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DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT: AN ATTEMPT TO APPRECIATE THE DYNAMISM OF LANGUAGE LEARNING ABILITIES

Gurpal Singh Rana

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Lovely Professional University, (India)

ABSTRACT

The very notion of DA challenges conventionally followed approach on teaching and assessment by counter positioning an idea of synchronization and synthesis, where these are not seen as two separately timed unique entities but intertwined ones. The distinctive focus here is on the scope of individual's developing abilities which come to the fore when evaluation as a process provides him support framework. This was definitely quite contrary to traditionally overused methods of evaluation, in fact still the predominant methodology followed across the educational spectrum, by offering a paradigmatic thought to assess the widely unexplored scope of growth in an individual under scrutiny. This paper tries to formulate a symbiotic triumvirate among assessment, teaching and learning patterns and how relevant the design of evaluation becomes to assess the scope of development in a learner. This study takes an exploratory drive into the term DA which will make us settle for a definition explaining it as a definitive tool of assessment whereby an active-target oriented teaching intervention is provided in order to have a significant impact on child's learning drives, perception orientation, thinking patterns, and subsequent problem solving abilities.

Keywords- Dynamic Assessment, English Language Teaching, Mediated Learning Experience, Traditional Assessment, Zone Of Proximal Development.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the recent times, especially in India we have witnessed various experimentations in English Language Teaching (henceforth, ELT) classroom in terms of curricula patterns, range of pedagogies, course specific orientation, teacher training modules and framework of evaluation. The visible shift in approach has been towards phenomena of learner centrism from the traditional yester decade outlook of teacher centrism. But there is a clear sign of unease and reluctance to manifest the same in assessment too, and this paper puts forward a step towards adopting Dynamic Assessment (henceforth, DA) in all forms of ELT evaluations. This paper looks into various dimensions of a proposition of adopting this long-established yet so long-unused methodology of comprehensive evaluation. The case study based research shall be able to validate the proposal while simultaneously drawing attention to the challenges in its implementation. This effort looks into: 1) genesis of the concept of DA, 2) its uniqueness vis-a-vis other non dynamic assessment criteria, 3) challenges in its actual

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implementation as well as its imperative value in ELT classroom context, and 4) evidentiary findings of the study conducted along with other supporting research works.

II. WHAT IS THE ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF DA?

Lev Vygotsky's iconic concept of a Zone of Proximal Development (henceforth, ZPD) and Reuben Feuerstein's theory of Mediated Learning Experience (henceforth, MLE) served as the bedrock conceptual bases for most of the DA's elaborative characteristic profile. ZPD has been defined 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" (Vygotsky 86). It describes the gap between, what a learner has already acquired, and all those additional possibilities of learning when a support framework is provided. On the other hand, Feuerstein and his colleagues formulated an assessment pattern to figure out the learning potential of low performing children. These MLE interactions are defined as a process in which parents or experienced adults interpose themselves between a set of stimuli and a child thus modifying the stimuli for the developing child which is an apt example of socio cultural dimensions of learning (Feustein et al., 1979). In context of DA, the examiner mediates the rules and strategies for solving specific problems on an individual basis, and assesses the level of internalization of these rules and strategies as well as their transfer value to other problems of increased level of complexity, novelty, and abstraction. So, all these theoretical aspects oppose the notion of assessment through standard tests measuring ability of the learner to independently handle the problem at hand, by giving an alternative of identifying the prospect of growth in the learner by providing assistance, whenever they are sought. This paper extends forward the notion that this logic, which seems justifiably acceptable for measuring growth in children, can be extrapolated to language learners too.

However, this approach of evaluation through DA came more as a contrast to the largely popular framework of adaptive tests, which was first started by a French Psychologist Alfred Binet (1916), whose initial purpose was to suggest a framework of differentiating unequivocally mentally retarded children from mentally sick for their admission into special educational programs. This later on became popular as Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale with various improvisations from time to time in scope and its salient features of testing modules to assess intelligence at the school level. This all triggered a flurry of tests originating from different parts of the world with some from United States and England setting a qualitative measurement benchmarks. And finally, Vygostsky turned the table upside down in certain different ways where he started by putting a question mark on the utilitarian aspect of these testing tools, where it did not not take into account the potential of growth in learning abilities of the learner.

