

# Research on Application of Dynamic Assessment in Foreign Languages Teaching

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**Abstract**—This study first introduces the origin and definition of dynamic assessment, and then analyzes the differences between dynamic assessment and traditional non-dynamic assessment. Considering many advantages of dynamic assessment, more and more foreign languages teachers apply it in their teaching. Through the literature review on its application in foreign languages teaching, this study analyzes its four functions in teaching, such as avoiding underestimating students' abilities, revealing the degree of mistakes made by students, tracking students' development changes in real time and promoting students' development. The findings of this research will help to promote application of dynamic assessment in foreign language teaching.

**Keywords**—*Dynamic assessment, Foreign languages teaching, Mediation*

## I. THE ORIGIN AND DEFINITION OF DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT

The origin of dynamic assessment can be traced back to intelligence test a century ago. In 1905, Alfred Binet and his colleagues published the world's first scale on children's intelligence level tests. But soon he realized that intelligence tests should not only look at the results, but also assess children's cognitive processes and learning processes (Haywood&Tzuriel, 2002). Although he was enthusiastic about the idea at the time, he never made a viable solution. The biggest problem on intelligence test is that it only reflects the results of individual development statically. In the 1950s, Piaget's perspective on children's cognitive development and the process of intellectual assessment provided theoretical preparation for dynamic assessment. What really promoted the development of dynamic assessment was the socio-cultural theory proposed by Vygotsky.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory highlighted social, cultural and historical influence on children's psychological development, and he also innovatively proposed the concept of "mediation", "scaffolding" and "zone of proximal development". These concepts have had an important impact on the development of dynamic evaluation, the most influential of which is the concept of "zone of proximal development". Zone of proximal development refers to 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 able peers (Vygotsky, 1978 :86). Vygotsky emphasized that children's response from the help of an adult or a partner can be used to understand the cognitive energy of children because it provides an insight into child's future development, that is, what children can do now with help, What can be done on his own in the future.

Therefore, if we want to comprehensively assess the development of an individual's ability, it is not enough to focus on the actual development zone. It is necessary to pay attention to the zone of proximal development, that is, what can be formed and what can be done future. With this in mind, the assessment is as close as possible to the cognitive development process itself. The zone of proximal development concept has laid a solid foundation for dynamic assessment theory and practice. Researches related to dynamic assessment began in the 1930s, but a large number of specialized studies emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and culminated in the late 1990s. The main representatives were Feuerstein, Budoff, Carlson, Campione, Brown, Stott, and Lidz et al.

Due to the different insights and focuses of different scholars, a series of different dynamic assessment methods have been proposed. Lantolf & Poehner (2004) argues that these patterns can be broadly divided into two categories: interventionist and interactionist. In the intervention model, the form of mediation is standardized. It focuses on the "quantitative" indicator of evaluation: index of speed of learning (Brown & Ferrara1985:300) and the amount of help a learner needs to reach the learning goals specified beforehand quickly and effectively. In the interactive mode, mediation appears in the interaction between the evaluator and the learner. Concerning on the definition of dynamic assessment, this study will adopt the one put forward by Lidz. He pointed that dynamic assessment (DA) is a general term for a series of assessment methods that explore and discover students' potential developmental abilities through the interaction of evaluators and students, especially with the help of experienced evaluators (Lidz, 2003: 337).

## II. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT AND NON-DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT

First of all, the process of dynamic assessment is a process of combining evaluation and instruction. Some scholars even figured out the central feature that distinguished dynamic assessment from non-dynamic assessment is that DA does not separate instruction from assessment but instead considers them as two sides of the same coin (Lantolf&Thorne, 2012). Teachers complete the assessment of students' potential abilities through interacting with students, and provide corresponding mediation according to their zone of proximal development to promote their actual development. In the whole process,

instruction and assessment co-exist. However, in non-dynamic assessment, evaluation and instruction are separate. Non-dynamic assessment is a measurement to test the results of the teacher's instruction. In traditional teaching method, instruction and assessment are two independent steps and never take place meantime. The form of non-dynamic assessment is composed of a series of unified and standard tests. Teachers only play the role of tester in it and do not make any intervention and feedback on the test results of the students.

