
Interview with Matthew Poehner

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Dr. Matthew Poehner is Assistant Professor of World Languages Education and Applied Linguistics at The Pennsylvania State University. He delivered a keynote address at the 2013 Second Language Studies Symposium titled *Dynamic Assessment: Understanding Mediation*. He was kind enough to speak with us after his talk.

How did you become an applied linguist and how did you become interested in the field?

First, as an undergraduate student, I spent some time teaching ESL in the US, and I got really interested in teaching languages. I was studying French at university, and so I thought I could stick around for a while, get some credentials in education, and then become a language teacher. There was no certification at that time in ESL for working in schools, but I did a certification to teach French. I knew I wanted to go back to graduate school, but I wasn't sure of what I wanted to do. So I applied to a masters program that gave a broad base in literature and civilization and formal linguistics, and I also took a course on SLA. I was really interested in learning more about processes of second language development, and I thought that seemed like it could inform my teaching—because I was still committed to teaching. By the way, this was at Penn State, and they were building a PhD program for people who were interested in applied linguistics. Big names were coming, and I applied to stick around there. I thought that was a good

place to do a PhD. One thing led to another!

Is that how you began working with Dr. James Lantolf?

Yes, Jim Lantolf came to Penn State, and he offered some courses on sociocultural theory, and I became fascinated by that. Not just as a way of thinking about second language learning, but as a way of thinking about what it means to be a human being because it is a broad ranging theory that speaks to so many different academic areas. It offers a fascinating perspective on being human. So, I was taking some classes with him, and I was taking some classes in language assessment with Dr. Elana Shohamy. I was interested in sociocultural theory, and I was interested in assessment, but these two things seemed like they couldn't go together. Then, very serendipitously, I was having dinner with Dr. Tim McNamara, and he introduced me to Reuven Feuerstein's work. I thought that his work sounded exactly like sociocultural theory, and that's how I got interested in Dynamic Assessment (DA). I realized that people were working in DA who were not

schooled in depth in sociocultural theory. So I tried to speak to the second language people about the Vygotskian view of teaching and assessment, but I also tried to speak to the DA scholars outside of the field in order to show them where the theory originated and what I think Vygotsky had in mind.

What is the history of DA? Who invented it?

Vygotsky wasn't really a developmental or child psychologist. He wanted to develop what he called a "unified scientific psychology." He was thinking about what the one psychology would be, the parent psychology overarching the various disciplines: a unified theory for what it means to have a human consciousness and human mind, how it develops and is maintained. He was thinking very broadly, but at the same time, he wasn't only operating at this sort of meta-level. He was also faced with a lot of practical problems. The context in which he was working was the very early days of the Soviet Union, where they were setting up a public school system and trying to integrate children from all walks of life: from urban or country environments, some without any formal schooling, some victims of poverty, and many of them speaking different languages. He was thinking about how to prepare teachers to meet those different needs and about the curriculum. He worked a lot in teacher education and educational psychology. He was dealing with real, concrete problems that needed to be addressed immediately as well as with broad theoretical ideas, and he saw this relationship between theory and practice as the idea that the two are tied up in one another. This is an idea that I've been trying to develop in the L2 field with

my colleague, Jim Lantolf, rather than separating theory and practice. Take Vygotsky's argument that a good theory should be able to guide practical activity, but that the practical activity has to be the test of theory. So if the theory doesn't hold up in practice, then it is not a good theory, and you need to revise it or throw it out. That's exactly where DA comes from. Vygotsky came up with this idea of how abilities develop as a result of engaging in activities with others and being mediated by others, and talked about it as the Zone of Proximal Development. But this should hold up in practice, so he started working with teachers and having them think concretely about how they could organize activities that could be used to foster and support this development. He did not use the term *DA* himself because his life was cut short tragically, but others who continued on with his work, among them his colleague Alexander Luria, started talking about assessments that are dynamic. The term later was picked up outside Russia in different parts of the world, and the term stuck. The main proponent of DA for years was the Israeli researcher and practitioner was Ruben Feuerstein, who works mostly with children with special needs.

Is DA problematic for the results of assessment?

We typically think of assessment as a kind of snapshot, and the image that comes to mind is a test. Testing is the tried and true way, but it is a bizarre scenario. When else in life are you put in a situation where you are given a task, you are not allowed to use resources or ask for help, you have only 45 minutes, it is the same for everybody regardless of background, and we are going to quantify your performance

with a number so that we can compare it with other people's performance? Only very recently have we been subjected to widespread testing. It is linked to the rise of experimental psychology, where there's the idea that we can measure mental capabilities in the same way as you measure physical attributes like height, weight, and blood pressure. That's the script of testing. But DA comes from a really different paradigm. When we start thinking of providing interaction, because we have that testing script in mind, it seems like cheating. Using psychometric terms, the results are going to be contaminated because we want to extract a sample of your knowledge. In DA, we take a very different perspective, which is exactly what Vygotsky was talking about: You can look at independent functioning, as we do in tests, and that can give you a pretty good idea of development that has already taken place. But it is only when you start looking at how people respond and engage in interaction that you can have a sense of abilities that haven't fully developed but are in the process of emerging. You need both of these things to have a full diagnosis. If you look only at one, you miss a lot of the picture. We can use the example of two kids that when working independently, are both able to solve problems at the level of an eight-year-old. But we noticed that if we start to provide some hints, clues, or feedback during the process, one of these kids is able to improve his performance up to the level of a 10-year-old, and the other up to the level of a 14-year-old. So, are these kids the same, or are they different? If you just look at their independent performance as we do in most testing situations, then they are the same. But if you look at their ZPDs, there are emerging understandings

and abilities that are quite different, and these differences are important.

