

Original Paper

The Use of Dynamic Assessment for Group Learners in the Language Classroom: A Literature Review

Xiaotian Liu¹

¹ School of Humanities and Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Technology, Qingdao, 266520
People's Republic of China

Received: May 12, 2023

Accepted: May 22, 2023

Online Published: May 24, 2023

doi:10.22158/selt.v11n2p148

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/selt.v11n2p148>

Abstract

The paper reviews the research on the use of Dynamic Assessment (DA) in the language classroom instruction for group learners. DA assesses learners' abilities in a comprehensive scope of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) from one continuum of actual independent performance to the other continuum of potential performance with external support, and DA also sees the external support offered as a driving force of advancing learners' development within ZPD. With its unique view, DA sheds the new light to the ESL and EFL language teaching and learning, and most DA studies focus on its effectiveness in promoting the development of EFL and ESL learners' language skills. However, most studies adopt DA in a one-on-one teacher-student model and address DA's interplay with individuals' ZPD, which discourages the implementation of DA in the language classrooms with group learners. This paper reviews the existing research on how DA mediates group learners in the language classroom. The review indicates that among the limited research, most studies follow from Group Dynamic Assessment (GDA) and few studies propose alternative DA approaches. All the studies reviewed confirm DA's effectiveness of promoting group learners' learning. However, given the dearth of research, it is insufficient to conclude on DA's mediation of group learners in the language classroom, and more studies are needed.

Keywords

Dynamic Assessment, Group Dynamic Assessment, Mediation of group learners

1. Introduction

Dynamic Assessment (DA) proceeds from Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) which sees the development of human abilities as a result of individuals' engagement in activities where they gain the support of cultural artifacts and have the interaction with others (Poehner, 2008). SCT's view on the

development indicates that collaboration with individuals or scaffolding on their development is necessary to understand the process of individuals' development. SCT uses Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), ranging from one continuum of individuals' independent performance to the continuum of their performance in collaboration with others, to evaluate the scope of learners' abilities and development (Poehner, 2008). In the light of SCT, assessment needs scaffoldings or interactions to see the full range of learners' abilities, while the scaffoldings or interactions serve as instructional intervention that helps with learners' development, which moves beyond their independent performance level to the potential performance level. This assessment-and-instruction-integrated approach is well reflected in DA.

2. Background

Dynamic Assessment was first defined as opposed to static assessment. Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002.vii) contrasted DA to static assessment which was believed to profile ones' current matured abilities of independent performance. They described DA as the assessment that "takes into account results of an intervention" during which "the examiner teaches the examinee how to perform better on individual items or on the test as a whole", and the score may be interpreted as "a learning score representing the difference between pretest (before learning) and posttest (after learning) scores, or "the posttest score alone". Though being widely objected to by mainstream researchers, this definition considered introducing interventions in the measurement of abilities. Poehner (2008, p. 13) further proposed to distinguish between "dynamic" and "non-dynamic" assessment by addressing on their respective view on the relationship between assessment and interaction. DA is conceived to integrate assessment and instruction as a whole, while Non-DA is conceived to isolate assessment and instruction. DA's understanding on the integration of assessment and instruction requires the re-conceptualization of the role of examiners and examinees. DA researchers posit that collaboration with examinees is essential to measuring and promoting learners' development. Given Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, individuals' abilities are seen as a scope covering the range of their independent performance and assisted performance. With DA's interplay with ZPD, the relationship between the examiner and examinee can be transformed to mediator and learner. The mediator offers support to mediate learners development and help learners extend to their potential level (Poehner, 2008, p. 15). The re-conceptualization of roles as mediator and learner sheds a new light in the language teaching and learning.

