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## **A PARADIGM SHIFT TOWARD A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF ASSESSMENT: DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Dynamic assessment (hereafter DA) is an interactive approach to conducting assessment focusing on the ability of the learner to respond to his own learning. It is teaching to test paradigm in language testing which does not separate instruction from assessment, but instead, is in favor of a teacher-student unity that works jointly towards student's future improvement through their zone of proximal development (ZPD). This paradigm shift toward a new philosophy of assessment is a tool for helping individual learners develops from current level through intervention (Sternberg and Gregorenko, 2002). DA rooted in sociolinguistic theory of Vygotsky's ZPD and Feuerstein, to Vygotsky for the need to assess both the zones of actual and proximal development and to Feuerstein for creating procedures attempting to do just that DA explores how each mind works and how each individual can learn to assemble and to use knowledge better. This paper is an attempt to review, evaluate, and critique the validity of DA and discuss the genesis and promises of DA in general and L2 DA in particular. The procedures will be to: (a) review the theoretical and empirical developments in applying the principles of DA in assessing L2 learner's language ability and empirical evidence reported on in favor or against DA (b) briefly compare dynamic vs. non-dynamic assessment (NDA) and finally (c) discuss the practical implication teaching to test instruction (DA) in EFL/ESL context.

**Key Words:** *Dynamic Assessment, Psychometric Dynamic Assessment, Approaches to DA, Non-Dynamic Assessment, Theoretical Framework of DA*

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the areas in which language testing is of great application and has great implications is language teaching. From the early days of language teaching, language tests have been always utilized by teachers as important devices for the purposes of assessment, evaluation as well as many other applicable purposes related to both the process of language teaching and language learners themselves. The emergence of new approaches, theories and methods in language teaching has affected the form and type of language tests too. In fact, theoretical developments in the area of language teaching have been compatible with that of language testing. Kuhn's (1962) concepts of paradigm and paradigm shift help understand the issue well. It simply states that the appearance of a new paradigm in a specific point in time has influenced all the previous teaching and testing practices and thus has led to the shift in the ruling paradigm as well as introduction of new notions compatible with the latest scientific achievements. Taking a glance at the early days of language teaching reveals that when the aim of language learning was the ability to read the target literature, language tests usually consisted of essay writing, translation and grammatical analysis judged subjectively by language teachers. Considering the evolutionary path of language teaching as a long continuum, at one end, at the other end there is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) moving away from psychometric and discrete-point testing and focusing on dynamic ways of assessment which integrate both teaching and testing together. In fact DA is considered as one alternative to standardized testing method. Crick and Yu (2008) believed that DA can help the learners to increase their awareness about their own learning and lead them to take responsibility which conclude to autonomous learners. DA assesses the learners based on their abilities and potential abilities (Lantolf, 2006).

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The central feature of DA is that it does not separate instruction from assessment, but instead, is in favor of a teacher-student unity that works jointly towards student's future improvement through their ZPD. From this point of view, not only assessment and instruction are interwoven with each other. Poehner (2007), Mardani and Tavakoli (2011) defines DA as the activity that integrated with assessment and instruction as a single activity to the purpose of finding the learner's development by actively promoting it.

According to Haywood and Lidz (2007) the DA website defines DA as "an interactive approach to conducting assessments within the domains of psychology, speech/language, or education that focuses on the ability of the learner to respond to intervention". DA is a method of conducting a language assessment which seeks to identify the skills that an individual child possesses as well as their learning potential. It is an umbrella term. It means it is neither an assessment tool nor a method of assessing. The DA procedure emphasizes the learning process and accounts for the amount and nature of examiner investment. It is highly interactive and process-oriented; the focus is on the process rather than products of learning.

In DA the learners has opportunity to learn during the process of assessment. In DA not only the learner's current information will be assessed but also the potential future performance level of learners will be assessed typically through a test- train- retest process with the aim of measuring both the level and rate of learning. Douglas (2010) believed it is not sufficient to assess what learners can do it by him or herself at the present moment as a result of their previous learning, but rather it is necessary to assess what learners will be capable to do through mediations that received from the teacher.

DA in its simplest definition means supporting learner development actively by understanding learner abilities that its aim is to assess potential for learning, rather than a static level of achievement. It does this by prompting, cueing or mediating within the assessment, and evaluating the enhanced performance.

