**Teach-to-Test Instruction of Dynamic Assessment:**

**A Critical Overview**

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**Abstract**

The present paper aims to meticulously focus on the integration of the assessment and instruction which leads to a new approach, Dynamic Assessment, based on the principles of Socio-cultural Theory of Mind (SCT) developed by L. S. Vygotsky and his colleagues.A Vygotskian approach to language assessment suggests that ‘process of development’ should be viewed as a predictor of the individual’s or the group’s future performance. Dynamic assessment has developed as an alternative to statictypes of assessment, i.e. standardized and/or non-dynamic assessment (SA/NDA). However, it is not regarded as a replacement for the other test types, rather as a compliment. The present paper is a modest attempt to analyze the literature using a critical extensive approach.

**Overview**

It was about the late nineteenth century that assessment appeared as a domain of interest for researchers and educators, and the rife assessments were initiated only in the twentieth century (Gould, 1996).

The standardized test, the premier form of assessment identified by the standardization of procedures and instruments and the statistical analysis of results. According to Gould (1996) in the 1900s when the USA started using tests of general intelligence to evaluate immigrants and to evaluate the abilities of Army new members, standardized testing became amazingly widespread. Subsequently, standardized tests have been used in other contexts such as educational settings.

Traditional summative assessment attempts to summarize students’ learning at some point in time, say the end of a course, but it cannot provide the immediate, contextualized feedback useful for helping teacher and students during the learning process (Garb, 2008). So, the dynamic and holistic feature of assessment cannot be fully exploited.

As a matter of fact, assessment is becoming a big challenge for those engaging in the field of teaching. Bailey described assessment as an information gathering activity. McNamara (2004, p.765) referred to gaining insights into learners’ level of knowledge or ability as the purpose of assessment. In this way, learnt information via assessment is of high importance and considered a vital dimension of proper instruction. It also equips us to get involved in the cornerstone terms of Dynamic Assessment, (henceforth, DA) “teaching to the test,” “narrowing of the curriculum,” and “assessment-driven instruction”, which make this point clear that assessment and teaching are not separated from each other but they are, possibly, at odds with one another (Linn, 2000; Lynch, 2001; McNamara, 2001; Moss, 1996).

Teachers’ lack of acquaintance with principles and theories of practical assessment can also highlight the distinction between assessment and instruction. Most of the time, teachers attend their classrooms unprepared to develop acceptable testing instruments to monitor testing term, and to analyze the outcomes (Torrance and Pryor, 1998), but they are supported with eclectic practical collection of testing types far from the deep understanding of underlying theories .

Teachers’ mastery in assessing individuals is considered as the construct *diagnostic competence* ( Edelenbos and Kubanek-German , 2004). Based on their findings, they claim that teachers are not equally master in realizing the exact proficiency level of their students and, of course, it is not wondering when comparing the paid attention to assessment with that to other parts in teacher training programs. The bifurcation between assessment and instruction becomes clearer when considering the volume’s title of Bachman and Cohen’s (1998): *Interfaces between Second Language Acquisition and Language Testing Research*, focuses on the rising interaction between researchers in the concerning fields.

Nowadays, one of the major and common methods of testing in the world of second and foreign language learning is the product oriented one. Many language teachers around the world consider final assessment tests a framework of their assessment. The cornerstone rationale behind testing students after instructing them for a definite period of time is to observe how much of the instruction the students have received on the subject. It is also worth mentioning that we frequently hear that a teacher acknowledges the drawbacks of any special assessment method which leads some talented students to attend weakly at the final test, whereas, s/he performs well in the class. Applying Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory in assessment, dynamic assessment in language learning might offer new insights to assessment in the language classroom.

Assessment takes place not in isolation from instruction but as an inseparable feature of it. Inseparably from each other, assessment and instruction are integrated as a single activity. This pedagogical approach, known as Dynamic Assessment (DA), seeks to manage an instruction-based assessment.

The concept of DA does not speak of any specific way of testing. Indeed, dynamic assessment is a whole different approach, or an umbrella term (Elliott, 2003), to the issue of testing in the language classroom and this approach can be devoted to any way of testing ranging from multiple choice to essay writing, and with a great variety of student backgrounds from monolingual environments to linguistic diversities (Haney and Evans, 1999; Laing and Kamhi, 2003). Accentuating this dimension of dynamic testing, Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p. 331) mention that “what makes a procedure dynamic or not is whether or not mediation is integrated into the assessment process. In other words, fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice, open-ended essay, or even oral proficiency tests in themselves may or may not be dynamic”.