In the EFL and ESL language teaching, DA has received research interests. A majority of DA research in the field examines DA's potential in facilitating language development, by analyzing the effectiveness of two DA models (interactionist DA and Interventionist DA) in the development of language skills, such as listening, reading, speaking, writing, grammar and vocabulary (Li & Li, 2015). However, given that language pedagogy is mostly conducted in a classroom, research on DA's use in the language classroom seems to be under reviewed. Poehner (2009) describes that DA is assumed to

work in one-on-one mediator-learner model which makes DA difficult to be implemented in a language classroom with multiple learners. The research on how DA is used for group of learners is thus worth reviewing to indicate the potential use of DA in the language classroom. In this spirit, the research question is asked:

What does research say about DA's mediation of group of learners in the language classroom and its effectiveness in the group learners' language learning?

3. DA Use in the Language Classroom

The major difficulty of implementing DA in the language classroom is DA's one-on-one mediator-learner model that can hardly fit in the classroom instruction. Poehner (2009) suggests that mediating with group of learners is possible given Vygotsky's own recognition. Poehner (2009) proposes the Group Dynamic Assessment (G-DA) which complies with the principles of DA with individual learners but mediates group of learners. Mediating a whole group does not mean that no mediation is offered to individuals, but every mediation offered is group-oriented (Poehner, 2009).

Poehner (2009) first introduced primary interactants (the learners directly receiving mediations from the mediator), and secondary interactants (the other learners in the same classroom with primary interactants and the mediator). The two models then evolved: Concurrent G-DA and Cumulative G-DA. In Concurrent G-DA, the mediator interacts with a whole group, and mediator's interaction alternates between primary interactants and secondary interactants. The previous interactants' responses serve as a support for the following interactants, given that all interactants study in one classroom where mediator-learner exchange has mediating potential for the rest of the class and henceforth may achieve the mediation for the whole class. In Cumulative G-DA, the group works towards solving one problem with the mediator conducting one-on-one interaction with each group member. Each individual learner take turns to interact with the mediator as a primary interactant while understanding "each subsequent one-on-one exchange will have the advantage of building on early interactions that the class witnessed". The mediation of group learners is assumed to be achieved by the mediation of individual learners in the group (Poehner, 2009). G-DA sheds a light on the possibility of DA use in the classroom instruction.

Despite the dearth of empirical studies in DA's mediation of group learners in language classrooms, the existing ones mainly follow up from G-DA in terms of its effectiveness in mediating group of learners and in the development of language skills, and a few studies proposed alternative DA approaches (Peer-DA, or complementing other techniques with DA) to mediate group of learners.

4. Studies on G-DA in Mediating Group Learners in the Language Classroom

Existing studies on G-DA are conducted on its effectiveness of mediating the learning of specific language skills (grammar, writing and vocabulary) as well as the self-management of language learning. Mehri and Amerian (2015) researched on G-DA's mediation of a group of three EFL students and

G-DA's effectiveness in the learners' control of past tense. Mehri and Amerian (2015) chose the three learners with each representing the elementary level, the lower-intermediate level and the intermediate level, which creates a mini prototype for group mediation. All the three learners studied were asked to read a novel and take turns to retell the story. During the story retelling, the teacher provided Cumulative G-DA to mediate individual learners. Finally the students were asked to write the retelling section and their written work was evaluated. Besides the improvement in the past tense control in their final writings, Mehri and Amerian (2015) found that the two more capable students intervened to mediate the elementary-level student during his interaction with the teacher, while the lower-level student contributed to the mediation of the other two students as well. The role change of the peer learners from "the benefactor of mediation" to "the provider of mediation" helped mediate others group members and thus helped move beyond the whole group's ZPD.

