

An Investigation into the Effect of Interactionist versus Interventionist Models of Dynamic Assessment on Iranian EFL Learners' Speaking Skill Proficiency

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Abstract

Dynamic Assessment (DA) refers to a range of approaches that incorporate mediation into the assessment procedure (Poehner, 2008). Although DA has been applied to some areas of second language pedagogy, its effect on speaking skill seems as if to be less attended to, hence the present study aims at investigating the effects of this assessment procedure on the Iranian advanced EFL learners speaking skill proficiency. To this end, 40 homogenous advanced EFL learners were divided into three groups. They were assigned to two DA groups and one Non-DA group. As the pretest, the participants of the three groups were interviewed to assess their speaking proficiency. Next, the Non-DA group participants were given specific topics as discussion topics and were required to discuss them in the class without any DA based intervention. The first DA group's participants were assessed and given the required assistance through interaction based DA procedures, while the second DA group received DA based intervention following Lantolf and Poehner (2011) scale to assess and assist the participants' speaking proficiency in their discussions. The results of two Matched Samples t-test indicated that: (a) interactionist model of DA had statistically significant positive effect on Iranian

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EFL learners' speaking ability; (b) interventionist model of DA had statistically significant positive effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. Furthermore, the results of ANCOVA indicated that the three groups, namely, interactionist DA, interventionist DA, and non-DA had statistically significant effects on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability with the interactionist DA group outperforming. The findings of this study can shed light on the comparative efficacy or inefficiency of the DA based assessment procedures in the realm of foreign language teaching and testing.

Keywords: Dynamic Assessment; Speaking Proficiency; Advanced EFL Learners

1. Introduction

Language testing is an undividable constituent of educational programs; however, Shepard (2000) states that the high-stakes-essence of the tests employed at the most educational contexts (e.g. school) are blamed to be accountable for restricting the curriculums because they force the instructors to only highlight the content which is going to be presented in the exams. Another problem of high-stakes-essence tests is reported to be that they influence the methodology applied by the teachers in the classrooms; as Gipps (1994) confirms, high stakes tests influence the extent and content of the instructional materials which are used by the teachers.

Further, Crooks (1988) believes that in high stakes settings, the learning is believed to be superficial. Learners are generally passive recipients of the knowledge, and their needs are normally disregarded (Broadfoot, 2005). This is due to the fact that the learners bank the contents of the materials for forthcoming withdrawal (Freire, 1970). In addition, high-stakes tests also influence the methodology employed by the instructors in the classrooms and they will force the teachers to spotlight only the sections which are included in the final tests. Kirkland (1971) states that these tests modify and deform the

curriculum. Likewise, as stated by Crooks (1988), standardized tests appear to focus on grading rather than improving learning.

On the other hand, alternative assessments tend to be more effective and educational. Crick and Yu (2008) believe that alternative assessments enhance learners' awareness regarding their own learning styles and characteristics and persuade them to be more responsible for their own learning. Besides, considering the dynamic nature of the classrooms, the interpretation of alternative assessments is much easier than traditional testing, which provides the instructors and learners with summative and formative perspectives. Dysthe (2011) believes that alternative assessments are tightly linked to the sociocultural theory. Gipps (1994) confirms this idea by claiming that alternative assessments are grounded in the cultural and social aspect of instructional tasks.

One of the most important forms of alternative assessment emerging from sociocultural theory is dynamic assessment. Dynamic assessment is grounded in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD). This approach offers an analytic comprehension of the current place of the students while concurrently improving their learning by providing them with particular mediations or minute hints throughout the process of assessment, which helps the students to remove or solve the obstacles in the process of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008). Therefore, the present study intended to investigate the effects of two major models of dynamic assessment, namely, interactionist and interventionist models, on Iranian EFL learners speaking ability. Furthermore, the possible existence of any difference between the effects of these two models on the learners' speaking ability was also investigated.

2. Dynamic Assessment

One of the Vygotsky's colleagues, Luria (1961) coined the term "dynamic assessment" in his English writings regarding Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) of mind. Vygotsky

believes that the abilities of human are constantly fluctuating and they are totally affected by two sources of mediation. These two primary sources are symbolic and physical instruments which can develop the learning systems. Vygotsky views learning as a sort of development and fluctuation between two points of independent and dependent performance.

Williams and Burden (1997) maintain that DA is a procedure in which “assessment and learning are seen as inextricably linked and not separate” (p. 42). Likewise, Lidz and Gindis (2003) define DA as an “approach to understanding individual differences and their implications for instruction that embeds intervention within the assessment procedure” (p. 99). Another definition worth mentioning is proposed by Haywood and Lidz (2007) who believe that dynamic assessment is “an interactive approach to conducting assessments that focuses on the ability of the learner to respond to intervention” (p. 1).