Sternberg & Grigorenko believed DA considers abilities to be "malleable and flexible rather than fixed" (2002). Poehner (2008) argued that "DA challenges conventional views on teaching and assessment by arguing that these should not be seen as separate activities but should instead be fully integrated". A number of researchers (Campione, 1989; Lidz and Elliott, 2000; Lin, 2010; Davin, 2011; Teo, 2012; Ghahremani and Azarizad, 2013; Zoghi and Malmeer, 2013) observed that the main characteristics of DA are to provide help in order to develop performance in which determine learner's potential change.

Lantolf and Poehner (2004a) defined DA as "integrates assessment and instruction into a seamless, unified activity aimed at promoting learner development through appropriate forms of mediation that are sensitive to the individual's (or in some cases a group's) current abilities". Murphy (2011) sees DA as "an approach to understanding and conceiving an individual in the assessment process". Ajideh and Nourdad (2013) argued that DA helps learners identify their ability to develop their ability as a result of both meditation and independent performance in the future

### **Conventional Test Method: Demerits**

Traditional assessment is one-shot exam which is decontextualized test item. Scores are sufficed for the feedback with the product oriented perspective. Many teachers believe testing should be a measure of an individual's work. In fact, collaboration in the psychometric paradigm of assessment is seen as a threat to measures of reliability and validity (Hughes, 2003). In non-academic language collaboration is termed cheating and often carries strict penalties when it occurs in both formal and informal situations. This viewpoint implies that learning occurs only within a person. It is an individual's own personal competencies that are quantified in traditional assessment.

Paradigms other than SCT view the learner as what must be examined. The mental processes that cause cognitive change occur only within the individual. In SCT, development is investigated by the analysis of interactions between people and between people and cultural artifacts. The environment is the source of development (Elkonin, 1998). Working within an SCT framework researchers are not concerned with controlling for environmental effects. In fact, according to SCT theorists, humans and their social environment cannot be understood if separated (Poehner and Lantolf, 2005). With the advent of new educational policies, the resources given to programs are often based on that program's performance in

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terms of entry and exit test scores. This is not always the best indicator of a student's performance. Using assessments to make judgments about the future of an individual or an institution makes an assumption that is false. That is to say, such judgments assume a person's future is a continuation of their present and their present performance is a reflection of their past. Standardized assessments encapsulate an individual's actual development. They assume a person's past is the best indicator of their future. However, SCT adopts a conceptualization of the future that looks forward instead of backward. Valisner (2001; cited in Poehner and Lantolf 2005) calls this future as an emerging process, the present-to-future model. Poehner & Lantolf (2005) contend that emergence in the present-to-future model is the 'proximal' in the zone of proximal development. Therefore, if one adopts the SCT paradigm toward learning and development, then the future is seen as evolving rather than fixed. These emerging functions are best determined by what an individual is capable of doing with assistance. This is the essence of DA.

#### ***Dynamic Assessment: A Paradigm Shift towards New Philosophy***

The premier form of assessment is, of course, the standardized test. Gould (1996) points out that standardized testing became increasingly popular in the 1900s when the USA began using tests of general intelligence to screen immigrants and to evaluate the abilities of Army recruits. Since that time, such tests have gradually come to be used in a variety of other contexts, including educational settings.

Traditional assessment tend to measure the learner's abilities without mediation. In other words they prefer to test the learner's actual development. In traditional point of view, assessment has been used as an information-gathering activity to gain insight into learner's current level of knowledge or ability (Bailey, 1996; McNamara, 2004). The main focus of teacher made test prefer grading rather than promoting the learner's motivation or the object of this test is only evaluating the level of learners (Xiaoxiao and Yan, 2010; Black, 1993; Crooks, 1988). NDA (psychometric assessment) has several advantages over the other form of assessments. For instance, it can be simultaneously assess thousands of individuals; the individuals can take the test several times; the instruments and procedures can readily be used anywhere in the world, and test scores for individuals as well as entire populations can be compared with relative easily. In addition some scholars such as Budoff prefers the NDA and arguing that "it is difficult to distinguish the contribution the tester makes to student responses from what the student actually understands and can apply" (1987). On the other hand Black and Williams (1998) believed that the competition based on NDA can demotivate the learners and cause them lose their self-esteem hinder the learners to reach the autonomy. Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002) discussed the concept of DA with put it against NDA view. The crucial point here is that dynamic assessment, contrary NDA that its aim is just assessed the learner's production learning without consider their potential development level, does not separate instruction from assessment but instead considers them as two sides of the same coin. It means in DA the both production level of learning and potential development level of learner should be assessed. According to Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002), in NDA the teacher or examiner provide some test and expected that the learner or examinee to response successively to the test without any kind feedback or intervention. At some point in the future when the administration became over the only feedback that the learner will receive is an individual score or a set of scores. By that time, the learner is already studying for one or more future tests. On the other hand, DA is a procedure which takes the results of an intervention into consideration. During the intervention, the teacher helps or teaches the learner how to perform better on individual items or on the whole test.

