Examining the Implementation of Dynamic Assessment in Development of Listening Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

Dynamic assessment (henceforth, DA) is an approach to assessment which is derived from Vygotsky's notion of zone of proximal development (ZPD). More precisely, DA is as an alternative to traditional testing which emphasizes greatly on the role of interaction. Recently, the focus of research has shifted from testing listening to teaching it through the use of dynamic assessment; therefore, the present paper aims at reviewing the implementation of dynamic assessment (DA) on listening comprehension. Reviewing the literature has shown that generally dynamic assessment has led learner's development in listening comprehension. Moreover, the present paper concluded some valuable points. First, group dynamic assessment was conducted in most studies. Second, researchers applied mixed method in their researches. Third, interactionist kind of DA was mainly used and finally lower-intermediate and intermediate learners were the subjects of most studies.

Introduction

Lantolf and Poehner (2004) refer to DA as a kind of procedure to assessment which unifies assessment and instruction into a single activity. It aims at promoting learners' knowledge through mutual interaction among teachers and learners by providing appropriate feedbacks. Haywood and Lidz (2007) explain that DA is a kind of assessment varies from traditional kind of assessment while including the teacher's interaction and learner's responsiveness as reactions. More precisely, the manipulation of listening process is achieved through dynamic instruction in classes. The present paper attempts to review applying DA-based instruction in listening classes.

Definition of dynamic assessment (DA)

Dynamic assessment as a kind of an ongoing assessment rooted in Vygotsky's concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) more than 80 years ago. Vygotsky (1978) discovered that a child's independent performance is merely a partial image of his/her ability, because a child can perform better when he/she is assisted by a more skilled person. Haywood and Lidz (2007, p.1) defines this approach to assessment as follows: "an interactive approach to conducting assessments within the domains of psychology, speech/language, or education that focuses on the ability of the learner to respond to intervention." They believe that the distinctive feature of DA is an active collaboration between teacher and learners during the learning process. Following Lantolf and Poehner (2008), assessment and instruction as a single activity in DA seeks to simultaneously diagnose and enhance learners' development by offering mediation.

Mediation is provided during the assessment procedure and is intended to lighten the problematic areas and not only help learners overcome the problems but also fosters development. Generally, mediation may include leading questions, hints, prompts, feedback, and examples. This cooperative process aims at promoting learner development and the mediation provided, leads to learners' emerging needs.

Interactionist and Interventionist DA

There are two approaches to dynamic assessment: interactionist and interventionist DA. In these approaches, assessment and instruction as a unified activity can activate learning potential and recognize the higher level of students' abilities. With regard to interventionist DA, mediations offered are prefabricated and they are predetermined hints and clues. Generally, the learners' reactions or responsiveness is not important for the mediator Lantolf (2009). According to Birjandi and Ebadi (2009), interventionist DA is closer to static assessment and quantifying. Specifically, mediations are scaled in the form of a graded set of standardized hints from implicit to explicit. Moreover, the variation of the learners is due to the number of mediations not the content of mediation, in other words, interventionist approach tends to quantitative analysis. With regard to interactionist DA, learners are viewed as individuals and both interaction and collaboration among the teacher and learners will form the appropriate kind of feedbacks. following Minick (1987, p. 119) interactionist dynamic assessment is considered for "qualitative assessment of psychological processes and dynamics of their qualitative development". Interactionist DA is the result of the interaction between the learner and mediator and is sensitive to both

context and the learner's ZPD. therfore, mediations are context- sensitive and would vary from learner to learner. To put in a nutshell, interactionist approach tends to qualitative analysis.

Assessing listening

Listening plays an important role in learning a new language. In fact, giving preliminary focus to listening in the early stages of acquiring a language would benefit the development of other language skills. Following Lynch and Mendelson (2002) and Nunan (2002), traditionally, listening was a passive process but now listening is considered as an active process and listeners are as active as speakers. Simply put, in traditional listening classes, the listeners just listened and answered some follow-up questions (testing listening) but recently the focus has shifted from testing listening to teaching it. Listening skill could be developed by practicing when learners reflect on the process of listening. To that end, teachers can help learners how to come to the right responses by manipulating the listening process through dynamic-based instruction.

Traditionally, there have been three approaches to assessing listening: discrete point approach, integrative approach and communicative approach (Buck, 2001). Discrete point testing was the most common approach to testing proposed by Lado. The basic idea in discrete point testing is the possibility of isolating the separate units of linguistic knowledge and test each separately. According to Lado (as cited in Buck, 2001) listening comprehension is a process of discriminating the sounds of language. Mainly, selected responses are used in discrete point testing. The most common ones are true/ false and multiple-choice options. Phonemic discrimination tasks, paragraph recognition and response evaluation are among discrete point testing tasks.

