, one of the participants said:

With attitudes changing towards students as customers buying the HE product, assessment changes could be part of the wider package of student ownership of their programme.

He continued to say:

In social situations, where language usage is less of a threat, the environment (e.g. the pub) might be the threat, thus affecting students' 'performance'. There should be a safe haven (EAP classroom?) where students can feel free to express themselves without fear; a laboratory to experiment with their language skills.

Another participant said, "The exam system of static assessments doesn't account for different learning styles."

The above seem to suggest that negotiated scaffolding, teacher intervention in assessment and empowering students in the assessment process, as part of the principles of dynamic assessment, are supported by the viewpoints of some of the participants.

### *5.3. Ambivalent Feeling About Dynamic Assessment*

The data and their analysis suggest that the participants have an ambivalent feeling about dynamic assessment and its potential application to the English language assessment in the UK HE. Some of the lectures were in favour of dynamic assessment of the English language skills of HE students. For example, they said this would allow the students to take some ownership by setting the agenda for intervention, as it is their course after all. They also said dynamic assessment would avoid giving the students only one chance, which is unfair and which does not provide a true picture of their abilities. They believed that dynamic assessment would be less stressful for students. One of the proponents of dynamic assessment, in particular, said,

In terms of interventions to support students to improve their work, I am strongly in favour of it [DA]. I do see that there can be some tensions between this and attainment testing [though]...

Others said that dynamic assessment might turn out to be unpopular as it would require more time and engagement from students and lecturers. From this group's viewpoint, it also requires an enormous input in terms of training for lecturers to be able to implement it in a fair and transparent way. This perception endorses what Es-hagi Sardrood (2011) found in his research in the Iranian EFL context. His research indicated that most of the teachers had a negative attitude to DA and believed that a complete implementation of DA in Iranian EFL classrooms would be too demanding. The teachers participating in his research also questioned the feasibility of DA in Iranian EFL classrooms due to the lack of DA training, guideline and ICT resources as well as large EFL class sizes. Among the above group in my study, some were more skeptical about dynamic assessment in that they were not sure how it works, confused it with more formative opportunities, wanted to see examples of what it might look like in real practice and thought it might undermine the generalisability of assessment outcomes. The following quotation from one of the opponents of dynamic assessment is interesting:

I think it is problematic in that it muddies the waters in terms of generalisability. Few assessment tasks in HE are explicitly explained and scaffolded. If EAP pre-sessional assessments are heavily scaffolded then it makes it difficult to generalise to the target language use context that does not have this.

Yet, some participants believed that their students would benefit from both dynamic and static assessment. The reasons they gave included the following: dynamic assessment could provide some degree of learner autonomy, scaffolding in terms of learning and assessment, and less pressure while

static assessment would motivate students, would require students to show a level of independence, and would be a standardised routine across the board. One of the respondents, for instance, said:

Static assessments perhaps can motivate some students, encouraging them into action under the pressure of a forthcoming test. However, I feel that there is more learning benefit and less pressure in dynamic assessment where students improve through the process rather than a one-off evaluation.

It seems that the participants who believe in the application of both dynamic and static assessment are in favour of a complementary approach in English language testing. Researchers such as Ajideh, Farrokhi and Nourdad (2012) take dynamic assessment as a complementary approach to traditional static assessment. Likewise, researchers such as Hessamy and Ghaderi (2014) take DA as a supplementary procedure to standard testing. However, I agree with Hidri (2014) on this, who argues that these two types of assessment are basically different:

Though complementary they might appear, static and dynamic assessment have methodological differences. Since this type of assessment [SA] considers the learners' abilities as already matured i.e., fixed and "stable across time" (Leung 2007, p. 260), in DA, such abilities are "malleable and flexible" (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002, p. 1). In addition, while scores in SA may be praised for their objectivity, they nevertheless fail to infer much about the learners' cognitive processes. Hence, the importance of implementing DA. (p. 3)

Other respondents believed that their students would benefit more from dynamic assessment because it is fairer, less stressful and provides a true picture of students' abilities. Yet others believed static assessment with more formative feedback would be more beneficial to their students because their students are very mark-orientated and keen to use feedback to improve their marks. One of the respondents, for example, said:

It depends on the student and the circumstances. I would guess that many students would be wary of dynamic assessment and it would be difficult to sell it to them in a transparent way. Tutors may be accused of favouritism.

While a minority of lectures categorically said that they would replace the current assessment system(s) in HE with dynamic assessment for the reasons of being more process-orientated and accounting for different learning styles, others said that they would first like to learn more about dynamic assessment and to see more examples because they were not sure how it could be done. Yet others said in some parts they would do so depending on situational factors. For instance, one of the participants said:

In some areas perhaps but it is labour intensive and requires administrative support, e.g. databases of student achievement, and may be difficult with situations of student illness, low attendance and the design of the tasks.

#### *5.4. Challenges and Tensions of Dynamic Assessment*

All participants believed that implementing dynamic assessment is challenging as far as HE institutional policies are concerned. However, a minority of them commented that barriers could be overcome and that the challenge might not be traumatic. One of the participants, for instance, commented:

It would be challenging to current conventions but maybe not too traumatic. With attitudes changing towards students as customers buying the HE product, assessment changes could be part of the wider package of student ownership of their programme.

