

# The Effect of Dynamic Assessment on the Listening Skills of Lower-intermediate EFL Learners in Chinese Technical College: A Pilot Study

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**Abstract**—The dynamic assessment, based on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory and the concept of zone of proximal development, has been considered capable of unifying assessment and instruction in the development of the assessee. This study aims to explore whether dynamic assessment can promote the integration of listening comprehension assessment and instruction while at the same time enhance students’ study in listening. Five second-year English majors from a technical college in an underdeveloped area of a coastal province in China took part in the study. The assessment adopted the cake format in which participants were firstly played a length of audio material and asked to answer comprehension questions and verbalize their comprehending process. The researcher then intervened to mediate the task. Afterwards the participants were played the audio material again and asked to retell. This process continued until the listener gained sufficient understanding of the audio material. An analysis of the data from the researcher’s notes, students’ notes, students’ verbal reports and reflective reports revealed that dynamic assessment can provide both the researcher and the participants a better understanding of the problems in listening. The data also indicated that the researcher’s intervention and mediation geared at participants’ problems helped construct the mediated learning experience for the participants. The conclusion is that dynamic assessment can realize the integration of listening comprehension assessment and instruction, and promote the development of students’ listening study at both macro- and micro-levels.

**Index Terms**—dynamic assessment, sociocultural theory, listening comprehension, Chinese technical college

## I. INTRODUCTION

There is a prevalent tension between assessment and instruction in Chinese EFL teaching, which is especially intense in the case of College English Test (CET). Cheng (2008, p. 32) pointed out that the stakes associated with the CET are extremely high. The CET certificate can bring the university graduates an edge in the job market. Students’ performance in the CET-4 also affects the evaluation of teachers. Therefore, the CET has exerted a huge amount of influence on English language teaching and learning in Chinese colleges. Teachers and students follow the testing in their teaching and learning and/or make passing the test the goal of their teaching and learning.

Scholars in the field of applied linguistics are working on the ways to ease the tension between assessment and instruction. Some take the sociocultural approach developed by L.S. Vygotsky, according to whom, assessment and instruction should be a dialectical unity, and they could be combined to promote students’ learning (Lantolf, 2009, p. 356). And guided by the sociocultural theory, they adopt an alternative to traditional assessments—dynamic assessment (DA).

Voluminous researches have been done on DA in psychology and general education (e.g., Tzuriel and David, 2001; Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2002; Haywood and Lidz, 2007). Few scholars in applied linguistics have done much research on the application of DA of language proficiency (Antón, 2009). Even less are the studies of the application of DA principles to the evaluation and promotion of the listening comprehension proficiency of EFL learners.

Vandergrift (1999, p. 168) argued: “Listening is hard work, and deserves more analysis and support”. He also pointed out that to help language learners develop good listening skills is a highly demanding job. Teachers should not focus their attention on the product of the listening comprehension. They should try to develop a richer understanding of the listening process and use the knowledge to inform instruction (Vandergrift 2007, p. 191).

Yang (2004) analyzed the English proficiency of Chinese university students based on the results of the national College English tests from 1987 to 2003. In the study, he has found a striking imbalance in the English proficiency level of the students among different institutions of higher learning. He pointed out that the students’ performance in listening comprehension was not satisfactory on the whole and it left a great room for improvement (ibid, p. 59). There are more than 1,000 technical colleges in China and most of the students are of lower-intermediate levels and are struggling with English learning. Teachers in Chinese Technical colleges need to work hard and find effective ways to improve students’ listening comprehension.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. *Dynamic Assessment*

According to Kozulin and Garb (2002), the term DA was not used by Vygotsky himself but was introduced by his followers outside of Russia, after his death. Lantolf (2009, p. 355) reported that it was coined in English by Vygotsky's colleague Luria in 1961. It was originally implemented in Russia with children with various kinds of learning disabilities (Ableeva, 2008, p. 59).

Haywood and Lidz (2007, p. 7) summarized some fundamental concepts and assumptions that appear to underlie virtually all approaches to dynamic assessment: Some abilities that are important for learning (in particular) are not assessed by normative, standardized intelligence tests; Observing new learning is more useful than cataloguing (presumed) products of old learning. History is necessary but not sufficient; Teaching within the test provides a useful way of assessing potential as opposed to performance; All people typically function at less than their intellectual capacity; Many conditions that do not reflect intellectual potential can and do interfere with expression of one's intelligence.

### B. *DA Studies in an L2 Context*

Few studies have been carried out concerning DA and its implementation in second language settings.