Secondly, the focus in dynamic assessment and non-dynamic assessment is totally different. The non-dynamic assessment test focuses on the learner's existing ability, which is designed to examine the students' learning results through a period of time. The major concern of it is learning result rather than process. In other words, it wants to test what learners can do and what they can't do. In addition, what is the rank of their ability compared to their peers. However, the dynamic assessment pays attention to the future and aims to discover the potential development ability of the learners. It is concerned with how students learn under new conditions, how their learning and behavioral performance can be improved, how much can be improved, and what obstacles need to be overcome to achieve the desired level. The teacher's mediation during DA will help to promote the development of learners' potential. Only by dynamically assessing learners and accurately grasping the learner's recent development zone in real time can it effectively promote the development of its potential capabilities. The unified and static test results of non-dynamic assessment ignore the individual differences in capacity development, and it will lead to the learners' mechanical mastery of past knowledge.

Finally, the relationship between the evaluator and the examinee is different. In the non-dynamic assessment, in order to ensure the fairness and accuracy of the assessment, examinees are given little or no feedback on the quality of their performance until the assessment is complete. In dynamic assessment, the main form of assessment is the interaction between the examiner and the examinee, and the examiner will provide a specific form of feedback—mediated assistance which is the core of the assessment process. In the interaction, the evaluator plays the role of the mentor and facilitator of the examiner's learning. The two sides have a common goal in the assessment: that is to complete the potential development of the examinee.

Generally speaking, non-dynamic assessment is characterized by objectiveness and quantification, and the design is precise and structural. It focuses on the level that students have achieved so far, with a specific focus on learning results by only providing information on the success or failure of the student's learning, and centers on the evaluator. Dynamic Evaluation emphasizes the interaction between evaluators and students, stressing a combination between evaluation and teaching, highlighting the characteristics of students' cognitive processes and cognitive changes, and especially focuses on the potential cognitive development of students.

### III. THE APPLICATION OF DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT IN ENGLISH TEACHING

**Preventing Teachers from Underestimating Students' Abilities.** Standardized non-dynamic assessment can only test whether a student has mastered a certain knowledge point, and not reflect the reasons why they fail in acquiring that knowledge point and the difficulties which they encountered in the learning process. Therefore, if we rely on the results of the non-dynamic assessment to test students' ability, we will tend to underestimate the ability of students. Budoff (1968) apparently stated that his research endeavored to uncover hidden potential among underprivileged learners, whose abilities were typically underestimated by non-dynamic tests.

In the study, it became clear that one of the learners, Amanda, used only the present tense and one of the past tense forms, the *passé composé*, avoiding the *imparfait* altogether when telling stories in French. The *passé composé* in French equals to present perfective aspect (PP) in English and emphasizes past actions, events, or states of being as completed at some point before the present time. In addition, the *imparfait* (present imperfective aspect) in French equals to past progressive tense and is used to express states of being in the past or the unfinished repetitive action. When telling story, Amanda used *passé composé* instead of *imparfait* in the situation when it was needed. When the evaluator found this situation, he reminded Amanda that there were two tenses in French that express past actions. But the evaluator's reminder did not affect Amanda's expression, she still kept using present perfective aspect and avoiding the present imperfective aspect. Therefore, the evaluator once again interrupted Amanda, reminding her that there still exists a type of tense called present imperfective aspect and letting her pay attention to the difference between the present perfective aspect and present imperfective aspect. But he did not explain the difference between these two tenses, nor did he provide examples of tenses. When Amanda once again told the story, she could use both of these tenses to tell the story, although she sometimes made some mistakes.

It is evident that without dialogic interaction between the evaluator and the learner it would have been difficult to discover that Amanda did indeed have some control over verbal aspect. A non-dynamic procedure would have more than likely underestimated Amanda's level of development.

**Revealing the Degree of Mistakes Made by Students.** Non-dynamic assessments focus learning results and do not provide specific reasons analysis for different students who give the same wrong answers. Furthermore, it is found that in some cases two individuals whose performances bore striking phenotypic similarities were actually at different levels of development through interaction between mediator and learner. One learner, Nancy, performed in ways very similar to Amanda during her initial DA. However, through interaction mediator determined that the reasons for her problematic performance were different. When Nancy tried to tell the story in French, she didn't use the tense of present imperfective aspect. However, when the evaluator reminded her that she could consider using that tense, Nancy still did not use it. Through mediator's interaction with her, the mediator found that Nancy seldom used present imperfective aspect because she was not sure about the composition of the tense and how to use it properly. Unlike Amanda who forgot the tense for a while, Nancy didn't use the tense because she

didn't know how to use it. Although the mistakes of different learners on the surface are similar, the reasons for the errors are not the same. But the reasons of mistakes can only be found through dynamic assessment.