Put another way, the teacher gave some cue or expresses some key words to the learners to find the best answer based on their previous knowledge. The final score is either the learning score representing the difference between pre-test (before learning) and post-test (after learning) scores, or the score on the post-test alone. In nut shell, NDA focuses on the outcome of past development or the attention is only toward the current levels of learner's performance on the other hand DA focuses on foregrounds future development.

Poehner (2008) mentioned that NDA clearly offers several advantages over other forms of assessment. It can simultaneously administered thousands of learners or examinees also the learners can take the test

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several times; the instruments and procedures can readily be used anywhere in the world, and test scores for learners as well as entire populations can be compared with relative ease. The additional advantage of this approach is that standardization is believed to increase objectivity. In this way, one can have confidence that test scores represent a pure, uncontaminated sample of individual's abilities. According to Poehner (2008), three important features can distinguish between DA and NDA:

- The view of the abilities underlying the procedures
- The purpose of conducting the assessment
- The role of the assessor

Lidz and Gindis (2003) stress the difference between NDA and DA as follows: "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."

### **Dynamic Assessment from Theoretical Perspective**

DA is an assessment method based on Vygotsky's model of cognitive development. Vygotsky is often referred to as the father of DA with his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky defined ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (1978). It should not be forgotten that the concept of DA was not introduced by Vygotsky himself but the introduction of this concept to Western audiences was by Vygotsky's colleague, Luria (1961), that set the stage for the widely divergent approaches to DA that exist today.

Some researchers believe DA emerged based on Vygotsky's ZPD and Feuerstein *et al.*, (1979) Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) point of view. According to Feuerstein *et al.*, (1988), human cognitive abilities are not fixed; instead, they develop while interacting with adults who mediate the world to them in their daily lives. In other words, human beings are open (not fixed) systems and that their abilities can be modified in a variety of ways depending on the instruction and supportive interaction available in the social environment. In MLE construct, mediation is the key component.

Pena *et al.*, (2001) mentions that the mediated learning experience (MLE) is designed to teach the child problem-solving strategies to achieve successful test-taking performance. The four mediation components include intentionality, transcendence, meaning, and competence. The mediator intends to teach (*intentionality*), and he/she links the immediate task to events in the child's experience (*transcendence*). The mediator enhances the child's awareness of why the task is relevant (*meaning*). Finally, helping the child carry out strategies for approaching a task fosters *competence* (Lidz, 1991; Pena *et al.*, 2001).

Seen in its theoretical context, DA is a broad approach, not a set of specific tests. The psychologist's goal is one of identifying what cognitive skills need developing and strengthening in a child (and this can be conveyed, for example, in the format of an Individual Education Plan), the cognitive requirements of given types of task (which can inform differentiation of the curriculum for the child) and advising upon and supporting the teaching of the child. This will be direct teaching of cognitive skills, as well as of traditional curriculum content. This micro-analysis focuses on the three 'partners in the learning process': the child, the task and the mediator (typically parents or teachers). DA aims to help optimize, through understanding the interplay of these essential elements, the match between the learner and the curriculum on offer (Stringer *et al.*, 1997).

### **Dynamic Assessment (DA) VS. Non Dynamic Assessment (NDA)**

DA envisions that since learner's language ability is always approaching the potential zone, the conventional assessment tools (Non-Dynamic, static or psychometric) are not able to tap the learner's real language abilities. As Poehner and Lantolf (2005) express "the principle underlying DA is that a full picture of what an individual/group is capable of does not emerge unless and until the ability is not only observed in independent performance but is also pushed forward through specific forms of intervention and social interaction between learners and assessors". Hence DA incorporates intervention and interaction into the process of assessment. In DA, assessment and instruction are seen as two sides of the

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same coin and it is this fact that distinguishes it from NDA. The fundamental differences between them lies in the fact that whether intervention or assistance is allowed for modifying examinee's performance doing the administration of assessment or not. In NDA the decision is only based on how the testers have performed on the test items that is to say the actual not potential performance but in DA one cannot have a complete picture of an individual's capabilities based on his solo performance on a test but a full picture required two types of information: (a) the person's performance with assistance from some one's and (b) the extent to which one can take the advantages from his assistance both in completing the same task and his performance (Poehner and Lantolf, 2005). In fact DA assesses the learner's abilities and provides them with opportunities for learning and development (Ajideh and Nourdad, 2012a).