According to Poehner (2008), there are numerous approaches to dynamic assessment. The difference in the approaches is regarding their way of providing mediation. As Lantolf and Poehner (2008) assert, there are two main approaches to DA, namely, interventionist and interactionist.

2.1 Feuerstein’s interactionist model

In this model, Feuerstein completely incorporates assessment and instruction in a way that no one of them exists without the other one (Poehner, 2008). According to Feuerstein and Feuerstein (2001), the cognitive abilities of human are not static and could be customized or improved using interventions; therefore, general hypotheses regarding normal distributions of the conventional models of psychometrics and intelligence are disputed. A main concern in these kinds of assessments is the problem of cultural discrepancies (Lidz, 1983). Kozulin and Pressisen (1995) state that in Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) model of Feuerstein, the stimulus-response method is changed in a way that the student cooperate with a more

knowledgeable friend who assists the student by choosing, altering, intensifying, and explaining the objects with the student by mediations. Poehner (2008) also maintains that this model is different from the other models of instruction in that it emphasizes on enabling the learners to learn the way of acquiring more information. It tries to improve the learners' abilities in acquiring important skills and discovering successful methods of problem solving.

2.2 Brown's interventionist model

This model is based on the number of prompts required to obtain a desired answer. Gutierrez (2000) asserts that the potentiality of the students' learning, defined as a gain score, is predictable by the number of prompts required to achieve the objective and the extent to which learning is transferred to other tasks. As Poehner (2008) believes, Brown's interventionist model is different from Feuerstein's interactionist model with regard to the fact that in Brown's model of DA, mediation is ordered from the most implicit one to the most explicit one and ends with an accurate response. In this model, the tests are run in a roughly standardized method. If the student does not manage to complete the task successfully, the instructor provides him/her with required prompts.

There are two other forms of dynamic assessment, namely, Cake Model and the Sandwich model. Grigorenko's Cake Model is more integrated and it presents the students with required mediation all through the assessment process. The Sternberg's Sandwich Model is more similar to conventional forms of assessment which makes use of the pretest-intervention-posttest format (Poehner, 2008). This Model is also a more extensive format of dynamic assessment. The difference among particular models of dynamic assessment is with regard to their types of mediation throughout the administration of the assessment. In the graduated-prompt method, the test is like the

conventional tests and has an almost standardized manner (Brown & Ferrara, 1984).

2.3 Previous research findings

Numerous studies have been conducted on dynamic assessment. For instance, Malmeer and Zoghi (2014) investigated the impact of an interactionist model of DA on grammar ability of Iranian EFL learners. To fulfill the objectives of their study, the researchers selected 80 students. They implemented the interactionist model of DA as the treatment. The results of data analysis revealed that DA intervention has a statistically significant positive influence on the EFL learners' grammar ability.

In another attempt to explore the efficacy of DA, Ajideh and Nourdad (2012) investigated the existence of any difference between using dynamic and non-dynamic assessment of EFL learners' reading comprehension ability and exploring its instant and late impact. To this end, 197 Iranian university students took part in this study. The results of their study revealed a significant difference between dynamic and non-dynamic assessment of reading ability with the dynamic assessment outscoring. Furthermore, dynamic assessment had a statistically significant positive effect on EFL learners' reading ability and the positive effect did not vanish after a while.

Furthermore, the impact of dynamic assessment on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension, while considering different proficiency levels, was explored by Nourdad (2012). To this end, 197 Iranian EFL learners participated in his study. The results of data analysis indicated that dynamic assessment had positive immediate and delayed impact on the reading comprehension of the EFL learners.

In the same vein, Orikasa (2010) conducted a case study on the effect of interactionist DA in the context of second language learning by training second language English oral communication to examine how interactions between a mediator

and a first language Japanese learner are discussed and improves the student's ability. The results of his study indicated that interactionist DA in the second language context is successful in assisting the student to prevail over problems and have better performance through discussed interactions with the mediator and showing the learner's real capability.

Furthermore, Anton (2009) investigated the realization of diagnostic assessment in an advanced Spanish language program. The researcher paid particular attention to the implementation of dynamic assessment procedures as a way of assessing language capability, providing interventions in learning, and documenting learners' progress. The procedures of assessment applied to third-year Spanish language learners were described in order to illustrate the possible impacts that dynamic assessment can have on second language learning. Therefore, the learners took a five-part diagnostic test. The speaking and writing sections of the test were conducted on the ground of the assumptions of dynamic assessment. The analysis of the findings indicated that dynamic assessment provides a more profound and comprehensive account of the students' real and potential abilities, which provides the programs with the opportunity of developing individualized educational policies adjusted for the students' needs.

