Effects Of Mediation On An EFL Learner’s Grammar Development: A Case Study Of An EFL Beginner Student

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Abstract

The focus of this study was on the design, administration and scoring of dynamic assessment of English tag questions. Dynamic assessment involves offering mediation to help learners develop and perform beyond their level of independent functioning. It is based on learner modifiability for improved performance. This study included a single case analysis of one beginner L2 English learner. Student’s first answers were recorded as the student’s grammar static score. If her answers were wrong, mediations from most implicit to most explicit were given, and the results were used as mediated scores and also a learning potential score, which may be used as a predictor of readiness to benefit from further instruction, was recorded. Analysis of the results showed that there was a significant difference in her knowledge of tag questions. The findings can help EFL practitioners design more effective grammar tests and make more accurate decisions about learners’ achievement.

Keywords: Dynamic assessment; zone of proximal development; mediation; learner L2 development; tag question

1. Introduction

One essential part of each syllabus is assessment. Traditionally, students were assessed at the middle or end of the course of instruction. This kind of assessment was called summative assessment, the purpose of which was to provide information about the students’ achievement at certain point of time. However, Butler (2000) suggests that static tests suffer from some weaknesses. First, all static assessments presuppose that all learners have similar

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experience and background knowledge. Second, testees are provided no help during static assessments and the examiner plays a neutral role. Therefore, there is no intervention and no learning in static assessments. So, there is a shift in many educational systems toward learner-centered as opposed to teacher-centered classrooms to help students’ development. So, dynamic assessment (DA) was proposed as a way to develop students' abilities. DA involves offering mediation to help learners’ development and to help them perform beyond their level of independent functioning. DA is based on Vygotsky’s proposal of zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1998) describes the ZPD as "the optimum time for teaching both the group and each individual" (p.204). The zone of proximal development is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable others" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85, emphasis in the original).

When a person is assisted by a more competent peer, s/he moves from his present ability to the next potential ability with some help until the child learns different kinds of tasks. Actually according to Vygotsky (1987) that person internalizes these processes at different times.

1.1. Interventionist And Interactionist DA

According to (Lantolf and Poehner, 2004) there are two general kinds of mediation that DA practitioners can make available; one is interventionist and the other interactionist. According to (Lidz, 1991), any kind of support offered to learners is called intervention. But according to (Poehner, 2008) mediation entails a wide array of support, ranging from standardized hints to dialogic interaction. (Vygotsky, 1998) used the term “cooperation” to describe the mediator–learner relationship, implying a dialogic interaction in which both of them are responsible for development.

In interactionist dynamic assessment which follows Vygotsky’s preference for cooperative dialoguing, assistance emerges from the interaction between the mediator and the student and is sensitive to his/her ZPD and regardless of effort required, focuses on the development of learners. Interventionist DA, on the other hand, is close to static...
assessment and uses standardized administration procedure to produce quantifiable results that can be used to make
comparisons between and within groups and also to make predictions about performance on future tests. In
interventionist method, the feedbacks and clues can be in the form of a graded set of standardized hints ranging from
implicit to explicit. The researcher counts the number of feedbacks required by the student in order to respond
correctly to the particular item.

1.2. Sandwich And Cake Formats Of DA

According to Sternberg and (Grigorenko, 2002), DA procedures can be classified as sandwich and cake formats.
In sandwich format, which is close to traditional experimental research, a treatment is administered between pre-test
and post-test. Actually a mediation phase is similarly “sandwiched” between pre-test and post-test that are
administered in a non-dynamic manner. So, based on students’ performance the effect of the treatment can be
analyzed. They also posit that this method can be administered for an individual or group of students. In group
method, the feedbacks and mediations are the same for each student.

In cake format, the mediations, whenever a problem arises, are offered during the test administration.
Although there are many studies conducted within the framework of DA in general education, there are few
studies in relation to SLA. According to (Alavi et al., 2012), DA in the context of second language studies is very
new and still developing. To the best of knowledge of the researcher no study has considered the effect of DA on
EFL learning of tag questions. The current study seeks to fill these gaps by providing interventions that are directed
towards the individual and to see whether there is a significant difference on the effects of DA on learning of tag
questions in an Iranian student. In line with these points the following research questions were raised.

1. Would the dynamic assessment procedure that includes feedback significantly improve the learning of tag
questions of an EFL student?
2. Would the dynamic assessment procedure add information regarding student’s learning potential over and
beyond her initial performance level?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participant of this study was an Iranian EFL language learner. The participant was an adult female (age=25)
and her proficiency level according to oxford placement test was basic. The method of selection was convenient
sampling.

2.2. Instruments

An Oxford Placement Test was used to find out her placement in terms of language proficiency. 20 English tag
questions were used in this study. The first ten were used to test her knowledge of tag questions and the other ten for
mediation phase.

2.3. Data Collection

To assure that she did not know how to use these rules, at the beginning of this study, the participant was given
ten tag questions. There was no time limitation while she was answering them. After answering these questions, her
needs were recognized and feedback and mediations were given in both Persian, her native language, and English,
the targeted language. Actually the model used in this study of interventionist and cake model of DA.

2.4. Data Analysis
To observe whether the gains for the tag questions were significant or not, her actual and mediated scores were analyzed.