**Tracking Student Development Changes in Real Time.** As we all know, non-dynamic assessment methods can not evaluate the change of students' ability. It pays more attention to the overall difficulty of testing and the distribution of different difficulty test questions. Therefore, whether students consider tests simple or difficult, they all need to face the same test questions. However, in the dynamic assessment, the evaluator can grasp the change of the learner's ability at any time, and give the most appropriate help according to the learner's reaction. Because the development of human ability is a complex and unpredictable process, and only through interaction with learners can you understand the degree of their abilities development. In his research, Lantolf (2010) documented the development of a Spanish learner, Vicente. Vicente's development process is not gradual. Begin with making mistakes, he experienced the teacher's frequent prompts and he can correct the mistakes spontaneously after three days. His progress speed is very amazing because not all learners can have such a fast progress. Undoubtedly, his progress is mainly due to the evaluator's help. In dynamic assessment, mediator can trace learner's present development level through dialoguing with him or her in real time and provide proper mediation to promote their potential ability development, which is not available in non-dynamic assessments.

**Promoting Learners' Development.** Gibbons (2003) proposed that teacher's mediation in the dynamic assessment would promote learners' development through the teacher's successfully co-constructing the zone of proximal development with his or her learners. He observed classrooms interaction between teachers and students when students attempted to report the results of physics experiments in the group discussion. The teacher asked students to do group discussion with a simple hint that the students should describe what happened during the experiment. The common problem made by students was that they tend to use everyday language, such as "stick" "hold" and "push", to describe physics experiment of magnetism. At first, the teacher just pointed out that students' answers were not proper by asking them to try again. This form of mediation is clearly quite implicit, as the teacher didn't give any feedback on what students should do to improve their descriptions. After trying, students found them struggling to use the appropriate scientific discourse to express herself. When the teacher found the implicit prompt fail, she moved to a more explicit prompt and asked students to start using the scientific language. In this time, one learner succeeded using the terms attract and repel to describe the behavior of the magnets.

Lantolf and Poehner (2004, 65), analyzed this same episode in Gibbons's study and argued that the learners' actual level of development was based on a concrete understanding of the experiment, so they described it by using everyday language. A more generalized description relied on the use of scientific terminology lay within their zone of proximal development because they were able to perform appropriately when offered mediation help from the teacher. That is, the students observed in this study were not able to use the terms independently, but they also did not need the teacher to provide the scientific discourses meanwhile. From the case in this study, we found that students' language use transformed from everyday language into the specialist discourse through the mediation provided by the teacher. During the dynamic assessment process, the teacher successfully co-constructed a ZPD with her learners and learners achieved their potential level of development.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Based on literature review on teaching application dynamic assessment, this study summarized the functions of dynamic assessment in foreign languages teaching. It will help teacher to assess learners' actual level of development in real time and analyze their learning problem. With aid of it, teacher can promote learners potential level of development. Compared to non-dynamic assessment, dynamic assessment has so many advantages. Therefore, we should promote dynamic assessment to foreign languages teaching so that more teachers can use it and it will benefit more students.

Since dynamic assessment become more acceptable nowadays, it is necessary for us to look into the direction and trend of the future development of dynamic assessment research. With the rapid development of wireless communication technology, blended learning based on information learning resources and online learning platforms becomes an effective way of learning compared with traditional classroom teaching and remote online learning. This kind of learning method combines classroom face-to-face learning and various forms of online learning to meet the learner-led and fragmentation learning requirements of the information age. From the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) model to today's combination of online learning and flipped classroom model, blended learning will be one of the main ways to improve teaching efficiency in the future. We need to try to apply dynamic assessment into this blended learning and find out the suitable model of dynamic assessment for it.

In addition, Computer-based testing is another tendency in the field of testing. There are many advantages of online dynamic assessment. For example, it can manage many learners at the same time, independent individuals can be evaluated repeatedly; and evaluation reports can be automatically generated. Therefore, online dynamic assessments are less restrictive than dynamic assessments in actual classrooms. In the future, we may replace the classroom dynamic assessment with on assessment. In this way, the efficiency of assessment will be badly improved. At the same time, some researcher proposed a new model of peer's assessment instead of teacher's assessment. However, some people may question the feasibility of peer review, and research shows that peer review is feasible. Swain (2001) pointed out that even in the small talk, students may use the various psychological strategies (such as reference, clarification) when trying to express their ideas. These strategies could help them to form and externalize learners' assumptions, which they will jointly evaluate, and finally give appropriate responses.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the financial support of 13th Five-Year Social Science Project of Education Department of Jilin Province—Research and Application of Dynamic Assessment of Model in Flipped Classroom of College English (JJKH20190747SK). This paper is a part of research results of the project.

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