Research Article

DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT: ENHANCING READING COMPETENCE THROUGH DIALOGIC MEDIATION AND STRATEGY INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT
The present study reports on the use of an innovative assessment, dynamic assessment (DA), with EFL learners. It shows how the researcher implemented DA to assess and instruct 6 Iranian EFL students' reading skills through the use of mediation. The theoretical construct of DA is based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the distance between one's actual and potential development levels. It challenged traditional static assessment that relied on a student's current/actual performance as the primary indicator of an individual's abilities. The assessment procedure was designed based on Vygotsky's notion of zone of Proximal Development and Feuerstein's concept of Mediated Learning Experience, which consisted a pre-test, dialogic mediated learning phase and a post-test. The results of the study indicated that when reading strategies are mediated to the participants appropriately, they helped improve the learners' reading skills effectively.

Keywords: Dynamic Assessment, Dialogic Mediation, Reading Competence, Strategy Instruction, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Mediated Learning Experience

INTRODUCTION
Over the past few decades, one of the most popular used testing methods in today's educational environments seemed to be Product oriented testing. Many language teachers around the world use final assessment tests in their curricula. The primary idea behind testing students after instructing them for a certain amount of time is to see how much the students have progressed on the subject they are being taught. Nonetheless, teachers sometimes argue that while some students perform very well in the class, they cannot get high grades from the tests.

At this point, dynamic assessment in language learning, which applies Vygotsky's sociocultural theory into assessment, might offer new insights to assessment in the language classroom. Vygotsky's theory basically suggests that if we want to understand learning and development, we have to focus on process instead of product. According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), Vygotsky argued that "the only appropriate way of understanding and explaining forms of human mental functioning is by studying the process, and not the outcome of development". This is the critical point which distinguishes dynamic assessment from other forms of assessment. In this approach, development process is seen as a predictor of the individual's or group's future performance.

Dynamic assessment according to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory suggests that instruction and assessment should be inseparable from one another. In other words, if teachers want to see how their students really progress in their classes, their assessment should not focus on testing the students' performance with a final achievement test per se. The real focus should be on what students can achieve with the help of the teacher or peers during the class activities because what is achieved with the help of others shows the potential progress for achievement without any help. That is, if students are able to achieve a task with others today, this shows that they will be able to achieve it by themselves in near future because being able to achieve it with others proves that the internalization process has already begun.

On the other hand, what teachers generally do in language courses is to assess students' actual development after some time of instruction, and to decide on the potential development by looking at the results. However, according to Vygotsky, this process should be the other way around because "the

Research Article

potential development varies independently of actual development, meaning that the latter, in and of itself, cannot be used to predict the former" (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006).

This paper takes an in depth look at the issue of dynamic assessment from the standpoint of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and its effects on promoting successful use of reading strategies. The central concept of the dynamic assessment (DA) is grounded in the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Feuerstein *et al*.'s Mediated Learning Experience (MLE), which form the theoretical constructs of this study. First, the theoretical framework is drawn, and then the methodological applications of the theory are discussed and carried out through a case study.

Theoretical Basis of DA

Dynamic assessment is a concept of sociocultural theory practiced mainly by Feuerstein *et al.,* (1988), but its theoretical forefather is Vygotsky whose notion of the ZPD is one of the key constructs to the approach. Sociocultural theory is a theory of the development of higher mental functions and it offers a framework through which cognition can be systematically investigated without isolating it from social context. For cognition development, sociocultural theory argues that the unit of analysis for the study of development is not the individual acting alone, but the interpersonal functional system formed by people and cultural artifacts acting jointly.

According to the sociocultural theory, human leaning is mediated leaning. Through mediation, usually in the form of dialogue, human cognition develops from other regulation (the assistance from other significant people, for example a teacher) to self-regulation (independent completion of a given task) (Wu, 2006). In the other-regulation process the students skip the distance, which is called Zone of Proximal Development, between their present development level and the mediator's. In ZPD, the whole picture of learners' development not only includes their actual level of development, but also their responsiveness to mediation which can provide insight into their future development.

