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Dynamic Assessment of Writing Skill in Advanced EFL Iranian Learners

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Abstract

Dynamic Assessment (hereinafter DA) fundamentally is based on Vygotsky's theory of mediation and ZPD. In contrast to Traditional Assessment (hereinafter TA) which focuses on the product to show the current capability of learners, DA focuses on the process to predict their future achievement. This study intends to investigate the effectiveness of incorporating DA in improving teaching writing at advanced level among Iranian EFL learners. To fulfill this end twenty randomly chosen participants underwent a course of study in advanced writing for the period of two months and in eight sessions. All these participants received the same treatment, however, half of them, in the experimental group, were assessed dynamically and the other half, in the control group, were assessed traditionally. The participants' essays in both groups were assessed by two distinct raters and their results were statistically analyzed. In order for the study results to be triangulated a questionnaire consisting of three questions was distributed among participants to support the quantitative results in a qualitative and subjective manner. The result of statistical analysis of the T-test which was used to distinguish between the experimental and the control group in addition to the questionnaires showed a significant change in the essays of the participants in the experimental group. The paper concludes with some practical implications for teachers, material developers and syllabus designers.

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1. Introduction

Year after year with new approaches and ideologies regarding language learning, the focus of scholars in the field has shifted from faculty psychology on lexicons and grammar to rather newly developed approaches such as cognitivism and recently, to socio-constructivism around the Vygostkian idea of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) and scaffolding. In all of these approaches assessment is an integral and an inseparable part of the learning process.

Some inadequacies of traditional methods in testing led scholars towards more comprehensive approaches in which more aspects of learners could be evaluated. Assessment, as a means of comprehensive testing was a result of their efforts. However, assessment in its own right and due to its emphasis and dependence on the final product of learners suffers from some deficiencies which, it is believed, are addressed in a new version of assessment which is called Dynamic Assessment.

In contrast to TA which focuses on summative evaluation of learners as an indicator of efficiency and effectiveness of a program, DA tries to blend instruction and evaluation to measure active processes of learners in order to determine their future and potential development. In other words, DA focuses mainly on what a learner can acquire in future in contrast to TA which emphasizes what a learner knows and can perform now.

In the present study we are interested in an examination of the notion of DA in an Iranian context and for a specific level and skill in order to extract relevant facts and implications regarding these specific contexts for syllabus designers, material developers and finally for Iranian language learners.

2. Review of Literature

DA theoretically has its roots in Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Near to the notion of scaffolding, mediation is defined as the process by which other-regulated activities are transformed into self-regulated ones (Birjandi & Ebadi, 2012). This is what happens through scaffolding which by definition is the process of data mediation from more proficient peers (or instructors) to less proficient ones in the borders of Zone of Proximal Development. This zone is an area in which learners' current capabilities are distinguished from those capabilities that can be acquired with the help of other more proficient peers or instructors.

In DA the emphasis is on the process rather than product (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011a). In fact the idea of the difference between competencies which were already completed and turned into performance and the ones which are in development to flourish (by Vygotsky) is the main motivator for DA in the realm of assessment.

In another perspective, Lidz terms DA as the interaction between examiner as intervener and learner as an active participant which seeks to estimate the degree of modifiability of the learner and the means by which positive changes in cognitive functioning can be induced and maintained (Lidz, 1987). In this perspective DA is basically different from TA.

Based upon this theory, Aljaafreh and Lantolf (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994) distinguished a distinction between learners' actual level of performance (what is actually assessed in TA) and their potential development level of performance (what is supposed to be assessed in DA).

