DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT AND THE IRANIAN UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTORS' CONCEPTUALIZATIONS: AN EFL CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The concept of dynamic assessment is primarily built on the aspect of Vygotsky's work which is directly concerned with the development of a person's potential abilities (Poehner & Lantolf 2003, 2005). And a central tenet of this approach is that it considers abilities to be "malleable and flexible rather than fixed" (Sternberg & Grigorenko 2002). Since dynamic assessment has played a pivotal role in the realm of assessment in the last three decades, thus, in this study, Iranian university instructors' perceptions toward the application of dynamic assessment have been explored.

Key words: *dynamic assessment, instructors' conceptualizations, EFI setting*

1. INTRODUCTION

Notably, the emergence of DA is attributed to Vygotsky's criticism of traditional assessment (Poehner & Lantolf 2005; Shabani et al. 2010). As such, in his reaction to the insufficiencies of traditional psychometric-based school assessment, Vygotsky (1962) asserted that traditional assessment accounts only for the already attained developments rather than prospective development viable to emerge (Vygotsky 1978). According to this perspective, promotion of language learning entails reformulation of teachers' and assessors' competencies of conducting classroom assessment beyond constraints of the conventional psychometric issues and shortcomings of standardized tests (Haywood & Lidz 2007; Inbar-Lourie 2008). Thus, Vygotskian psychology paves the way for diagnosing and measuring the fully matured as well as dynamically emergent abilities (Lidz & Gindis 2003), and, DA, by placing zone of proximal development at the core, represents a dialectically integrated means to the assessment of a dynamic and ever-emerging goal in instruction (Lantolf & Poehner 2004).

Consequently, research on assessment as an inseparable part of instruction, and also as a social practice, has recently gained a currency evoked by social constructivist perspectives as well as poststructuralist transgressive challenges which illuminate boundary making effects of language practices (Inbar-Lourie 2008; McNamara 2012). Accordingly, teachers are encouraged to engage in the critical reflection of classroom-based assessment to gain awareness about classroom performance, progress, score interpretation, issues of validity, value-laden constructs, social and political character of assessment, etc. (McNamara 2012). Considering the researches on DA in IRAN, a major share in this area is mostly classroom-based (Derakhshan, Rezaei & Alemi 2011) and little has been done to investigate teachers' conceptions in this regard. Thus, the present study aimed at investigating Iranian EFL university instructors' conceptualizations toward dynamic assessment to shed more light in this regard.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. The onset of DA

Dynamic assessment has its roots in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind (Poehner 2008). The significance of the notion of DA lies in the fact that it extends the interactive nature of learning as promoted by mediation theory and ZPD to the process of assessment. DA renders the conventional approach to assessing learners' knowledge and abilities in which one person such as the teacher one-sidedly assesses the learner as inadequate and views assessment as a two-way process involving interaction between both parties. The assessor, therefore, enters into a dialog with the assessed in an

attempt to learn of their current level of performance and share with them the possible ways in which that level of performance might be improved a step further (Williams & Burden 2002).

Poehner (2008) argues that the lack of a learning phase during the assessment whose outcome is an underestimation of learners' underlying abilities constitutes a major hurdle in the current assessment processes. Contrary to the norm in the traditional testing which emphasized independent functioning of the learners, DA offers a more comprehensive and humanistic approach in which learners are assessed based on their assessed and unassessed performance (Lantolfn 2006; Anton 2009). Therefore, observation of solo performance will prove inadequate if one is to understand the development processes, introduce the necessary interventions in order to help learners overcome difficulties and aid them in their ZPD (Caffrey, Fuchs & Fuchs 2008; Poehner 2008). Instead, simultaneous active collaboration with individuals will reveal the full range of learner abilities. As mentioned earlier, the key to a monistic view of instruction and assessment is resort to mediation, defined as the appropriate form of support (Poehner 2008).