The challenges they mentioned included the pressure to follow standardised assessment procedures, requiring more time and effort on the part of lecturers/assessors, requiring lecturers' classroom hours to be reduced in favour of probably more one-to-one teaching and assessment which would have recruitment

and cost implications for HE institutions, the issue of transparency and equality, the issue of practicality with large numbers of students and the issue of reliability. In this regard, the following quotation from one of the participants is noteworthy:

Dynamic assessment requires considerably more time and effort on the part of teachers/assessors. In order to be implemented effectively in an EAP context, a considerable amount of one-to-one time has to be made available for students; ... tutors' classroom hours need to be limited, with obvious recruitment and cost implications for HE institutions. HE institutions – UK educational institutions as a whole - are also still imbedded in outdated modes of teaching and testing (e.g. lectures and exams) which are easy to implement, but may be of limited educational value. This love affair with the easy to administer, standardised exam dies hard.

The challenges and tensions mentioned above are also referred to in the research carried out by Karimi and Shafiee (2014) who reported that the EFL teachers participating in their research perceived dynamic assessment as a challenging learning opportunity and were conscious of the impact of contextual and institutional factors on the application of dynamic assessment. Similarly, Hamilton's (2014) report criticises that despite issues with traditional examinations, they are still widely used in HE, because "programme teams are finding it challenging to move away from examination based practices, constrained by institutional culture, lengthy regulatory frameworks and lack of training" (no page number). Here we also need to remind ourselves of what Naeini and Duvall (2012) pointed out as the epistemological differences between those who support traditional assessment methods and those who promote the use of DA. According to these researchers, the proponents of DA argue that if we take the concept of the ZPD seriously, we should assist the learner even during and/or in-between the assessment process to see what they are really capable of, which is an indication of their future independent performance (Naeini and Duvall, 2012, p. 24).

A minority of the respondents believed that implementing dynamic assessment would not be challenging in their own teaching context for the reasons that "there is an informal approach to assessment, running parallel to formal assessment criteria" in their department and that their "colleagues and department would be interested to learn more about it." One of the participants, in particular, said that they already do a lot of dynamic assessment, much more so than in other university departments, and they still need to do more however. The majority of the respondents, however, believed that implementing dynamic assessment would be challenging in their own teaching context, as it would raise quality, transparency, equality, reliability and practicality issues.

### *5.5. Receptivity to the Idea of Dynamic Assessment*

A good number of participants welcomed the idea of dynamic assessment. For instance, one of the participants said, "Strongly support its use. As stated above, I believe that more dynamic, process forms of assessment should be used on our courses." Another participant reported, "I like the idea of it, and would be interested in seeing/reading examples of what it might look like in my context (academic writing)." She continued, "I am open to the idea that barriers could be overcome." She also added, "I think my colleagues & department would be interested to learn more about it." Most participants reported that dynamic assessment suits their values, knowledge and experiences. They argued that this type of assessment is in line with their philosophy of teaching, helps students to achieve their personal goals, is more personalised, focuses on the whole person and treats learning as a process. One of the participants, for instance, said:

Dynamic assessments are more in line with my values, knowledge and experience. Possibly my initial experience in teaching in ESOL has coloured my outlook on assessment, as in ESOL the focus is more on the whole person and very often that person has had some very difficult experiences. Therefore, if the person is not completely at ease, this will have an impact on their learning. Language learning, in my opinion, cannot be treated in isolation without considering the person as a whole.... Learning is a process and never stops.

Another participant commented, "Dynamic is more in line with my own view of effective learning, the process of constructing your own knowledge, often in collaboration with others and in context."

I would like to mention that while these participants were receptive to the idea of dynamic assessment, they were also concerned with the issue of equality, clarity of the use of this type of assessment and its practical application. For example, one of them said:

Dynamic assessment as described above sounds like good teaching. So in that sense it matches my values. How it works as assessment is less clear to me so I cannot say how it matches my values. I have no experience of it, at least where it has been explicitly labelled dynamic assessment.

Another one said, "With writing, dynamic testing would work but I would have to see examples of successful dynamic assessment in other contexts before I would be convinced to try it." This finding of mine endorses Hidri's (2014) finding, who reported, "although the new assessment [DA] provided better insights into learners' cognitive and meta-cognitive processes than did the traditional assessment, raters were doubtful about the value of and processes involved in DA mainly because they were unfamiliar with it" (p. 1).