Another distinction between FA (Formal Assessment) and DA comes in the words of Lantolf (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011b) when they say that in FA learners receive no form of feedback during the process of assessment while in DA they receive it in different and orderly levels. This is in line with what Sternberg and Grigorenko mentioned in their studies as the distinctions between TA and DA (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002). They identified three differences between TA and DA. The first one refers to the distinction between considering performance as a

static state or a dynamic process. The second difference is about feedback. In DA a form of explicit or implicit feedback is provided for learners while this is not the case in traditional assessment until the test is done. Finally the third one is about the relationship between test-giver and test-taker; while this relationship in TA is completely neutral, in DA it is a sort of interactive and mutual one.

3. Purpose of the Study

DA encourages assessing the process of learning rather than its product and evaluating potential performance of learners instead of their current one. Due to the difference which lies between TA and DA and considering the difficulties of learner assessment in terms of the processes involved in learning, research on this topic is rare, and because of noticeable differences which DA makes in today's education, in great demand. As a partial fulfillment to this deficiency this study intends to evaluate how effective is the use of DA compared to TA in final evaluation of the process and product of learners.

4. Research Question

To accomplish the purpose of the study, the following research question was posed:

Is there any significant difference in the final evaluation of writing skills between advanced Iranian EFL learners who are assessed dynamically and those who are assessed traditionally in terms of the product and learning processes?

The term product above points to the final works of participants and will be quantitatively analyzed with statistical procedures. Likewise the term 'processes' above points to the processes and procedures in which participants are involved to perform their tasks. These processes will be discussed qualitatively and based on the outcome of a questionnaire.

5. Method

5.1 Participants

The students of an engineering college were invited to register for an eight-week instruction in English advanced writing class. Sixty students registered for the course. For sampling consideration we administrated a written pre-test among them and selected twenty participants. The selection was based on their results in the pre-test and according to the guidelines of ACTFL 2012 for advanced-low English learners. These participants again were randomly divided into two groups of experimental and control. Both groups received the same contents and took part in the same classes for the same period of time (two month advanced writing program; 8 weeks; one session per week). The groups were differentiated by their means of assessment. While the control group members submitted their works and were assessed traditionally, the experimental ones were assessed dynamically.

5.2 Instrumentation

The experiment and control group of the study both underwent an 8-session treatment in advanced writing program. The control-group members submitted their essays manually and received their ratings on the spot for three times per session (per week). They had no clue as an indication for their current proficiency except their scores.

On the contrary the experimental-group members submitted their writings and received their ratings accompanied with the raters' comments. According to a framework which will be introduced later they were provided with leveled comments on their essays and had the opportunity for further instruction along with their assessment procedure.

5.3 Design

The study enjoys a Qual/Quan (mixed method) approach for investigating the effect of implementing assessment dynamically in making improvement in the process and product of writing ability in advanced Iranian EFL learners.

For the part of process analysis or qualitative analysis a questionnaire was developed and distributed among the experimental participants. For the part of product or quantitative analysis, a paired T-test procedure is used to judge the effectiveness of the method of the study.

5.4 Procedure

This study is interested to investigate the effect of dynamic assessment on the learning process of participants in terms of process and product. Since this method of evaluation incorporates treatment with assessment, the procedure is discussed in two parts; treatment and assessment.

5.4.1 Treatment

For the part of treatment, since the level of participants was advanced-low in proficiency (according to the guidelines of ACTFL 2012) a lesson plan including 8 sessions of treatment in advanced writing and according to some chapters of the book “Steps to Writing Well” by Jean Wyrick (Wyrick, 2008) was planned and administered. The book is a classic in teaching advanced writing courses in many higher education institutes. This part was conducted for both groups at the same time and in the same manner. The details of the lesson plan in addition to the criteria for subjective essay correction for the first session are included in appendix A as a sample.

5.4.2 Assessment

In part of the assessment the participants were required to write an essay around a topic and in line with what they had learned in each session. In this part the two groups departed from each other.

The members of the control group were writing their essays and were submitting them to their instructor two or three days after their class. Their papers were rated by two raters (for inter-rater reliability considerations) and delivered to them on the spot. Then they were to modify their essays according to their scores and to resubmit it again two days later. This process was repeated three times a week.

