Applicability of Peer-dynamic Assessment in Crowded Second Language Classes

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Abstract—One of the criticisms leveled against Dynamic Assessment (DA), with a robust theoretical foundation rooted in Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), has been its applicability in populated L2 classes. The present paper, therefore, aimed to explore the applicability of Peer-Dynamic Assessment (Peer-DA), as a novel approach to DA, to ameliorate this concern. In order to achieve the goal, 15 fourth-grade female Iranian high school students, aged 15-17, were assigned into trios groups. After having been instructed to know how to apply Peer-DA procedures in their groups during three sessions, they worked on ten reading texts during ten one-hour sessions held twice a week. When the participants were trying to comprehend the texts and learn the embedded vocabulary within the texts, their interactions were meticulously audio-recorded. Next, a number of episodes were selected, transcribed, and microgenetically analyzed. Analyzing the obtained revealed that not only does Peer-DA have the capability for diagnosing developing abilities but it also can improve the developing abilities in a much more efficient way. More importantly, it was demonstrated that if the principles and procedures of peer-DA be taught to L2 learners, they can be utilized by learners in large classes to facilitate language learning processes. The implications of the present study were discussed from a sociocultural perspective for both ESL/EFL teachers and learners.

Index Terms—zone of proximal development, peer-dynamic assessment, microgenetic analysis, reading comprehension, vocabulary learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Dynamic Assessment (DA) is essentially based on the sociocultural theory (SCT) introduced by the famous Russian psychologist, L. S. Vygotsky (1978). 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 can do more when just a bit of assistance, or mediation, is offered by a more capable person. According to Vygotsky (1987), what the child is able to do independently represent a view of the child past development, but what the child is able to achieve with mediation provides insight into his/her upcoming development. Vygotsky refers to the distance between what a child can independently carry out and what s/he can accomplish with mediation as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Interaction in the ZPD, for Vygotsky, was a way of predicting a child's future development and a way of cultivating and nurturing the developing abilities.

According to Poehner (2009), Vygotsky believed that instruction must not be concerned with fully developed abilities but it must operate within the ZPD to optimally promote learner development.

"Since teaching depends on immature, but maturing processing and the whole area of these processes is encompassed by the zone of proximal development of the child, the optimum time for teaching both the group and each individual child is established at each age by the zone of their proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 204).

Thus, the ZPD was taken as a theoretical foundation for dialectic integration of instrucyion and assessment by Vygotsky himself and Vygotsky-informed research. The corn stone of Vygotsky-informed approach to instruction is that effective instruction involves assessment, and effective assessment involves instruction; they are dialectically integrated (Poehner, 2009). In other word, both of them are united together to help learners diagnose and redress their problems through teacher peer mediation.

To put it in a nutshell, Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002) defined DA as a type of assessment that takes the result of an intervention into consideration. In the intervention, the examiner assists the examinee how to perform better on individual items or on the test as a whole. The final score may be a learning score representing the difference between pre-test and post-test score, or it may be the score on the posttest alone (Lantolf & Thorn, 2006). That is to say, it attempts to modify the student's performance during testing by introducing material or instructions to elicit higher achievement levels (Embreston, 1987).

As mentioned earlier, DA is largely rested on the Vygotsky's conceptualization of ZPD which tries to capture human unique potential to exceed beyond his/her existing capabilities in cooperation with others whose dialogic interaction mediates him to higher levels of cognitive functioning . As it can be inferred, human social interaction is vital for

shaping and nurturing current becoming capabilities "because cognition emerges through engagement with others" (Poehner, 2009, p. 472). This stance is best manifested in the concepts of intermental and intramental functioning. To Vygotsky (1978), every cognitive function initially is co-constructed at social plane when people are involved in interaction with others human beings or cultural artifacts, and then this co-built knowledge is internalized at intramental or intrapsychological level. Accordingly, verbal interaction, especially dialogic, is conceived of as a mediatory tool through which learners are assisted and pushed toward self-regulation. Anton (2003) underscores that involving in dialogic interaction can best set the scene for learners to actively participate in their development and teachers are afforded with optimal opportunities to supply their learners with the assistance tuned to learners' actual lacks and needs. However, to achieve the higher levels of ability based on ZPD, two general approaches, interactionist and interventionist, have been proposed to fine-tune the required assistance to learner's current levels of developing capabilities.

