

An Overview of Dynamic Assessment in the language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to outline the recent researches on Dynamic Assessment (DA) in second language learning classroom. As an approach to assessment and instruction, DA derived from Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this outlining study the very recent researches, which were done in relation with DA and ZPD, have been investigated. This study includes six sections. Section one has focused on an introduction about the essence of DA and ZPD. Section two defines specifically about DA and how it is related to teaching. Section three focuses on the relationship between DA and ZPD. Section four explicates aspects of DA and its effect on Corrective Feedback. Section five is devoted to DA and its relation and differences with Formative Assessment. Finally, section six is all about the conclusion of these five mentioned sections. By analyzing and investigating the recent researches, this study has confirmed that DA should be entered into L2 classrooms.

Keywords: Dynamic Assessment; Zone of proximal development; Assessment; Writing skill

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Lantolf, "the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has reached a point where university departments, professional organization, and scholarly journals devoted to supporting and disseminating research relevant to its aims have recently celebrated a number of birthdays and anniversaries" (Lantolf et al, 2010). On the other side of this, "the field continues to witness debates over fundamental epistemological assumptions that underlie the question and methodologies"; see Firth and Wagner (1997) as well as Lafford (2007). The discipline's contested theoretical foundation also explain in part of reluctance of many SLA researches to articulate implications of their work for second language teaching Lafford (2007). As Latoff (2010) has stated, "there is a widespread sentiment among those conducting theoretically informed SLA research that connections to teaching practice is premature" (Lightbown, 200; Gass & Mackey, 2007).

The Russian psychologist L.S. Vygotsky - whose sociocultural theory of mind (SCT) continues to draw attention from L2 researchers - confronted a similar set of questions as he endeavored to articulate a scientific psychology that offered a coherent perspective on human consciousness while also providing concrete proposals for education (Lantolf et al, 2010). However, as Lantolf (2010) argues, Vygotsky's dialectical perspective on human

beings and their relation to the world led him to view these not as separate aspects of his professional work but as complements of one another (Kristen Nielsen, 2012).

Vygotsky insisted that the true test of theory is not in its explanatory power but in its potential to bring about change in the world (Vygotsky, 1997). According to him, his interest was in a psychological theory 'which attempts not so much to explain the mind but to understand and master it' (p. 305), noting also that such a theory 'gives the practical disciplines a fundamentally different place in the whole structure of the science' (p. 305). That is, Vygotsky's scientific enterprise was concerned with much more than a description of human psychology because the kind of understanding he sought was one that illuminated the processes of the mind's development, specifically the social and cultural means through which individuals come to master thought.

Vygotsky's promise to praxis runs through every aspect of his work, and perhaps its most well known expression comes in his formulation of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Much has been written about the ZPD as a lens through which to view development. Indeed, the ZPD represents a powerful way of thinking about both the products of past development - the development that has been completed at the present and that can be inferred from an individual's independent performance - as well as cognitive functions that have not yet fully developed but are still in the process of forming (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). However, Vygotsky assigned a far more important role to the ZPD than simply a theoretical lens, locating it at the center of developmental pedagogy. The significance of the ZPD is that it provides a framework for the diagnosis of learner abilities and an orienting basis for intervention to support their development. In other words, it is a means of accessing and at the same time promoting the process of development rather than focusing on its product, as happens in more conventional approaches to assessment (Kristen Nielsen, 2012). In the decades following Vygotsky's death, use of the ZPD for diagnosis and intervention inspired a number of pedagogical reforms within Russia and internationally (Kozulin & Gindis, 2007). One line of research that has been particularly fruitful is dynamic assessment (Denceforth, DA). DA has been pursued by school and clinical psychologists as a way of more accurately assessing an individual's potential for future development by embedding instruction in the assessment process itself (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002). Echoing Vygotsky's sentiments about the value of theory, Reuven Feuerstein - a leading proponent of DA - explains that in DA 'what is at stake is not theoretical elegance, but issues that affect the lives and destinies of real people' (Feuerstein et al., 1991, p. 203).

According to Haywood and Lidz (2007) most current approaches to DA are comprised of three stages: a conventional assessment of the abilities in question, an intervention targeting problematic aspects of learner performance, and a final assessment that parallels the initial one. Pre- and post-intervention levels are compared, and the difference is taken as an indicator of whether the abilities being assessed lay within the individual's ZPD. Often these insights then lead to more long-term instructional plans. The problem with this approach, however, is that it is more biased toward product than process. Research on L2 DA, in contrast, has focused more directly on the classroom and how mediator-learner interactions can function simultaneously to understand and promote learner development (e.g. Poehner, 2007, 2008). In other words, assessment and instruction exist in a dialectical relation as the provision of mediation attuned to the ZPD allows for the identification of emergent abilities and at the same time supports their development. To date, L2 DA research has not focused on implementation of the procedure during regular classroom instruction but has instead occurred in one-to-one sessions

outside the classroom and has been implemented by a teacher/researcher with expertise in applied linguistics. Moreover, this research has been conducted in university settings (e.g. Ableeva, 2008).