In the Kozulin and Garb (2002) study with 23 young Israeli academically at-risk students trying to learn English, the authors followed the test-teach-test paradigm. The students were first given a static test. Then the teacher reviewed the test with the students, guiding the students through the strategies required in each item and their errors in reading comprehension processing. Soon after the mediation of the teacher, a posttest was used to determine how individual students benefited or failed to benefit from the mediation. The results of the study showed that the students' posttest scores had increased significantly. The authors suggested that the dynamic procedure could indeed provide information on student' learning potential which was not available from the static test and that the information could be used for the development of individual learning plans accommodating the students' specific learning needs.

Poehner (2005) described a particularly powerful example of how dynamic assessment can be used to provide a complete picture of learner development. In the study six advanced undergraduate learners of L2 French were asked to orally construct a series of narratives in French based on short video clips. The study participants watched a video clip for a total of four times. The first time they watched the clip and described the action without mediation. The second time they watched the clip and described the scene with the help of a mediator. Following the initial video viewing sessions, a tutoring program was conducted with the student. This tutoring session was specific to each learner's individual language strengths and weaknesses that were uncovered during the initial narrations. Moreover, the interaction between the student and administrator was contingent on the students' needs. Following enrichment, the nature and extent of their development was explored through repetitions of the original assessments as well as variations of these tasks. The results suggest that DA is an effective means of understanding learners' abilities and helping them to overcome linguistic problems.

So far the only research applied the DA to listening assessment has been Ableeva (2008). There are six participants in Ableeva's study and it last one week. Following the pretest-mediation (DA intervention)-retest format, the study explored the potential contributions of DA to the listening comprehension assessment and instruction. For the pretest the students were played some recording twice and asked to write down the answer. At the beginning of the DA intervention, the participants were allowed to ask questions and the intervention from the mediator was given by hints, explanations, suggestions and other mediations. During the retest stage, participants were asked to summarize the text. She reported the results in six case studies to demonstrate DA is a helpful diagnostic pedagogical tool which can not only allow instructors to establish the actual level of learners' listening comprehension abilities but also to reveal their potential abilities that are in the process of developing.

Poehner and Ableeva are both members of Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research of the Pennsylvania State University, which champions the study of DA in L2 contexts. Their studies help to frame the present study, which follows a DA-based approach to assessing listening abilities of lower-intermediate EFL learners in a Chinese Technical College.

## III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### A. *Research Questions*

The research questions to be addressed are:

1. How do the results of a DA of listening abilities differ from the results of an assessment that is not dynamic?
2. What should teachers do during DA to best nurture the development of listening abilities of lower-intermediate students?

To answer the first question, we must understand what insights can DA help us gain into the listening comprehension process while traditional assessment can not, especially what problems listeners encounter during listening comprehension. Also we should investigate how DA can promote students' learning. This can be accomplished by a

diagnostic approach to listening comprehension. Poehner (2007, p. 325) pointed out that in some DA programs the initial DA session is used as a diagnostic of learners' abilities and later repeated in order to track developmental changes over time. Ableeva (2008) referred to DA as "a helpful diagnostic pedagogical tool" (p. 58).

The overall design of the research will include the following components: diagnosis of listeners' problems, intervention of the mediator to help the students deal with the problems through interaction with the students while at the same time promoting their development. The findings from the diagnostics the subsequent intervention, interaction and mediation will inform us on the answer of the second question: "What should teachers do during DA to best nurture the development of listening abilities of intermediate students?"

### *B. Context of the Study*

The participants are second-year English majors from a technical college in an underdeveloped city of a coastal province in China. The opportunities for English learning are attending lectures, going to the library and surfing the internet. There isn't much chance for the English majors to practice their English outside the classroom. The English majors sit for CET-4 and CET-6 and generally half of the students passed CET-4 at the third term and the rest half are supposed to pass it at the end of the fourth term.

The participants all made several attempt to pass CET-4 but failed. They considered their participation as an opportunity to gain additional practice in listening comprehension. At first 9 students volunteered to participate, but during the process 4 participants left and 5 girls stayed till the end of the research: Lina, Wendy, Sue, Cindy, Dora (all pseudonyms). Another girl, Fay, dropped out after 4 sessions. They have been receiving formal instruction in English since junior middle school for 7.5 years at the time of the study. In their free time, they did little practice to improve their English listening proficiency except the assignment given by the researcher on dictation of the material from Special English Program of Voice of America.