Some scholars (e.g. Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2002) discussed the concept of dynamic assessment by differentiating it from non-dynamic assessment. The crucial point here is that dynamic assessment, contrary to non-dynamic assessment, does not separate instruction from assessment but instead considers them as two sides of the same coin.

According to Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002), in non-dynamic assessment the examiner presents items and the examinee is expected to respond to these items successively, without taking any kind of feedback or intervention. At some point in the future the examiner receives the only feedback he or she will get: an individual score or a set of scores. By that time, the examinee is already studying for one or more future tests.

On the other hand, dynamic assessment is a procedure which takes the results of an intervention into consideration. During the intervention, the examiner teaches the examinee how to perform better on individual items or on the whole test. 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. As assessors, we were taught to be neutral and provide directions as the way the test is.

Nevertheless, providing effective mediation is the core of dynamic assessment (DA), which means that when we use DA, we are not expected to be a neutral third party. Instead, we should "find routes to move the learner to the next level of development" (Haywood and Lidz).

DA is based on a considerably more open-ended assumption regarding the stability of learners. One significant characteristic of DA is that it is not like static assessment which measures a learner's response without any attempt to intervene in order to change, guide, or improve the learner's performance. The importance of DA, therefore, should not be ignored because it is not simply an assessment, but also a tool that can be used to help make a difference in the learner's skills. As Lidz and Elliott (2000) proposed, instead of constantly seeking to discover how the child came to be what he/she is, we should strive to discover the child's potential and what he/she is capable of becoming.

Zone of proximal development (ZPD)

The concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) holds the view that one's abilities are flexible rather than fixed. It is also concerned with the development of a

Research Article

person's potential abilities. Vygotsky (1978) believed that the normal learning situation for a student is a socially meaningful cooperative activity. He considered tests/assessments at school that only looked at the learner's individual problem solving skills as inadequate, arguing instead that the progress in concept formation achieved by the learner in cooperation with a more mature counterpart (an adult, a teacher, or a more competent peer) was a much more practical way to look at the capabilities of learners.

Vygotsky emphasized the role of social interaction and mediation in a learner's internalization. Moreover, the responsibility of the more mature counterpart is to provide constructive mediations, or scaffolding, to the learner. According to Vygotsky, new cognitive functions and learning abilities originate within this interpersonal interaction, and later they are internalized and transformed to become the student's inner cognitive processes. Thus, through cooperation and mutual interaction between the learner and his/her more mature partner, the learner may reveal certain emergent functions that have not yet been internalized. In Vygotsky's SCT, these functions belong to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is in counter-distinction to fully developed functions that belong to the Zone of Actual Development (ZAD).

An individual's responsiveness to mediation or support that is sensitive to their current level of ability (ZAD) reveals cognitive functions that have not yet fully developed (ZPD). While the results of static assessments show us the already existent abilities of the student, the analysis of ZPD allows us to evaluate the ability of the student to learn from the interaction with the teacher or a more competent peer. This learning ability may serve as a better predictor of the students' educational needs than the static scores indicated in a static assessment.

Mediated Learning Experience (MLE)

Feuerstein *et al.,* (1988)'s Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) construct was developed independent from Vygotsky's ZPD, but it realizes Vygotsky's vision of integrating mediations and assessment, and that involves co-constructing a ZPD with learners in order to promote development. 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 MLE construct, mediation is the key component.

Feuerstein *et al.,* (1988) state that children in a non-mediated environment learn through a trial-and-error fashion, which resembles the stimulus-response conditioning model of the behaviorist paradigm. They believe that this direct learning experience does not promote children's ability to construct meaning and make connections with a world that is beyond their understanding when they are on their own.

On the other hand, in a mediated learning environment, an adult or more competent peer can extend a child's attention beyond the direct learning environment, and help him/her develop many of the cognitive functions necessary to perform tasks that he/she can't perform at the current level. The mediator provides the child a model to move beyond his/her current capacities. The MLE construct challenges the unstated belief in educational static assessment in the way that it claims that the ability of human beings does not stay the same.

When an adult or a more competent peer offers mediations to a learner, the mediator is able to attend to the learner's responsiveness to the mediations and then modify the mediations according to the learner's needs. The learner's ability will change with the assistance of effective mediations. The MLE construct fits perfectly within Vygotsky's vision of unifying assessment and instruction as a single development oriented activity (Kozulin and Garb, 2002).