A learning potential score, which may be used as a predictor of readiness to benefit from further instruction, was also reported.

3. Results And Discussion

In order to make sure that the participant did not know the rules, she was asked to answer ten questions. Although some guidelines were given, she could not answer them correctly. To help her develop her knowledge of tag questions and her ZPD, feedback was given from the most implicit to the most explicit based on Tracy’s model. The model is presented below.

1. Pause.
2. Repeat the whole phrase questioningly.
3. Repeat just the part of the sentence with the error.
4. Teacher asks, "What is wrong with that sentence?"
5. Teacher points out the incorrect word.
6. Teacher asks either/or question.
7. Teacher identifies the correct answer.
8. Teacher explains why.

3.1. Item Analysis

In order to answer the first research question, ten other tag questions were given and her needs were recognized and feedback was given based on that needs.

The first sentence was ”Ali is a good student”. Her first answer was “does he”. After mediation that started from the most implicit to the most explicit, she answered correctly in the sixth step, so she gained two points out of eight.

The second sentence was ”Ali had a lot of friends” and her answer was “wasn’t he”. In the sixth step she corrected her mistake.

The third sentence was “Ali studied hard” and her answer was “did he”. She could correct her mistake in the second phase.

The fourth question was “Ali has a book” and she answered “hasn’t he”.

The fifth one was “Ali has bought a book” and her answer was “hasn’t he”. She could not answer correctly to the last step, so a complete explanation was given by the researcher.

Her answers were all correct in items sixth, seventh and eighth ones. The sentences were” Ali is studying hard, Ali was studying hard and Ali had a book”.

Her answer was wrong in the ninth item, “Ali had bought a house”. She corrected her mistake in the third phase.

She answered correctly the last sentence used in this study, “Ali bus a house”.

The data revealed that before conducting the study, she did not know these rules and her ZPD was not at that level. Analysis of the data showed that she learned tag questions by the feedback she received.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Scores for each step</th>
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<tr>
<td>Correct answer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pause</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repeat the whole phrase questioningly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat just the part of the sentence with the error</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teacher asks, "What is wrong with that sentence"  4
Teacher points out the incorrect word.  3
Teacher asks either/or question  2
Teacher identifies the correct answer  1
Teacher explains why.  0

As shown in Table 1, for each item, if answered correctly, 8 was given. Based on the feedback received, it decreased step by step to zero. We had ten questions, so the complete score was 80. Her actual score at the beginning of the study was zero but after receiving the feedback, her knowledge of it improved. Therefore, we can conclude that there was a significant difference in her knowledge of tag questions.

A learning potential score, which may be used as a predictor of readiness to benefit from further instruction, is also reported. (Kozulin and Garb, 2004) describe LPSs ranging from 0.47 to 1.21 (p. 121), with clusters of learners in a high range (LPS ≥ 1.0), a middle range (LPS between 0.79 and 0.88), and a low range (LPS ≤ 0.71).

To answer the second research question, LPS for tag questions was calculated. We had ten questions, so the maximum score is 80. To calculate her learning potential score, the researcher used the formula for LPS. Her mediated score was 55 and her actual score in the mediation phase was 40, because she answered 5 questions without any help. The LPS was 0.87 which shows a middle one.

Although there are no studies regarding dynamic assessment of tag question, the results of this study are in line with studies on dynamic assessment of language skills, especially grammar. For example, Compernolle and Zhang (2014) found that there was a significant difference in the student’s knowledge of English morphology.

This study also supports the findings of other studies on dynamic assessment, for example, reading comprehension (e.g., Guterman, 2002; Artelt, Dorfler, & Golke 2009; Ajideh & Nourdad, 2012; Gellert, 2012; Shabani, 2012; Ahmadi, 2013) and speaking (e.g., Hill & Sabet 2009).

4. Summary And Conclusions

The present study aimed at investigating the effect of applying dynamic assessment on grammar ability of an EFL learner and also the immediate effect of it. The results of the study revealed a significant difference in her knowledge of tag questions. We can conclude that her ZPD reached to that level. The findings were in line with the findings of some similar previous studies such as (Compernolle and Zhang, 2014) and Hill and Sabet (2009). All these studies like the findings of the present study showed that dynamic assessment improved the abilities of participants in grammar or other skills. The findings of the present study also presented the existence of positive effect of dynamic assessment on learning of verb tenses. The results have some positive results both for teachers and learners. First, it finally helps students become autonomous after mediation provided by the teacher. Second, it decreases the stress of the students, because they know that the purpose of testing here is their development. Third, dynamic assessment shows that the developed ability of the students is not enough for assessment and teachers should assess the developing abilities of the students.

Indeed, one of the limitations of this study is that it only uses interventionist model. Although this model has the advantage of foregrounding the function of DA, it can be used with other models. The second limitation is that this study is a case study. There are some factors that jeopardize the internal validity of the design of this study like history and maturation effect. Although this study is not generalizable, it can serve as a point of departure for future work that integrates DA principles into L2 assessment. The third one is the scope of this study. It is just limited to tag questions. Based on the results of this study and the shortcomings mentioned above, researchers can investigate
the effect of dynamic assessment on other skills, like pragmatics and other parts of grammar with enough participants and use both interactionist and interventionist model.

References


