Dynamic Assessment in the Language Classroom

James P. Lantolf & Matthew E. Poehner

What is Dynamic Assessment?

Assessment has become a fact of everyday life. In today's world, people are assessed in order to obtain a driver's license, obtain a diploma, gain admittance to a university, earn a promotion at work, and receive credit for completing a course of study. Usually when people are assessed, great effort is made to assure that the assessment procedure is the same for everyone, and any interaction or assistance during the assessment itself is seen as unfair or even cheating. Dynamic Assessment (DA) takes a very different stance, arguing that important information about a person's abilities can be learned by offering assistance during the assessment itself. In fact, not only can DA provide a different picture of an individual's abilities, it can actually help him or her to develop those abilities by providing finely tuned instruction, or mediation, while engaged in the assessment tasks.

DA is based on the theory of development outlined by the famous Russian psychologist, L.S. Vygotsky. While studying the development of children's mental abilities, Vygotsky observed that what a child is able to do independently only represents a partial picture of the child's full ability, because the child often can do more when just a bit of assistance, or mediation, is offered by someone else. According to Vygotsky, what the child is able to do independently represents a view of the child's past development, but what the child is able to achieve with mediation, provides insight into the child's future development. Vygotsky described the difference between what a child can do independently and what the same child can accomplish with mediation, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Interaction in the ZPD, for Vygotsky, was not only a way of predicting a child's future development; it was at the same time a way of promoting that development. DA is grounded in Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD and as such it integrates assessment (understanding a person's current abilities) and instruction (helping the person develop these abilities further) into a seamless, unified activity. From a DA perspective, good instruction involves assessment, and good assessment involves instruction.

Since Vygotsky's time, DA procedures have been used for a variety of purposes, including:

- Differentiating between people whose learning disability is primarily biological and those whose difficulties are the result of their social or cultural background

- Offering a more valid and fine-grained assessment of students' general intellectual abilities as well as their potential for improving those abilities

- Identifying the underlying causes of poor performance in classes and on standardized tests

- Making recommendations for the placement of learners into appropriate instructional programs and making recommendation on the necessary instructional support they need to succeed

Currently, many approaches to DA are being widely used. They can be distinguished on the basis of the type of mediation made available to learners during the assessment. In some cases, for example, mediation is provided in the form of a series of hints and prompts that have been standardized. In these approaches, standardization makes it easy to add or detract points since the initial feedback, which is not very specific, will be weighted differently from later, more explicit feedback. The exact number of prompts used and the number of points assigned to each prompt can be reported along with an individual's score or grade on the assessment. These standardized approaches are particularly useful for large-scale tests that are administered repeatedly to large numbers of test takers. More interactive and individualized approaches to DA have been developed for use in the classroom, and examples of their use with language learners are given below. Specifically, one example shows a learner of French struggling to produce a past tense verb form in spoken language; here the use of DA provides a more detailed assessment of the student's knowledge of the French structures. A second concerns an ESL student attempting to use English verbs in a written composition; in this case, using DA principles at two differ-

ent points in time shows that even though the learner could not fully control English verbs on either occasion, the mediation she needed changed because she was in fact improving. The third and final example presents two learners of Spanish trying to use the Spanish past tenses; although both learners appear to have the same problem, the use of DA showed that the two students actually have very different ability levels and consequently require different instructional intervention.

Using Dynamic Assessment in the Classroom

The first example of using DA in the classroom setting involves the assessment of oral proficiency of a student of French as a foreign language. This student, Sara, was shown a short clip from the film *Nine Months* and asked to re-tell the events of that scene in French. She was also reminded that since she was telling a story in the past, the French past tenses would be particularly helpful, especially the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*. During the DA, it became clear that Sara was struggling to choose which verb tense to use and was even having trouble forming the tenses correctly. Through interacting with her during the assessment, the mediator was able to determine a more accurate profile of Sara's knowledge that was apparent from her initial solo performance. Consider the following exchange between Sara (S) and the mediator (M):

S: *enceinte, elle était enceinte avec le bébé de Samuel et Samuel n'a pas croyé* et pose /pregnant, she was pregnant with Samuel's baby and Samuel didn't believe it and asked/ pour le moment il a um (...) /for the moment the uh (...)/*

M: *oui, le verbe* there's something there with the verb, you just used the

S: *imparfait* (?)

M: what was it?