2. DEFINING DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT

Although DA has its roots in Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD, Vygotsky himself did not use the term DA when formulating his proposals on the cultural development of the individual nor when discussing his views on the importance of distinguishing between diagnostic and prognostic testing in the school and in the laboratory settings (Lantolf et al. 2010). In a paper published more than forty years ago, however, A.R. Luria (1971), one of Vygotsky's most influential colleagues, contrasts 'statistical' with 'dynamic' approaches to assessment (p. 7). The former, according to Luria, although grounded in sound psychometric principles, inappropriately assumes that a person's solo performance on a test represents a complete picture of the individual's capabilities. The latter, on the other hand, argues that a full picture requires two additional bits of information: the person's performance with assistance from someone else and the extent to which the person can benefit from this assistance not only in completing the same task or test, but in transferring this mediated performance to different tasks or tests (Kristen Nielsen, 2012).

In the preface to their critical review of the research on DA since the time of Luria's publication, Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002: vii) define DA as a procedure whose outcome:

takes into account the results of an intervention. In this intervention, the examiner teaches the examinee how to perform better on individual items on the test as a whole. The final score may be a learning score representing the difference between pretest (before learning) and posttest (after learning) scores, or it may be the score on the posttest considered alone.

According to Lantolf et al. (2010), "although scholars working in either DA or more traditional psycho-metric approaches to assessment might quibble with this definition, it seems clear that the fundamental difference between the two approaches has to do with whether or not the administration of the assessment should have the expressed goal of modifying learner performance during the assessment itself." DA, because of the fact that has much in common in the ZPD, insists that any assessment that fails to determine the extent to which the person's performance is modifiable is incomplete. Nevertheless, if one examines Traditional statistically based assessment, due to the accountability of psychometric principles, considering change in the person's performance during the administration of the assessment as a threat to these principles, in particular, test reliability (see Lidz, 1991; Haywood et al. 1996).

3. DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT AND ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

For Vygotsky, the notion of praxis was not an ideological position in academic debates but was a powerful orienting basis for his empirical research and clinical work with individuals experiencing learning difficulties and an array of mental disorders (see Vygotsky, 1993). As Kinard & Kozulin (2008) explained, education plays a crucial role in Vygotsky's theory of development because formal schooling offers the possibility to integrate abstract, theoretical knowledge with everyday experience leading to full conceptual

understanding of the world. According to these authors, this development occurs through mediation in the form of cultural artifacts, interaction with others, and participation in socially organized activities. However, Vygotsky himself did not articulate or endorse sets of teaching and assessment methods or techniques to be followed in a specified way. Rather, one cannot deny his educational contributions that may be described as helping teachers to reorient their practice to the goal of supporting learners' development of conceptual understanding of the world so that they may position themselves to act in the world in more agentic ways (Kristen Nielsen, 2012).

On this fact we can say that Vygotsky understood that the particular ways in which curricula could be organized to foster development could not be prescribed beforehand but needed to emerge as the theory was brought into classrooms. He also, as stated by Lantolf (2010), understood that this process was necessary for further elaboration of the theory itself, a point exemplified by the evolution of the ZPD concept in his own writings. Initially proposed as an alternative to conventional IQ tests, the ZPD was first framed relative to the school curriculum, with development understood as the difference between learners' current performance and the level demanded by the school. In this way, the ZPD provided an indication of time and resources that might be needed to move individuals toward set curricular standards.

However, it also defined development in teleological terms, as the curriculum could be viewed as an endpoint, at least at a given grade level. In this regard, Vygotsky (1933, p. 53, cited in van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 341) found that some learners were able to 'run through' their ZPD before others, effectively meeting the school's performance goals more quickly than other learners. In other words, the ZPD was construed as a way of understanding learner progression from one curriculum-defined point to another.

