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Emotionalized dynamic assessment as a key to enhancing learners’ emotion in an L2 context

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to apply dynamic assessment (henceforth DA) procedures to the development of learners’ emotional intelligence. It focuses on the effect of using emotional intelligence activities (based on Goleman’s framework) as a tool for motivating learners while being assessed. The study was conducted on 34 students studying Interchange 1 in two groups: a control group, which was taught under institute’s normal procedures; and an experimental group, which received emotionalized dynamic assessment (EDA) procedures, in the form of an intervention focusing on emotional characteristics of Goleman’s emotional intelligence framework with the express purpose of inducing them to work with their emotions.

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, L2 research has begun to examine the application of dynamic assessment (DA), an assessment approach which is basically grounded in the socio-cultural theory and specifically in Vygotsky’s notion of Zone of Proximal Development whereby instruction leads development. Holzman (2009) offers an insightful discussion of various understandings of the ZPD with implications for research agenda and practice. She identifies three distinct understandings of ZPD as: a) a characteristic or property of an individual learner. She further adds that those who have interpreted ZPD in terms of...
try to devise alternative means of evaluation (Allal and Pelgrims, 2000; Lantolf, 2000) fall in this category; b) an approach to offering social support to learners, usually in dyadic interactions. In this view, psychologists conceptualize "ZPD as some form of aid" from "a single, more capable individual, most often an adult" (Holzman, 2009, p.28); and c) a collective transformative activity of developing undertaken with learners. However, as Goldstein (1999) and Holzman (2009) rightly put forth, these interpretations of Vygotsky are limited to strictly cognitive aspects (Berk and Winsler, 1995; Dean, 1994; Stone, 1993, to name but a few). In these collective activities which are mainly based on the interaction between individuals, emotion cannot be fully ignored. While taking into account what Barbara Rogoff asserts, "Understanding happens between people; it can't be attributed to one individual or the other" (1990, p. 67), we find that the process of cognitive growth is deeply relational. And there is "a high degree of interpersonal connection between the individuals working together in the process" (Goldstein, 1999, p. 648). The focus on interpersonal interactions would bring affective factors into one's mind. In other words, in the learning-leading-development groupings, an "emotional zone" is created in which the instructor and each individual member should be encouraged to develop "the group's level of emotional development" (Holzman, 2009, p.35).

According to Lantolf and Poehner (2004), DA can both be used as a method of providing a picture of an individual's abilities and as a method of developing those abilities through some kind of mediation. DA makes the frame of this study, which aims to shed light on the dynamic nature of emotion in the second language classroom and its dependency on the interaction of the person and his surrounding environment. It focuses on the use of dynamic assessment (DA) practices as a way to measure one’s emotional intelligence (henceforth EI) and enhance it.

Studies on DA assessment in specific academic domains have proliferated since 1987 by the pioneering work of Campione and Brown and its pedagogical applications in applied linguistics have only recently been examined by a number of researchers (Ableeva, 2010; Antón, 2009; Kozulin & Garb, 2002; Lantolf & Poehner, 2004, Poehner, 2005). However, the role of DA on emotions and motivation, and more specifically, its role on emotional intelligence in foreign language learning context has been a slightly neglected area of enquiry.

The relationship between emotional intelligence, defined it as “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayor, Salovey & Caruso, 2004: 197), and foreign language learning has recently attracted researchers' attention (Abdolrezapour & Tavakoli, 2011; Dewaele, Petrides & Furnham, 2008) and the possibility of its development in an EFL context has been investigated in Abdolrezapour & Tavakoli's (2011) study, which focused on learners' reading achievement. However, their intervention was assessed through statistic assessment procedures and the dynamic nature of emotion was rather neglected. In addition, the possibility of enhancing EFL learners' EI through dynamic procedures which can be used both individually and collaboratively has not yet been investigated. The present study intends to fill this gap by examining how dynamic assessment with emotional load could affect second/foreign language (L2) learners' emotion and motivation to learn. More specifically, the possibility of enhancing emotional intelligence through dynamic assessment with the hypothesis that the resultant enhancement would transfer to learners' motivation and L2 achievement is the focus of the present study.
2. Method

This study employed a quasi-experimental pretest-treatment-posttest design involving two intact EFL classes one serving as the experimental group which receives emotionally loaded DA (n=28) and the other as the control group (n=26) who undergoes normal procedures. The treatment for experimental group involves an interactionist DA approach.