Dynamic Assessment of Reading

Teachers must devote time to the processes involved in reading and learning. Brown (1981) noted that product rather than process is stressed in most traditional classrooms. In order to stress processes, the covert cognitive and metacognitive processes must first be rendered into overt form, i.e., suitable materials must be devised. Teachers must do task analyses of strategies to be taught. Strategic problem-solving activities must be examined and strategies broken down into global steps. Teachers must demonstrate a variety of situations in which learners might profitably use the strategies taught, and transfer to these situations must be explicitly taught.

Research Article

Dynamic assessment of reading abilities uses a response-to-instruction paradigm to complement traditional static assessment of word recognition and reading comprehension. The process helps the examiner to predict appropriate intervention by exploring students' responses to a series of mediations in an interactive teaching-learning relationship. According to Carney and Cioffi (1990), the characteristics of using DA to diagnose one's reading abilities are that it is process-oriented versus product-oriented; its procedure involves response to instruction, not mere recording of existing abilities; and it allows the examiners to analyze the student's patterns of response to a series of mediated instructions designed to promote one's reading proficiency, instead of only indicating the learners' performance by the use of indices such as percentiles and points.

In DA, the examiner analyzes reading tasks to determine what the student needs to do to be successful and how the task may be adapted to help the student achieve success. The significant advantage of dynamic assessment of reading abilities over static assessment is that the learners' response-to-instruction information tells us how they may be able to perform if the conditions that make them inefficient are addressed. Successful reading results from automatic and consciously directed cognitive activities and efficient use of reading strategies.

DA thus investigates the degree to which a student's use of consciously directed cognitive activities through dialogic mediation can improve reading performance.

One piece of research which highlights the importance of strategy training is that of Dole, Brown and Trathen (1996). The group which received strategy training outperformed other groups when asked to read selections on their own, without the teachers' support, pointing to the transfer value of teaching students to become independent learners. This study, like earlier ones, shows that lower achievers benefit particularly from learning specific strategies. In addition, the research indicated that strategies could compensate for lack of background knowledge.

Most of the previous studies conducted to explore dynamic assessment of reading abilities were in the field of special education (Cioffi and Carney, 1983; Hamilton, 1983; Spache *et al.,* 1981; Spreen, 1982; Wilson, 1981). They consistently noticed that traditional static assessment often failed to provide the information teachers needed to help their students constructively. Assessing reading abilities in a dynamic manner is not common in L2 assessment.

One of the few known DA studies in L2 reading was by Kozulin and Garb (2002), who investigated whether DA could help provide information about the learning potential of at-risk Israeli high school EFL students in their grammatical knowledge and reading comprehension skills. In contrast, the areas being examined in the current study included more cognitively-demanding reading skills such as finding main idea in higher-level texts, using contextual clues to predict the meaning of vocabulary words, and making inferences. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the effects of dynamic assessment on Iranian EFL learners current and potential reading skills, and discover the effectiveness of dialogic mediation and strategy instruction through dynamic assessment of reading comprehension. The research questions of the study are as follows:

1) Does DA help the participants realize their learning potential and if so, to what extent?

2) What are the effects of dynamic assessment on reading comprehension through dialogic mediation and strategy instruction?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The participants of the study were 6 Iranian students attending a foreign language institute in Shiraz, majoring in different fields of study, with an average age of 20. The results of a placement test given to them by the institute at the end of the term ranked them as below intermediate level learners. They were selected from an initial sample of 30 students. Based on the results of the placement test, all of the participants except these 6 were considered to be intermediate level learners. Thus, the majority of the students followed their regular courses. However, by the permission of the institute, the researchers decided to work with these 6 students in a mediation program. For arranging the sessions, the students'

Research Article

opinions were sought. Furthermore, they were assured that their participation is voluntary and that they will receive no grade for this course. Therefore, all of them agreed to participate in the program. Furthermore, each researcher worked with 3 of the students using dialogic intervention.