Shabani (2018) studied G-DA's mediation of ESL students in the development of their writing abilities. 44 students were divided into 2 groups: the experimental group that received G-DA instruction for 12 weeks, and the control group without interaction. Shabani (2018) compared the before-instruction writing test and after-instruction writing test between the two groups with quantitative analysis to confirm the G-DA's effects, and analyzed the students responses to the mediation offered in the experimental group to find out the potential developments in learners' writing process. The whole experimental group was asked to revise a randomly chosen essay from before-instruction writing tests with the teacher's mediation of prompts and hints. G-DA was conducted with one mediator interacting with a whole class. G-DA started by the teacher choosing a sentence for the whole class to revise, and proceeded to the next sentence after students detected the corrected the errors in the previous one. The study first confirmed the G-DA effect through the quantitative analysis that the experimental group outperformed the controlled group. In the qualitative analysis, the whole class was fulfilling a common goal of revising a writing with minimal assistance provided from the mediator to the whole class. The whole class did not respond to errors until the mediator's initial mediation triggered the first individual's response. The learner's response served as a further mediation for the subsequent responses from other learners, and eventually the group of learners collectively solved the problem. It can be implied that the whole class's ZPD was advanced with the mediator's and peer learners' scaffolding (Shabani, 2018).

In the vocabulary learning through lexical inferencing (discover the word meaning by drawing clues in the text and using learners' own knowledge), Bahramlou and Esmaili (2019) compared the effect of vocabulary enhancement (VE) exercises with that of G-DA. 45 intermediate EFL learners were divided into three groups: the G-DA group, the VE group and the G-DA+VE group. A pre-test and a post-test on the target 37 words were conducted to measure the learners' knowledge change in the words. After finishing the reading comprehension of the texts containing target words, the teacher in G-DA group mediated the word inferencing from the implicit to the explicit. Each mediating move was directed to a different learner. If the first learner did not spot the error given the mediating move, a new learner would be asked to answer the question and be given another more explicit mediation. The VE group

received no mediation and only did the vocabulary enhancement exercises containing the target words. The G-DA+VE group followed the procedure of G-DA group plus VE group. Though no substantial difference was found between the G-DA group and VE group, the G-DA+VE group outperformed the other two. Bahramlou and Esmaeili (2019) implied that both G-DA and VE helped with vocabulary learning through lexical inferencing, and the integration of the two may multiply their respective effect. Sanaeifar and Divcolaii (2019) researched G-DA's effect on EFL students' self-management of tasks. Sanaeifar and Divcolaii (2019) sampled 40 EFL intermediate learners and assigned them into 2 groups: Concurrent G-DA group and Cumulative G-DA group. Both groups first filled out the Learners Self-management on Learning Tasks Questionnaire (SLTQ) that measures learners' self-management capacities. Concurrent G-DA group received the mediating moves on the group ZPD's while Cumulative G-DA group's individual learners were primary interactants with the mediating moves directed to individuals' ZPD. Both groups were asked to fill out SLTQ questionnaire after G-DA, and were found to make improvements in self-management of learning tasks, while Cumulative G-DA group performed better than Concurrent G-DA group.

In G-DA, secondary interactants do not participate in the interaction with the mediator, but witness the mediator conducted between the mediator and the primary interactants. It is worthwhile to investigate if they can be mediated in the process of G-DA. Ashtarian, Ebadi and Yousofi (2018) and Van Compernelle and Williams (2013) focus on studying the mediation of secondary interactants' learning in the process of G-DA.

Van Compernelle and Williams (2013) researched on the active reception of a FL (French Learning) secondary interactant with little spoken contribution in a group work. Through the analysis on the secondary interactant's embodied participation, the study investigated on the effect of peer dialogue in mediating the secondary interactant's learning. The group was comprised of four people. Each member was offered a French text of one particular register, and was required to "identify the differences in the use of French pronouns. The group members found the solutions through discussion, and one member recorded all the findings on a worksheet. The secondary interactant Diane, who spoke little in the group work, was analyzed on her embodied participation, such as gazing on other group members, nodding. The study found Diane's subsequent solution of the questions and verbal contribution to the group work, which Van Compernelle and Williams (2013) interpreted as a sign of Diane's gaining the understanding from the talk of other members. They hypothesized that the secondary interactant was mediated by the group work while the whole group was moving towards in its group ZPD.