DA introduces a significantly fresh approach of viewing classroom assessment as a tool which must buttress the ongoing gradual improvement in skill set of the examinee. The term *dynamic* implies variable change which remains in state of flux and the task is to assess and measure it. It tries to formulate a mechanism to describe and quantify in some measureable terms the shaping cognitive bubble in the learners mind rather than coming to conclusion on some static figures. This new interface is in many ways a reflection of socio cultural aspect of an

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act of assistance all the time available to all of us while performing everyday as well as professional tasks. Few exemplar situations can bring a forceful perspective on its utility: imagine a modern day teacher is restrained to use any teaching aids like projector, audio visual files, presentation slides, worksheets or workbooks; an engineer working on a problematic issue is asked to avoid consultation of any kind; a doctor while diagnosing a patient is disallowed to seek ailment specific laboratory test reports. All these instances of almost everyday occurrence reaffirm the imperative importance of assistive environment to judge someone's effectiveness index rather than expecting independent performances. This paper harps on the importance of change in evaluation perspective taking a more considerate stance towards discovering learning potential of the examinee.

III. HOW DA IS DIFFERENT FROM METHODS OF TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT?

Majorly we have two forms of assessments at various levels of Indian education system starting from school and moving up to universities: formative and cumulative. Formative primarily delves into in-process evaluation of student learning with certain fixed frequencies already notified in the syllabus. The result analysis helps the educational set-up to formulate a feedback idea of cognitive gains or lesser gains or in some cases no gains at all to arrange for remedial measures in order to keep those lagging students to improve their academic understanding. In ELT classrooms these evaluations can take different patterns depending on the targeted skill set. But overall it is observed that these tests have become tools of assessing the knowledge already gained at the time of appearing, as it centers on the foundational principles of unaided memory based attempt of the questions asked. Normally the pattern of weightage is either credited or non-credited but whatever it is, it always counts comparatively less towards final grade of the student as compared to cumulative assessment. On the other hand, originally the summative assessment was seen as a term ending cumulative evaluation where higher weightage is accorded, questions tend to gather more complexity in their nature of framing and difficulty level, more of a memory test of how much quantity of knowledge student can sustain and deliver in the exam. And more so in professional courses they have taken shape of either capstone projects, or live projects, or report submissions followed by a viva voce or in some cases, a presentation. These recent variations in evaluation pattern does suggest that the focus lies on implementation of theoretical framework in an examinee mind in the form of quality showcased on completion, and all the time student has an access to all kinds of help he deems fit for the task to be completed. Most of the institutes now have a mechanism where assessments results are threadbare analysed, discussed, and brainstormed upon for achieving better quality in the future results. Through this paper we propose a differential perspective which is little more comprehensive in terms of assessing the unexplored or undocumented potential of the examinee.

The proposed proposal in this paper certainly shall enable DA to prosper, in fact recent researchers' interest have shown, on the inadequacy of non-dynamic-standardized tests. These *other kinds* of tests have, in many ways, ignored some of the noticeable salient characteristics which occupy prime position in dynamic testing and some of these points are: (1) low scores of some learners make the evaluators to hypothesis while typecasting them as having lower cognitive ability without putting any effort to try gauging their learning potential, (2) do not have a framework to visualize learning processes deficiencies resulting in blockade of cognition, (3)

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feedback and assessment report become more of citation of generic description of learning deficits than individualized specific detailed progress report, (4) non-availability of a tool to measure effectiveness index of learning-teaching strategies adopted. The study results, which shall be discussed in the later paragraphs, will corroborate the urgent need to implement framework of DA on the larger scale.

