The Effect of Dynamic Assessment on EFL Process Writing: Content and Organization

Davoud Ghahremani¹, Rana Azarizad², Davoud Ghahremani³, Rana Azarizad⁴

¹. PhD holder in ELT from Islamic Azad University (Science and Research Branch). He is a member of faculty in Islamic Azad University (Garmsar Branch). His eras of interests are applied linguistics and testing.
². Iran University of Science and Technology (Tehran- Iran).
³. Islamic Azad University (Garmsar - Iran)
⁴. MA in ELT from Iran University of Science and Technology. She has been teaching General and Specialized English at both language school and Applied Sciences University. Her main areas of interest are teaching and testing.

Corresponding author email: Rana.azarizad@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This research aims at introducing a simple process and framework for teaching English writing to Iranian EFL intermediate learners based on the principle of Dynamic Assessment (DA). Boehner and Lantolf (2005) define dynamic assessment as the interaction between assessor as intervener and learner as active participant with the aim of making cognitive changes in the learner during the process of learning and assessing. DA is rooted in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD), and it does not separate instruction form assessment. The teacher-student interaction and joint work carry students’ future improvement through their ZPD. Reflections and results of this research reiterate that the dialogic way of teaching is of great help in enhancing learners’ writing interest and improving their writing competence.

Keywords: Dynamic assessment, zone of proximal development, frame work, process writing

INTRODUCTION

Focus of EFL writing in Iran has changed from the end product to process writing in recent years. Lots of researchers contribute most of their efforts to improve EFL writing process instruction, and many of practitioners try to apply the steps of writing process, generating ideas, structuring, drafting, revising and editing, into their writing courses in the hope of better enhancing of learners’ independent writing ability than traditional approach (White & Arndt, 1991). Therefore, the process writing approach is facing a galloping increase of implementation in world; however, its assessment can be an emergent issue.

Some teachers in Iran are using modified assessment methods, like self assessment, peer assessment, and teacher conference, etc., but there are some limitations in them. For example, according to Siyyari (2012) it can be due to the fact that most teachers doubt learners’ ability to do self/peer-assessment accurately. Also, the research of assessment is confined to either several assessment methods in one step of writing process or one assessment method during the whole process. It can be seen in the research study of Javaherbakhsh (2010).

Traditional summative assessment attempts to summarize students’ learning at one point in time, like the end of a course, but cannot provide the immediate and contextualized feedback which can be useful for helping the teachers and students during the process of learning (Garb, 2008), so the dynamic and holistic feature of process writing approach cannot be fully exploited. Laura (1995), about the importance of assessment method in process writing instruction and its problems believes that: “Instruction and assessment must be of the same philosophy. It is unfair to assess process writing with traditional assessment. Furthermore, assessment and evaluation must be viewed as integral, planned parts of the writing curriculum; students need to be actively involved with the teacher in understanding, assessing, and evaluating the writing process.” Therefore, it can be said that DA can be more suitable for assessing the process writing, because the teacher acts as the promoter and the immediate and situated feedback during the whole process can be more beneficial, also unlike the traditional ways of assessment the main focus in DA is on the future development not the past development.

As a newly emergent instruction pedagogy which is grown up from a well-developed set of theories, DA is not yet widely practiced and is still virtually unknown to many educators and psychologists (Elliott, 1993; Lidz, 1991; Tzuriel, 2000). Considering the fact that there is not that much practical experimental application mentioned in foreign language teaching classroom, enlightened by principles underpinning DA, as well as the
few practice examples in L2 field in foreign countries (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994), the authors want to make a
new attempt to improve Iranian EFL writing instruction by implementation of principles and methods introduced
in the DA. In this case it is expected that both students’ writing ability and motivation will be improved by
introducing this new method.

EFL writing can be more complicated comparing with other skills in learning a foreign language, since it
involves many activities, like choosing an appropriate topic considering your audience, creating a logical idea,
building a rich and proper content, demonstrating the accuracy in language, using some thinking skills such as
classifying and synthesizing. It is clear that through a static knowledge, meeting the needs of the dynamism of
a process writing class cannot be easy. However, the DA procedural frame work suggested by Elliot (2000)
which is pretest - teach- posttest can make us reach this dynamism better and easier. The combination of
Elliot’s procedural frame work with the features of EFL writing gives the researchers this opportunity to create
a practical DA frame work which aims at promoting learners’ writing abilities through giving the explicit feedback
and interaction. In this sense the results will mainly contribute to instructing the writing skill than assessing it.

DA components have been designed as three steps: 1) pre-task, 2) mediation, and 3) post-task. These
three steps in this study are as follows: 1) topic-choice stage, 2) idea generation & structuring stage, and 3)
macro-revising stage, though other stages such as drafting, editing are also included in the writing process.