The assessment materials for the pretests and posttests are materials adopted from CET-4, which is a well-established English test with high reliability and validity. The test was introduced in 1987 for undergraduates in China who have completed the College English Courses Band 1 to 4, usually second-year students. The test is administered by the National College English Testing Committee on behalf of the Higher Education Department, Ministry of Education of China. Considering that the students might get bored with all the standardized tests, sometimes the teacher would invite them to give suggestion on what to be listened to. Some stories from New Concept English and video clips from the video-sharing website of tudou.com were adopted as suggested to maintain students' interest.

### *C. Procedure*

The procedure design is primarily based on Poehner (2005), which followed a pretest-enrichment-posttest format in a linear pattern. In his study, materials used were several video clips from a French movie. Unlike Poehner who identified the students' problem in oral proficiency at the onset of the experiment which was the past tense in French, the researcher argued that listening comprehension is a dynamic process and the problems could only be identified through a long period of interaction and observation with students. Because of the early identification of students' problems, Poehner's study had a long period of enrichment, while in the present study, there is not going to be a separate enrichment period. The enrichment will be embodied during the process of dynamic assessment.

As has been argued that through mediation and intervention with the students, the problems identified could be handled and the improvement be promoted. That is why there are 2 static assessments and 2 dynamic assessments in Poehner's study while the present study has 2 static assessments and 8 dynamic assessments. The researcher hopes that with more assessments, more problems could be identified and more insights could be gained into listening process and with more mediation and intervention, the problems could be more effectively addressed, thus more improvement resulted.

The research will adopt a cake format, in which the researcher presents a listening comprehension task to the learner as a pretest, and the learner tells the researcher what he or she gets from the audio information, the researcher identifies the problem and makes an effort to intervene through interaction to overcome the problem. In this sense, the enrichment is not "sandwiched" between the two tests as in Poehner (2005), but carried out during the process of the assessment.

In the beginning, the participants were given the pretest with one passage from the sample test. The passage is about the traditions of engagement (henceforth referred to as the Engagement Passage). They were asked to both answer the multiple choice questions and summarize the passages. The participants were also asked to provide their total scores and the scores of the listening part of the latest CET-4 test held in the coming December as a reference.

Then there came the DA sessions which last 2 months. Each week the researcher and the participants met in the researcher's office once for a session which last about 40 minutes. Each session was mainly conducted on a one-to-one basis and rarely on a group basis unless upon the request of the participants. The participants would wait for their turns in their classroom which is on the sixth floor of the main building.

During the each session, the passages from CET-4 tests were played to the participants twice and then they were asked to answer the comprehension questions orally or in writing as they please without mediation. At this stage the students' problems were identified and then came the intervention and mediation. The participants were allowed to listen to the same audio material as many times as they needed and they were encouraged to ask questions in either Chinese or English and the researcher would provide necessary hint, explanations and suggestions. Afterwards the retest

was given where students were asked to summarize the same audio material. Considering the length of the audio material and the participants' level of language proficiency, the whole passage was divided into several sections for summarization. When the participants were summarizing the audio material, the researcher would either provide a correction, make inquiries about something that was said or written, or make some comments. The participants could speak Chinese and English as they pleased and the researcher switched to Chinese when making further explanations or clarifications. The national CET-4 test came right one week after the end of the study, and this test was to be the posttest.

#### D. Data Collection

The data were mainly collected from the following sources: participants' retrospective reports, researcher's notes, participants' notes, and participants' reflective journals.

To identify participants' problems in listening comprehension, the participants were asked to report what they did or failed to do when trying to comprehend the audio material texts during the DA sessions. The participants described the difficulties they encounter in their own words. In some cases, they also offered reasons for these problems.

The participants whose English proficiency was at a lower level were allowed to use their first language. As Ericsson and Simon (1993) mentioned, speech in a foreign language could serve as an example of how encoding processes that are not automatic slow processes down. They further pointed out that how the thinking is slowed down is a function of the subject's skill in the foreign language (p. 249).

The students were allowed to report not only in their first language but also in written form. The verbal report of the participant's understanding and the summarization during the DA sessions were allowed to be in written form as a kind of materialization of the object of study. The advantage was that the mediator and learner could then collaboratively examine students' understanding as a whole, noting underlying problems, evaluating them, and revising and extending the intervention as necessary.

The interaction between the researcher and the participants were recorded and partly transcribed. The coding process followed Seng and Hashim (2006) which coded according a tentative list of reading strategies based on previous strategy research. In the present research, coding was made with reference to the list of Poehner's (2005) Mediator Typology. After the coding process, the excerpts of transcription of three passages were used for analysis.