This, however, poses the logical question of how to responsibly support learners who reach the standard ahead of others. In subsequent discussions of the ZPD, Vygotsky's statements of its 'great practical significance' to education are decidedly non-teleological, as he explains that the ZPD serves to orient instruction to have an optimal role in guiding development (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 204) and points out that there is no endpoint to development through cultural means (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004, p. 204). As some mentioned, Praxis is also a strong current running through much of the pedagogical work pursued by Vygotsky's colleagues and students, most notably Piotr Gal'perin (1989) and Vasily Davydov (2004). These scholars designed educational approaches based on Vygotsky's theory that have led to advances in understanding of concept formation and internalization. With regard to the ZPD, Valsiner and van der Veer (1993) enumerate several strands of Vygotsky-inspired work that have led to developments in the concept itself, including DA.

They point out, however, that there is a good deal of variability among approaches to DA, with some maintaining a stronger connection to Vygotsky than others. As we have argued elsewhere (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004, 2007), all DA proponents share a conviction that independent performance is insufficient to fully understand abilities and that important insights into development are gained when mediation is offered as performance begins to break down. Nevertheless, DA practices differ widely with regard to the quality of mediation they propose as well as how DA sessions relate to ongoing instruction (Kristen Nielsen, 2012).

4. DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT AND CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

As a debatable topic in SLA, corrective feedback is the out of the iceberg, and when it

is mixed with DA it is going to be much more controversial. There is an extensive research literature on the effects of feedback on L2 learning. A thorough review of this research is well beyond the scope of the present article (for excellent reviews, see Ellis, 2008; Ellis et al., 2009). However, it is useful to relate mediator-learner interaction during DA with the findings and assumptions on feedback as reflected in SLA research. The focus of most SLA research on feedback has been on whether implicit or explicit feedback is more effective in stimulating L2 development (Kristen Nielsen, 2012).

According to Ellis (2008, p. 804, Cited in Lantolf et al, 2010) the research shows that teachers use different types (i.e. direct or indirect) and frequency of feedback, depending on such factors as context, personal preference, and recommendations made in their teacher education courses. Research has documented, for instance, that teachers frequently use recasts to provide learners with indirect correction (Ellis, 2008). One of the uncertainties associated with recasts is whether or not they result in acquisition. While researchers report frequent learner uptake of teacher recasts (most often as repetition of the corrected form), this in itself does not necessarily confirm acquisition. One would want to document appropriate use of the corrected form in future independent performance (Ellis, 2008, p. 256). The evidence we present below documents such performance.

In a research conducted by Meihami(2013) on the effect of CF in writing grammatical accuracy improvement of advanced EFL students he found that giving CF in a direct way has the most effective way of improving the accuracy of grammatical points. In his research he has declared that CF in the way of DA can be very beneficial.

On this ground of idea, researchers have also tried to determine whether corrective feedback better serves acquisition if it is delivered implicitly, as with recasts, or explicitly as when overtly pointing to an error, correcting it, and perhaps offering a meta-linguistic explanation as well. Ellis et al. (2009) surveyed 71 studies that directly compare implicit to explicit corrective feedback and conclude that the latter is more advantageous, at least as far as production is concerned (p. 314). On the other hand, these same authors note that some studies report no advantage for either type of feedback. They also point to research findings that support positive effects for implicit correction when compared to learners who received no feedback at all (p. 315).

Ellis et al. (2009) suggested that it is difficult to arrive at unequivocal conclusions with regard to feedback type because the studies they surveyed were in most cases not directly comparable. For one thing, some of the studies are experimental, while others are observational; for another, measures of learning ranged from mechanical to communicative activities and varied with regard to whether focus was on input or output processes. Above all, the studies did not often jibe with respect to what constituted implicit or explicit feedback. In most, though not all cases, the former comprised recasts, although requests for repetition were also used and at times recasts were combined with corrections or repetitions (p. 313). Explicit feedback also varied, ranging from a simple indication that an error occurred to specifying the error accompanied by extensive meta-linguistic explanation (Kristen Nielsen, 2012).

In another study, Ellis et al. (2009) carried out their own study with groups of low-intermediate proficiency ESL learners where they compared the effects of implicit (recasts) with explicit (repetition of error followed by meta-linguistic information) feedback on learning the past tense *-ed* marker in English. Without going into detail, and despite self-admitted limitations, the results of post-tests and delayed post-tests showed a distinct advantage for the group receiving explicit feedback (p. 327).

The authors hypothesize that 'explicit feedback seems more likely to promote the

cognitive comparison that aids learning' (p. 330). In an earlier study comparing implicit and explicit feedback, Carroll and Swain (1993) speculated that explicit correction aids learning by identifying the site and nature of the learning problem whereas implicit feedback expects learners to infer both of these important aspects of learning.