In this study during the ‘Pre-task’ step, the tasks which are done before mediation, are expected to create
learners’ ZPD, and can increase their sensitivity to assistance and willingness to get assistance as well. In the
second step, namely ‘mediation’ the aim is to give mediation to the learners in the form of either dialogues
between teacher and students, or meditational tools (guidelines, samples, reading materials etc.). In this case,
their internal developmental processes would be awakened. During the ‘post-task’, the imitation of externally
obtained skills or knowledge, can contribute to an obvious improvement, which subsequently would become
part of learners’ independent developmental ability.

In topic-choice stage, the teacher assigns a general writing task, so that learners are free to focus on their
own interested sub-topic under which they can write something unique. After learners’ own attempt for
choosing a topic (pre-task), the teacher goes on with topic negotiation, mostly in the form of dialogues
between teacher and students, or meditational tools (guidelines, samples, reading materials etc.). In this case,
he might provide some hints, leading questions, suggestions and explicit feedbacks as mediation.

In idea-generation and structuring stage, first the teacher shows some necessary idea-generation
strategies; for example, branching, and structuring techniques, such as scratching. After that learners are given
a task to generate ideas and define the writing purpose. Finally, they should make outlines for their
compositions according to the purpose. In DA framework, unlike the traditional ways of writing class task, the
attempt of idea generation and structuring serves as a pre-task, and mediation is arranged immediately
afterward. As a mediator, the teacher can observe learners while walking around and review and negotiate
learners’ outlines with the learners if required.

Peers also can be asked to review each other’s outlines (mediation stage). Having been scaffolded by the
teacher or peers, learners can start to revise their own outlines again. Learners are supposed to bring their
finished drafts for the next session. Now we have the stage of revising as posttask, and the first and most
important stage is ‘macro-revising’. In this stage, content and organization of the drafts are to be negotiated and
improved later. Drafting task done independently outside the classroom, as a pre-task. The mediation of the
teacher and peers at this stage can include: teacher analysis of some samples, teaching relevant writing
strategies and techniques and peer-to-peer interactive reading or discussing. After the mediation in this step,
modification in the class becomes a want-to-do activity for the learners. Remarkable achievement is supposed
to appear in this post-task activity.

METHOD

Participants
The participants of this study are a group of 15 upper-intermediate students who have the experience of
studying English for two years. Writing is taught as the complementary course. What we are discussing in this
study is exposition writing practice which is the first task for writing a long article in 1000 words. The study was
done in 3 continuous weeks (three sessions).

Procedure
Choosing the topic
The crucial part in this stage was choosing a topic which should be authentic, interesting and
challenging. In this stage teacher leaded learners to choose topics which worth writing. Firstly, the teacher gave
students a broad and general topic: ‘Your Hometown’. She mentioned that you can write about any aspects of
your hometown, like the customs, cultures, foods, clothing and other aspects. Here the teacher as the mediator should try to help the learners to narrow the topics:
S. I want to write about the life style of people.
T. Don’t you think it is too broad?
S. you mean it should be more concrete?
T. Yes, because it includes many aspects like food, clothing and so on.
S. ok, what about housing
T. is it still broad. What is it that you want to talk about in specific?
S. housing change in my home town.
T. great. Now it is ok.

Based on the teacher’s instructions and guidelines, learners revised their topics independently. They could ask for peers’ help and suggestion as well.

**Idea generation and structuring**

In this step helping learners to develop their ideas in terms of content and organization. Some techniques, such as brainstorming, branching, clustering, debating, free writing, and cubing can be used. Here the teacher suggested branching in four stages. Branching is a visual way of generating ideas which can show logical relations between and among ideas. The four steps are as follows:

a. Write your topic in the middle of a piece of paper and draw a circle around it.
b. Think of related ideas and write them down near the circle.
c. Think of ideas, facts, details, examples related to each of the primary branches.
d. Go on with the process until you are satisfied.

**Revising**

Marco-revising was done during this stage. It means looking at the whole essay in terms of subject, audience, and purpose. Then it comes to identifying major problems and fixing them so as to bring about better unity and development. Also, order to instruct learners in a marco-way a sample of a good essay in terms of content and organization was brought to the class by teacher. Three most relevant Mediated Learning Experience components from Feuerstein et al. (1988) have been considered in this study, namely Intentionality, Reciprocity, and Transcendence.

**Intentionality**

It says that the mediator should have a clear objective of the activity and adapt the activity level to the learners’ ZPD. In our study objectives are set as follows:

Objectives: Make the learners: I) Understand the criteria of a good exposition in terms of content and organization. II) Enrich their drafts in terms of content and improve them better in organization as well. It was done through the analyzing a sample article to realize the objective provided by the teacher.

**Reciprocity**

The interaction and negotiation between the learners and the mediator is the key element here. ‘Situated dialogue’ is used for this purpose. For example, teachers asked some questions to make the learners understand if they have a clear central idea for their essay (thesis statement) and if this idea is well supported and developed by giving enough examples and statistics. Also see if each paragraph has a clear idea that all sentences are related to it to support the main idea. The logical sequence of the paragraphs was taken into consideration as well.