Interactionist DA follows Vygotsky's tendency for dialogic interaction. In this approach, assistance emerges from the interaction between the mediator and the learner; it is, therefore, highly sensitive to learner's ZPD. This approach finds its origins in Vygotsky's qualitative interpretation of the ZPD; one that foregrounds instruction-learning over static and reliable measurement. One of the leading proponents of interactionist DA is Reuven Feuerstien (Feuerstien, Rand, & Hoffman, 1979) whose main theory is the Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) - a construct reflecting Vygotsky's understanding of mediation. In MLE model, the stimulus-response is altered so that the learner is interacting with more competent peer or teacher who assists the learner in a way by selecting, changing, amplifying, and interpreting the objects with the learner through mediation. On the other hand, the interventionist DA tends to follow a quantitative approach, and so it lends itself more easily to a psychometric orientation. Poehner (2008) states that the defining characteristics of intervention DA is the use of standardized administration procedures and forms of assistance in order to produce easily quantifiable results that can be used to make predictions about future performance. It is currently implemented as a pre-test - mediation (intervention) - post-test experimental approach. The role of teacher is interactive, collaborating with the student to affect change in the skill being assessed.

However, in spite of the considerable body of supporting evidence for the efficacy of DA, some criticisms were leveled against its applicability in engaging whole group's ZPDs; more specifically, it was postulated that DA approaches are only productive in tutorial sessions, or what is dubbed as "rickshaw" model (Poehner, 2009). Reacting to the criticism, Poehner (2009) drew upon Vygotsky's original conceptualization of ZPD in public schools and introduced group dynamic assessment (G-DA).

Group-based and one-to-one DA procedures, in fact, follow the same general principal of offering learner mediation to help them co-construct a ZPD, but they differ in that G-DA must also consider the group's ZPD. G-DA entails understanding the group to be not merely a context for individual performance but a social system in its own right that might be supported to function in ways that are beyond the present capabilities of any individual member. G-DA then must engage the group in an activity that no individual is able to complete independently but for which all members require mediation, although at different levels and quantities. Of course, the forms of mediation needed may vary from learner to learner at any given point in time (Poehner, 2009). The vital point to bear in mind is that for G-DA to effectively promote the development of all group members, the teacher must actively engage the whole group in G-DA interactions. However, it may be claimed that the procedures of one-to-one DA and G-DA be applied in groups of L2 learners where the students can provide appropriate mediations for their peers.

II. EMPIRICAL STUDIES

A study concerned to DA and reading comprehension conducted by Kozulin and Grab (2002) in which they developed an interventionist approach to DA. The results of their study indicated that the procedure is both feasible and effective in obtaining information on students' learning potential. It was approved that students with a similar performance level demonstrate different, and in some cases dramatically different ability to learn and use new texts comprehension strategies. One interesting aspect of their work was the manner in which they reported the outcome of the DA procedure. Rather than generating a qualitative report of each learner's performance for all stages of the study they presented the learners' abilities with a single score which they themselves called Learning Potential Score (LPS) which is the difference between the learners' pre-test and post-test scores.

Another study carried out by Anton (2003) utilized DA as placement procedure. In this study participants were asked to construct orally past tense narratives after watching a short video clip. This time the learners received no feedback or mediation. They were then shown a second clip and asked to repeat the task, but this time the assistance of the mediator who offered suggestions, posed questions, made correction and helped them think through decisions making. After approximately six weeks of instruction, the participants were re-administered the original independent and mediated narration tasks in order to check their progress. The result indicated that there was a significant advance in their oral performance.

One of seminal studies of van Compernolle and Williams (2013) was on G-DA in the language classroom in which they explored the notion of active reception during small-group collaborative interaction in the foreign language classroom, focusing on the embodied participation of a secondary (nonspeaking) interactant, Dian, their subject. They argued that within a small-group work ZPD can be formed in which students pool their collective resources to push the

group's developing understanding of a problem or task while at the same time the individuals potentially benefited from the group work. The result revealed that active reception has the potential to help learner develop analytic ability.