How can teachers put DA into practice?

If we look at Feuerstein, he primarily works with children with special needs. They come to his educational center as kids that are educably mentally retarded, and the public school system cannot do anything with them. The expectations for these kids are extremely low. In this kind of situation, standardized testing would reinforce the experience of failing and not being capable. Feuerstein tries to do whatever possible to mediate them, provide support, and to use any kind of instruction in order to see what he can do that will prompt some sort of response in them. That's his approach to DA. It's very open-ended and very dialogic. Teachers or mediators will try to do everything possible to try to understand and promote the students' development.

That is one tradition, and it has been very influential in the second language field. Most of the work that my colleague Jim Lantolf and I have done has been in a classroom setting. Most of the time, teachers are less concerned with affecting test scores. They want to see what can help their students. They want to try whatever can give them better assessment information about their students. They want to pursue interactionist DA, which emphasizes interaction.

The other tradition in DA started in the 1980s in IQ measurement. Cognitive psychologists wanted standardized cognitive measurement, so they wanted standardized tests, and they standardized how they approached the mediation. They would provide multiple attempts for the students to solve the problems. They would give very scripted hints about how

to work through a problem, starting off with something very implicit, like “Try again,” and then “Try again, and this time think about what the problem is asking you to do or how these items are related.” It can become more explicit, like “think about these numbers in the problem. What kind of relationship do they have?” The idea is that there is a Level 1 hint, a Level 2 hint, and so on. In this way, the mediation can be included in the score. For example, “The student got 80% and needed Level 5 prompts.” We have termed that interventionist DA. It is almost like a treatment in an experiment.

Those are the two traditions. The interventionist tradition is the one we have drawn more from. We asked ourselves, “How can we use DA with second language learners, not just in classroom settings or in tutoring settings? How can we do it in a more formal testing situation? What would it look like in the context of the TOEFL? 15,000 learners are taking the exam, and we cannot give them all open-ended and dialogic DA. We’ve been drawing on the idea of a scripted mediation that is weighted and goes from implicit to more explicit. It is a step-by-step approach in order to standardize the results. Still, the idea is that you’re providing only the support the learner really needs—not too much—because this gives you the best diagnosis.

In DA, you’re not just testing the learners, but you are also teaching them something. If at the beginning of the test the learners learn something, are they likely to do better as they proceed through the test?

Yes, that’s right. In psychometrics, the theory behind the standardized measurement, that is a problem. That is

referred to as instrument decay. In order to make a measurement, we have to assume that your abilities aren’t changing in the context of the test. You can’t measure a thing that you can’t pin down. If you get on a scale and your weight is changing, what do you do? You have to assume that it is stable during that process. DA is taking the opposite perspective. If your abilities are changing through the test, that means you’re developing, and that’s the desired outcome. In classroom DA, that is killing two birds with one stone: teaching and assessing simultaneously. One of the ways of tracking this kind of development is looking not just at the independent performance, but looking at how much of support learners need over time. Maybe they started off at the beginning needing a lot of support but later, just a little bit of support. Without DA you’ll miss all of that. When you introduce the idea of transfer, you see if you can apply that principle to a more complex problem. That also gives you a sense of the development that is taking place.

DA seems natural for teachers, but it also seems like it would be natural for placement tests because of the problem of students who are close to the cut scores.

I think that’s right. Using DA, we can place students on the basis of the prediction of learning that’s going to take place. Vygotsky’s theory would suggest that they should be placed on the basis of their ZPD, not just on the basis of their independent performance.

What is the role of students’ motivation in DA?

One of our students was working with first language literacy development in

public schools with kids who were having trouble with the state-mandated standardized tests. One of the things she found using DA over time was that it helped students perform better, but there was an affective motivational change as well. She reported that a child said to her at some point, “Now I understand I have a mind and that I’m able to think about things.” One of the major issues he had dealt with initially was being very impulsive and not having the control to think about what the question was asking. He realized that he could think about things and be successful. These kinds of experiences can actually engender motivation and positive self-perception.

What is the future of DA? What are the challenges?

In my opinion, one area of future work is looking more at some of the applications of DA to formal assessment. What would it look like to administer the TOEFL in a dynamic manner? What would it look like to administer an ACTFL or OPI dynamically? This would be testing the predictions of DA. In this area, we are just scratching the surface with the computerized DA work. The other area is still working in classrooms: Is there a way of organizing instruction that is sensitive to learners’ emerging capabilities while also giving glimpses into what their emerging capabilities are? If there is a framework for doing that, what are the ways we can do it effectively with a variety of languages, a variety of learners, a variety of learners’ levels and school contexts? And that’s where collaboration and partnership with teachers is absolutely crucial. Rather than telling them how to do DA, it needs to be driven by teachers that know the different variables. We’re doing

some projects with teachers now to get a better sense of what DA might look like in different classroom contexts. Our early studies were one-to-one DA, and this may not always be realistic in a classroom setting.

Are there any tools available to teachers or organizations who would like to create their own computerized DA?

We have produced a guidebook for language teachers that is available on DVD-ROM, with reflection questions and activities. It is available on the website: http://www.calper.la.psu.edu/dyna_assess.phh. It presents the theoretical principles behind DA as well as models and examples of DA. Teachers should think about how it could be relevant in the context they have.

Thank you very much for talking with us.

Thanks a lot. I was happy to come to MSU.