## 6. Implications of the Study

The implications of this study are twofold: theoretical and practical. Vafae (2011), Nazari (2012) and Karimi and Shafiee (2014) point out that dynamic assessment research is still at its embryonic stages, empirical research on dynamic assessment is scarce, more research is required to shed light on the advantages and disadvantages of this type of assessment and the findings of dynamic assessment research are not generalisable yet. My research and its findings, therefore, by exploring and reflecting UK HE English language lecturers' perceptions of dynamic assessment and its use in UK HE, help to fill an existing gap in the literature and make contributions to knowledge on (the potential of) dynamic assessment. As was explained in Section Three, the findings of my study can modestly contribute to the formation of a theory of dynamic assessment of English language skills in HE by adding to the concept of dynamic assessment the perceptions and views of the lecturers and therefore to some extent exposing the explanatory power and external validity of this approach to assessment from its potential users' viewpoints. My research also empowers UK HE English language lecturers by including their voice. I believe the dissemination of my research can help with hearing the lecturers' voices and promoting change in the UK HE as well as in what these lecturers do. As Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012, p. 283), citing Wedell (2009), put it, "an understanding of teachers' beliefs needs to be an integral part of initiatives that aim to promote change in what teachers do in the classroom." In addition, my study echoes the lecturers' voices and as "in the wake of new forms of curricular policy in many parts of the world, teachers are increasingly required to be agents of change" (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 191), it will hopefully "encourage change at the discipline/institutional level" (Norton et al., 2006).

### 6.1. Implications for the uptake of DA in HE English language classes

In the interviews, the research participants pointed out the barriers to the potential implementation of dynamic assessment in Higher Education. For example, they highlighted the following:

- university regulations and policies
- lack of enough knowledge of dynamic assessment and needing training in it
- needing to see examples of dynamic assessment
- requiring more time and engagement from students and lecturers
- requiring one-to-one time with the student/assesse
- issue of fairness

However, they also argued that in some contexts there were certain approaches leaning towards dynamic assessment. To help this to spread and to address the above-mentioned issues, we would have to make sure that certain actions are taken. For instance, we would have to liberalise university policies to enable lecturers to implement dynamic assessment. This could be done by, for example, making sure that our dynamic assessments are relevant to the learning outcomes of our modules and courses rather than being too obsessed with the issues of validity and reliability in a positivist way. We would also need to redistribute the teaching and assessment hours in Higher Education institutions by, for example, less teaching and doing more assessment-as-learning. We would need to provide professional development for academics, because as Guskey (2000, p. 4) states, “One constant finding in the research literature is that notable improvements in education almost never take place in the absence of professional development.” In our professional development courses, we should provide examples of dynamic assessment, one of which is shown in the work of Lantolf and Poehner (2004, pp. 62-64).

Regarding the issue of fairness, as far as dynamic assessment is concerned, fairness does not mean providing equal amounts of feedback to students. In dynamic assessment terms, fairness means providing feedback to students based on their scaffolding needs to reveal/achieve their potential. As Lantolf and Poehner (2004) state:

to be maximally useful in promoting development assistance must be tailored to the needs and responsiveness of specific learners or groups of learners... In what to some is no doubt a curious turn, the more reliable the procedure, the less effective it is in promoting individual development. As Lidz (1991: 18) cogently puts it, ‘the word “dynamic” implies change and not stability. Items on traditional measures are deliberately selected to maximize stability, not necessarily to provide an accurate reflection of stability or change in the “real” world.’ (p. 67)

## 7. Limitations of the Study

No research study is perfect or impeccable. Mine is not an exception. For instance, in spite of the fact that I sent 65 emails to 15 universities in the UK where the names and email addresses of their English language lecturers were accessible on their websites and I also sent an email to BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes) members, only 10 lecturers replied to me. In other words, the small size of the sample might be one of the limitations of my study. In addition, as was explained in Section Three, I realise that interpretivism and qualitative research, while rigorous, inherently work with data that is subjective and contextual, which places limits on the extent to which findings can be generalised. To put it another way, the degree of the generalisability of the research findings might be one of the limitations of my study.



## 8. Recommendations for Further Research

As was mentioned earlier, my sample size was small and my research approach was interpretive and qualitative. Similar qualitative studies to mine could add to the developing picture by seeing if similar themes apply in related contexts.

All my participants were native speakers of English. It would be interesting to find out whether there are any similarities and differences between the perceptions of native English speaking lecturers and non-native English speaking lecturers. Also, my context of research was the UK. It would be useful to know the perceptions of English language lecturers working in other native English speaking contexts, e.g. the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

My research did not explore any likely gender similarities and differences in the perceptions of lecturers. Different genders might perceive dynamic assessment and its potential implementation in HE English language classes in different ways, as the research on gendered language strategies use, gendered motivation in second language learning, gendered attitude in second language learning, gendered achievement in second language learning, gendered second language teaching and gendered supervision of doctoral and postgraduate theses has produced certain findings (see, for example, Bryant & Jaworski, 2015; Abu Sharbain & Tan, 2013; Zeynali, 2012; Abdul-Rahman, 2011; Ali, 2008; Kissau, 2006). Therefore, exploring likely gender similarities and differences in the English language lecturers' perceptions of dynamic assessment and its potential use in English language classes can be another avenue for further research.

In seeking to ascertain the perceptions of UK lecturers of English Language towards dynamic assessment and its potential use in English language classes in Higher Education, this research has revealed a mix of current practices and viewpoints. Notwithstanding ambivalent feelings and concerns about the challenges of implementing dynamic assessment, there are clearly some lecturers who are philosophically inclined and open to its potential for enabling more personalised learning - and the above recommendations for future research and practice are offered to facilitate a way forward here.

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