In the Iranian setting, few studies have recently been carried out. Birjandi, Estaji, and Deyhim (2013), for example, tried to investigate the impact of DA on reading comprehension and metacognitive awareness of reading strategy use in intermediate learners at private institutes. An interventionist approach was employed and the procedure of pretest-treatment (mediation) -posttest was administered. After analyzing the obtained data, it was found that DA has a positive effect on improving reading comprehension but there was no improvement in metacognitive awareness strategy. One of the criticisms may be levelled at this study was that it was quantity-based and ignored qualitative perspectives. That is; it was not able to show how DA can improve the learners' reading comprehension in classroom context. More importantly, it was not clear whether the students in the experimental group could equally benefit from the provided mediation through DA intervention.

Finally, another study was carried out by Hashami, Ketabi, and Barati (2015), who selected as their focus the listening comprehension of a group of participants with diverse English proficiency levels. Iranian EFL learners at three proficiency levels participated in the study and multi assessment procedure in the form of dynamic and non-dynamic pretest-enrichment phase-dynamic and non-dynamic posttest was conducted. During the nine-week group dynamic assessment procedures, mediational strategies were only given to the experimental groups. The quantitative data analysis revealed that through mediated interactions within the group's ZPD, G-DA is able to determine the learners' developed abilities in listening comprehension while at the same time support the development of individual learners in this skill. Moreover, it was found that the level of proficiency of the learners did not have a significant effect on learners' gains from G-DA procedures.

Despite the contribution of the aforementioned studies, there are still very few studies examining the efficacy of peer DA on reading comprehension and vocabulary learning in EFL classroom context at public high schools in a qualitative dimension. Therefore, in order to fill in the gap, the present study aimed to examine whether peer DA in classroom has significant impacts on students' reading comprehension and vocabulary learning in small group at high school level. In addition, there was an attempt to show how partners could assist each other to overcome comprehension problems and internalize the word meanings. Finally, an attempt was made to apply a microgenetic analysis on the collected data, which has recently received attention in SCT research and it has been demonstrated to be helpful to achieve a more comprehensive picture of learning. Furthermore, it was investigated if a more detailed account of the student's strengths and weakness could be provided by using DA approach to assess their reading and vocabulary knowledge, so, it is expected that whether DA could provide more precise and detailed information about reading comprehension skill and word meaning which are considered to be important for Iranian English learners, especially at high school levels.

To meet the objectives of the current study, the following questions were raised:
1. How may informed peer-DA contribute to co/constructing reading comprehension gains?
2. How can informed peer-DA assist learners to co/building vocabulary knowledge?

III. METHOD OF THE STUDY

A. Setting and Participants

Fifteen female fourth-grade high school students aged 15-17 participated in the study. This research was, in fact, run in the setting of "Fatemato Zahra" state high school in Khoram Abad, Iran. Of particular note is that the participants have been learning English as a foreign language only in their regular schools. For them, English course is obligatory within high school schedule and they receive two hours of instruction per week. The focus of their classes is mainly upon reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary; indeed, they hardly ever use English for communication purposes and they never work on listening comprehension activities. It is noteworthy that an attempt was made to form triples comprising a student from low, average, and high level of proficiency. This step was taken to let students benefit from collaboration and interaction with more capable peers. Finally, one of the researchers well-familiar with using principles and procedures of DA run both the training and instructional sessions.

B. Instrumentation

The employed instrument consisted of ten passages selected from Active Skills for Reading (Anderson, 2009). Concerning the criteria for choosing the passages, the passages were in harmony with students' proficiency and their native culture.

C. Procedure

Before implementing the meditational sessions, the students were divided into five groups, trios. At the onset of the mediation phase, in order to further prepare the students to carry out peer-DA in the classroom, three training sessions were run by one of the researchers during which he tried to instruct them on the principles of SCT, DA, and peer-DA. In addition, they were asked to observe the pilot study in which trios were employing peer-DA to a reading comprehension task. The teacher and students watched some sections of the films and discussed the way each group was collaborating and exchanging feedback. The researcher tried to direct their attention to the moments when students were following principles of DA to feedback. Further, the situations in which the students failed to follow peer-DA rules were

highlighted by the researcher. In fact, he assisted learners through graduated feedback to discover the violations of DA principles to appropriate feedback. The researcher approach to instructing DA was itself revolved around feedback qualities from SCT-informed principles; that is, the feedback was graduated, dialogic and contingent.