To complement the data, the researcher took note of the various types of mediation and moves on the part of the learners. The participants were told that they take notes while listening so that they could remember everything that they would like to include in their summarization. All notes were collected at the end of each session. Furthermore, participants were asked to write a retrospective report to reflect and evaluate on their listening process and learning progress. All the participants' notes and researcher's notes were collected.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Insights into Lower-intermediate Students' Listening Comprehension

In the context of CET-4 test which is a typical standardized test, all that the students receive is a sheet of paper reporting their total scores and the scores of sub-sections and nothing more. The students get to know where they need improvement but they do not know the full extent and precise source of problems. Through the study, some problems that students encounter during listening comprehension were found out and a fuller understanding of students' mental process was illustrated by the discussion of students' mental translation and private speech.

##### **Mental Translation**

Here is a report from Sue:

"It is very bad. When I listen, my mind translates every word into Chinese. Sometimes when the word is too difficult, my head becomes heavy and I do not want to continue listening."

What Sue reveals is a problem that may strike a chord with many lower level English learners. Why does it happen? How to deal with it?

Chamot and Kupper (1989) identified translation as one of the cognitive language learning strategies. It defined translation as "rendering ideas from one language to another in a relatively verbatim manner" (p. 16). When the translation happens inside the head of the listeners during the process of listening comprehension, it is mental translation. It is also referred to as *on-line translation* by Vandergrift (2007, p. 193). Eastman (1991) found that beginning level listeners try to translate what they hear into their language as they listen and they often feel compelled to use such a strategy.

The participants' performance and report during the study also confirmed that mental translation was part of the process of their listening comprehension. During the study, when the researcher asked the participants to report their understanding, they would do it immediately in Chinese and when they were asked to do it in English, they did not know how to express it. They might have retained the information in Chinese in their short-term memory during listening and retrieve it when verbalizing. Sue and Wendy reported that when listening, they would try to translate every word into Chinese. They did so in reading, too. They recognized that it is counterproductive, but they could not get rid of it.

Few scholars have addressed the issue of mental translation during listening comprehension, but it is gaining more and more attention. Goh(2002) pointed out that the translation tactics listeners use actually slow down the processing of the language input and often take the listeners' attention away from clues that might have assisted their comprehension(p.192).Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, and Tafaghodtari (2006) included mental translation as one of the strategies in the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire. Vandergrift (2007), Chang (2008) also identified mental translation as an important factor to inhibit listening comprehension.

Mental translation obviously hinders participants' listening comprehension. The listeners are listening to a whole passage continuously, if they always try to translate what they hear into their mother tongue, they are not likely to be able to catch up with the speed of the speaker and will miss a lot of information. The main reason for mental translation might be that the students' listening vocabulary is underdeveloped. They spend a lot of time figuring out the meaning of the words. This strategy of employing linguistic knowledge in listening comprehension is usually termed bottom-up processing, whereby the sounds, words, clauses and sentences of a passage are decoded in a fairly linear fashion to elicit meaning (Rost, 2005). Too much emphasis on the bottom-up processing does not leave listeners adequate attentional resources to construct meaning. Listeners should also activate top-down processes to make sure that comprehension does not break down. In top-down processing, the listeners' knowledge of the topic, their general knowledge of the world and of how texts generally work, will interact with this linguistic knowledge to create an interpretation of the text (Buck, 2001, p. 29).

From what we have discussed, we then could tell the students that if they want to become skilled listeners, they must learn to resist the compulsion to translate the audio input. But if they can not do it, let them not be worried. The researcher assured the students that he himself constantly suffered from such a problem and that mental translation was very common among English learners and sometimes it could assist them in their learning.

It is natural for mental translation to occur in the process of foreign language learning. Cook (1992) argued that all L2 learners in fact access their L1 while processing the L2. He suggested that "the L2 user does not effectively switch off the L1 while processing the L2, but has it constantly available" (p. 571). Cook also maintained that when working with L2 learners, teachers should remember: "The L1 is present in the L2 learners' minds, whether the teacher wants it to be there or not" (p. 584).

The commonness of mental translation in listening comprehension could also be understood from a Vygotskian perspective. Upton and Lee-Thompson (2001) argued that mental translation is related to what Vygotsky (1986) has called inner speech. He stated that: "...inner speech is speech for oneself; external speech is for others" (p. 225). The role of inner speech in thought is important to the understanding of the relation between language and thought. He argued that thought and language cannot be regarded as "two unrelated processes, either parallel or crossing at certain points and mechanically influencing each other" (p. 211). From Vygotsky's perspective, thought and language interact with each other and higher thought is impossible without language, be it first language or a foreign language. During the listening comprehension process, students are trying to construct meaning from the audio input, which is a form of higher thought. The process of meaning construction is mediated by two languages but their foreign language is in such an inadequate state so the students compensate it with their first language.