DA assumes a different perspective about assessment traditionally done on the part of the classroom teachers and researchers. L. S. Vygotsky, the famous Russian psychologist, develops DA followed by an ontological prospect, developed more than 80 years ago, on human abilities. Considering development of cognitive functions, Vygotsky’s study uncovered that this movement is not a matter of innate abilities developing into a mature state but the advent of new thought, manner, and outcome derived from one’s encounter in activities where culturally fabricated aspects touch him or her and where he or she interacts with others. From this viewpoint, development is triggered due to the social environment and the social environment plays a critical role for it.

So, we can put a step forward in claiming that the autonomy on the part of the students in doing performance is the outcome of past development. The apparent observation of individuals’ performance is not ample to support them in the process of development, but cooperation with them creates a fortune of revealing their abilities as well as their development. Educationally, it means that assessment and instruction are firmly integrated in to a single activity i.e., DA. DA proponents present a variety of approaches in which assessment and instruction are unified as a development-oriented activity Poehner (2008).

Lidz and Gindis (2003, p. 99) believde that “DA questions traditional opinions about teaching and assessment by disputing that they should not be looked upon as discrete activities but should be quietly blended in return. This integration occurs as intervention is embedded within the assessment procedure in order to interpret individuals’ abilities and lead them to higher levels of functioning”. The integration of assessment and instruction is founded on Vygotsky’s understanding of development. In Sociocultural Theory of Mind (SCT), the development of higher forms of consciousness, such as voluntary control of memory, perception, and attention, occurs through a process of internalization whereby these functions initially occur as interaction between human beings but are then transformed into cognitive abilities with the result that “the social nature of people comes to be their psychological nature as well” (Luria, 1979, p. 45). Devising the declarations of his educational theory, Vygotsky puzzled out that perceiving learners concerned with autonomous problem solving disclosed those functions that had previously been internalized but manifested nothing about abilities that were still in the process of developing. In other word, in the case offering different forms of support while conflicting with baffling tasks the scope of learners’ abilities can be uncovered. Additionally, the arrangement of such support simultaneously aids development, and so assessment itself becomes an instructional intervention.

In fact, the present study aims to focus on the integration of the assessment and instruction which leads to a new approach, Dynamic Assessment, based on the principles of SCT developed by L. S. Vygotsky and his colleagues. In Europe and North America, researchers (such as Kozulin et al., 2003; Lantolf, 2000; Wells and Claxton, 2002) are mainly focusing on the capacity of SCT to elucidate processes of cognitive development. Other researchers (Feuerstein et al., 2003; Lidz and Elliott, 2000) have devised a number of methodologies that try to comprehend and promote human cognitive capabilities and that are known under the general term DA.

**Review of the Related Literature**

Based on Lidz and Elliott (2000), there is a robust body of literature on DA in psychology and general education. In the realm of DA, applied linguists have concentrated on L2 and have paid great attention to Vygotskian theory to recognize the role of DA principles in L2 context (e.g., Kozulin and Garb, 2002; Antón, 2003).

Vygotsky in his book, *Thought and Language,* (1986) coined the term ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (ZPD) which is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. One of Vygotsky‘s followers, Jerome Bruner, put great emphasis on appropriate social international situations. According to Bruner, teachers are supposed to cultivate or scaffold preparation in learners’ mind by accentuating the learners’ powers at the level where you find them and not by waiting for that readiness.

Dynamic assessment which considers cognitive development within the context of social interactions with others who are more qualified is based on the work of Vygotsky. In fact, language and culture influenced these experiences. He argues that learning happens within the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD); that is, what learners can do to at this time with help and support, they can do in not distant future autonomously. Engaging ZPD, the aim is to introduce the amount of change that can be prompted while interactions with the examiner during the assessment course. Dynamic Assessment deems that a valid source for anticipating learners’ possible progress later on during any specific course of instruction (ZPD) is learners’ hibernated capability. Dynamic assessment, according to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, assumes that instruction and assessment should be inseparable from each another. In other words, if teachers want to observe 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 actual focus should be on what students can accomplish by helping on the part of the teacher or peers during the class activities because what is brought about with the help of others presents the latent development for success without any help. Assessing students’ real progress after some periods of instruction and deciding on the latent achievement by checking the results is what teachers generally do in language courses. In spite of that, based on Vygotsky, this process should be completely against it “the latent achievement differs autonomously from actual progress that is the latter, in and of itself, cannot be used to anticipate the former” (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006, p.328).