After the three preparatory sessions, the intervention was conducted for ten sessions. Each session lasted an hour to work on a passage and the target vocabularies embedded in them. More precisely, at the outset of each session, the teacher provided a brief introductory on the topic of the passage and he tried to activate the students' background knowledge by asking questions concerning the topic and directing the students' attention to the existing picture accompanied the texts. Afterwards, the students were asked to team up and to work on the passage. The students collaboratively made endeavor to understand the main topic and the meaning of difficult words. When an error raised the participants attempted to scaffold each other. They, precisely speaking, used Davin's framework in an interactionist way; that is, by providing contingent and graduated support in the form of question, hints, and prompts (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). The students employed the five prompts as follows in order:

Prompt 1: pause with skeptical look
Prompt 2: repletion of entire phrase by student
Prompt 3: repletion of specific site of error
Prompt 4: force choice option
Prompt 5: correct response and explanation is provided

The process of graduated feedback, from implicit to explicit, continued until all problems with different aspects of reading comprehension and vocabulary were rectified. In line with Davin (2013), the students were allowed to use both L1 and L2 to avoid misunderstanding. It is worthy of note that all mediation sessions were audio-recorded and a number of episodes were selected, transcribed, and microgenetically analyzed.

D. Data Analysis

In order to analyze the obtained data, a microgenetic analysis approach was used. Microgenesis, according to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), as a data analysis approach, is utilized to show how developments occur over the course of a specific interaction in a particular setting. Thus, interactions occurred among the students were recorded, a number of them were transcribed carefully, and analyzed to see how the students assisted one another during working on the passages. That is; it was investigated to show how the offered mediations by the students assisted their peers to comprehend a part of passage or to discern the aspects of the embedded vocabulary most specially meaning.

IV. Results

The first research question intended to track changes in reading comprehension in lieu of collaborative dialogues conducted based on Peer-DA procedures among the students. In the following, some episodes from learners' moment-to-moment dialogues are microgenetically analyzed to unravel such undertaken processes.

Episode 1

If you have Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD), you

a) Are online for an hour a week
b) Send e-mail message at work
c). Are on the Internet more than with friend

After reading and working on the passage, the students answered the follow-up questions which measured the comprehension.

1. Simin asked her partner about the answer of the above question.
2. Nazanin said "I think choice *b* is correct."
3. Leila looked at her surprisingly and said "read the passage again".
4. Nazanin read the passage but she couldn't yet find the answer.
5. Leila said "Read the second paragraph".
6. Nazanin read it but she was again unsuccessful.
7. Simin read the fourth and fifth sentences meticulously.
8. Nazanin guessed "if to spend means not to save so choice c is correct."
9. Leila said "very well done. You found it."
10. Nazanin: "Thanks for your help".

When students were engaged in mastering the passage their interaction was audio-recorded and transcribed. This interaction occurred among three students of a group whose pseudonyms were Simin, Leila, and Nazanin. After reading the question, Simin tried to measure her partners' understanding by raising a question about the correct choice. Nazanin thought that choice *b* is true. Since Nazanin's answer was not correct, Leila encouraged her to read the passage again. After reading the text, Nazanin could not yet find out the correct response. So, Leila attracted her attention to the second paragraph and wanted Nazanin to read it more meticulously. As Nazanin was again unable to reach the intended comprehension, Simin pointed to the third and fourth sentences to provide more explicit feedback. After receiving more explicit guidance, Nazanin by guessing the meaning of "spend" could find the correct choice and said that *c* is correct. Finally, Simin and Leila confirmed and applauded her attempt.