From the discussion of this perspective, teachers could tell students that to understand the meaning of the audio material in a foreign language, they should have a very good command of the target language so as not to resort to their first language. It is also the same with reading. There is a possibility that the students transfer the strategy they use for reading to listening comprehension. Since students in their study deals more with reading than listening, they could deal with mental translation in reading first.

Cohen and Allison (1998) conducted a study to investigate how students in an immersion program used both their native language and the immersion language to perform classroom tasks. One of the questions the study tried to answer was the extent to which the students use mental translation during classroom activities and how the students viewed the helpfulness of mental translation. The results showed that students with less exposure to the language environment tended to use more mental translation than those immersed in the language environment. Both kinds of students found mental translation helpful in some way. Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) revealed that mental translation might be helpful if students did not engage in word-for-word translation that the reported increased use of mental translation actually reflected an increased ability to identify the meaning of words.

To sum, students should be encouraged to overcome the compulsion to translate word for word during listening if they are to be successful listeners. Some students may blame themselves for such kind of problem. Tell the students not to panic if they encounter such a problem and assure them that this is an unpleasant but inevitable part of learning a foreign language. Tell the students that the causes of such a problem is that they listening vocabulary is underachieved and that they depend too much on the bottom-up approach rather than the top-down approach. Make it clear to the students that listening comprehension is a very complex process and it involves many factors. Encourage the students to speculate on the causes for this problem and consider how these it could be dealt with realistically. In this way, the students could be spurred to take a more active part in overcoming some of their listening problems.

Thus far we have discussed some of the problems that surface during the study which would remain hidden with the standardized tests. The researcher tried to understand the problems and find effective ways of intervention. Insight could also be gained through students' problem-solving process. The next part on private speech shows how.

### Private Speech

Firstly look at the following dialogue between the researcher and Dora when she was trying to understand some part of the Headmaster passage.

R: What will he do when he retired?

D: En, he will do something.

R: What's the thing?

D: I don't know, but the thing begins with ga(..) or something.

R: Is it gardening?

D: What?

R: Gardening

D: Gardening? (looking puzzled) gardening(whispering) ...

R: Yes, garden, gardening, garden.

D: Garden (looking away from the desk to the ceiling), garden, garden, Oh, yes, gardening, I know it.

R here refers to the researcher in this protocol and the protocols of all interactions between the researcher and the participants. In this conversation, Dora met some problem with recognizing the word *gardening*, but the researcher knew that with some assistance, Dora could have been able to pick up the word. Dora repeated the words to herself for several times and finally she got it. During the process of solving the problems, especially at the final stage of speculating, Dora was not speaking to the researcher but to herself. She talked herself out of the problem. This kind of speech, according to Vygotsky, is private speech and the pattern is referred to as repetition of other's utterances by Ohta (2001).

Vivid examples of private speech are everyday self-directed speeches such as *What? Wait a minute, No! etc.* These speeches in which we ask ourselves questions, tell ourselves to interrupt a particular activity, tell us something unexpected happened or we are wrong are generally referred to as *private speech*. Lantolf (2000) defined it as "speech that has social origins in the speech of others but that takes on a private or cognitive function" (p. 15).

Wertsch (1985) and Lantolf (2000) discussed how inner speech develops and the relationship between private speech and inner speech. Inner speech develops through the process of social interaction, and through verbal interaction that includes private speech. Private speech evolves into inner speech as cognitive development proceeds. Appel and Lantolf (1994) stated that private speech usually emerges in the face of difficult tasks and private speech in an L2 could serve to mediate the mental activity comprehension (p. 438).

Frawley and Lantolf (1985) put forth affective markers to detect the happening of private speech which are most noticeable among English as second language learners. In the present study, the utterances *Oh* manifests that the speaker is addressing no one other than herself.

This *Oh* moment is critical in the development of the learners. The problem the student really has is that she could not match the sounds she heard with any script in her long-term memory. Although she might know the word in written form, she could not recognize it by sound. The information of the word is stored in the long-term memory in some abstract form, not in words. It only substantiated through the mediation of private speech. During the *Oh* moment, the word *gardening* has been internalized by the speaker. As Lantolf (2003) pointed out, internalization in second language learning is "...the process through which learners construct a mental representation of what was at one point physically present (acoustic or visual) in external form (p. 351). In this case, the sound of the word *gardening* is an acoustic physical entity while its meaning is the mental representation of the sound. Then mental representation of *gardening* is within the zone of proximal development of the student. Private speech here serves a function of self-regulating the process of learning. McCafferty (1994) pointed out that a self-regulated child depends less on others for mediation of meaning, and eventually he or she becomes capable of functioning in a largely autonomous manner. In the same vein, a self-regulated foreign language learner depends less on mediation from others. Private speech plays an important role in a foreign language learner's road to self-regulation.