This process for the experimental group was rather different. Their essays were rated three times a week like the control group. But unlike the control group they received leveled guidance on their scores to satisfy the levels of correction in the framework of Aljaafreh and Lantolf (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). Aljaafreh and Lantolf proposed a model of mediation from other-regulation to self-regulation in learners which included five transitional levels. These levels are;

- Level 1: the participant is not able to notice his error.
- Level 2: the participant notices his error with assistance and can correct it with explicit help
- Level 3: the participant notices his error with assistance and able to correct it with implicit help.
- Level 4: the participant notices his error with assistance and able to correct it without help.
- Level 5: the participant notices his error without assistance and corrects it himself.

For the sake of brevity and time management four out of five levels of the framework were implemented in the assessment process of the experimental group.

The essays of the participants were rated for the first time on receipt. The criteria for this rating are elaborated in details in appendix A. But what accounts in this phase to show the level of the participant is the manner of marking

their essays. If no mark was spotted on the essay then admittedly s/he was in the level 5 of the framework. Otherwise if any error was spotted, it was underlined by the rater and was delivered to the participant without any hint. The participant received his paper and saw his/her marked errors. S/he made required adjustments according to his own idea about the source of error and resubmitted the essay.

In second submission if the participant was able to correct the underlined errors s/he would be considered in level 4. Otherwise in the second rating administration her/his errors were marked again by drawing a line on the error in addition to the line beneath it which remained from the previous rating. The source of difficulty was also implicitly stated in this phase.

Again if the participant in third submission was able to modify her/his error he would be considered in the third level. Otherwise her/his paper was rated for the third time with an explicit explanation on the source of error accompanied by only a straight line on the spot of the error. The ability of learners to correct the spotted error distinguished level 2 participants from level one. If s/he was not able to modify his/her error s/he would be considered in the first level. In the weekend of each week each participant had three scores (usually absolutely ascended) which showed his or her progress.

In order to enhance the reliability of the study each paper was rated twice by two raters. Correlation coefficient between the two raters is reported to be 79%. Although each rater used his own idea to rate the essays, they always adhered to the criteria on which each session's instruction materials had focused. In this way the papers were rated objectively but in a very controlled manner.

6. Results

6.1 Quantitative Findings

In order to certify the reliability of the rating process all the essays were rated twice by two independent raters and a test of Pearson correlation between the two raters was administrated which showed;

There was a positive correlation between the two raters; $r=0.7982$, $n=480$, $p<0.001$

Additionally by averaging all scores of each group in each session and conducting a paired t-test procedure between the averages of experimental and control group null hypothesis was refuted:

There is a significant difference between the scores of experimental ($M=64.854$, $SD=14.92$) and control group ($M=48.958$, $SD=12.35$); conditions: $t(14)=4.98$, $P<0.001$

Table1: T-test results

| Groups | Number | Mean | SD. | T _{obs} |
|--------------|--------|--------|-------|------------------|
| Experimental | 8 | 64.854 | 14.92 | 4.98 |
| Control | 8 | 48.958 | 12.35 | |

6.2 Qualitative findings

In order to gain qualitative insight into the reaction of the participants to the program and also to triangulate the findings of our statistical analysis a questionnaire containing three questions was distributed to the members of the experimental group. All questionnaires except one (one unreachable participant) were returned completed.

Question number one of the questionnaire asked the participants if the program had an effect on their writing ability and how. All participants answered this question positively by providing their own reasons. Some of them evaluated the program effectual for an algorithmic procedure they had been offered for writing and others for usefulness of the program in their other courses. Some of them advocated the program for letting learners correct their error themselves without providing them with the right answer in the first occurrence. They believed that in many cases they needed only a hint to correct their problems and if in these cases they were provided with the right answer they would not learn anything. Still there were some participants who advocated the program for the sense of responsibility it offered to them in the process of essay writing.