Episode 2
In Morocco people often use ……….. to eat food.
a) small potatoes   b) spoons   c) bread
After reading the statement…
1. Fatemah guessed that choice b is correct.
2. Maryam looked at her skeptically and says "why do you think so?"
3. Fatemah responded that because most people nowadays use spoon to eat food.
4. Sadaf smileed softly and said "that's not correct. Read the passage again meticulously."
5. After skimming the text, Fatemah couldn't find the intended concept.
6. Maryam pointed to the third paragraph and said "the point is here".
7. Fatemah said "aha, choice c is right. They use bread to eat."
8. Maryam and Sadaf told her jointly "well done, you found the correct way".
9. Fatemah thanked her partners.

This episode like the previous one investigated how peer-DA can assist learners to achieve higher level of understanding when students are working collaboratively on a passage. This interaction occurred between three students whose pseudonyms were Fatemah, Maryam, and Sadaf. After reading the item measuring learners' comprehension about an important concept of the passage, Fatemah said that since most people often use spoon to eat, choice *b* is the intended response. Maryam looked at her skeptically to show that her answer was not correct, that is, Maryam implicitly indicated that Fatemah's response should be changed. Fatemah justified her answer that these days most people often use spoon to eat. But Simin urged her to skim the passage to discover the answer. As Fatemah could not discover the intended concept, Maryam guided her to the second paragraph and similarly made her feedback more explicitly. After reading the second paragraph more meticulously, Fatemah loudly expressed that choice *c* is correct because people use bread to eat food in Morocco. This episode revealed that Fatemah was able to reach the intended answer by using Peer-DA.

Episode 3
"Computers are good tools. The Internet is good too."
1. Zeynab asked her partner for the meaning of "tool".
2. Nazanin read the sentences and said "I don't know".
3. Leila pointed to the computer in class and said "It is a tool. Got it?"
4. Nazanin replied "you mean that they are a kind of machine?"
5. Leila responded "Yes, of course they are machines, but that is not my purpose. For example, pen, book, punch, and marker are tools as well".
6. Nazanin said "aha, I understand. Tools means vehicle, am I right?"
7. Leila told "well done, that's it."
8. Nazanin gave an example "mobile is a useful tool for distant communication."
9. Leila smiled softly to her partner's success.

This episode is related to the second research question investigating how informed Peer-DA can assist learners to co/build vocabulary knowledge. This interaction took place among three students whose pseudonyms are Leila, Nazanin, and, Zeynab. This episode was audio-recorded when the learners were struggling to understand the meaning of the text which was about the effects of the Internet on human being. As it is clear from the episode, after reading the sentence, Zeynab asked about the meaning the word "tool" which is a key word in understanding the sentence to examine whether her partners did get its meaning. Nazanin read the sentence and said that she didn't know the required meaning. Leila helped her to understand the meaning of the intended word by pointing to the class computer and said that it is considered as a tool. In response, Nazanin said that you mean that computers are machine. As Nazanin was unable to get the meaning, Leila offered more explicit mediation by giving an example. After receiving this more explicit prompts, Nazanin could get the meaning and by giving a synonym "vehicle" she demonstrated that she understood the word meaning. Her partners confirmed her success by applauding her.

Episode 4
And learning doesn't stop when you graduate from high school or college.
1. Fatemah said that I didn't know the meaning of "graduate from". That means" to be tired?"
2. Maryam looks at Fatemah surprisingly and reads the sentence word-by-word.
3. But Fatemah doesn't understand the meaning of the word again.
4. Sadaf gives an example "If I graduate from high school, I will get a job."
5. Fatemah said "It means "pass not fail?"
6. Maryam said "No, the opposite is start. Got it?"
7. Fatemah read the sentence precisely and said "aha, that means finish".
8. Maryam said "bravo. You're right."
9. Fatemah thanked her partners for patience and guidance.

