

Dynamic Assessment in Second Language Learning: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Applications

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Abstract: Dynamic Assessment (DA) is an alternative to traditional approaches to language testing that merges teaching and assessment based on the framework of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which views learning as socially mediated, focusing on what learners can develop in their Zone of Proximal Development. DA is conducted using interactionist or interventionist approaches, with the benefits that each provides to a particular teaching situation. DA has been shown through empirical studies to be an effective means of helping learners acquire the grammar of their second language, build their lexicon, or learn the target language at all levels of competence. If evaluation is turned from a black box into a part of the learning loop, DA offers teachers the possibility to use it not only as a diagnostic device, but also in order to foster learning processes. This paper discusses some of the theoretical underpinnings of DA and reviews what is known about using DA for teaching a second language (SL) and describes the implications of this for future teaching and assessment practice.

Keywords: Dynamic Assessment; Sociocultural theory; Zone of Proximal Development; Mediation; Second language acquisition

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1. Introduction

Classical methods of evaluation are the most used in education to evaluate students, and they usually focus more on what students know or can do so far instead of evaluating what they could become. On the other hand, Dynamic Assessment (DA) is a new approach to assessment which views the process of assessing as being intrinsically related to teaching; in other words, it merges the two processes into one single evaluation procedure which not only assesses but also facilitates learning. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, DA assumes that human cognition and learning are socially and culturally mediated, not isolated, individual processes^[1]. The latter is a radical change to static assessment and focuses on knowing not only what students are able to do in

isolation, but also what is possible for them given proper treatment.

The advent of DA within second language acquisition (SLA) research has allowed researchers access to an invaluable methodological resource when studying learners' abilities: through the use of mediation, as well as the subsequent evaluation of learners' responses to mediation, DA is intended to investigate possible learning opportunities and promote capability building in line with the teaching philosophy of "assessing for learning." The purpose of this paper is to explore the theory behind DA, its main ideas, and how it can be applied within an SLA setting, with an overview of implications to language pedagogy and testing.

2. Theoretical foundations of Dynamic Assessment

DA is built on the foundation of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, according to which human cognition develops not by itself but with other people, and therefore learning is a mediated activity wherein people learn new knowledge, understandings, or skills through their interaction with more capable other people ^[2]. DA is a pedagogical instantiation of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and it may also be understood from a dialectical materialist viewpoint. ZPD, a core concept of DA that represents the distance from a learner's current level (determined through independent solving) to his or her potential level, and the extent to which they might be developed by adults, or with more mature peers.

The main way in which DA works is via mediation, where mediation "is a term used to refer to the process of regulating the social and mental activity of the material world, others, or oneself via cultural artifacts, concepts, and activities" ^[3]. From a sociocultural perspective, all human activity, including higher mental functions, is mediated by objects (e.g., machines, computers), mental artefacts (e.g., texts), or other people. This realization has an important implication, that is, not having access to mediating someone (or some people). It means losing one's chance of promoting their development. Assessment without mediation will be ineffective.

The second main construct of interest in the DA framework is that of transfer, which can be described as the learner's capacity to use the knowledge that has been internalized through the help provided by a mediator in order to solve new and/or harder problems: new tasks. Transfer tasks are used during DA for several reasons: to demonstrate that mediation is effective, to show learners improving, to predict future performances under the same context, and to promote high-order cognitive development. This emphasis on transfer reflects the fact that DA is about more than just learning for the moment; it's about developing a mind over time.

The theoretical basis for DA is built upon the idea that human consciousness grows through good-quality mediation provided via social interaction. In contrast to a static evaluation, which emphasizes already matured abilities, DA focuses on abilities that are maturing in the ZPD and highlights a trajectory of "future development." In such a way, DA drives development, which in turn paves the way to further assessment leading to an ongoing loop of learning and evaluation.

3. Interactionist vs. interventionist approaches in DA

Typically, DA has been divided into two broad categories according to the kind of mediation used: interactionist DA and interventionist DA. Both kinds of DA, while they share a common theoretical background, are implemented differently and applied to different problems.

Interactionist DA offers contingent, dialogic mediation, which is flexibly adjusted according to learners' responsiveness, which makes it especially appropriate to diagnose the process of individual cognitive

development. The mediator (usually a teacher or a more capable peer) engages in dialogues with the learner, supporting the student with just-in-time, responsive assistance. Aljaafreh and Lantolf studied how negotiation of corrective feedback, a type of mediation in the zone of proximal development, could facilitate ESL learning ^[4]. The results showed that although the learners committed similar mistakes, the problems tended to be different and required case-by-case mediation.