Afterwards, Oller advocated integrative testing. "Whereas discrete point items attempt to test knowledge of language, one bit at a time, integrative tests attempt to assess a learner's capacity to use many bits all the same time" Oller (as cited in Buck, 2001). The basic idea is about using a language not knowing about it. Listening close, dictation, sentence repetition, statement evaluation and translation are the tasks in integrative testing.

Finally, communicative testing developed in response to communicative language teaching. Communicative language teaching is based on the idea for communication, in a particular situation with a particular purpose. Following Widdowson (as cited in Buck, 2001), by communicative testing, it is claimed to test the use of language not the usage and distinguishes between Chomsky's competence and performance. Besides it is believed that communicative tests should test performance not competence: simply put, they should test the language use in ordinary situations.

Implementing DA in Listening Classes

To date there has been little research on the implementation of DA-based instruction on listening comprehension. One major reason is that early research concerned testing listening. Recently, testing listening has shifted to teaching it. Recent developments in language teaching for listening heightened the need for implementing dynamic assessment in teaching listening. Researchers tried to analyze the data both quantitatively and qualitatively while practicing listening comprehension through dynamic assessment. Regarding ESL context, a preliminary work was undertaken by Ableeva (2010). Quantitatively, she investigated the effects of dynamic assessment on improving listening comprehension of intermediate French university students. In her study, three stages of pre-test, enrichment program, post-test were applied. The pre, post- test stages were conducted in non- dynamic assessment. The mediator provided mediation in the enrichment program stage. After comparing the results, there was a great progress and development in the learners' listening comprehension ability. From the qualitative perspective, by applying an interactionist approach to dynamic assessment, she designed a typology of meditational strategies provided by the teacher and a typology of learners' responses to those meditational strategies. Both the typology of meditational strategies and the learners' responsive moves were as the result of the learners-teacher interactions in the learning process. The typology of meditational strategy included teacher's hints and prompts in which the mediations offered are not predetermined in advance and they are as the result of teacher-learner interactions in the context of learning. This meditational typology helped the learners to self-correct and to be more engaged in the learning process moving from the most implicit to the most explicit kinds of feedback. This typology revealed the students' autonomy toward learning. Besides, the learners' responsive moves indicated that by applying a dynamic-based instruction to listening class, students tried to be more responsive to the teachers' feedbacks and this was the indicator of learners' engagement in the learning process and that the learners viewed listening as a simple activity.

With regard to EFL context, Alavi and Taheri (2014) employed a mixed method to study the effects of dynamic assessment of EFL learners. The participants were 57 students and they were randomly divided into one experimental and one control group. The participants were required to listen to a listening track and then transcribe it. The control group just listened to audio files and then took the test while simultaneously the experimental group received teachers' help through mediations. Practicing listening through dynamic assessment could help teacher to diagnose the source of problem and meanwhile help learners to overcome their problems. Qualitatively, they reported and transcribed the interactions between learners and teacher. The qualitative analysis demonstrated the learners' promotion in listening comprehension. Besides, the learners' independent performance improved through the teacher's meditational strategies. The meditational strategies were good indicators for developing the learners' ZPD. On the other hand, in the quantitative analysis of data, a comparison of the post-test results of both the control and experimental group was made. It revealed that the participants in experimental group outperformed the control group. Consequently, it is clear that students benefit the context-sensitive feedbacks and mainly their listening comprehension problems were sold. To conclude, the information obtained through treatment sessions (dynamic classes) pave the way for teachers to design remedial instruction for the learners.

Shabani (2014) also investigated interactionist dynamic assessment of listening comprehension in transcendence tasks. In this study, he attempted to analyze the learners' listening performance both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis revealed the learning product while the qualitative analysis revealed the learning process. Quantitatively, the development in learners' ZPD was observed and learners had better comprehension in later stages. Qualitatively, the analysis of protocols showed the extent of mediations at the level of phonology, lexis and

grammar. Finally, the improvement achieved in all these three levels. A major finding in this study explored that group dynamic assessment could cause development in listening comprehension. Moreover, the fact that instruction and assessment area single activity is achieved; that is, by assessing learners through mediations, a teacher could realize the learners' problems and therefore can plan the needed instruction to overcome problems.

Recently, Barati, Hashemi Shahraki and Ketabi (2015a) investigated the implementation of group dynamic assessment in assessing intermediate learners' pragmatic knowledge of conversational implicatures in listening and identifying the mediational strategies to improve this knowledge. They employed a mixed method and carried out the study on fifty intermediate students. The quantitative analysis was conducted by administrating the post-test after the mediation phase to both the experimental and control group. After analyzing the mean score of pre and post-test, the results indicated the improvement of the learners' listening ability and their pragmatic understanding of conversational implicatures. Qualitatively, they aim at recognizing the types of meditational strategies needed for the pragmatic understanding of the conversational implicatures. To fulfill this aim, they offered mediations to learners and designed nine types of meditational strategies to develop pragmatic knowledge. The meditational strategies moved from the most abstract to concrete (implicit to explicit). Consequently, the result of both quantitative and qualitative analysis revealed that the mediations offered by the teacher improved both. Through the meditational strategies offered by the teacher and based on the learner's responses to the mediating moves, there were insights for teachers to identify both the problematic areas in which learners encountered in understanding the conversational implicatures and the developmental changes.