IV. WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES IN DA IMPLENTATION?

The very inquisitive as well as assistive nature of Socratic dialogues can be visualized as a bedrock idea for DA to take shape as it has taken on the core concept of performance enhancement resulting because of enabling questions. Those loaded questions which initiate a thoughtful answer from the learners, the key points of the questions themselves can be easily used to make much more extended oral replies. There are few challenges which put forth a counter narrative to DA implementation with regards to its adaptation to objectively uncover learning patterns in mediated environment. The few points which can be looked into and researched for attaining comprehensive clarity are as follows:

- Traditionalists having puritanical notion of evaluation discounts it as an extended "teaching and not testing, (E. Poehner, 20). Researchers have proved its utility but teachers have shown disdain to the attempt as it shows a radical departure from the standardized testing model used across the wide spectrum of educational framework. So another grim challenge is to adopt as well as adapt a change in the system of evaluation.
- The difficulty in DA lies in measuring how much and what are those objective changes of improvement which surfaced in a learner following a triumvirate model of pre test-intervention-post test. This empirical measurement can be done in some exact terms but the problem aggravates further in case the mediated interventions are simultaneous in nature. So the challenge of objectively quantifying and pinpointing specific changes which a learner showcased.
- All components of dynamic assessment appear to be more interested in ascertaining potential performance than in assessing typically already-matured performance. But it has to be researched how much of this mediated assistance spoils the learner to avoid toiling hard to enhance his cognitive quotient as DA, as some claims, provides easy gains.
- DA positions itself while recognizing common human behavioral trait that all people typically function at levels little below their individual capacities. How much of contemporary research validate and support this notion, we need to seek concrete evidence of validation for this perspective.
- Assessment of typical performance is invaluable for making an objective prediction of future performance. If one truly wishes to assess what is possible or what would be possible under more optimal conditions, then a testing strategy that involves intervention thus drawing out optimum potential. Again the challenge lies in determining those *optimal conditions* which remain examinee specific rather than universal ones all the time.

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V. WHY DA HAS AN IMPERATIVE ROLE IN ELT CLASSROOM?

In context of an ELT classroom, assessment encompasses wide range of methodological tools to evaluate, measure, express, document, and publish as well- the academic preparedness of examinee, acquisition of language skills-sub skills, progress report of the individual learning curves, skill enhancement, skill acquisition, stream specific language needs, or overall communicative competence. The generic purposeful view about assessment is to measure specific salient characteristics expected of the examinee. The very nature of DA challenges the stereotypical notion of teaching, learning, and assessment by suggesting an alternative proposition of seeing all these three processes as fully in sync with each other thus impacting the overall objectives of ELT classroom framework. The approach suggested here is derived from Sociocultural theory of Mind as developed by the Russian psychologist L.S. Vygotsky allowing an interface to peep into the cognitive churning taking place in learner's mind in a English Language Teaching classroom.

DA's role is a work on evaluation model which hinges on inclusion of "deliberate and planned meditational teaching" (Haywood & Tzuriel) to have an impact on the performance to follow after that input in an interactive environment. It rests on following premises: (a) that, a discreet performance will not all the time be a true indicator of potential of learning in an individual, (b) there is a significant danger of buildup of miscalculations done on the basis of one-off performance result, (c) there can be multiple performance inhibitors on individual basis which need to be addressed before an individual participates in an evaluation, (d) elasticity of abilities can only be measured in case the evaluative process provides a specifically-targeted assistance.

DA is a synthetic fusion of assistive assessment and interactive instructions which enables the examinee to allow the initiative to move towards development orientation of the activity. It discredits, in fact disowns, the notion of innateness or for that matter the stationary aspect of cognitive development while suggesting a contrary viewpoint of appreciating dynamic formation in those abilities. Here we make a paradigmatic move from measuring already matured cognition to maturation-work-in-progress of the examined individual. This kind of evaluation will have one added purpose of diagnosing the dynamic state of learnings-in-process of maturing than already matured faculties in a learner.

