



Shiraz University

Faculty of Literature and Humanities

M.A. Thesis in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

**DIAGNOSTIC AND DEVELOPMENTAL POTENTIALS OF DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT
FOR WRITING SKILL**

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JULY 2012

IN THE NAME OF GOD

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DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT FOR WRITING SKILL**

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THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN
PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ART (M.A.)

IN

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (TEFL)

SHIRAZ UNIVERSITY

SHIRAZ

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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The undersigned, Ali Kushki (890349), the student of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Shiraz University Collage of Literature and Humanities, hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own research, and whatever, in this thesis other, peoples' sources have been used I have given their exact address and specifications in the reference section. I also assert that my research and its topic are not the repetition of other peoples' works, and I commit myself not to publish or let others have access to the achievement of the thesis without the prior permission of the university. In conformity with the regulations of mental and intellectual ownership, Shiraz University reserves all the rights of the present work.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I should express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Rahimi, for his sincere spirit, support, and understanding. I would also like to thank Dr. Mehrpour, my first advisor, for his kind personality and helpful comments and suggestions on the drafts of the thesis. Moreover, I deeply appreciate Dr. Ahmadi' subtle and precise remarks on the thesis.

I would like to thank my dear family members for their heartwarming support, my father for his commitment to his family, my mother for her motherly affection and sincere support during all my life, my brothers for their unfailing encouragement, and my sisters for their sympathy. Last but not least, I must express my heartfelt thanks to my dear beloved for her moral and emotional support.

ABSTRACT

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This thesis sought to explore the application of DA to an L2 learning context by posing the four following research questions: (1) any insights into learners' abilities that is not obtained from assessing their independent performance but that only come to light during DA treatment; (2) the possibility of promoting learners' abilities through DA; (3) the usefulness of DA in leading to individualized instruction that remains sensitive to examinees' ZPD; and (4) the extent to which development is transferred to other learning contexts. Three sophomore students of English Literature were the participants of the study. The participants received individual treatments during a time span of one month. During the sessions, the participants were asked to produce individually a piece of writing. Then, the unassisted writing samples were reviewed jointly. During these review times, best attempt was exercised to get insights into the ZPD of the participants in order to diagnose their current levels of ZPD and consequently, help them have a better performance. The qualitative results

of the study showed that Dynamic Assessment had both diagnostic and developmental potentials to contribute the participants of the study.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0. Introduction

This chapter initially provides a background of how Vygotsky's (1978) theory, Sociocultural Theory (SCA), and its outgrowth, Dynamic Assessment (DA), developed. The chapter proceeds with providing short definitions for the two concepts. The chapter, then, refers very briefly to the current research status of DA within SLA. Finally, the objectives and significance of the present study will be dealt with, respectively.

1.1. Preliminaries

The field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and learning has been the battlefield of a host of competing learning theories like cognitivism, structuralism, and behaviorism, just to name a few. Some are time-honored and have withstood the crippling and belittling effect of time, and some, on the other hand, yet nascent and to be nurtured. That is what makes SLA so interesting a research enterprise. Each of these theories has tried to fit only a tiny part of a massive and convoluted jigsaw (Brown, 2007) whose completion demands doing a lot of puzzle solving on the part of both practitioners and theorizers (Kuhn, 1970). Historically, scholars

like Vygotsky (1987), Leontiev (1981), and Wertsch (1985) have proposed a set of new metaphors of viewing learning, which is steadily developing into an alternative paradigm in SLA. In this paradigm, a teacher or one with a higher knowledge tries to activate and make use of students' potentials by scaffolding students within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Baleghizadeh, Timche Memar, & Timche Memar, 2010). This, which has been the cynosure of SLA scholars recently, is what has come to be called Sociocultural Theory (SCT) (Lantolf, 2000). From a SCT lens, learners are active agents in the learning process and seen as individuals who become part of the L2 community (Baleghizadeh, Timche Memar, & Timche Memar, 2010). Therefore, SCT is not a theory of history or things to this effect (Ellis, 2008) as it may be understood by some shallow minds. Rather, it has to do with how knowledge is constructed and mediated socially through the mediation of some artifacts (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). From its inauguration into SLA, Vygotsky's SCT has proved influential. A fuller understanding of learning process, in general, and language learning, in particular, has been achieved due to the key outgrowths of the theory such as ZPD, scaffolding, intervention, and mediation. One of the most recent derivations of SCT has been Dynamic Assessment (DA). The presupposition based on which DA is built is that learning is not a fixed and stagnant process. Instead, it is an ongoing and dynamic process. It has been neglected throughout past years when measuring students' abilities and continues to be neglected even now. A

quick leafing through the materials on SLA assessment and testing gives a good indication of this claim. For example, a cursory look at the subject index of some major reference books of testing like Bachman (1990) and Brown (2005) shows no inclusion of DA except Bachman and Palmer (2010) with only one mention and a negligible explanation for it.

However, it seems that the body of research on the potentials of DA is getting more robust recently. A brief report of a couple of studies will be relevant here. Studies on DA have been done with various aims such as getting insight into the text comprehension of EFL learners (Kozulin and Grab 2002) and evaluating the potentials of DA for assessing reading competence (Anton , 2009). However, thus far no study has, except Shrestha and Coffin's (2012) which more will be more elaborated in the literature review section, tried to look into the potentials of DA as a tool to get insight into the problems of learners weak at writing in an EFL context. The aim of the present study is to fulfill the gap in the literature by examining how DA can be employed as a diagnostic and developmental tool for those new to writing.

1.2. Objective of the Study

The present study aims at putting the principles of Dynamic Assessment proposed by Vygotsky (1978) into practice in writing classes to show the diagnostic and developmental potentials of the methodology for those who

are weak at writing.