On the other hand, interventionist DA consists of using a script of predetermined questions and measuring standard indicators derived from the evaluation session (e.g., frequency of hints, scores) that is useful to predict the future performance and more feasible for a larger-scale implementation (or computerized). It will also have higher reliability and be easier to implement in a setting where there are a huge number of learners, although it is not as tailored to each child’s needs and circumstances as the interactionist method. A summary of some important differences between the two methods can be seen in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Key differences between Interactionist DA and Interventionist DA

Feature	Interactionist DA	Interventionist DA
Nature of Mediation	Flexible, dialogic, contingent	Pre-scripted, standardized
Focus	Process of cognitive development	Outcome metrics and prediction
Strengths	Individualized diagnosis, deep understanding	Consistency, scalability, practicality
Best Suited For	Individual or small group contexts	Large-scale computerized implementations
Assessment Emphasis	Qualitative insights into development	Quantifiable measures of potential

Each has proven effective for different pedagogical settings. Poehner, for example, reported findings that showed transfer among more advanced L2 French learners when a mediational interactionist focus was used with target past tense verb forms and aspect ^[5]. On the other hand, interventionist techniques were applied to computerized DA, as well as in some massive educational settings that require standardized measures.

4. Empirical research and applications

There is a large body of empirical studies showing the effectiveness of Dynamic Assessment in different settings of second language acquisition (learning). It has been found that DA can be more effective than static testing in facilitating language learning, in particular in grammar learning and the lexicon. In grammar teaching, in a study in which they focused on the effect of DA on L2 grammar acquisition by EFL students, Kamali et al. examined the English unreal conditional, i.e., Type II conditional, a grammatical construction that is known to be difficult for language students, and demonstrated the didactic benefits of applying DA to teaching L2 grammar through classroom learning ^[6]. Likewise, Jafary et al. explored how DA influenced the EFL learners’ grammatical knowledge by comparing the difference between DA and static assessment ^[7]. They found out that the students receiving DA intervention performed much better in terms of syntactic competence than those in static assessment, with DA being more effective for improving learners’ syntactic knowledge.

Another aspect in which DA seems to have been successful is vocabulary learning. Bahramlou and Esmaeili investigated the effect of group dynamic assessment on word learning via lexical inferencing and its effectiveness over vocabulary enrichment ^[8]. Their study showed that a group dynamic test was equally good at facilitating word learning via lexical inferencing, and that combining group DA with vocabulary exercises could

more effectively enhance word learning via inferencing.

In-class applications of DA have also shown the utility of DA in classrooms at various levels. For example, Poehner reported on how a primary school teacher of Spanish successfully integrated DA into her normal classroom practice for promoting learners' development ^[9]. The assessor had designed an array of mediation prompts ranging from implicit to explicit prior to the session. The results showed that the whole class benefited, although in different magnitudes, from the teacher-learner interactions. In addition, Poehner claimed that whole-class DA has a distribution effect since students who did not interact directly with the instructor still seemed to benefit from the mediation offered via peer-to-peer interaction ^[10].

DA research has also demonstrated its efficacy for use not just between individuals but in group settings as well. Gibbons, who looked at teachers' interactions with their students in primary school content-based L2 classes, found that interaction in groups scaffolds student's appropriate use of specialized scientific registers, moving out of the realm of common usage, and similarly, Davin and Donato investigated the use of an interactive writing task between FLES learners of Spanish working in dyads or trios and concluded that students were able to offer support during interaction, with the support of peer mediation in addition to teacher guidance ^[11-12].

5. Conclusion

Dynamic Assessment is an important new approach to the study of assessment, as well as to the study of learning processes in SLA. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, DA turns evaluation from a measuring device to an instrument of cognitive growth ^[13]. DA focuses attention on what learners are potentially able to learn in the ZPD with suitable mediation and thereby produces an integrated process of testing and teaching that is useful for learners at different levels and under different conditions.

The experimental studies repeatedly show that DA is effective for the promotion of L2 grammatical and lexical learning, demonstrating its superiority over conventional static evaluation for facilitating language learning ^[14]. Regardless of being used as either an interactionist or interventionist means, DA gives teachers useful information about students' evolving skills and helps them to develop those skills ^[15]. The success of extending the DA from the one-to-one version to that for groups also indicates the flexibility and usefulness of this algorithm in a variety of contexts.

6. Future outlook

As people continue to do more work on DA, there are a few directions that might also be pursued down the road. First of all, the combination of technological capabilities and DA provides opportunities to develop more scalable versions of responsive assessment systems that can achieve some of the responsiveness associated with interactionist models without limiting their application only to small cohorts of students. Second, future studies should examine how DA impacts language learning in the long term and what mediating approaches are most effective given various types of learners and situations.

Also, the professional development of language teachers on DA methodology is another important field for future work, and as Poehner and Leontjev point out, mediation is more than just a teaching tool; it is part of what makes us human, and has important ramifications for instruction. Getting teachers to see that will go far toward making DA (Dynamic Assessment) successful as a method for SLA.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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