2.2. L2 studies on DA

As Haywood and Lidz (2007, p.2) contend, DA "is no longer a new approach to psychological and educational assessment [as] some of its current applications have been around for more than a half century." Thus, Haywood and Lidz enumerate the studies conducted on the basis of DA such as the one on reading by Gettinger (1984); on mathematics by Jitendra and Kameenui (1993); and on speech and language by Kozulin and Garb (2001), to name a few. Nonetheless, Poehner (2008, p.5) states that "to date, few studies have examined L2 performance from a Dynamic Assessment perspective, although the growing interest in Vygotskyan theory among applied linguists has led to some exploration of how DA principles might be used in L2 contexts." However, the following studies fall within L2 DA studies:

Lantolf and Aljaafreh (1995) investigated the interaction between adult ESL learners and a non-native, but more expert, tutor. Learners progressed in the ZPD through developmentally sensitive assistance in tutoring sessions. The emergence of a ZPD through pair-work resulted in performance at a higher level of competence for both students because a learner performs above his/her level of individual competence in the ZPD with the assistance of the peer and as the learner acts with increasing independence development occurs.

In another study, Poehner (2005) introduced a reconceptualized formative assessment according to the principles of dynamic assessment. He argued that formative assessment is not necessarily low stake and can be carried out quite systematically. In comparison with summative assessment it can reveal more systematic results based on the learners' development.

Poehner (2008) also assessed university students' ability to correctly decide between and conjugate the imparfait and passé compose in French when narrating a movie. He offered mediation tailored to the needs of his students in both a near and far transcendence task and concluded that using DA provided insight into the source of students' errors. He also concluded that the mediation resulted in improved understanding of these two tenses and aspect for the students.

Birjandi, Daftarifard, and Lange (2011) examined whether it is possible to distinguish the quantitative and qualitative effects of dynamic assessment on the items and persons. They used two types of Rasch scaling to scale sets of wh-type questions and scanning items. The results showed the anticipated quantitative improvement in learners' performance on the posttest relative to the pretest—for the wh-type questions as well as for scanning items. But clear qualitative effects were not found, because the item and person hierarchies were almost the same for the pre- and post-test.

Finally, Nazari and Mansouri (2014) explored the feasibility and practicality of development and implementation of Dynamic Assessment (DA) to reading comprehension of EFL students in the context of Iran. The results of this study displayed that the participants' performance improved dramatically on the post-test after DA- training but unlike static assessment, DA gives the language teacher a chance to appropriately gauge the students' understanding and ability level and how to improve the students' level development.

2.3. Purpose of the study

Literature in recent decade has gained much research interest concerning L2 teachers' knowledge of DA (e.g., Golombek 2011; Lidz & Gindis 2003; Murphy 2011; Poehner 2007, 2008; Poehner & Lantolf 2005; Sternberg & Grigorenko 2002). To further highlight the importance of education in teachers' assessment competence, and to compensate for the gap between theory and practice, Taras and Davis (2012) highlighted the dichotomy between assessment theory, classroom assessment, and learning process due to separation between practitioners and educationalists.

As a result, this study aims at investigating Iranian EFL university instructors' conceptualizations

toward dynamic assessment. For this purpose the following questions were formulated:

1. What are the Iranian EFL university instructors' conceptualizations toward dynamic assessment?

2. How is dynamic assessment applied practically by the Iranian EFL university instructors?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

In this study, 65 EFL university instructors with the average of four years of teaching experience were selected by the researcher based on purposive sampling. They were all M.A. and Ph.D. holders in TEFL teaching different courses of English Language Translation major at Islamic Azad University in Tehran. In the first phase of the 10 TEFL experts were interviewed in order explore their conceptualizations toward the issue of dynamic assessment. Then, a semi-structured interview was devised based on the coded ideas and responses obtained from the first phase's interview in order to run the second phase. Consequently, 4 EFL university instructors among 65 were selected randomly to attend a semi-structured interview to reflect their conceptualizations toward dynamic assessment. In the third phase of the study, these 4 instructors' classes were observed. And, finally, the total number of 65 instructors took part in answering a 5-scaled lickert questionnaire.

3.2. Instruments

A semi-structured interview, an observation checklist and a 5-scaled lickert questionnaire were utilized in this study, successively.