In another major study, Afghari and Mashhadi Heidar (2015) also studied the effects of dynamic assessment in synchronous computer-mediated communication on EFL learners at higher intermediate level. The study focused on a web-based inquiry in the synchronous computer-mediated communication via web. Sixty students were randomly chosen for the experimental and control group. The experimental group was taught in a dynamic based instruction for seven weeks. The listening materials used in the treatment sessions (DA instruction) were audio dialogs by native speakers. In the enrichment sessions the learners first repeated independently and then in case of failure in recalling they were given mediations. The data analysis revealed that DA not only shows the actual level of performance but also reveals the learning potential; in fact, learners' failure to recall the spoken discourse and demand of mediations represent both the learners' responsiveness and their capacity in the process of learning. Moreover, it helps learners how to act better in a performing task for better comprehension.

A qualitative study in EFL context was conducted by Alavi, Kaivanpanah and Shabani (2012). They investigated group dynamic assessment for teaching listening. In this study, the researcher investigated the implementation of DA based instruction on a group of learners. As a result, a typology of mediational strategies explored and revealed that group dynamic assessment pave the way for collaboration and interaction. It could be noted that there is a great practice atmosphere among the learners which activates learning potential and causes the developmental changes.

A major quantitative study was conducted by Barati, Hashemi Shahraki and Ketabi (2015b). They investigated the implementation of dynamic based instruction on groups of learners at three different proficiency levels.

Table I. Studies on DA-based instruction and listening comprehension

Study	Group or Individual DA	Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed method	Interactionist VS. Interventionist	Subjects	Students' level
Ableeva (2010)	Individuals			X	Interactionist	7	Intermediate
Alavi et al. (2012)	Group	X			Interactionist	15	undergraduate
Shabani (2014)	Group			X	Interactionist	17	intermediate level
Alavi and Taheri (2014)	Group			X	Interactionist	57	First year students at university
Barati et al. (2015a)	Group			X	Interactionist	50	Intermediate
Barati et al. (2015b)	Group		X		Interactionist	146	3 proficeincy levels
Afghari and Mashhadi Heidar (2015)	Group			X	Interventionist	60	higher-intermediate level

They aimed to find whether group dynamic assessment can enhance listening comprehension of learners or not and whether the students in three proficiency levels will have the same advantage or not . The participants were assigned to one experimental and one control group. They applied DA to experimental group during nine weeks and traditional approach to teaching listening to control group. Provision of mediations in experimental group engaged the learners more in the learning process and it is a good chance for teacher to recognize the source of problems. The quantitative analysis of data revealed learners' progress over listening comprehension. Besides, the different proficiency level of the learners did not affect learners' benefits from the DA procedure.

The results obtained from the preliminary review of the implementation of dynamic assessment on listening comprehension are presented in Table 1 below

As indicated in Table 1, researchers have mostly conducted group dynamic assessment in listening comprehension. Another major finding was that mainly researchers conducted mixed method. Moreover, it is apparent that lower-intermediate and intermediate learners were the subjects of most studies. Last but not the least is that the interactionist kind of dynamic assessment was generally employed.

Discussion and Conclusion

Assessment and instruction are as a single activity in dynamic assessment. More precisely, a teacher plans instruction while assessing the learners. Recently, testing listening has shifted to teaching listening and researchers tried to investigate the implementation of dynamic assessment for teaching listening. Research studies in this area has shown that teaching listening through dynamic-based instruction can help learners to view listening as a simple task and have more tendency over practicing listening. Consequently, practicing listening through dynamic assessment could enhance development in listening comprehension. Moreover, reviewing literature has shown that many researchers have conducted group dynamic assessment. This fact may be due to some reasons. First, group dynamic assessment is highly practical. In fact, individual dynamic assessment is harder to conduct because it demands more time and care. Second, teachers need to have more time in dealing with different learners and different ZPDs while working with individuals. Another major finding is that researchers applied a mixed method in their studies. It could be due to the fact that dynamic assessment as a kind of formative assessment has a process-oriented nature; besides, the central role of interaction led to analyze the teacher-learner interactions and henceforth having qualitative analysis. Moreover, interactionist kind of dynamic assessment was used while practicing listening in DA. As the process-oriented nature of dynamic assessment, the teachers' hints and prompts are given while interacting with the learners; moreover, they are context-sensitive feedbacks. It means that teachers figure out the learners' problems through flexible interactions and finally lower-intermediate and intermediate learners were the subjects of most studies. This finding could reveal that learners need more care and practice in listening comprehension at these levels for development in later stages.

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