Based on such findings, one might indeed conclude that explicit corrective feedback is more effective and therefore should be the preferred approach to dealing with learner errors. From a perspective that looks more at the product rather than the process of learning, this makes sense. For instance, if the instructional aim is simply to help learners arrive at a correct response, then explicit feedback is certainly an efficient means. However, as Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) argued, if the intention is to promote development then process must be foreground, as in the ZPD. This is because development is not only about appropriate performance but it is equally about where responsibility and control for the performance resides. Development moves from other-regulation - where one's performance is primarily controlled by someone else - to self-regulation where one establishes control over one's own performance. From a Vygotskian perspective, this is what learner agency and autonomy are about. By providing uniform explicit corrective feedback all learners are treated in the same way regardless of the level of control they may have achieved over a particular language feature (Kristen Nielsen, 2012).

Consequently, it is difficult to determine how much regulation a learner is gaining over her or his performance and thus much of the process of development not only remains hidden but it may very well be inhibited. Learners may come to rely on others rather than on themselves, or at least may do so for a longer time period than necessary.

5. DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT AND FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Formative assessment is often positioned in contrast to summative assessment. Summative assessment evaluates performance at the end or the beginning of a unit of study, a course, or a program and is often used for purposes of accountability, admission decisions; promotion and selection (see d'Anglejan et al., 1990; Torrance and Pryor, 1998). While our focus here is on FA, we are struck by the general assumption that summative assessment somehow captures the culmination of the learning process, at least as it is defined by a given curriculum. From our perspective, there is no reason why even assessments administered at the end of a course or program could not be forward-looking and thus promote development. In other words, given our theoretical framework, assessing without mediation is problematic because it leaves out part of the picture – the future – and it is difficult to imagine an assessment context that is not interested in the future (for additional discussion of this important point, see Lantolf and Poehner, 2004). Formative assessment occurs during a course of study and has traditionally been used to gather (Kristen Nielsen, 2012):

“information which will inform teachers and students about the degree of success of their respective efforts in the classroom. It allows teachers to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses in relation to specific curricular objectives and thus guides them in organizing and structuring instructional material”.

(d'Anglejan et al., 1990: 107)

Based on a series of teacher interviews, Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000: 229-30) conclude that FA serves teachers in four different ways: it helps them plan and manage their teaching; it provides evidence of student learning; it indexes the extent to which they and

their students have attained what has been prescribed in the curriculum; and it provides them with evidence for evaluating their own teaching. Despite the perceived benefit of FA, Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000: 231) express concerns about its validity and appropriateness, particularly because as a knowledge base, FA has remained an informal procedure rather than being systematically integrated into the curriculum and classroom practices. In addition, FA might also serve to motivate learners by providing them with feedback about what they can already do and what still needs improvement (Vandergrift and B elanger, 1998: 572).

According to Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000: 215), although researchers and educators have for some time acknowledged ‘the pedagogical function of assessment’, an insufficient amount of detailed research has been conducted on this topic. Moreover, Dann (2002: 102) points out that even in the general assessment literature, where a fair amount of research has been conducted on FA, focus has been on ‘the ways in which teachers have tried to inform their own practice so that pupils’ needs are more specifically met’ and much less attention has been paid to ‘the ways in which pupils participate in this process’.

This is an important area for classroom research to address because as Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000: 237) caution, despite assumptions to the contrary, classroom assessment is not necessarily low-stakes: high-stakes decisions are often predicated on learners’ in class performance. The problem is that because it is generally informal and unsystematic, FA may either over or underestimate learner ability and progress, resulting in inappropriate instruction or no instruction at all when it is in fact required (2000: 238).

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper we investigated different theories regarding to DA and ZPD. We draw the conclusion that Vygotsky as the forerunner of the field of ZPD didn’t introduce us with the concept of the DA but in its place he did a lot by introducing the concept of ZPD that is an umbrella term for the other terms such as DA and FA. The pedagogical aspects of this paper can all be mentioned by the fact that with the help of concept of DA and ZPD we can have much more prosperous classes that students have also much more opportunities to learn and to manifest their learning. The concept of FA (Formative Assessment) is another path to know about students’ different learning. In its ground, FA has introduced some alternative methods of assessing students in which the process of learning can be manifested in a more clear way. As an example, portfolio is one of alternative methods of teaching and assessing writing. Corrective Feedback is another concept in which ZPD has played a great role. Giving or not giving corrective feedback is a hot debate in progress that confused lots of instructors due to the fact of different skills. According to all those conducted research one should have this in mind that giving corrective feedback in different skills should be considered as an instructor in L2 teaching context.

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