Data Collection

Stage 1. The pre-test. A static reading comprehension test (pretest) was administered to all participants one week before the outset of the study. The pretest included 2 reading passages adapted from Baleghizadeh (2009). The passages were followed by 10 multiple choice questions. The book is selected because it's considered to be appropriate for intermediate level EFL students. The pretest included 20 questions (3 questions on the main idea, 5 questions related to inference, 6 questions on word meaning, and 6 questions pertaining to the details). The students' papers were collected after the administration of the pretest and the results were used to design the mediations. Table 1 shows the results and the students' performance on the pretest and posttest. The items were analyzed in terms of the strategies required to meet the students' needs.

Stage2. The aim of the mediation program was to enhance students' comprehension of the texts as well as their ability in using appropriate strategies. First, the results of the pre-test were analyzed so as to determine the major areas of difficulty. The results revealed that the majority of the participants had difficulty identifying main idea, word meaning, and inference. Based on the above-mentioned analysis, a mediation program was designed including 3 sessions.

In the first mediation session, the students were provided with a list of reading comprehension strategies mainly adapted from Brown (2001), as well as the first sub skill, that is identifying the main idea. They were provided with different passages, and were asked to identify the main ideas. Then, they were provided with immediate feedback and the related strategies were also taught and discussed with the students.

Then, in the second intervention session, the students were encouraged to ask questions with regard to the last session, in order to resolve any kind of ambiguity. Furthermore, the students worked on different passages taken from Baleghizadeh (2009) and they were asked to identify word meaning. What's more, they were provided with immediate feedback, and the related strategies were explained and worked in detail.

Finally, in the last intervention session, again the students were encouraged to ask questions with regard to the previous sub skills and strategies. Then, they were given different passages to work on their ability to make inferences. The answers were checked and feedback was given to the learners. Then, the relevant strategies were taught and discussed further.

Stage3. Post-test. After mediation sessions, the participants were given a static post-test to trace their reading comprehension improvement. The post-test consisted of two passages with 20 multiple choice items. The results are presented in table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of pretest and post-test were analyzed and compared in terms of correct answers related to each reading skill. Table 1 represents the results of comparison of pre- and post-tests.

Table 1: Results of the Pretest and Posttest: Correct Answers to the Questions.

student	Skill 1 Main idea (3) Pre post	Skill2 Inference (5) Pre post	Skill3 Word (6) Pre post	skill4 Details (6) Pre post
1	0 2	3 5	4 5	3 4
2	2 3	3 3	3 5	2 4
3	0 3	1 3	5 6	5 5
4	2 3	2 4	4 4	4 6
5	1 2	4 4	4 6	3 5
6	2 3	3 5	2 6	4 5

Research Article

According to the data presented in Table 1, concerning the main idea, the performance of the students changed from pretest to post test. On the one hand, this improved ability can be attributed to the effectiveness of instruction; on the other hand one can relate it to the effective use of strategies. The table further illustrates that student 3 improved dramatically.

The dialogic interventions with student3 revealed that not only has she difficulty in identifying the main idea, but also she is reluctant to use the strategies already taught. What's more, it seems that student 3 couldn't remember the strategies and thus she couldn't apply them practically. Therefore, it's not surprising that she has made improvement after the mediation process.

To illustrate the results clearly, a visual representation of the data is displayed through bar graph.