As foreign language teachers, we should understand the importance of research on private speech because it helps us gain insights into how learners endeavor to gain control over the various difficulties that confront them. We should be able to notice the *Oh* moment of the learners and try our best to bring about this moment. Actually in the reflective journal of Dora, she said it was during such moments that she felt the most sense of achievement and the most exciting.

Let's bring an end to the discussion of the problems and insights gained from dynamic assessment. The data gathered are useful in that they revealed the students' difficulties in listening that would have otherwise remained hidden. The findings are in line with Haywood and Lidz's (2007) claim that DA enables the assessment of cognitive processes, i.e. "ongoing tactics, strategies, habits and modes of thinking; of approaching, defining, and solving problems" (p. 27). Knowing the reasons behind the problems will enable the teachers to be in a better position to intervene and guide the students in how to deal with or overcome some of their listening difficulties. The next part will discuss how well the students develop from the intervention and guidance.

### B. Results of CET-4 Listening Comprehension Component and Students' Reports

Students' scores on the CET-4 Listening Comprehension Component before and after the DA sessions are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1.  
CET-4 LISTENING COMPREHENSION SCORES BEFORE AND AFTER THE DA SESSIONS

	Lina	Wendy	Sue	Cindy	Dora	Fay*
Before	135	123	140	137	132	106
After	130	159	173	125	122	150

\*Fay dropped out after the first four sessions.

The results are mixed. Lina’s score did not show much change, but Cindy and Dora’s show a decrease in their scores. Wendy and Sue’s scores have improved. In her retrospective report, Lina said: “I didn’t memorize the words and I could only recognize several words during the test. I finished the listening part following my feelings. I made several attempts to pass CET-4 but failed. I do not persist in listening in my daily life. So I should listen more and memorize more words.” Lina attributed her low score to not knowing enough vocabulary and lack of practice. That could be part of the reason. Lina was not so motivated during the study. She had a boyfriend and the researcher often saw them together everywhere on campus. She might not have devoted enough time to the improvement of listening skills. But the fact that she expressed the will to listen more shows she could impose self-regulation on her own study.

The rest four, Wendy, Sue, Cindy and Dora always showed up very early at the researcher’s office sometimes when I went to my office, they were already there with books in their hands. Cindy and Sue were quite quiet during the study while Wendy and Sue were very active. Sue was very motivated. During the May Day holiday she rang up the researcher to ask for an extra session. Before each session she would discuss what she had listened to recently.

In Sue’s report, she said that the study had helped her to enlarge her vocabulary. She thought that retelling after listening to the material was an effective way to improve listening skills. She also pointed out some of the problems in listening and the ways to deal with them. Her report shows she is stretching her own zone of proximal development. Wendy said in her report that she learned how to concentrate during the test through listening again and again to the material with the researcher. This is in line with Lidz’s (1991) description of mediation of regulation and control of behavior. This is a form of mediation leading to MLE where the mediator helps the child to inhibit impulsive responses, as well as to increase her focus and attention. The optimal state is self-regulation and active, sustained involvement (p.14).

Cindy and Dora did not think that the study offered too much help to them. Both of them thought that the frequency of the DA sessions were not intense enough. Cindy also listed the problems she still suffered from: a) When she was listening to the material in her daily life, she did not pay attention to where she got wrong; b) Her reading speed was slow; and c) She was easy to get distracted by new words. She also established a short-time goal of learning for herself to enlarge her vocabulary and listen more and communicate more in English with dorm-mates. Dora said she felt the excitement each time when she learned a new word during the session. She felt very regretful that she got absent-minded during the CET-4 test. The researcher would like to say that if the test had been conducted in a dynamic approach, Dora would have earned much better results.

Another interesting finding from Cindy and Dora’s reports that was not found in the others was that both of them mentioned the benefits they received from *strict teachers* in their previous formal schooling. This could be interpreted that they were accustomed to following the teachers passively. Cindy even mentioned that her interest and effort in the subject of study changed according to which subject her head-teacher taught. The researcher has found that for dynamic assessment to be effective, it is important to get to know the students’ English learning experience prior to college. The information could be used to decide how much autonomy the students have on their own study. If the students are not quite autonomous learners, the researcher needs to put in extra efforts either to increase the frequency of the sessions or give instructions on how to learn effectively.