S: *croyé**

M: *n'a pas croyé** using the

S: *n'a pas la croyé** did not believe at that time

M: using *passé composé?*

S: yes

M: right so then it's not *n'a pas croyé* but *n'a pas* (...) do you remember? it's irregular

S: *croit*?*

M: uh

S: it's *cru*

M: *cru*

S: see I remember that

M: exactly *n'a pas cru*

S: yeah *ne l'a pas cru* did not believe it *ne l'a pas cru*

The assessor first interrupts to point out simply that there was a problem with the verb that she used. At first, Sara incorrectly assumes that she has used the wrong tense, and so M clarifies which tense she was attempting to produce and then begins to focus her attention on the location of the problem: the past participle. Sara mistakenly applied the rule for forming past participles of French verbs that end in –er to the verb *croire*, producing *croyé*. She does not respond to the initial assistance offered and so he reminds her that *croire* is an irregular verb. After producing another incorrect form, *croit*, Sara remembers that the past participle is actually *cru*. M accepts this response, and Sara appears quite pleased with her self, pointing out that she remembered it on her own and that M did not have to provide her with the correct form. Sara also shows some degree of proficiency when, after remembering the irregular past participle, she inserts it back into the past tense construction and even correctly places the *l'* (the direct object) before the auxiliary verb.

It is easy to see from this example how M was able to gain a better understanding of Sara's knowledge by interacting with her and providing mediation as she struggled with the past tense of this verb. In a traditional assessment, the assessor would have simply noted that Sara incorrectly formed the past tense of the verb *croire*. In this dynamic assessment, the assessor was able to discover that Sara actually could form the verb correctly, even inserting a direct object pronoun, although she required some assistance to do so. Thus, it can be concluded that in a relatively short period of time and with perhaps a bit more mediation, Sara should be able to independently produce the correct form of the verb.

The next example is taken from an interaction between a tutor and an ESL student as they work together to evaluate and revise a sample of the student's writing. In the following excerpt, the student has produced the sentence "*I called other friends who can't went do the party," and the tutor offers assistance as the student attempts to overcome the verb tense problem.

T: Okay what else ? ... what about the verb and the tense ? the verb and the tense

F: Could

T: Okay, here.

F: Past tense.

T: Alright, okay, "who [alright] could not." Alright ? And ? ...

F: To.

T: Here [points to the verb phrase], what's the right form ?

F: I... go.

T: Go. Okay, "could not go to [that's right] to the

party ..."

As can be seen, the tutor had to provide several forms of mediation in order to help the student. The mediation gradually became more specific. Now contrast this with the following performance. A week later, during another session with the same learner, the same problem occurred. Once again, the mediator attempts to help the learner overcome the difficulty. This time, however, the learner reacts positively to much less explicit assistance from the tutor than the previous week.

T: Is there anything wrong here in this sentence ? "I took only Ani because I couldn't took both" ... Do you see any thing wrong ? ... Particularly here "because I couldn't took both"

F: Or Maki ?

T: What the verb verb ... something wrong with the verb ...

F: Ah, yes ...

T: That you used. Okay, where ? Do you see it ?

F: (points to the verb)

T: Took ? okay.

F: Take.

T: Alright, take.

It appears then that the learner's level of understanding had changed between the first and second sessions. In both cases, she was unable to control the structures completely on her own and required help from the tutor to use them correctly. However, the amount and kind of help she needed changed. In other words, she was able to do better during the second session with less help. This is an indication that the learner had in fact developed. Of course, in a traditional assessment, only the learner's independent performance would have been looked at, and this improvement would probably not have been visible.

The final examples, taken from Antón (2003), concern two students of Spanish who, like the French learner described earlier, were asked to tell a story using the past tense as part of an assessment of his oral proficiency. In the first case, the examiner noted that the student began the story using the past tense but then slipped into the present tense (the excerpt has been translated into English).

(E)xaminer: You started the story in the past and then, half way   you switched

(S)tudent: Yes, yes

E: To the present.

S: Yes, yes. I heard

E: Do you want to try again using the past ? And you can ask me. If there is a verb you do not remember it's OK.

S: Yes, yes, from the beginning ?

E: Perhaps from the middle

S: In the past, yes, yes.

E: Did you realize that you made the switch ?

S: Yes, yes, I heard.