2.1. Participants

The population under study included the EFL learners who enrolled in a language centre in Iran. A total of thirty four female students studying Interchange1 participated in this study. Learners were native speakers of Farsi and they had taken English courses for one to two years. One class was taken as the experimental group with 15 students and the other as the control group with 19 students. All participants were female and they varied in age from 12 to 15 (average age was 14, S.D. = 1.3). Participants agreed to be videotaped and audiotaped while studying. Two camcorders were used to record participants’ activities: one to capture the individual who was performing the task and the other to capture the larger scene, including the participant and the peers as well as the instructor.

2.2. Instruments

For the purpose of the present study, a number of instruments were used which will be described in order:

- **Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Adolescent Short Form (TEIQue-ASF)**

In this study, the short form of the TEIQue (Petrides *et al.*, 2006) comprised of 30 items was used to measure the students’ emotional intelligence before and after the experiment. TEIQue-ASF is a simplified version, in terms of wording and syntactic complexity, of the adult short form of the TEIQue developed for use with adolescents aged 12-18 years. All items are sampled from the 15 subscales of the adult trait EI sampling domain (two items per subscale). The test yields scores on four factors, namely well-being (covering self-esteem, happiness, and optimism), self-control (covering low impulsiveness, stress management, and emotion regulation), emotionality (covering emotion expression, relationships, empathy, and emotion perception), and sociability (covering assertiveness, emotion management, and social awareness) in addition to global trait EI. Example items include ‘I can control my anger when I want to’, ‘I’m happy with my life’, and ‘I’m good at getting along with my classmates’. Higher scores on the TEIQue-ASF indicated higher levels of trait EI. We opted for the short version with 10-minute completion time, because we had time limitation and there was a concern that the participants might not be able to complete the longer version (e.g. due to reading difficulties). Subjects responded on a 7-point Likert scale continuum from ‘Completely Disagree (number 1)’ to ‘Completely Agree (number 7)’. In this study the reliability of the test was found to be relatively high (Cronbach’s $\alpha =$ 0.88).

- **Reading texts**

All subjects went through a series of reading materials. The texts were all of the same level but the theme of the texts differed with respect to the group. EDA group went through some texts with emotional
background while the other group had normal texts which placed no emphasis on emotional words and content.

2.3. Procedures

The dynamically assessed tasks in this study provided the opportunity of performing emotional activities by language learners while interacting with the instructor as well as with other peers. The interaction between the learner and the teacher happens when the teacher asks them to be engaged in emotional aspects of the story, and the interaction between peers is in the form of providing some opinions about the story and its characters. The same program is offered to the control group with the difference that in selecting activities for the control group every attempt is made so as to select stories that include no emotional words or content. The treatment lasted for about eight weeks. Participants had about ten hours of English per week - three hours for reading activities, and seven hours for speaking, listening and writing. There were 24 lessons between the pre and post-tests. At the end of the term (four weeks), TEIQue-ASF was administered to subjects of the three groups for post-test measures.

- Experimental group activities

In the emotional mediation process, which sought to educate learners about EI and Goleman's framework, some reading passages were provided for learners followed by some texts and images in which they were asked to work collaboratively or individually to find answers which were mainly with emotional background. These passages were all short. More information about the ways Golman's EI framework was introduced to learners of the experimental group is provided in Appendix A. It was assumed that performing such activities and answering some questions regarding emotional facts would enable learners to become increasingly aware of their emotional states. As said above, passages given to the subjects in the control group were void of emotional words and content and learners were taught under the ordinary procedures in which no explicit emphasis was placed on emotions during reading activities.

2.4. Data collection and analysis

The students' emotional states were assessed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data sources were TEIQue-ASF, and video data. The data obtained were ultimately analysed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) to provide plausible answers to the research question posed above. First, descriptive statistics were used and the obtained scores were checked in terms of the normality of distribution using such indices as Kurtosis and Skewness. Then, independent sample t-test was run.

3. Results

- First stage: Pretest

Independent sample t-test was performed on learners' TEIQue-ASF prior to the study (see Table 2). As shown in the table, the analysis produced no significant differences between the two groups and the EDA and control groups were fairly similar prior to the treatment. This test proved the initial comparability of the two groups.
Table 1
Descriptive and Inferential Statistics on Pre-tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEIQue-ASF</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>104.78</td>
<td>7.67</td>
<td>.855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EDA</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>106.05</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Level of significance is 0.05

- **Second stage: posttest**

To provide a plausible answer to our research question, learners' TEIQue-ASF scores underwent statistical procedures. The results of the t-test performed on the TEIQue-ASF scores reveal a significant difference between groups in the level of achievement. As Table 2 shows, the EDA group was found to be significantly different from the control group. Thus, subjects' engagement in the emotionalized dynamic assessment procedures, which was used as the treatment given to the experimental group, has positively impacted their TEIQue-ASF scores on the post-test.