Figure 1 represents the change in the students' ability to find the main idea from pre-test to post-test.
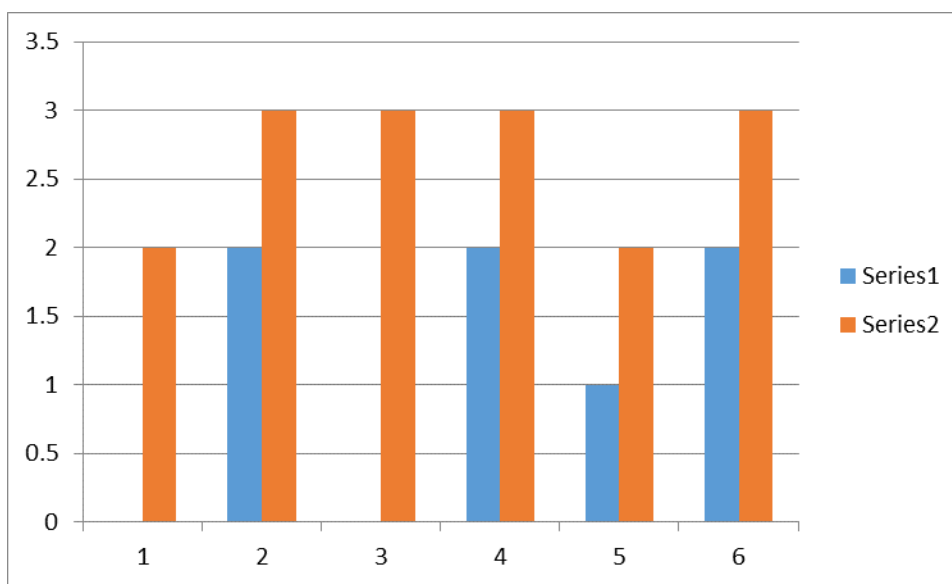

Figure 1: Change in performance of students' ability to find the main idea

Figure 1 further highlights the fact that all the students progressed in their ability with regard to finding the main idea; nonetheless, as can be seen from the figure, student3 progressed dramatically in comparison to the other students.

In order to explain the reason a closer look at the dialogues between the researcher and student 3 is needed.

R: Read passage 2 and answer question number 7.
S3: The answer is "a"
R. Why do you think it is the main idea? How did you find it?
S3: I have read the first paragraph and the last one
R: Yeah, usually the main idea can be found in the first and last paragraphs, but…
S3: So, the answer is c
R: Sometimes the text is more complex, and in this case you have to make guesses based on the context.
R: There are some strategies you can use.
R: Do you look at the key words?
S3: No, I just read the first and the last paragraph
R: Remember to pay special attention to words such as but, yet, although, since, except, moreover, unless, nonetheless, however.
S3: What's the use of them?
R: These words signal a shift, something you should note. The ideas that follow these words are usually important to the overall meaning of the passage.

Research Article

S3: Got it, right

R: Now, try to spot wrong answers, do you remember?

S3: Yeah some answers are too broad some irrelevant, forgotten

R: Yeah some are too narrow, incorrect, and illogical

Further analysis of the dialogic mediation reveals the student's improvement.

R: Now, the next passage, read it and answer question 1.

S3: Yeah, found it, there is moreover, number c.

R: Yeah good, but read the sentence after moreover. Is it the main idea?

S3: No, let me find it, after some minutes. In fact, it's after in fact.

R: Yeah, correct, how did you find it?

S3: The main idea should come after in fact let me read the sentence.

As can be seen in the excerpt, S3 made progress after the first attempt. In other words, she was able to apply what she had already learnt independently, only after she was provided with additional opportunity to practice more.

Regarding the ability to make inferences, according to the data presented in table1, all the students progressed, while students 2 and 5 didn't improve in their performance from pretest to posttest.

Figure 2 visually represents the change in participants' pre and post-test scores with regard to making inferences.
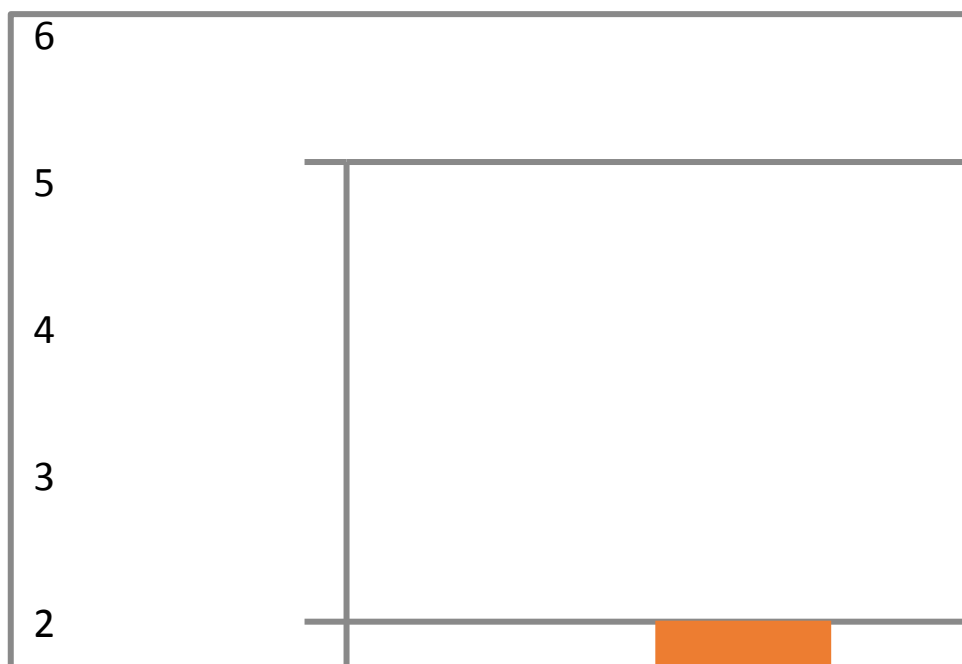