Dora, Sue and Wendy expressed explicitly that they had benefited from the study. Cindy and Lina did not give explicit comments on the effect of the study, but the effect of the study had been manifested through their plan to future study. They all have gained self-control in their studies with varied degrees.

It is very hard to identify the reasons behind the various performances in a standardized test and nor should a practitioner of dynamic assessment endeavor to. Thomas Oakland remarked in the preface to Haywood (2007) that “...the ultimate goal of assessment should be an accurate description of behavior that helps promote development” (p. xviii). The result of the static assessment could shed some light on the development of the students but it is by no means a ruler to measure the successfulness of a dynamic assessment. Haywood (2007) also pointed out that:

In fact, we insist that DA is not for everybody on all occasions but instead constitutes a valuable part of the assessment repertoire when used in conjunction with other forms of assessment, including standardized testing, social and developmental history taking, observation of performance in learning situations, and data gathered from clinical interview, parents, teachers, and others. (p.2)

Unlike the traditional assessment from which the only feedback students receive is a piece of blank score report, dynamic assessment approach explores behind the scores which demonstrate the present performance and adds information about the potential performance of students. Through the DA sessions, the students have learned to face their own problems in study, and they have also learned how to cope with problems. What’s more, they have exercised

initiative to regulate their own studies. All that the students' have gained from the research has provided them with a springboard for future study.

### *C. Impact of Dynamic Assessment*

Taylor (2005) remarked that "testing can have consequences beyond just the classroom (p. 154)." These consequences are termed washback and impact. Bachman and Palmer (1996) pointed out that "...the notion of washback in language testing can be characterized in terms of impact, and includes the potential impact on test takers and their characteristics, on teaching and learning activities, and on educational systems and society" (p. 35). The impact of the dynamic assessment on test takers and their characteristics will be explored in student motivation and its impact on teaching and learning activities is to be illustrated in teacher-learner relation.

Following Dörnyei (2001), at the onset of the study, the researcher endeavored to construct a pleasant and supportive learning environment (p.42). The location of DA sessions is in the researcher's office where it is spacious and bright and not very far from their classrooms. The students were told that mistakes were a natural part of learning and when they made a mistake, they would not be criticized. With the recruitment of participants, the researcher has shown his commitment to the students' learning progress by offering help with the improvement of their listening skills (p. 34).

During the study, the researcher observed an enhancement of student motivation. Dora and Cindy were always found waiting at the door of the researcher. Sue phoned during the holiday to ask if the researcher was available. Wendy was very active during the sessions. Though Lina needed to spend a lot of time with her boyfriend, she always managed to be there at the last minute with sweat on her nose. All of them were trying harder and harder to note down what they heard and narrate what and how they understood. All of these show that they are motivated to learn.

In a study to understand the student's experience of school, Alerby (2003) found that students identify relationships with teachers as being among the most important parts of their school experience (p.21). The teacher who has a positive relationship with the students on not only an academic level but also a personal level is a motivating teacher Dörnyei (2001, p.36). He also mentioned that: "Developing a personal relationship with the students and achieving their respect is easier said than done" (p. 36). But the study has witnessed an enhancement in the teacher-learner relation.

The English teacher in the college where the researcher teaches is understaffed. On average, he needs to teach three periods each working day. This is quite common among teachers in China, as Cheng (2005) pointed out that teachers in China as a whole suffered from heavy workloads (p. 37). Working in such a context, the only chances for the teacher to communicate with the students are happening in the classroom. As each class holds at least thirty students, it would be impossible to interact with each student and know their learning needs and problems. After a term, it is not uncommon for a teacher not knowing who is in his or her class. This alienation between the teacher and the students is detrimental to students' development. The students would feel they have been ignored by the teachers, schools, or even the society.

Things are even worse for the listening course with more than thirty students retreating to the back rows of the classroom, hiding behind the glass screens and the teacher checking the answers. The teacher knows nothing about the students' level and what they are thinking. Students respond sporadically to teacher's question and complain at the end of the term they have learned nothing. When the researcher started the study, the participants would sit in the first row and interacted actively with the teacher.

The teacher also used the insights gained about students' problems and ways of intervention to guide the teaching. The whole class became very active and the teacher also won respect of the student as someone who knew their problems. The above discussion reveals a change of the teacher-student relation from cold, alienated to warm, involved.