To understand how DA procedures could be performed in L2 contexts and how the outcomes could be interpreted in a parallel manner with Vygotsky’s (1986, 1998) understanding of development Lantolf and Poehner (Lantolf and Poehner, 2004; Poehner and Lantolf, 2005) proposed a framework. For the time being, several researchers are continuing projects following this approach to L2 DA. Over the last few years, James Lantolf and Poehner have together and individually presented a number of lectures and presentations on DA at universities, conferences, and professional development workshops and these words have generated much discussion from both applied linguistics researchers and language teachers.

Based on the reactions to the DA, It is crystal clear that DA’s charisma cannot simply be attributed to its recent advent. The question raised here is that:

What makes DA of such great importance among people with widely different interests? Poehner, to answer the dealing question, believes that DA gives glad tidings to teachers and learners, assessment specialists, and educational researchers. The famous psychologist, R.J. Sternberg, and his colleague, Elena Grigorenko, present a similar comment in the introduction to their precise scrutiny of DA (Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2002, pp. viii–ix). They believe that a dynamic procedure covers more than all the information that other assessments provide. They argue that DA develops learners’ sight of knowledge and abilities. In this case, it provides more valid and proper analysis and uses of assessment outcomes.

Sternberg and Grigorenko, moreover, deem that DA principles have thrown new light on the “new origination of tests” that “differ in both slight ways, from what we now have, and “substantial ways” (p. ix). They also claim that DA presents a theoretically triggered approach to unifying assessment and instruction. From this view point, we likely mention that DA plays a crucial way in providing teachers scores and grades and in yielding deep insights in learners’ abilities, sources of weak accomplishment, and particular channels of promoting development.

**Lev Vygotsky and Reuven Feuerstein**

The essential works of Vygotsky have been translated from the original Russian and supplied wisdom into his beliefs considering education and remediation. The pioneer of dynamic assessment, historically, superiority has been attributed to Vygotsky and this is while Grigorenko and Sternberg (1998) assert, simultaneous and independent develop­ments within the field have appeared.

Contrasting the work preceding that of Feuerstein whose achievement extended from working with culturally handicapped immigrants , Minick (1987) designates that dynamic assessment studies have sought to generate quantitative outcomes. He continues that definitely ignoring a stable baseline measure by Feuerstein may block the development on the part of the learner if scores are low or tasks cannot be done sufficiently. To do so, a more sure connection between tester and testee is founded, enabling the learner to perform tasks that echo both strengths and weaknesses and also supplying more individual and special kinds of support (which is most often not the case with other dynamic assessment measures).

Vygotsky’s perspectives are more qualitative than quantitative and Minick (1987) states that the work of Feuerstein is closer to that of Vygotsky, or at least more so than the work that is parallel with the quantification of learning capacity. Vygotsky accentuated the interaction between the child and the tester, as well as the nature of the interac­tion (Minick, 1987), resulting in a more strong unification than when either the pre-test or interaction is assessed alone (Day, Engelhardt, Maxwell, & Bolig, 1997). This is of high importance because a pre-test, mediation and post-test methodology is a process based on which much of the dynamic assessment study in South Africa is determined upon.

Considering the role ascribed to the ex­aminer in the work of Feuerstein, the emphasis on scaffolding tasks in assessing cognitive processes is greater than that on quantifiable achievements,. In Vygotsky’s theory of proximal development, which considers the child developing within a socio-cultural setting, the communicative nature of achievement is clarified. Ripping functions are the outcome of interaction and computing these functions one requires to assess the child in interaction. Many pretest-posttest studies do not emphasize this noticeable issue at all.

Feuerstein’s emphasis on revising imperfect cognitive structures within the learner as conflicting Vygotsky’s emphasis on social partnership in the assessment is one of the major differences between Vygotsky’s and Feuerstein’s approaches. In Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD), identified by the autonomous performance of a child compared with his or her performance when supported by a more well-informed or mature peer the role of social collaboration is revealed. The difference in performance is thus ascribed to the achievement manifest in the child’s zone of capability when assisted by a more adapted peer (Lidz, 1991; Nell, 2000).

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