3.3. Procedure

In this study, Mixed Method design was used which is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods.

According to Sandelowski (2003), there are two main and somewhat conflicting purposes for combining methods: (a) to achieve a fuller understanding of a target phenomenon and (b) to verify one set of findings against the other. To this end, in the 1970s, scholars who conduct mixed methods research desired to combine qualitative and quantitative research methods through introduction of a new concept called "Triangulation". The term "Triangulation" became synonymous with combining data sources through multiple methods. This method maximizes both the internal and external validity of research and helps reduce the inherent weaknesses of individual methods (Dornyei, 2007).

In the present study, a field study was conducted. To do so, the researcher interviewed 10 TEFL experts to find out their perceptions toward TBLT. As a result of this phase of the study, the researcher coded the ideas and responses to prepare a semi-structured interview to be deployed at the second phase of the study.

Then, the questions were used to interview 4 instructors teaching different courses of English Language Translation major at Islamic Azad University in Tehran to find out their ideas toward dynamic assessment. Based on the coded interview responses, an observation checklist was devised to track down the instructors' orally expressed statements in their classrooms where dynamic assessment was practiced through an 8- sessioned non-participant observation. Then, the results derived from the

checklists were analyzed to devise a 5-scaled lickert questionnaire to distribute among the total number of 65 EFL instructors to generalize the results.

4. RESULT

4.1. Field study

Initially, 10 TEFL instructors were interviewed to explore their perceptions toward the issue of TBLT. As a result of this phase of the study, the ideas and responses were coded to device a semi-structured interview to interview 4 university EFL instructors.

4.2. Interview

At this stage, considering the coded data extracted from 10 instructors' interviews in the first phase, semi-structured interview questions were devised and then were deployed to interview 4 selected instructors teaching different courses of English Language Translation major at Islamic Azad University in Tehran to figure out their conceptualizations toward dynamic assessment.

The results of the semi-structured interview with 4 university EFL instructors are presented in the following table:

Table 1. The results of Interview with 4 university EFL instructors toward dynamic assessment

EFL instructors' conceptualizations toward dynamic assessment
✓ DA is process oriented rather than being product oriented. ✓ Applying DA in the classroom is a challenging process for teachers. ✓ Leaning is promoted through the application of DA. ✓ Learners' feedback in DA reflects efficiency and effectiveness of instruction. ✓ Teachers can facilitate learning process by being creative in applying DA. ✓ Teachers should be familiar with the theory of DA. ✓ Teachers' motivation and interest play pivotal roles in the deployment of DA. ✓ Learners' anxiety in static assessment may impede instructional role of assessment. ✓ DA generates motivation for learners and encourages learning. ✓ DA makes learners a better critical thinker. ✓ Duality of teachers' and systems' criteria for assessment limits the teachers' authority in the application of DA.

4.3. Observation

At this phase of the study, an observation checklist was developed based on the results of the conducted interview to observe the implementation of dynamic assessment in practice. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2. The result of observation checklist analysis of the 4 EFL university instructors

Items	The result of observation checklist analysis of the 4 EFL university instructors	Frequency
1	DA is process oriented rather than being product oriented.	28%
2	Applying DA in the classroom is a challenging process for teachers.	38%
3	Leaning is promoted through the application of DA.	45%
4	Learners' feedback in DA reflects efficiency and effectiveness of instruction.	30%
5	Teachers can facilitate learning process by being creative in applying DA.	33%
6	Teachers should be familiar with the theory of DA.	85%
7	Teachers' motivation and interest play pivotal roles in the deployment of DA.	40%
8	Learners' anxiety in static assessment may impede instructional role of assessment.	48%
9	DA generates motivation for learners and encourages learning.	46%
10	DA makes learners a better critical thinker.	38%
11	Duality of teachers' and systems' criteria for assessment limits the teachers' authority in the application of DA.	95%

The results show that considering most of the items, there is not a direct line between what the university instructors believed in and what they could perform in practice. The only exceptions go with items 6 and 11. In other words, instructors' familiarity with the concepts play an important role both in theory and practice but it is not the sufficient factor for having a perfect context to perform dynamic assessment. Moreover, the results reveal that the duality of teachers' and systems' criteria for assessment limits the teachers' authority in the application of DA both from teachers' conceptualizations point of view and their performance in classrooms.