#### **Approaches to Dynamic Assessment**

Lantolf and Poehner (2004 b) propose the terms interventionist and interactionist to describe the two general kinds of mediation that DA researchers can make available. Based on Leung (2007) view the tendency of interventionist DA is going from quantifiable preprogrammed assistance to quantifiable psychometric measurement. In other words, assistance with the standardized interventions take place with the aim to measure the learner's capacity to make use of predetermined guidance, feedback, and support with a view to increase what the teacher estimate about the learners current level. This kind of approach also remains closer to certain forms of NDA and their concerns over the psychometric properties of their procedures. Interventionist DA can take the sequence of pretest—intervention—posttest.

On the other hand, interactionist DA follows Vygotsky's preference for cooperative dialoging. In this approach, there is interaction between the teacher and the learners for the purpose of assistance and support. It is also highly sensitive to the learner's ZPD. In this approach the attention of measurement became deemphasized and the interest is toward qualitative assessment of a person's learning potential. It also focused on the development of the learners, regardless of the effort required and without concern for predetermined endpoints.

In sum, based on Fulcher (2010) the nature of mediation is important. If it is interventionist, the mediation is standardized. This kind of intervention that traditionally known as programmed learning will be provided by a computer. However DA practitioners prefer interactionist mediation. In this approach the teacher treat to the individual learners as their need separately through ongoing assessment of the current stage of the individual's development.

Allal and Ducrey (2000) have been called the interactionist approach *teaching in assessment*. They also have been called interventionist DA as *assessment in teaching*. Leung (2007) has been called interactionist DA as *assessment as teaching*. In addition, he has been called interventionist DA as *assessment for teaching*.

Sternberg and Gregorenko (2002) distinguish between the Sandwich format and the Cake format of intervention dynamic assessment. The Sandwich format is more in line with traditional assessment, NDA. In this approach, the learners are performed a test after which they receive intervention for some sessions and finally they receive a post-test with a parallel form to observe the effectiveness of the treatment. It means this approach includes an initial pre-test, a teaching phase and a post-test phase to measure the improvement achieved. The score which the learners obtained from this approach is most of the time as the average of the pre and posttest scores.

On the other hand in intervention Cake format the learners received assistance on the assessment session based on some predetermined criteria. This approach presents prompts and assistance during an initial assessment phase, gauging 'online' the individual's need for assistance. In other words, the learners are provided with mediation drawn from a standardized menu of hints, cues, and ranging from implicit to explicit, during the administration of the assessment itself.

#### **Dynamic Assessment in EFL/ESL Context: Validity of the Statements**

Nassaji and swain (2000) proposed a study for distinguish between the ZPD group and NON-ZPD group based on random and non random feedback. The result shows that the ZPD group who received the non

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random feedback and scaffolded by his teacher growth better than the NON-ZPD group who received random feedback.

Jacobs (2001) explored the effectiveness of a new version of KIDTALK with preschoolers by adding more DA features to the test. The results showed that DA had higher predictive validity especially for children coming from low socio-economic status and minority children who are culturally and linguistically different from their mainstream.

Anton (2003) in her study applied a DA procedure for placement of L2 Spanish undergraduate students. She explains that DA is more appropriate for placement purposes because it sheds light on student's developing abilities rather than focusing solely on developed ones which is done by non-dynamic assessment. She believes that using DA procedures makes the placement become more accurate because a complete picture of the abilities is presented. So important hidden differences among students become vivid which is a proof of the validity of dynamic assessment.

Poehner and Lantolf (2005) tried to dynamically assess and promote the French learner's speaking ability focusing on the use of two grammatical concepts of passé compose and imperfect. They also followed an interactionist approach. They concluded that providing mediation would enhance the student's awareness this grammatical concepts which would result in speaking French more accurately. They also claimed that a DA procedure enables the teacher to distinguish the differences between the students who scored the same in a NDA procedure through providing the learners with mediation which results in distinguishing the learner's ZPD.

### **Dynamic Assessment: Critical Issues**

Even though the scholars encourage the teachers based on their finding toward the DA, but the application of this kind of assess is to some extent difficult because DA is a relatively new concept in the field of language learning, and research on DA in the language classroom is limited to a couple of studies. This prevents language teachers from having practical guidelines about how to incorporate DA into their curricula. In addition, many countries around the world use standardized high-stakes language tests.