**Transcendence**

It emphasizes that the effect of the situated activity should go beyond the 'here and now' consideration, and stretch into the future.

In the end of the dialogue, what should be mastered in the activity should be restated and recapped. What’s more, the teacher’s most crucial responsibility is to enable the learners to compose independently a well organized and rich-content exposition in the future. For this purpose the following table was used.

Through the mutual negotiation, learners can combine the guide lines of the teacher and also the characteristics of a good sample, which were analyzed before, to revise their writing in the class. The peer-peer interaction is taken into consideration as well.

**RESULTS**

The purpose of DA-oriented instruction is improving the students' writing abilities and it can stimulate their motivation in the future.
In the first step, which was choosing a topic, most of the students went through the process of narrowing down the topics through the mediation of teacher. They choose some topics, like famous people in their home town, a specific product and also the culture of their home town. In the second step, which was idea generation, again through the mediation of teacher, learners were able to make a clear and organized mind map on their topic.

After the first and second steps, by comparing the first draft and revised version it could be seen that learners’ compositions were greatly improved both in surface and macro-revising. According to Faigley and Witte (1981), English learners’ writings can change through revision in terms of surface and content. Moreover, in the present study, increasing the length of essay can be referred as one component of improvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Standards of Macro-revision—Criteria for Good Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* The paper is focused on a particular subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* The purpose of the paper is clear to its readers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* The thesis is well supported.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Surface</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* The introduction gets the reader’s attention and prepares the reader for what is coming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* The organization is easy to follow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* There is clear transition from one idea to the next.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Individual paragraphs are coherent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* All details develop the purpose of the paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* The conclusion draws the paper to a close, summarizes main point, and reemphasizes the paper’s purpose.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Revised based on Qi, 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Types of Revision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surface Changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deletions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permutations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consolidations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reorderings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Modified based on Faigley and Witte, 1981)

After analyzing and comparing the learners’ drafts and the revised versions, we calculated the amount of changes for each term. The results are shown in the following frequency table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Frequency of Types of Revision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deletions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permutations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consolidations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reorderings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Figures of Length Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of paragraphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it can be seen in Table 3. and 4., the learners’ revised versions are much richer and more logical than their drafts, especially in terms of the content. In another words, it can be said that the greatest benefit students get from DA in process writing is ‘content’ improvement. The increased number of additions shows more richness in the content and also reordering shows more logic. The changes in surface structure show that the learners’ compositions became neater after mediation of teacher and peers. The number of deletions and reordering in surface structure also shows the wirings became richer, more concise and more logical through DA. Also, the increase in the length shows the improvement as well.
DISCUSSION

This study aims at investigating the effect of using DA framework in improving the writing ability of the students, in terms of content and organization. It was done through providing mediation as a means of promoting students to span the ZPD which is established by the distance between them and their teacher or peers in a writing task and we were trying to achieve the aim of enhancing their writing competence. The findings indicate that the writing ability of the students has been improved substantially.

Feuertein (1988, p.8) said, “human beings are open rather than closed systems, meaning that cognitive abilities can be developed in a variety of ways, depending on the presence and the quality of appropriate forms of interaction and instruction”. In our case study the teacher tried to establish students’ Zone of Proximal Development through the interaction and instruction in a cooperative and equal way with the tool of dialogue.

As a study of some initial and promising attempts, we may still face some uncertainties and limitations of it, like: 1) In this study we were dealing with the first session of long-article writing which lasted only three weeks, and the number of participants were only 15, so the effect of DA framework for regular writing instruction might need further study. 2) The extent to which participants were influenced by other activities or factors might not be clear, such as the perspective of possible online-cross-cultural communication, the possibility of exchanging final-articles with classmates and also the teachers’ experience in writing instruction. 3) Since different students have different degrees of responsiveness to assistance, the effect of mediation can vary from student to student. Therefore, the extent to which different students could benefit from the mediation might need further investigation. But it is clear that Dynamic Assessment is marked by its relevance to and usefulness in instruction for the benefit of the students and it should be viewed as part of the teaching process but not merely as its inevitable end point.

CONCLUSION

Dynamic Assessment framework focused in this study can bring great importance to the whole process of writing practice, especially the first three stages that are usually neglected by most EFL teachers. In the process-oriented instruction, promoting the writing skill is not a static, separate and unilateral attempt for the teacher or the learner, but is a dynamic, continuous and mutual effort. Unlike other methods of assessments, which aim at evaluating the level of students or providing feedback for their study, the goal of Dynamic Assessment is promoting development. By determining the potential of learners (pre-task), assistance was made through interaction between mediators and learners in form of the dialogue or other mediational tools (mediation). Since the mediation was made within the Zone of Proximal Development of learners, remarkable progress was likely to occur.

The present study has really got some valuable results and surely can contribute to the enlightenment to EFL writing in Iran.

REFERENCES