Ashtarian, Ebadi and Yousofi (2018) explored the benefaction of secondary interactants from the exchange between the mediator and primary interactants in the G-DA's use in EFL writing accuracy. 25 students first underwent a pre-test to write compositions for the identification of their current writing accuracy. G-DA 1 intervention then followed, where each student read aloud their composition with the mediator mediating primary interactants to spot writing errors. The prompting and hints from the mediator ranged from the implicit to the explicit ones. Secondary interactants were required to attend to

the exchange between the mediator and primary interactants, and to underline and correct their writing errors. The secondary interactant's compositions were later collected and checked. All the students then took a post-test to write compositions for the identification of possible changes in their writing accuracy. Then G-DA 2 intervention was conducted with the same procedure as G-DA 1. To find out the development of primary interactants, their scores in the pre-test and post-test were compared to confirm the effect of G-DA 1, and their performances in G-DA 2 were compared to theirs in G-DA1 on whether they needed fewer hints and less explicit prompting to find writing errors. For secondary interactants, their benefaction was evaluated by checking their compositions in terms of frequency of corrections while they were exposed to the exchange. Secondary interactants were also interviewed on the exchange's impact. The results implied the G-DA's effectiveness on primary interactants in reducing the writing errors, and the benefaction of secondary interactants from the exchange between the mediator and primary interactants.

5. Studies on other DA Approaches in Mediating Group Learners

Besides G-DA, alternative DA approaches are adopted to address group learners, such as Peer-DA and the combination of DA and other instructional techniques. Khoshsima and Rezaee (2016) proposed the idea of Peer-DA (the more capable peers give mediations to other learners, based on the principles of DA). Their study focused on Peer-DA's applicability in reading comprehension and vocabulary learning in the language classroom. 15 EFL students were divided into 5 groups, and each group first received the training on DA approaches and then was asked to jointly comprehend a reading and learn the vocabulary in the text. When one group member made an error, other group members used DA to mediate them to find and correct the errors. Despite that positive evidence that learners reached intended answers with the mediation of Peer-DA, Khoshsima and Rezaee (2016) only admitted the Peer-DA's facilitation in the reading comprehension and vocabulary learning, and did not draw conclusions on its applicability given the limitations of their study.

Davin and Donato (2013) proposed to complement DA in classroom with small group work to mediate the group of learners. The study was conducted with 17 students in a Spanish language classroom from a primary school. All the students received the teacher's DA-based instruction on "WH- question formation" in Spanish, and then 6 students were further selected to form two groups for small group work. Each group was asked to compile a list of questions, which tested their control on the "WH-question formation". The number and comprehensibility of the questions created were evaluated to confirm the effect of DA pairing with small group work, and individuals' use of peer support was examined through the analysis of peer dialogue. The 6 students were comprised of 2 novice-low-leveled students, 2 novice-mid-leveled students and 2 novice-high-leveled students. Each group was formed by one student from each novice level. No student received any training on working collaboratively or assisting peers, and all students were hardly able to form questions independently. Davin and Donato (2013) observed that both groups were able to create the questions collaboratively

and group members were aware of their peers scaffolding. Despite of the successful completion of group work, the peer scaffolding was unsystematic compared to teachers' DA mediation. Small group work's with DA on mediating group of learners is yet to research.

Davin (2013) conducted another study on integrating DA with instructional conversation (henceforth IC, similar to Concurrent G-DA that "engages multiple learners in one interaction", but does not assess individuals) to investigate how DA and IC guided instruction and assessment in the language classroom. The study was conducted with the same 17 learners in Davin & Donato's (2013) study, and the "WH-question formation" was instructed in 10 classes. The teacher adopted the cumulative interventionist DA approach, which is the mediator-to-primary interactant DA model with hierarchical (from implicit to explicit) and pre-scripted prompts. The teacher kept a daily record of the students' error source and the number of prompts required to elicit their correct answers to assess students' progress. Based on the audio-recorded classes and interview transcriptions, the researcher highlighted the interaction series (where the teacher provided prompts after students made errors or inquired), and further categorized the interaction series into cumulative interventionist DA (where students made errors) and IC (where students inquired). Among all the 18 interaction series, 13 were DA and 5 were IC. A further analysis revealed that DA was effective in mediating students to spot and correct routine errors in vocabulary and grammar and assessing individuals' progress. IC, occurring in an unanticipated way, was effective in dealing with unexpected inquiries from students. Davin (2013) implied that the integration of DA and IC could be a potential way to construct a whole group ZPD and mediate group of learners.