Figure 2: Change in performance of students' ability in making inferences

Figure 2 reveals that all the students progressed compared to their performance in pretest; however, students 2 and 5 didn't make any progress.

It indicates that they may have been engaged in activities beyond their readiness. In other words, they were not ready to work on the material and it was not within their ZPD's. Vygotsky's ZPD is used to determine a child's readiness to work within a specific domain. However, the results indicated that these students were not ready to receive mediation, and further mediation is needed for them.

Considering the ability to identify word meanings, Table 1 indicates that all the students progressed in their performance. However, as it can be seen from table1, student 4 didn't make any progress. Figure 3 represents the results of change in performance with regard to identifying the new words visually.

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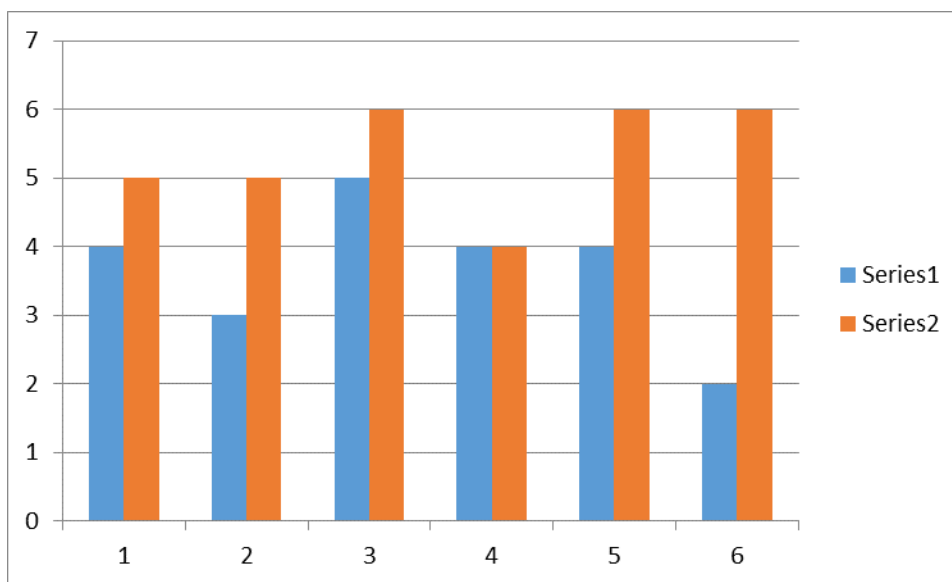*Research Article*

Figure 3: Change in performance of the students' ability with regard to identifying the meanings of unknown words

Figure 3 indicates that all the students except number 4 made progress. Again it can be explained by the fact that the mediation was not within her ZPD. In other words, the mediation is far above her current level. Thus, she needs further mediation. Figure3 further illustrates that student 6 made considerable improvements, compared to the other students. This can be explained by analyzing the dialogic mediations between the researcher and the student.

In pre-test, she responded correctly only to two questions indicating that she could only identify the meanings of a few words. Thus, in the last intervention session, the researcher tried to work with her through dialogic mediation to see to what extent she could make progress.