The dynamic assessment has achieved positive impact on the part of the students and the educational environment through enhanced motivation and teacher-student relation. At the same time, the dynamic assessment has help attain the third criterion of MLE by generating emotional and motivational behavior of the individual.

## V. CONCLUSION

### *A. Major Findings*

The most important differences between DA and NDA lie in the insights both the teacher and the learner gained through the process. The insights could only be gained through persistent and intense interactions with the students during the dynamic assessment that were characteristic of the present study. In the initial assessment, though the performance of the participants could all be labeled "failure", the problems the students encountered were each in its unique way. Further research revealed more of the problems students encounter.

Their responses to the comprehension question were based on the information occurring at the beginning of the passage or in the middle of the passage. They usually found it hard to follow the beginning part of the audio material. Their attention was very easily distracted by their surroundings. They translated what they heard into Chinese in their head. All the problems have helped the teacher to explore the listening comprehension process of the students. The sources behind these problems were revealed: lexical overlap, fixation, test anxiety, and mental translation. Student's private speech was also noticed during the research which has given the researcher insight into the budding ability of the student and provided insightful moment for the student.

Dynamic assessment in this study has helped both the teacher and students to better understand the latter's listening abilities, and this will put them in a better position to promote those abilities towards the zone of proximal development.

With the insights gained through the dynamic assessment, the researcher started searching for effective ways of intervention. The researcher gave the students guidance on how to gain a broader understanding of the text rather than several chunks of information. The researcher told students to focus on specific items while listening such as nouns, numbers, important words that carry meaning, intonation contours and stressed words. Also the researcher gave them directions on note-taking skills. The researcher even gave directions on how to ease their tension during test. To deal with mental translation, students were encouraged to overcome the compulsion to translate word for word during listening if they are to be successful listeners. They were also encouraged to speculate on the causes for this problem and consider how it could be dealt with realistically.

The results from the studying on the notes and reflective reports of the students have shown that they have made progress in note-taking skills and they have gained better understanding of their problems.

In conclusion, to promote the students' abilities during the dynamic assessment, teachers should pay close attention to and value highly the problems surfacing during the research for they provide valuable information for the intervention. During the intervention, the researcher should get to know the nature of the problems and the means to tackle them.

### B. *Limitations of the Present Study*

The limitations of the present study reside in the research design and data analysis.

While carrying out the research the researcher had to take into account the constraints of time and energy, so he only decided to recruit six volunteers and specified that the first six to contact got the place. Many more students wanted to join in, but the researcher had to persuade them not to. That is one of the drawbacks of the kind of dynamic assessment in this study. It requires such intense interactions that when it is carried out alone by one researcher, the number of participants is limited.

The participants of the study were all girls so it might render the study gender-biased. This researcher tried to retain the only boy volunteer but failed. The participants were all lower-intermediate students. If the research had contained students from mixed abilities groups, the picture might be different. This is an issue demanding further exploration.

From the reflective reports of Dora and Cindy, the researcher did not find in them a reliance on the teacher for their study before the research. For such students, the researcher needs to either increase the frequency of assessment or give them instructions on learning skills. If the researcher had noticed this earlier, the results in terms of their scores might have been different. It is important to get to know the students' previous formal English learning experiences especially when the students' English proficiency was relatively lower.

### C. *Suggestions for Future Study*

For further researches on the dynamic assessment of lower-intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension proficiency, the insights into the students' problems in listening could be referred to during the initial assessment. Then the researcher could adopt the sandwich format of DA. In which the English listening strategy instruction could be sandwiched between the initial static assessment and the final static assessment.

To better understand students' problems in listening comprehension, teachers need to develop what Edelenbos and Kubanek-German (2004) called "diagnostic competence" (p. 259). They firstly discussed why it is important for teachers to develop the diagnostic competence. According to them, the trend in education is that teachers will be expected to engage in more one-on-one contact with students and the days will be gone when the teacher finishes a big class and go away. To be a competent teacher, one must be able to use and account for data from various language sources. They also pointed out standardized and teacher-made tests provide limited options for describing and interpreting the individual learner's foreign language growth (p.260). They defined diagnostic assessment as "...the ability to interpret students' foreign language growth, to skillfully deal with assessment material and to provide students with appropriate help in response to this diagnosis" (p. 260). They also provide a working definition of the concept of a teacher's diagnostic competence and a preliminary description of levels of diagnostic competence (pp.277-278).

Both the facts that there have been few studies on diagnostic competence and that their research site was the primary foreign language classroom leave sufficient room for the research in the nature of diagnostic competence of EFL listening comprehension for teachers in the site of institutions of higher learning.

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