4.4. Questionnaire survey

A 5-scaled lickert questionnaire was devised to indicate 65 EFL instructors' conceptualizations toward dynamic assessment to generalize the findings of the study. Table 3 depicts the results.

Table 3. The results of the questionnaire survey

Items	SA=1	A=2	U=3	D=4	SD=5
1	56%	36%	6%	2%	0%
2	55%	30%	5%	10%	0%
3	30%	57%	4%	9%	0%
4	46%	33%	8%	13%	0%
5	33%	30%	20%	17%	0%
6	46%	53%	10%	3%	0%
7	40%	40%	10%	10%	0%
8	48%	42%	8%	2%	0%
9	46%	42%	8%	4%	0%
10	38%	52%	7%	3%	0%
11	56%	42%	2%	0%	0%
SA: strongly agree, A:agree, U:Undecided, D:disagree, SD: Strongly disagree					

As it is shown in table 3, the majority of the ELT instructors agreed with the items, and there was no strong disagreement for any items in any of the sections. Regarding item 1 "DA is process oriented rather than being product oriented" 56% strongly agreed, 36% agreed, 6% gave undecided responses and 2% disagreed. For item 2, "applying DA in the classroom is a challenging process for teachers", there were 55% strong agreement, 30% agreement, 5% undecided responses and 10% disagreement. Item 3 “leaning is promoted through the application of DA” had 30% strong agreement, 57% agreement, 9% undecided responses, and 9% disagreement**.** Dealing with item 4" learners' feedback in DA reflects efficiency and effectiveness of instruction" 46% strongly agreed, 33% agreed, 8% gave undecided responses, and 13% disagreed. Considering item 5, teachers can facilitate learning process by being creative in applying DA, there were 33% strong agreement, 30% agreement, 20% undecided responses, and 17% disagreement. Item 6, " teachers should be familiar with the theory of DA had 46% strong agreement, 53% agreement, 10% undecided responses, and 3% disagreement. As with item 7 “teachers' motivation and interest play pivotal roles in the deployment of DA.”, 40% strongly agreed, 53% agreed, and 10% gave undecided answers, and 10% disagreed. Item 8, "learners' anxiety in static assessment may impede instructional role of assessment", came up with 46% strong agreement, 42% agreement, 8% undecided responses, and 4% disagreement. Item 9, "DA generates motivation for learners and encourages learning", showed 46% strong agreement, 42% agreement, 8% undecided answers, and 4% disagreement. Coming up with item 10, "DA makes learners a better critical thinker" there were 38% strong agreement, 52% agreement, 7% undecided responses, and only 3% disagreement. And finally, item 10, "duality of teachers' and systems' criteria for assessment limits the teachers' authority in the application of DA, revealed 56% strong agreement, 42% agreement, 2% undecided answers, and no disagreement.

5. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, according to the first research question which dealt with Iranian ELT university instructors' conceptualizations toward dynamic assessment, the findings show that the majority of university instructors in Iran have firm knowledge of dynamic assessment, although in a study Nabi Karimi and Shafiee (2014) reported significant variations in Iranian ELT teachers' perceptions regarding DA as a function of their education and experience. Considering the second research question in this study which looked at the implementation of DA in real classrooms as claimed by the instructors, it can be concluded that the potential infeasibility of DA observed in this study can be due to the gaps in the assessment system. This is the case due to the fact that the scoring system in Iran generally and at tertiary education specifically, is predominately based on testing not assessment. Professors have good command of knowledge in the field of assessment and even dynamic assessment but since the main portion of score should go to the summative assessments such as final exams, they cannot do much in moving the pendulum from static assessment to dynamic in scoring process. Due to the fact that sociocultural factors which demand scoring system may determine success or failure in the application of DA, thus the duality of teachers' and systems' criteria for assessment in Iran can limit the teachers' authority in the application of DA and impede its success.

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