This episode has been selected from three students whose pseudonyms are Fatemah, Maryam, and Sadaf. The students are engaged in learning vocabulary of a passage which was about long life learning. After reading the above

sentence, Fatemah didn't understand the meaning of "graduate from" and so, she guessed its meaning as "to be tired". In order to implicitly show her that it was not correct, Maryam looked skeptically to her and read the sentence word-by-word. But again Fatemah couldn't understand the intended concept. Sadaf took an example to make the meaning of the word more explicitly. Next, Fatemah made a guess "pass not fail". In turn, Maryam gave the opposite of the word to assist her partner. Next, after reading the sentence again, Fatemah said the synonym of word "finish" to demonstrate her understanding. Her partners confirmed and appraised her success. Fatemah repeated the word and the synonym and opposite and thanked her peers. As can be observed, Fatemah' peers give her an indirect feedback and gradually make their guidance more explicit to promote collaboratively her knowledge of the key word.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

One of the issues that should be taken into account is that merely describing language performance does not provide sufficient opportunity to draw clear conclusions or offer effective recommendations. The obtained information of assessment may provide this opportunity and make it feasible to reveal reasons behind language learners' poor functioning, as well as, suggest efficient pieces of advice. To this aim, the present study examined the facilitative impact of Peer-DA intervention on reading comprehension and vocabulary learning of a number of Iranian high school fourth-grade students. More precisely, the first research question concerned how informed Peer-DA may contribute to co-construct reading comprehension gains. As shown in the above episodes, informed Peer-DA may have an effective impact on improving language learners' reading comprehension when employed in group activities. The findings of the study indicated that not only can Peer-DA have the potentiality to diagnose the learners' difficulties but it also may enhance them much efficiently. That is to say, when the students were working collaboratively on the passages to comprehend the main concepts and answer comprehension questions, they were able to diagnose each other's problems and remove them by using the procedures of Peer-DA. For example, when a misunderstanding raised, the students somehow rectified it by offering contingent and gradual prompts for their peers. As getting the topic and comprehending a text requires the learner to pay conscious attention to different perspectives, the students' understanding of diverse aspects of the text were improved by working on them through a collaborative attempt.

The second research question aimed to find out how Peer-DA can assist language learners to co-build vocabulary knowledge. As revealed in the given episodes, the answer to the question was that Peer-DA may be efficient to augment students' vocabulary knowledge particularly the meaning aspect. In harmony with the first research question, after transcribing and analyzing the selected episodes, it was indicated that Peer-DA may play an effective role in helping language learners master the word meanings in a much more useful way. More importantly, it was revealed that when the procedures of Peer-DA were correctly applied by language learners, it could have the capability to both diagnose and amend the risen difficulties vis-à-vis vocabulary simultaneously. In other words, the students with use of Peer-DA when they were trying to master the target words, they were able to unravel the enigmatic points to solve it as well.

However, it is worth noting that the offered mediations both in reading comprehension and in vocabulary learning should be contingent and graduated (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994). The prompts, as demonstrated in the episodes, should be based on the learners' developmental stages, that is; they should in harmony of learners' need. Regarding the second criterion, the prompts or mediations offered in an explicit-implicit scale. When a problem raised, students first provided the most implicit prompt. If it was dysfunctional, they used more explicit to rectify the problem. To round off the story, based on the obtained data, it may be concluded that DA in general and Peer-DA in particular can be applied in populated classes and can be considered as a new approach integrating teaching and assessment.

One of the often-cited issues is that second language teaching and assessment studies are done in order to make pedagogical implications for real classes where hope is that the research findings can facilitate second language learning. The first implication of the present study is that we should avoid making the misunderstanding that DA and its subcategories can be replaced by the static assessment. To put it simply, both assessment approaches should be considered complement and used in parallel in real class. Another implication is that the students who are unable to perform a task by themselves at the first time are not cognitively or affectively lagged and through offering appropriate mediations they can recuperate their developing abilities and use it in subsequent performances. The findings of the current study may be beneficial to language teachers having under-performer and over-performer in their classes. In this situation, language teachers can assign learners in pair or group in which under-performer and over-performer students can work cooperatively to scaffold one another to achieve their goals based on their capabilities and needs.

Even though the current study somehow provided supportive evidence on the usability of Peer-DA on reading comprehension and vocabulary learning in microgenetic perspectives, there exist some limitations with the study that should be noted. The sampling procedure was non-random and the participants were all female because of the logistical problems male gender was excluded. Furthermore, the research was conducted in a state school setting and the effect of Peer-DA in other situation may beg for further investigations. Finally, the present research has focused specifically on reading comprehension and vocabulary learning, and there are other areas of language components and skills begging for further investigations.

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