1.2.1. Research Questions

1. Can DA diagnose the source of learners' problem areas related to writing skill?
2. Can DA be applied to locate problems in learners' ZPDs?
3. Can DA be applied as a developmental tool to make learning happen in learners after diagnosis of their problems?
4. Is learning resulting from DA application transferred to other contexts?

5. 1.3. Significance of the Study

Luria (1961), one of the most famous colleagues of Vygotsky, juxtaposed statistical approaches to assessment with dynamic ones. According to Luria, the former has its roots in psychometrics and erroneously assumes that a person's solo and unaided performance in a test is tantamount to the total capabilities a person possesses. Any interference in this individual measure is to introduce error into the measurement process leading to overstatement or understatement of what the researcher is going to measure. The latter, on the other hand, argues that a full picture of capabilities a person is able of operationalizing requires more strands of information. First, it is necessary to observe a person's performance when

s/he is assisted by another individual, say, a peer or more knowledgeable mediator. This allows for a more complete picture of the capabilities of a person to appear. The second strand has to do with the extent to which a person can benefit from this mediation and involvement both in performing the intended task and transferring this mediated performance to different tasks.

Given the fact that the purpose of all educational systems is to direct the process of learning to the full actualization of potential capabilities, DA can provide a more comprehensive picture to base our treatment on it. Whatever happens in writing classes is no exception to the current approaches of assessment to which Vygotsky (1978) and later on, Luria (1961) objected to. The products of students' writing are judged upon as the representative of their writing ability with less attention to the underlying process through which this product has passed. Here a point of caution is in order. The process section of process writing shouldn't be taken the same as process in Vygotsky's theory. The former refers to the stratification of writing in stages for the sake of convenience. Here, the underlying mechanisms are not the locus of concern rather it is the ease of getting ideas from the mind down on the paper that matters. In so doing, the problems students have when writing and providing tailored treatment to their problems go unnoticed. DA, the study claims, has the potential to make up for that pitfall in assessing writing by bringing the process of writing rather than the product to the fore.

Moreover, DA has the hedge of proposing its diagnostic and developmental capacities over other forms of assessment when learning is going on, that is it is an on-going process not a posteriori one. The scores given to students as the quantification of their abilities have less to do with compensatory and diagnostic dimensions of the ability at hand, here writing. That is what Cioffi and Carney (1983) mean when they argue that standard assessment procedures are best at evaluating the students' skills knowledge, but insufficient for estimating the students' learning potential and provide little help for identifying the conditions under which the progress can be made. The reason for that is that these scores are given as a posteriori when the whole writing lessons are done with. To put it another way, these scores are not sufficiently indicative of the abilities of learners because they are off-line and it is not clear which aspects of the course students have learnt and which ones have not. This means that the ability cannot be helped anymore in that learners are not accessible after sitting their exams so as to provide them with contributions. Even in situations when this failing scores are interpreted as repeating the course, the assessment system begs the following questions: Do the failing scores mean that failed students have learnt nothing? Or if this is not the case, what aspects of the learners' writing ability have developed and what are those undeveloped aspects? These are questions which defy simple answers. So, modification in its on-line format common in DA is at the whim of evaluators and more troubleshooting and

treatment are possible in this form meaning that when the mistakes are being made in the interactive dialogues between the mediator and the participants they are immediately rectified. Consequently, the results of assessment are in a sense immediately seen and changed if inappropriate.

Last but not least is concerned with the very skill of writing. It is the most difficult skill to be acquired. Even native speakers face difficulty when writing is the case. To top it all, due to the compositional nature of the bulk of communication in the age of technology, the need to learn how to write doubles in importance. So, being difficult and at the same time important make the development of new ways of writing skill a must. That is why writing skill has been given the pride of place in the present study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0. Introduction

This chapter initially leads off a short background on Vygotsky's theory, Sociocultural Theory, and the development of its outgrowth, DA. The chapter proceeds with providing definitions for Sociocultural Theory and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by drawing on the accumulated body of literature on the concepts. Having reviewed the concepts, the chapter explains two different approaches to DA. Following the sections, DA is compared to Non-Dynamic Assessment (NDA) to delimit their scope. The last part of the section has to do with reviewing the available literature employing DA procedures. Then, the niche for the present study is established.

2.1. Theoretical Background of the study

In *Mind in Society* (1978), Vygotsky leveled a heavy criticism at the trend adopted in investigating psychological problems. The rationale behind Vygotsky's objection to the stimulus-response framing and experimentation was the artificiality of the context in which the responses were elicited and the sameness of the treatment with which all behaviors were analyzed, namely stimulus-response framing. Vygotsky (1978) objected to the methodology adopted because "by this we mean that no

matter what psychological process is under discussion...” (p. 58). Besides, the experimentation was nothing more than a failure when it came to higher psychological functions. In his fervent zest to figure out a solution round the stalemate, the free range Vygotsky brilliantly resorted to the works of the greybeard thinkers of his time, namely Marx and Engels’s ideas. The concern for delving into the process of learning and development and the need for a methodology to do so were not separable (Newman & Holzman, 2005). As a result, Vygotsky adopted the dialectic approach to the study of human development which predicated directly, in turn, on Marx’s and Engels methodology. On the bearing of Engels’s ideas on the methodology proposed by himself, Vygotsky is unambiguous by saying that:

The key stone in our method...follows directly from the contrast Engels drew between naturalistic and dialectical approaches to the understanding of human history. Naturalism in historical analysis, according to Engels, manifests itself in the assumption that only nature affects human beings and only natural conditions determine historical development. The dialectical approach, while admitting the influence of nature on man, asserts that man, in turn, affects nature and creates through his changes in nature new natural conditions for his existence. This position is the key stone of our approach to the study and interpretation of man’s higher