This specific favorable type of assessment was also seen in some quarters as a reactionary substitute to the prevailing dissatisfaction with more popular approaches as it takes into account of providing insight into cognitive buildup, gives a rationale of a tested theory, and synthesizes evaluation with instructions. The study conducted in the paper supports the utilitarian aspect of DA in ELT classroom.

VI. WHAT WERE THE FINDINGS OF THE CASE STUDY?

DA positions itself on the Vygotsky's concept of ZPD which is one of three zones of learning- first, student is able to independently perform assessment centric action on the basis of learning he has mastered, second student needs an assistive role of teacher to perform the task needed to be done as part of assessment, and third student will still not be able to perform the task needed no matter the teacher assistance was provided meaning that there is a skill deficit of somewhat grave dimensions. The second zone, the ZPD, is the area where DA takes a role by blending together teaching and assessment as one cohesive unit.

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A study was conducted in Lovely Professional University ELT classroom, where the emphasis all the times lies on professional enhancement of the student no matter whether they are enrolled in a professional or a regular basic course. This paper takes into consideration the various university run course where apart from the all too similar lecture, there are also other forms of content delivery means used like tutorial, practical, workshop, seminar, placement orientation sessions, and resume writing in soft skill enhancement drives. Despite the wide range of experimentation, still it is observed that pattern of assessment remains static to say the least as it emphasizes on factors like memory, layout, sentence construction and content retention thereby evaluating the actual state of thoughts matured in a student. Thus missing out all the time on the probable learning curve of a student when his efforts are supported through mediated intervention, which can be some clues provided in the question, question props provided by the teacher or even to the extent where a brief outline is discussed in a discursive mode with the student before the actual evaluation.

The paper presented a study conducted on a tripartite model of pre test, mediation, post test where they had to orally present randomly on a topic from the list of given ten topics. This was part of their regular second continuous assessment of the English communication skills input in the polytechnic course with a combined class strength of 136 students. In the pre test segment the students attempted this question and audio recording of the same is maintained for future evaluation comparison. Then after this initial unaided independent attempt the students are given a mediated session covering following points for two hours plus doubt clearing session while preparing them for the oral presentation. The following is the list of the topics:

- Cyber Crime
- Global Warming
- Corruption
- Drug Menace / Addiction
- Crime against Women
- Importance of Professional courses
- Sports and its importance
- New technologies in Agriculture
- Role of Engineering in Country's Growth
- Social Media and its Roles

The mediated session covered following points:

- Applying Wh-rule to the topic to explore key points
- Art of scribbling key points
- Collocation example with keywords
- Underlined usage of discourse markers
- Practicing the gestural support to complement oral presentation
- Flavoring feeling to the content

Then the students are evaluated again and are allowed to carry on and see whenever they feel the need, the key points of the presentation topic. Findings of the study showed a remarkable difference in the student's

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performance on following multiple points- Average Time Span (ATS), Average Words Per Sentence (WPS), Discourse Markers (DMs), Gestural Support Instances (GSI), and Point of Pitch Variations (PPV)

Table 1: Pre test results of the oral presentation of a class of 53 students

Parameters	ATS	AWPS	DM	GSI	PPV
Units	(in sec)	(no. of occurrences)			
Frequency	44	11	2	2	2

Table 2: Post test results of the oral presentation of a class of 53 students

Parameters	ATS	AWPS	DM	GSI	PPV
Units	(in sec)	(no. of occurrences)			
Frequency	163	16	7	6	7

DA presents a broad based panoramic view of learner's abilities where abilities at the time of evaluation plus prospective component of learning potential are taken into account as well. This is itself is a tectonic shift in mindset about the process of evaluation which is no longer seen as static measurement activity but more as an adaptive process taking into consideration the dynamism of abilities taking shape in the learner's mind. The outcome of results does help to do threadbare analysis of length and breadth of learning achieved, bottlenecks in learning, and solution through remedial measures in learner's abilities. The result very clearly shows remarkable improvements in overall performance on all the given parameters of evaluation. To validate further the findings there are few more case studies done on similar lines and the points are covered in the next sub-heading.