6. Conclusion

The paper reviews the use of Dynamic Assessment in the language classroom to investigate what the research indicates on DA's mediation of group of learners. It starts with the introduction of DA's definition and its research in the language instruction, and indicates the un-reviewed research of DA use in language classrooms to justify the research topic and the research question. In the lenses of DA's mediating group of learners, the paper reviews the follow-up research from Group Dynamic Assessment (G-DA) and the studies adopting alternative DA approaches. For the studies on G-DA, the current studies imply the G-DA's effectiveness in the language development of group learners, in reading, vocabulary, grammar and self-management of learning tasking. The benefaction of secondary interactants was also implied, which indicated the possibility of mediating group of learners within a collective classroom ZPD. However, the dearth of research is not sufficient for this paper to draw any conclusion on G-DA's mediating group of learners. Besides G-DA, only three studies on alternative DA approaches shed a new light on answering the research question. However, due to limited research in the field, Peer-DA, DA with small group work and DA with IC are in their infancy to indicate any group mediation. Thus the current research cannot answer the research question.

For the future reference, more studies are needed in DA's mediation of group learners. In G-DA, the benefaction of secondary interactants needs to be further explored, given its possible implication for the

development within a class's collective ZPD. For alternative DA approaches, DA with IC is worth further researching in terms of the model of their integration.

References

- Ashtarian, S., Ebadi, S., & Yousofi, N. (2018). Group dynamic assessment in an EFL classroom: Do secondary interactants benefit? *Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 21(2), 1. Retrieved from <https://ijal.khu.ac.ir/article-1-2934-.pdf>
- Bahramlou, K., & Esmaeili, A. (2019). The effects of vocabulary enhancement exercises and group dynamic assessment on word learning through lexical inferencing. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 48(4), 889-901. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10936-019-09638-x>
- Davin, K. J., & Donato, R. (2013). Student collaboration and teacher-directed classroom dynamic assessment: A complementary pairing. *Foreign Language Annals*, 46(1), 5-22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12012>
- Khoshsima, H., & Rezaee, A. (2016). Applicability of peer-dynamic assessment in crowded second language classes. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 7(5), 929-935. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0705.13>
- Li, Q., & Li, D. (2015). A review of empirical studies in L2 dynamic assessment. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 38(1), 55-73. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cjal-2015-0003>
- Mehri, E., & Amerian, M. (2015). Group dynamic assessment (G-DA): The case for the development of control over the past tense. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 4(5), 11-20. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.5p.11>
- Poehner, E. M. (2008). *Dynamic assessment: A Vygotskian Approach to Understand and Promoting L2 Development*. New York, NY: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-75775-9>
- Poehner, M. E. (2009). Group dynamic assessment: Mediation for the L2 classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 43, 471-491. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1545-7249.2009.tb00245.x>
- Sanaeifar, S. H., & Divcolaii, M. S. (2019). Actualizing language learners' potentials through mediation: Cumulative vs. concurrent group dynamic assessment and students' self-management of learning tasks. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 9(7), 802. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tppls.0907.08>
- Shabani, K. (2018). Group dynamic assessment of L2 learners' writing abilities. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 6(1), 129-149. Retrieved from https://ijltr.urmia.ac.ir/article_20494_56171933eeaeaea7ad9eb8c7ef408a5.pdf
- Sternberg, R. J., & Grigorenko, E. L. (2002). *Dynamic Testing. The Nature and Measurement of Learning Potential*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Compernelle, R. A., & Williams, L. (2013). Group dynamics in the language classroom: Embodied participation as active reception in the collective zone of proximal development. *Classroom Discourse*, 4(1), 42-62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2013.779284>