Table 2
Descriptive and Inferential Statistics on Post-tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEIQue-ASF</td>
<td>CG</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>107.76</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EDA</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>118.64</td>
<td>6.81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Level of significance is 0.05

4. Discussion

The major hypothesis of this study was that learners in EDA group will show higher levels of achievement in emotional intelligence than learners in the control group. The findings confirmed the hypothesis by showing that the EDA group increased its engagement in tasks from Pre- to Post-Teaching phase more than the control group.

A question may arise as to why the participants' EI, which is part of their personalities, had risen so much in such a short period of time. A plausible interpretation for this increase is that although the treatment period was relatively short, participants in the experimental group had extensive exposure to emotional activities and instructional materials that raised EI. Moreover, despite the commonsensical belief that personality traits do not change over time, there is now ample evidence in support of the fact that many traits could be changed if the individual is motivated enough (Haslam et al. 2007; Helson et al. 2002). Therefore, one of the possible contributions of this study is that it provides further empirical support for the utility of literature response activities as pedagogical instruments for enhancing EFL learners' EI (Abdolrezapour and Tavakoli, 2012). In addition, the findings add further support to Brown and his colleagues hypothesis that test performance would be improved by combining a 'psychology tool' and a 'stimulus' with an assessment task (Brown, et al., 1991; Brown & Ferrara, 1985).

In spite of repeated reference to the effect of emotion in learning and more specifically second language learning and in one's ZPD, previous attempts on using dynamic assessment paid little attention to the emotional states of learners and the possibility of integrating it to DA procedures. Findings of this
study seem to run in accordance with Vygotsky’s (1987) proposal of the link between cognition and more generally to the idea that “there are almost constant interactions between cognition and emotion in everyday life” (Eysenck, 2006, p. 407). The increase observed in the EI scores of experimental group point to the effectiveness of the treatment and EDA procedures with its numerous opportunities for direct exposure to emotional activities.

Of course, it should be pointed that the intervention of DA involves far more than promoting one’s EI; in effect, it has the potential to help learners become more socially competent and offers them access to a range of knowledge and abilities which might enable them to have better performance in academic context and in their social life.

Although every attempt was made to avoid some of the design, measurement, and analytical flaws, there were some limitations that need to be taken into account in future research. First, about the type of intervention; one may object to the reliability of the study as the difference observed might be the effect of DA procedures and not the emotional activities alone. Thus, there is a need for further studies with three groups of learners: one serving as the control group, one experimental with emotionalized dynamic assessment intervention and the third with pure dynamic assessment intervention to investigate the effect of dynamic assessment on one's emotional state. One implication of this study is that mediations designed for EFL classrooms might address the needs and preferences of certain students, taking into account learners’ individual differences and more importantly their emotions resulting in more motivating tasks. Thus, the emotional programs proposed in this study should be integrated into existing curricula and its implementation needs backing from institution’s principals, parents and teachers.

References


**Appendix A**

**Literature response activities**

The following are some literature response activities that were used for nurturing learners' emotional intelligence:

1. **Managing one's emotion** *(i.e. handling fear, anxiety)*: Students were encouraged to add script to say what the character could have said or done to make himself/herself feel better, and they were asked to give their opinions about the ways that the character could let others know how he or she was feeling. When the story ended, the teacher asked the students to discuss the possible ways of managing that emotion more effectively.

2. **Knowing one's emotion**: They were thought some ways to identify their own feelings and let others know how they feel. In this way they improved their self-understanding. Then, they were asked to talk about different emotions and their causes.

3. **Handling relationships**: Some stories that depicted situations in which emotions were clearly evident were selected. After reading the story students had to identify the characters in the picture and say how the character was feeling. Some suggestions were listed on the board. It was also an opportunity to invite students to go back to the story and reread relevant parts. Then they were asked to think about themselves in the characters’ positions and to say what they would have done to make the character feel better?

4. **Recognizing emotions in others**: to improve learners' level of empathy, the teacher encouraged them to pay attention to the body language of characters depicted in the story. In the final stage, parts of the story which could help them gain a better understanding of others' emotions were read again.

5. **Motivating oneself**: to raise learners' level of self-motivation, some parts of the story that characters experienced a positive feeling were read again and they were asked to talk about the ways characters could change their negative feelings to positive ones. Subsequently, participants were asked to think about their feelings in the classroom, what they want to accomplish and the good reasons they had for learning the language.