In another attempt, Panahi, Birjandi, and Azabdaftari (2013) conducted a study under the title of "Toward a sociocultural approach to feedback provision in L2 writing classrooms: the alignment of dynamic assessment and teacher error feedback". They argued that feedback is an important constituent of teaching second language writing. Furthermore, they stated that since the field of teaching writing of second language has put more stress on sociocultural concerns, the subjects pertinent to the essence, negotiation, and delivery of feedback are required to be revised. Therefore, they intended to suggest a sociocultural basis for such a revision by incorporating dynamic assessment

into the re-examining phase of the writing process in second language writing classes. They discussed how this implementation of DA might develop the essence of instructor error feedback and the delivery related to it in second language writing classes.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Forty homogenous advanced EFL learners from private language institutes in Kurdistan Province participated in this study. The learners were assigned to two DA groups and one Non-DA group which served as the control group. The participants' age ranged from 17 to 29.

3.2 Design

The main objective of the present study is investigating the Effect of Interactionist versus Interventionist Models of Dynamic Assessment on Iranian EFL Learners' Speaking Skill Proficiency. Therefore, an experimental design was adopted in conducting the current study.

3.3 Materials

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of two different approaches of dynamic assessment on the Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. To realize the objectives of the study, along with a placement test, the researchers made use of two interviews which served as the instruments of the study. The first interview was designed as the pretest and the second one was designed as the posttest of the study. The administration of the interview with each student took almost five to ten minutes.

4. Procedure

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of two different approaches of DA, namely, interactionist and interventionist, on the EFL learners speaking ability. First a placement test was conducted in order to homogenize them; then the participants of the study were divided into three groups, two

DA groups and one Non- DA group. To evaluate the speaking proficiency of the learners, all the 40 participants of the study were interviewed. The results of the interview were scored using IELTS scale for scoring speaking. This interview served as the post-test for the three groups. The treatment for the DA groups took eight sessions in eight weeks (one session per each week).

In the non-DA group the normal way of teaching speaking was performed. The students received no DA intervention throughout the course. The participants of this group were given particular topics for discussion and were required to discuss them in the class without any DA based intervention utilized for assessing and improving their speaking ability.

The second group's participants were assessed and given the required assistance through interactionist DA procedures. In this group, namely, interactionist DA group, assistance and intervention were presented through the interaction between the student and the assessor. The improvement in this approach is greatly sensitive to the ZPD of the students.

In the second experimental group, the effect of interventionist DA was investigated. Similar to the other DA group, the learners, in their speaking tasks, received interventions from the instructor to both assess and improve the learners' speaking ability. The learners received DA based intervention following Lantolf and Poehner (2011) scale. The Lantolf and Poehner's (2011) scale was implemented to offer mediation on the ground of each student's answer. If the student's answer was correct, no mediation was provided. But if the student's answer was not correct, the instructor selected one of the 8 forms offered by Lantolf and Poehner's (2011) scale namely: (1) Teacher pauses; (2) Teacher repeats the whole phrase questioningly; (3) Teacher repeats just the error part of the sentence; (4) Teacher asks a question, for example: what is wrong with this sentence; (5) Teacher points out the incorrect word; (6) Teacher asks either...or... questions; (7) Teacher identifies the correct

answer; (8) Teacher explains why. It can be observed that the list moves from most implicit to most explicit form in offering the mediation for the participants in the DA group. This approach is similar to specific types of static assessment, that is, the types of help offered are standardized which focus on the psychometric features of assessment procedures. Likewise, the treatment for this group of learners took eight sessions in eight weeks.

When the treatments of the experimental groups were finished, the researcher conducted another interview similar to the first one. All the participants in the three groups were interviewed by the researcher. The interviews were scored using IELTS scale of scoring speaking. The administration of the interview for each participant took almost five minutes. This interview served as the posttest to see whether the treatments have been effective or not.

5. Results

This study aimed at examining the effect of two major models of dynamic assessment, namely, interactionist and interventionist models, on the Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. Furthermore, the probable existence of any difference between the effects of these two models of DA on the learners' speaking ability was also investigated. To this end, three research questions and consequently three null-hypotheses were posed whose results are presented here.

Research question 1

Does interactionist DA have any statistically significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability?