VII. WHICH OTHER RESEARCH SUPPORTED THE DA FRAMEWORK?

There is an exhaustive list of established scholarly work which has affirmed the practical usefulness of administering DA framework. Some of these prominent articles are arranged in this short compended paragraph: McNamara addressed the issue of finding out the impact of introducing "social dimension of interaction" (p. 459, McNamara) in assessment, where examiner takes a role of interlocutor in speaking skill evaluation. Budoff (1975) was one of the earliest researcher suggesting a methodology of assessing learning potential through a pattern of test-train-retest sequence where the *training* zone provides "a strategy for solution and opportunities" (p. 4) whereby improved performances will emerge as the learner will have acquired acquaintance to the test conditions. Brown's Graduated Prompt approach (1985) laid focus on mediated interventions whenever the examinee experiences a challenge of sorts, and try measuring how much the examinee has mastered to transfer

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these newer abilities to solve and tackle successfully new problems. Feuerstein (Mediated Learning Experience 1988) suggested integration of assessment and mediated instruction which allows the examinee to move beyond his current capabilities.

Anton (2012) too emphasized on focusing symptomatic over diagnostic assessment where the priorities changed from static to dynamic components of development. Lidz (1987) succinctly expressed salient characterization of DA as "an interaction between an examiner-as-intervener and a learner-as-active participant, which seeks to estimate the degree of modifiability of the learner and the means by which positive changes in cognitive functioning can be induced and maintained" (p. 4). Poehner (2007) wonderfully captured the strong essence of a unique evaluative pattern where both assessment and mediated instructions "are dialectically integrated into the same development-oriented activity" (p. 324). Similar to the study presented and analysed in this paper, Hill & Mehran (2009) applied components of DA in speaking tasks where it focused on mediated assistance (MA), transfer of learning (TOL), Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and collaborative engagement (CE).

DA does expect a more proactive role to be exercised by the teacher in ELT classroom where he not only has to integrate teaching with assessment but also has to be elaborately objective while giving forth feedback on learner's performances covering as many components as possible. Lidz suggestively defined DA as a facilitation drive towards documenting "cognitive competence" (281) achieved through interactive interventions. Lantolf and Poehner (2008) propelled a fresh approach of redefining the nature of examiner's role in the form of interventionist as well as interactionist thereby eliciting a marked improved performance form the examinee.

The paper also would like to present three different kind of evaluative activities done on DA pattern in ELT classroom environment targeting different sub skills of language usage: speaking assessment, reading comprehension performance, and writing. Poehner (2005) in his study of dynamic assessment of speaking skills in the language classroom environment validated the notion of it as a "specific theory of mind and mental development" (p. 260). Tianshun (2013) conducted a study assessing the impact of DA mode in ELT classroom writing task where the results confirmed the utilitarian impact of the "dialogic cooperation". Naeini & Emily (2012) studied the affective role of richer interactive mediation on the reading comprehension correctness and the results validated the hypothesis with much improved results.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The study put forward here laid renewed focus on functional utility of DA framework in order to formulate characteristic features which allow measuring more comprehensively the cognitive development as well as the prospective development in the learner. The findings corroborate conclusively that teacher's mediation and intervention result in active involvement of the learner thus bringing forth appreciable results of improved performances. The results have enabled teachers to visualize students' present as well as futuristic learning potential in order to blend classroom instruction activities with effective and practical supportive pedagogies. The mediated sessions uphold their primacy of manifesting into the mechanics of learner's evolving conceptual understanding of the topic or skill set under evaluation by allowing the learner to attempt or answer more appropriately as well more correctly.

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Especially the assessment criteria in language learning classes have to follow prognostic blueprint rather than plain diagnosis, diagnosing will relate to identification and understanding the learner's comprehension issues related to language whereas the prognostic approach goes a step further into the mechanics of learner's issue, and thus more concrete remedial measures can be implemented with improved results.

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