R: Well, read this passage. Are there any new words?
S4: Yes. Many words ….spectacular… overlap….
R: Any other words?
S6: Yeah many I mean compelled.
R: Let's skip them, try to read the passage and tell me what you understood.
(After 5 minutes…)
S6: May I look up the words in my dictionary?
R: Well, let's guess the meaning of the first one together.
S: Spectacular?
R: Yes, read the whole sentence.
R: Can you guess?
R: Well, is it a verb, an adjective, adverb? What part of speech?
S6: Of course adjective
R: Now read the sentence and have a look at the answers
S: Unusual, no…beautiful
Then, the student was provided with further mediation. The analysis of the next dialogic mediation highlights her improvement.
R: Now, let's read this passage. The word compelled, what does it mean?
S6: Well, let me read the sentence and the answers.
S6: Read the previous sentence too.
S6: Oh, it's a verb. He was compelled to wear formal clothes.
R: Yes

Research Article

S6: And the answers,

R: Yeah, read the next sentence. It was summer and hot.

S6: Yeah got it, necessary

R: But do we have it in the answers?

S6: No, but he had to…

Taken together, it seems that providing the students with the instructional activities within their ZPD's and dialogic mediation can improve their comprehension with regard to three reading comprehension skills: finding the main idea, making inferences, and identifying the meaning of unknown words. In other words, in this way they can move from working cooperatively to working independently.

Furthermore, teaching them the appropriate strategies in context leads to substantial development in this regard. In fact, the analysis of the excerpts between students and the researchers revealed that teaching strategies related to each skill improved students' comprehension abilities in the process of interacting with the researcher.

The results further reveals that not only the strategies should be taught, but also they should be discussed with the students in practice. In other words, their application might not be apparent to some of the students; therefore, they should be applied in concrete examples so that the students see their use and application.

Consequently, through more practice, mediation and feedback the students enhance their comprehension abilities. What's more, this kind of division of skills along with dialogic mediation and strategy instruction provided the researchers with more opportunities to help students, by focusing on a certain skill and its related strategies in each session.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of dynamic assessment on Iranian EFL students' current and potential reading skills, and discover the effects of dialogic mediation and strategy instruction on promoting reading comprehension. The participants' pre and post-test results proved that when reading strategies are mediated to the participants appropriately, they helped improve the learners' reading skills effectively. More importantly, when the assessment was integrated with instruction, it helped the learners realize their learning potentials. Therefore, the participants were able to take the strategies learned from appropriate mediation a step further and apply them to new materials presented in the post-test.

In addition, based on the study, a pre-test score was obviously not sufficient to indicate what a teacher would need to know to prepare for effective lesson plans. Dynamic assessment allows teachers to see beyond what is shown in a static score. For example, when two learners received the same score in a pre-test, it did not necessarily mean that they were actually at the same proficiency level. Even if they were at the same proficiency level, a teacher could not tell whether they had different degree of learning potentials until the mediation stage took place in the dynamic assessment. In addition, understanding each individual's learning potential will help a teacher design more effective lesson plans that will serve the individuals more properly.

Based on the learners' responses, comments, and questions during the mediation process, a teacher can make adjustment to accommodate each individual's instructional needs. As a result, dynamic assessment helps teachers reach the goal of unifying assessment with instruction. In fact, it tends to be a common problem many EFL teachers are facing: How can we challenge the students in the classroom while at the same time help they apply the skills they learned in the classroom in real-life situations? The suggested solution is that one way is to include real-life scenarios in EFL dynamic assessment activities which will allow students to use English to solve the problems assigned.

The limitation in the study includes the small number of participants, which restricts the research's ability to make generalization based on its findings. Also, the study only investigated three reading strategies, namely finding main idea, identifying the meaning of unknown words, and making inferences. Dynamic assessment (DA) should also be implemented to explore other reading strategies that were not covered in the current study. In addition, since the quality of mediation is the primary component in DA, it is recommended that we maintain a consistent standard of the mediation for the mediator to use as

Research Article

guidelines while providing mediation for the learners. Thus, further research should focus on designing consistent and high-quality mediation to be implemented in the dynamic assessment procedure.

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