In order to answer the first research question of the study, a Paired Samples t-test was run the results of which are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Pre- and Post- Test Scores of EFL Learners in Interactionist DA Group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Interactionist DA, Pretest	5.92	12	1.16	.33
Interactionist DA, Posttest	7.92	12	.99	.28

As can be observed in Table 1, the mean score for the pretest of interactionist group was 5.92 and the standard deviation for this set of scores was 1.16. The mean score and standard deviation for the posttest of this group were 7.92 and .99, respectively.

Table 2
Paired Samples t-test for Interactionist DA Group

	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
Interactionist Pretest Interactionist Posttest	-2.00	1.34	.38	-2.85	-1.14	-5.13	11	.000

As indicated in Table 2, $t_{11} = -5.13$ ($p < .05$), the pre-test and post-test results were significantly different; in other words, the results of the post-test ($M=7.92$, $SD = .99$) was significantly better than the results of the pre-test ($M=5.92$, $SD = 1.16$). The learners' performance after the treatment improved significantly.

Research question 2

Does interventionist DA have any statistically significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability?

In order to test the second hypothesis, another Paired Samples t-test was run the results of which are summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Pre- and Post- Test Scores of EFL Learners in Interventionist DA Group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Interventionist DA, Pretest	5.77	13	1.09	.30
Interventionist DA, Posttest	6.38	13	1.19	.33

As indicated in Table 3, the mean score and standard deviation for the pretest of the students in the interventionist group were 5.77 and 1.09, respectively. The learners' mean score on the post-test was 6.38 and their standard deviation was calculated to be 1.19.

Table 4

Paired Samples t-test for Interventionist DA Group

	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
Interventionist pretest Interventionist posttest	-.61	.50	.14	-.92	-.309	4.38	12	.001

As is evident in Table 4, $t_{12} = -4.38$ ($p < .05$), the results of the pre-test and post-test were significantly different, i.e., the learners' performance on the post-test ($M=6.38$, $SD = 1.19$) was significantly better than their performance on the pre-test ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.09$).

Research question 3

Is there any statistically significant difference between the effect of interactionist DA and interventionist DA on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability?

In order to answer the last research question of the study, ANCOVA was utilized whose results are summarized in tables 5 and 6.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics

grouping	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Interactionist	7.92	.99	12
Interventionist	6.38	1.19	13
Non-DA	5.87	1.06	15
Total	6.65	1.36	40

As is evident in Table 5, there were three groups in this study, two DA groups, namely interactionist and interventionist and one non-DA group which served as the control group. The mean and standard deviation for the post-test of the interactionist group were 7.92 and .99, respectively. In the second group, i.e. interventionist DA, the mean score of the learners was 6.38 and the standard deviation of the post-test scores was 1.19. In the non-DA group, the mean score and the standard deviation of the learners' performance on the post-test were 5.87 and 1.06, respectively.

Table 6
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects, ANCOVA

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	47.803 ^a	3	15.934	22.676	.000
Intercept	11.084	1	11.084	15.774	.000
pretest	18.430	1	18.430	26.227	.000
G	22.813	2	11.407	16.233	.000
Error	25.297	36	.703		
Total	1842.000	40			
Corrected Total	73.100	39			

a. R Squared = .654 (Adjusted R Squared = .625)

Table 6 presents the results of ANCOVA. As it can be observed, F-ratio for G is 16.23 and the F-ratio for pre-test is 26.22 which are both statistically significant at the alpha level .05. Hence, it can be asserted that the learners' development in the three groups were statistically different from each other. That is to say, interactionist DA, interventionist DA, and non-

DA groups had significantly different effects on developing the speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners.

6. Discussion

The present study intended to investigate the effect of two major models of dynamic assessment, namely, interactionist and interventionist models, on developing speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, the probable existence of any difference between the effects of these two models of DA on the learners' speaking ability was also investigated.

The first research question investigated the effect of interactionist DA on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. The results of a Paired Samples t-test revealed that the scores of the learners on the pretest and post-test were significantly different with the post-test scores being much better. That is to say, the mediation based on the interactionist model of DA has been effective and it develops the learners' ability in speaking. Therefore, it can be argued that a good way of improving the EFL learners' speaking ability is making use of interactionist model of DA in second language learning classes.