Question number two asked the participants about their preference on assessing dynamically versus traditionally. Again all participants preferred to be assessed dynamically. Many of them believed that this kind of assessment developed their creativity by providing them with only what they needed. They said that in many cases they understood the teaching material but they needed to understand how those materials were used in practice and the implicit hints of the raters provided them with that understanding. They said they like to be told what to do only if they were given a suitable time to ponder their problem themselves.

Question number three asked the participants to list advantages and disadvantages of DA and TA separately. These items were mentioned as advantages and disadvantages of DA.

Table2: Advantages and disadvantages of DA

| Advantages | Disadvantages |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| In-depth learning | takes too much time and effort both by teacher and learners |
| More opportunity to improve | |
| No one-time administration problems | |
| Less stressful | |
| More opportunities to learn | |
| Learning in practice | |

All the participants believed that in DA they learned the teaching material more deeply and they mentioned various reasons for this such as the opportunity provided by this method to let them correct their problems themselves, etc. Additionally they thought that the step-by- step guidance provided through the process of DA offered them some extra teaching materials that they didn't notice in their teaching classrooms.

Some of them argued that since they were not forced to present all they had learned only in one examination session, they were less stressed and hence they performed better. Still some others believed that the manner of

teaching was perfect but they learned best when the instructor taught them in practice while they were writing their essays.

In response to the question in part of advantages and disadvantages of TA they listed almost all above mentioned items in reverse format. (i.e. advantages of DA as disadvantages for TA and vice versa)

7. Conclusion and implications

DA simply asserts that treatment and assessment cannot be separated. The present study demonstrated that DA significantly improves the learners' performance in writing ability. Almost all the participants advocated DA for its positive effects not only on their final product but also on the process in which they engaged to produce their essays. They rightly stated that DA through reinforcement on the teaching material has a long lasting effect on the process of learning. Additionally it provides learners with exactly what they need to improve their works and in this way challenges learners and enhances their automaticity.

One-shot test administration, as mentioned as one of TA disadvantages, has always been a challenge for learners by increasing their stress and in this way by affecting the validity and reliability of the process of evaluation. DA provides the practitioners with a means of continuous evaluation and a more reliable means of assessment.

All of these observations are tangible and practical implications for material developers and syllabus designers. There are few language materials (if any) which are designed based on the notion of DA and continuous assessment. Although there are some materials that incorporate portfolios or some other continuous means of assessment, the nature of such materials is still based on TA. In other word they only change the process of assessment from one-shot to continuous without paying attention to the relation between examiner and learner and to the dynamic nature of test administration or even to the notion of feedback. In designing a dynamic syllabus or material all these notions should be considered to produce materials that conduct their evaluation process dynamically, provide the learners with suitable and leveled-feedback in the process of evaluation and interactively engage the learners and instructor in the process of learning and evaluation.

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Appendix A. Lesson Plan and criteria for rating:

Full credit for all essays was 100 from which by each error a fraction was deducted.

First session

English rhetorical structure

- You need to organize your essay into three logical sections; introduction, body and conclusion
- English has a linear rhetoric structure, neither circular (like Persian) nor zigzag. So write to the point and avoid beating around the bush.
- Choose the topic of your essay and jot down different aspects of it on your scratch paper. These are the main ideas of your essay. House each one of them in one paragraph. All these paragraphs constitute the body part of your essay
- Your paragraphs in this class should be processed deductively. It means that they start with a sentence containing the main idea of that specific paragraph. This sentence then should be provided with some supporting sentences and finally a conclusion sentence.

Your essay will be rated according to these ratios:

30 points for grammatical structure and vocabulary (-5 for each error)

30 points for adherence to above guidelines (-5 for each deviance)

40 points to rate how successful were you to transfer your thoughts (subjectively; 10 for not comprehensible, 20 for hard to understand but perceivable, 30 for understandable and normal, and 40 for eloquent).