

Dynamic Assessment: A Dialectical Integration of Assessment and Instruction

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Formative assessment (FA), in contrast to product-oriented summative assessment, is carried out in the classroom for the purpose of providing students with developmental feedback. Closely related to instruction, FA is done to analyze both learning goals and the instructional processes involved. This kind of classroom-based assessment can be used to raise the learners' awareness of the language content and lesson objectives (Rea-Dickins, 2001; Rea-Dickins, 2006; Rea-Dickins & Gardner, 2000). According to Rea-Dickens (2007), good FA practices provide learners with ample opportunities for language practice through engaging them in collaborative learning activities and offering them self- and peer- assessment opportunities.

Despite the benefits of FA practices, there have been some major concerns over their effectiveness in enhancing learning. In order for FA practices to promote learning, instruction and assessment practices need to be integrated. However, according to some critics, these activities are still conceptualized as being separate. Specifically, Poehner and Lantolf (2005) contend that in most FA practices, assessment and instruction remain two separate entities. While these two activities may be jointly carried out, there is still an implicit bifurcation between them. Similarly, Torrance and Pryor (1998) argue that teachers lack an understanding of the relationship between assessment and learning and, as a consequence, there is no actual intervention in the development process of the learners in most classroom-based FA practices. Overall, Stenberg and Grigorenko (2002) have called for a paradigm shift in the practices of FA by which instruction and assessment can be integrated as a unified activity.

In light of these shortcomings, the purpose of this discussion is to introduce a type of FA in which assessment and instruction are dialectically integrated into the same development-oriented activity. This pedagogical approach towards FA has come to be known as *Dynamic Assessment (DA)*. According to its proponents, DA provides a kind of instructional intervention which is referred to as *mediation*, and is constantly adjusted and attuned to the learners' responsiveness to instruction. In DA, the responses of the participants are used as a springboard for launching the assessment activity into a deeper and more systematic analysis of the learning process (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005).

DA can be better understood when contrasted with static assessment (SA). The sharp difference between DA and SA is that DA focuses on the learning process, whereas SA focuses on the results of learning. In SA, which is usually done for summative purposes, any kind of interaction or assistance during the assessment is considered unacceptable. In fact, interaction and assistance of any kind could be seen as being unfair or even cheating. In particular, changes in the learners' performances during the assessment process are considered threats to the reliability of test scores (Haywood *et al.*, 1990; Lidz, 1991). However, DA adopts a categorically different stance and maintains that important information about a learner's abilities can only be obtained by offering assistance during the assessment. The expressed goal of DA is modifying learners' performance during the assessment itself (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004). Overall, DA is a

kind of classroom-based formative assessment that seeks to make up for the shortcomings of general practices of FA. It attempts to achieve this goal by integrating instruction and assessment practices in one single systematic activity.

According to Lantolf and Poehner (2004), DA not only provides a more complete picture of learners' abilities but also assists the learners to develop their L2 abilities by means of appropriate mediation or instructional intervention. DA is grounded in the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP), which, in its simplest terms, can be understood as the difference between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with assistance. In DA, the goal of assessment is not just to assist learners to get through a specific task but also, through mediation that is negotiated between the instructor and learners, to help the learners with their future tasks (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005).

Two different interpretations of ZDP have led to two approaches of DA: an interventionist one, and an interactionist one. Based on the interventionist approach, assistance is provided item-by-item by using a predetermined list of hints and feedback during a test administration. This approach lends itself more to a psychometric orientation and is not done for the purpose of enhancing learning (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004; Poehner & Lantolf, 2003; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005).

The second interpretation of ZDP by Vygotsky is qualitative. This qualitative perspective of ZDP has resulted in a different approach to DA which is referred to as *interactionist*. As Liz and Gindis (2003) state, this qualitative interpretation of ZDP and approach to DA emphasizes learning over assessment. Reuven Feuerstein, one of the leading advocates of interactionist DA, argues that cognitive abilities are open to development if appropriate forms of interactions and instructions are available. According to Feuerstein, roles of the examiner/examinee should be abandoned in favor of teacher-student roles. He calls for this change of roles to foreground the role of mediation and interaction in the process of assessment (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005).

Central to this qualitative interpretation of ZDP and interactionist approach to DA is the concept of *mediation*. According to the writings of Vygotsky, one's relationship to the world is mediated through his or her interaction with other individuals and other physical and symbolic artifacts like language (Poehner & Lantolf, 2003). These different kinds of *mediators* transform natural, spontaneous impulses into higher mental processes such as problem solving strategies. In the case of L2 learning, initially unfocused learning actions may become adjusted and modified based on how the learning of the language is mediated. Mediation is, thus, the instrument of cognitive change and learning (Donato & MacCormick, 1994). Therefore, responsiveness to mediation is indispensable for understanding cognitive ability because it provides insight into the learner's *future* development (Poehner, 2008). In other words, contrary to traditional assessment that focuses on already matured abilities, "DA promotes functions that are maturing" in the ZPD and "foregrounds future development" (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004, p. 54).

In terms of DA's classroom applications, according to Lantolf and Poehner (2004), DA usually involves three stages: pre-test, mediation, and post-test. During this kind of DA, questions, hints, or prompts are not planned in advance; instead, they emerge from mediated dialogue. Throughout the interaction, the examiner reacts to the examinee's needs and constantly re-calibrates his/her mediation (Ableeva, 2010; Poehner 2005; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002).

While there exists robust support for the benefits of DA in the literature, it has not been accepted in the field of assessment with open arms; this is mainly because of its psychometric shortcomings (i.e., issues with reliability, validity, and generalizability). Poehner and Lantolf

(2003) argue, however, the purpose of assessment is not to measure but to interpret; therefore, issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability in DA should be interpreted differently from SA. Empirical research on DA in second language acquisition is still scarce (Ableeva, 2010; Antón, 2009; Poehner, 2005), and future research will shed more light on both the benefits and drawbacks of this classroom-based practice of assessment.

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