Pohner (2005) states that dynamic assessment is an approach in which "assessment and instruction are dialectically integrated as the means to move toward an always emergent (that is, dynamic) future" (p. 20). By incorporating assessment and teaching, the teacher desires to assist second language students to perform over and above their real capability. Students who are not able to perform by themselves and elevate to the next level of competence by offering mediation, cooperation and interaction. As Pohner and Lantolf (2005) maintain, Interactionist DA focuses on a qualitative interpretation of ZPD. Vygotsky (1978) defines ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Therefore, it can

be claimed that Interactionist DA helps the learners' to reach their potential capabilities which are restricted because of some obstacles. Interactionist DA tries to remove those obstacles by requiring the mediator (that is the instructor as well) to provide the necessary mediation for the learners and help them to realize their potential capabilities. These arguments can, to some degree, justify the results of the present study in this particular aspect.

The results of the present study in this particular aspect are in line with those of a study conducted by Orikasa (2010). He conducted a case study of interactionist DA in the second language learning context by teaching second language English oral communication to investigate how interactions between a teacher and a first language Japanese learner are discussed and can improve the student's performance. The results of his study revealed that interactionist DA in the context of second language learning was successful in assisting the student to rise above the problems and have a better performance through discussed interactions with the teacher and showing the student's actual competence.

The second research question of the study aimed at investigating the effect of interventionist DA on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. Similarly, the results of a Paired Samples t-test indicated that the students' performance on the post-test was significantly better than their performance on the pre-test. Therefore, it can be concluded that the treatment has been effective and a good way of improving the learners' speaking ability is using interventionist model of DA in classes.

The interventionist DA model is concerned with estimating the total amount of help that a learner requires to competently reach a pre-determined point. In the context of dynamic assessment, interpretations regarding potential performance of the learners are not made based on the learner's current

dependent performance; rather, it is made on the account of the type and amount of intervention needed by the learners.

The mediation that is offered at some stages in an interventionist assessment is standardized implying that it is organized so that the student is provided with mediation, normally from implicit to explicit. As Poehner (2008) specifies the “mediators are not free to respond to learners’ needs as these become apparent during the procedure but must instead follow a highly scripted approach to mediation in which all prompts, hints, and leading questions have been arranged in a hierarchical manner” (p. 44-45). Interventionist DA provides the learners with step to step mediation, moving from most implicit to most explicit, with the purpose of finding out at what level of assistance the learner is able to achieve the predetermined point. Therefore, it seems logical that interventionist DA helps the learners in developing their speaking ability.

The last research question of this study intended to investigate whether there was any statistically significant difference between the effect of interactionist DA and interventionist DA on Iranian EFL learners’ speaking ability. The results of ANCOVA indicated that the three groups, namely, interactionist DA, interventionist DA, and non-DA had statistically significant effects on Iranian EFL learners’ speaking ability. While both approaches, namely interactionist DA and interventionist DA, had positive effects on improving the learners speaking ability, as the results of the study indicated, the interactionist DA approach had a more successful effect on improving the learners’ speaking ability than that of the interventionist approach. Better performance of the interactionist group over the interventionist group may be justified by as follows.

Interactionist DA follows Vygotsky’s dialoguing collaboration. In this model of DA, assistance is caused by the interaction between the mediator and the student, and is

consequently extremely responsive to the students' ZPD. On the other hand, interventionist DA is more closely connected to psychometric considerations of numerous static modes of assessment.

Regarding this characteristic of interventionist DA, Luria (1961) asserts that statistical approaches like psychometric tests are unsuccessful in representing a comprehensive picture of students' potentials (Pohner & Lantolf, 2005). He further states that, to obtain a complete picture of students' capabilities, two significant pieces of information are vital: the students' performance with assistance from the mediator and the extent to which the learners can develop. Further, Luria (1961) recommended that "the most important problem is that we have to pay more attention not only to the diagnosis, but also to the prognosis of the developmental potential of the children" (p. 5).

Furthermore, interventionist DA makes use of standardized administration measures and types of helps to generate scientific results which can be utilized to compare and contrast other measures within and between groups, and to predict the learners' performance in other tasks. Based on these arguments, it may be justified that the interactionist model of DA is more closely linked to the underlying assumptions of the dynamic assessment and therefore it is more successful than interventionist approach.

7. Conclusions

The present study set out to investigate the effects of two major models of dynamic assessment, namely, interactionist DA and interventionist DA, on Iranian EFL learners speaking ability. Besides, the potential existence of any difference between the effects of these two models on the learners' speaking ability was also investigated.

The results of a Paired Samples t-test indicated that the interactionist model of DA had a statistically significant positive effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. Furthermore, in

investigating the effect of interventionist DA on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability, the results of a Paired Samples t-test revealed that the interventionist model of DA had a statistically significant positive effect on developing Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. Finally, the results of ANCOVA indicated that the three groups, namely, interactionist DA, interventionist DA, and non-DA had statistically significant effects on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability with the interactionist DA group outperforming.

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