Based on the finding of Haywood and Lidz (2007) 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.

Lin (2010) concludes that assistance of a set of pre-formulated supportive cues and mediations during a test lead the teacher to provide a previous knowledge about student's 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

The further reason for difficulty of applying this kind of assessment can be because most of the student's (and their parent's) general expectation from language teachers is to prepare learners to those high-stakes tests. Offering a new and radically different form of assessment in the classroom would take many rejections from learners and their parents. They believed although DA has been hailed as a positive move towards fair assessment, it has generally not been used in educational or industry settings to the same extent that standard (NDA) tests have been.

Moreover, the different learner's have different ZPDs. These differences indicate the requirement of various supports and mediations; also important thing is that the actual independent performance level of the learners in the pretest stage did not show their ZPDs. It means that, the teacher should be more energetic for supporting different learners with different ZPDs. In addition, s/he should be more intelligence for estimating the learner's future needs for scaffolding and supporting based on their ZPDs. Naeini and Duvall (2012) believed that DA is considered as partial solution to the disadvantages of traditional tests.

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### ***Pedagogical Implications***

In fact DA with its psychological view toward teaching and testing change the point of view from just assesses the learner's current ability toward provides for them the opportunities for learning and development. Its focus is on the promoting development through mediation in the ZPD. DA allows teacher to see beyond what is shown in a static score. According to dynamic assessment, assessment and instruction activities are not separate or even complimentary undertaking, but rather dialectically integrated into a single activity which seeks to understand abilities by promoting their development.

Based on the finding of Ajideh and Nourdad (2012 b), DA can help learner to use teacher's mediation to become an autonomous learner. In addition, it leads into positive washback effect because it makes testing and teaching aims and procedures in line with each other and interwoven. Moreover, applying DA gives the chance of being mediated for learners with results in reduced stress. Long (2012) mention that as DA is an unbiased assessment, it could serve to differentiate between linguistic/cultural differences and learning disabilities for culturally and linguistically diverse children who are considered at risk for reading problems.

DA as test-teach test process that has the advantage of assessing large number of student simultaneously and a means to provide insights for identifying the learners in need of more intensive instruction to move beyond their current level of performance is reflected upon. When students are assessed, great effort is made to minimize any intervening factors such as hints, assistance. Deviating the true picture and to assess that the assessment procedure is the same for everyone, but DA take a very different stance, during that important information about the learner's abilities can be obtained by offering assistance during the assessment itself.

## **CONCLUSION**

The review of current literature revealed that DA is a useful framework to be used in the language classrooms because it focuses on potential rather than final achievement. If the teacher want to assess the real development of his or her students its better s/he change his or her point of view to more dynamic assess rather the traditional form of assess ant put this kind of assess to curricula. The aims of DA are providing learners with mediation, or appropriate forms of support, in order to simultaneously understand and promote their abilities. It is not only attention to the product of the learner's development also it is great attention to the process of learner's development.

DA according to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory suggested that that instruction and assessment should not be separated from each others. If the teacher want to understand actual perform of the learners, the assessment should not focus on testing the learner's performance with the final test. In addition, the primarily focus should be on what learners can achieve through the help of the teacher or peers during the class activities, since what the learners can do based on the instruction investigate the potential development.

Even though the understanding of each individual's learning potential will be difficult for the teacher but it can help to the teacher for designing more effective lesson plans that will serve the individuals more properly. Based on the learner's responses, comments, and questions during the mediation process, the teacher can make adjustment to accommodate each individual's instructional needs.

Considering its demerits, it should be mentioned that the field of DA as a whole still lacks a substantial body of empirical studies. What has been presented so far is a body of literature trying to elucidate the theoretical foundations and concepts of DA; however, not many practical investigations have been done in the area of language teaching and testing. Adequate training and support would seem to be essential if educational psychologists are to have a real choice of approaches to assessment and, in particular, if DA is to be critically evaluated. In fact, as a newly emergent instruction pedagogy grown up from a well-developed set of theories, DA is not yet widely practiced and is still virtually unknown to many psychologists and educators. According to Torrance (2005), DA, a procedure that —unites the goals of

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better understanding a learner's potential through structured sets of interactions and fostering development through those interactions, is just emergent into social-cultural-based L2 language research. To conclude, DA has a great potential to be a useful tool of learning and assessment in the language classroom, but it should be supported by more research, and the use of standardized testing should be reduced or eliminated.

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