Interestingly, in this case the student was able to start over and with only a couple of mistakes was able to use the appropriate past tense forms. However, another student doing the same task also had trouble using the past tenses. The examiner also pointed out the problem and allowed the student a second chance narrate the story. In this case, the student's performance did not improve. In fact, the examiner resorted to providing the student a choice between two alternate forms.

S: *Jugué ol tenis* [I played tennis]

E: *Jugué o jugó* [I played or she played ?]

S: *Jugó* [She played]

Moments later, the student had a similar problem and the examiner had to resort to the same type of mediation in order to help her:

E: .... *Muy bien. Y aquí dijo, que hizo ?* [Very good. And here   you said, what did she do ?]

S: *Comí*   [I ate]

E: *Comí o comió* [I ate or she ate ?]

S: *Comió*   [She ate]

E: *Comió*

If these two Spanish learners had been assessed in a traditional approach, the examiner would have probably concluded that neither of them could control the past tense very well. By conducting the assessment dynamically, the examiner's interactions with the learners revealed that this conclusion would have been inappropriate. The two students are clearly not at the same level in their understanding of the Spanish past tenses. The first student actually understood the tenses well and only needed a second chance to produce an adequate narrative. The second learner, in contrast, was not able to self-correct and needed very specific help to use the tenses. Consequently, from a DA perspective we would make very different predictions of each learner's future development and would therefore prescribe different types of instruction.

In all of the examples, it is important to note that the mediator did not simply provide the learners with the appropriate linguistic items; rather, he or she tailored the media-

tion offered in order to provide the learners with as much opportunity as possible to exhibit their real level of development. This is a key feature of DA based as it is on the ZPD, which differentiates it from what usually happens in Formative Assessment practices in the classroom setting.

The Future

At present, research is being done on the effectiveness of using different kinds of mediation in DA procedures. One area of interest concerns the use of interactive procedures with groups of learners rather than individuals. Mediation can be provided to several students at once as they jointly engage in completing a task, with instructional recommendations highlighting each person's contributions and how best to maximize their performance. Another particularly exciting area of research focuses on integrating computer technologies with DA procedures. Some preliminary work has already been carried out to develop programs that not only deliver computer-based tests but that also make available various kinds of mediation throughout the assessment procedure. An obvious advantage of using such technologies is that large numbers of learners could be assessed simultaneously, and their assessment results, including the amounts and kinds of mediation they required, can be reported instantaneously.

More information is available on the following pages on the CALPER Web site:

http://calper.la.psu.edu/assessment/dynamic_assessment.php
http://calper.la.psu.edu/dyna_assess.php?page=websites
http://calper.la.psu.edu/dyna_assess.php?page=articles

Further Reading

For those interested in learning more about Dynamic Assessment we also recommend the following books and articles:

Aljaafreh, A. & J.P. Lantolf. (1994). Negative feedback as regulation and second language learning in the zone of proximal development. The Modern Language Journal 78: 465-483.

Antón, M. (2003). Dynamic assessment of advanced foreign language learners. Paper presented at the American Association of Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C., March, 2003.

Kozulin, A. (2003). Psychological Tools and Mediated Learning. In Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context. A. Kozulin, B. Gindis, V. S. Ageyev, S. M. Miller (Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lidz, C. S. (1991). Practitioner's Guide to Dynamic Assessment. New York: Guilford.

Minick, N. (1987). Implications of Vygotsky's theories for dynamic assessment. In Dynamic Assessment: An Interactive Approach to Evaluating Learning Potential. C. S. Lidz (Ed.) New York: The Guilford Press.

Poehner, M.E. & J.P. Lantolf. (2005). Dynamic Assessment in the Language Classroom. Language Teaching Research. Vol. 9.

Poehner, M.E., & J.P. Lantolf (2003). Dynamic Assessment of L2 development: Bringing the Past into the Future (CALPER Working Paper Series, No.1). University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, CALPER.

Sternberg, R. J. and E. L. Grigorenko. (2002). Dynamic Testing. The Nature and Measurement of Learning Potential. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Additional copies can be downloaded at
http://calper.la.psu.edu/publication.php?page=pdd2

Revised October 2010
URLs updated

Please cite as:

Lantolf, J. P., & Poehner, M. E. (2004). *Dynamic assessment in the language classroom* (CALPER Professional Development Document 0411). University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, CALPER.

Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research
The Pennsylvania State University
5 Sparks Building
University Park, PA 16802
http://calper.la.psu.edu