

Dynamic Assessment in Iranian EFL Classrooms: A Post- method Enquiry

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Derived from the emerging paradigm shift in English language teaching and assessment, there has been a renewal of interest in dynamic assessment (DA) to be used as an alternative to the traditional static testing in language classrooms. However, to date, DA practice has been mostly limited to clinical treatments of children with learning disabilities, and it has not been widely incorporated into the EFL contexts. In order to find out the reasons behind the slow trend of DA practice, this research adopted a framework, based on the post method pedagogical principles and recommendations, to delve into the prospect of methodological realization of DA approaches in Iranian EFL classrooms. To this end, two instruments, a questionnaire and an interview were developed to explore the practicality of DA through seeking 51 Iranian EFL teachers' perception of DA practice in their classrooms. The results indicated that most of the teachers were negative about the practice of DA in their classrooms and believed that a full-fledged implementation of DA in Iranian EFL classrooms is too demanding. The feasibility of DA in Iranian EFL classrooms, where teachers are deprived of DA training, guideline, and technological resources, is questioned seriously due to the factors such as time-constrained nature of DA procedures, large number of students in EFL classrooms, the common practice of static tests as the mainstream, and overreliance on the teachers' teaching and assessment abilities. The paper suggests the framework of inquiry in this study,

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which was derived from the post method pedagogy, to be utilized as a blueprint for a critical appraisal of any alternative method or theory which is introduced into ELT contexts. Keywords: Alternative Assessment, Dynamic Assessment, Post Method Pedagogy

Along with the emergence of the post method era, ELT field has experienced a major paradigm shift in assessment and evaluation, and subsequently a range of alternatives in assessment (Brown & Hudson, 1998) have been introduced into the language classrooms to compensate for the shortcomings of the traditional assessment tools. Dynamic assessment (henceforth, DA) as an alternative to the existing static tests has received a renewed attention in the relevant L2 research (see Ableeva, 2010; Antón, 2003, 2009; Lantolf & Poehner, 2004; Poehner, 2005); renewed in a sense that in spite of having a rich theoretical background 'namely the socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and theories of cognitive modifiability and mediated learning experience (Feuerstein, 1988), it has not received a full-fledged exercise in the educational settings (Elliott, 2003); its practice has been mostly limited to clinical treatments of disabled individual learners (Haywood & Lidz, 2007). In particular, to date, the existing research literature about the practice of DA in EFL classrooms is scanty and DA is relatively an unknown approach in foreign language studies (see Ajideh & Nourdad, 2012; Alavi, Kaivanpanah, & Shabani, 2012).

DA in EFL Classrooms

Derived from Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, DA implications suggests that in classrooms instruction and assessment should be integrated, and to this end, teachers as more knowledgeable than others (MKO) are expected to first, locate present abilities of students and then work on their zone of proximal development (ZPD) to maximize it and help them achieve 'learning potential' (Poehner, 2008). In this respect, two primary approaches of DA, namely interventionist and

interactionist have received more attention (Lantolf et al, 2004). According to Lantolf and Poehner. (2010), while in the interventionist approach mediation is scripted before hand as hints, prompts, and leading questions that vary in their degree of explicitness with the goal of predicting the kinds of problems learners are likely to encounter, interactionist DA places no restrictions on mediation but instead demands that the mediator do everything possible to help the learner stretch beyond his/her current independent performance. Therefore, depending on what approach of DA a teacher wants to implement (interventionist or interactionist), a teacher in an EFL classroom needs standardization of instruction and scoring which entails preparing pre-test, post-tests, and graduated materials which include prompts, hints, tasks, and implicit-to-explicit feedback or providing individualized instruction which necessitates face-to-face interactional mediation and scaffolding. All these indicate that a teacher as a practitioner of DA should have a good command of not only interactional strategies but also assessment skills.

However, according to Poehner (2009), L2 classroom is a kind of context which does not permit the use of one-to-one format of DA due to the presence of a group of language learners; the main challenge facing DA practice is how to use DA in the classroom where the teacher interacts with not a single ZPD but a group of ZPDs; for instance, to follow interactionist approach, the teacher as mediator has less than a second to decide on how much mediation to give and what type of assistance to provide. All these render DA cumbersome in terms of time, teachers' skills of interaction and assessment, which can justify why DA is not practiced as an academically-recognized approach in EFL classrooms, and accordingly, why, to date, only few studies have explored the application of DA approaches and models in EFL contexts (see Ableeva, 2008; Lantolf et al., 2010; Kozulin & Garb, 2002).

On the other hand, Poehner (2007, 2008) believes that discussions and applications of DA to second/foreign language contexts are promising; he enthusiastically urges language teachers to implement DA in their classrooms and insist on its immediate

application in L2 contexts. However, the researcher believes that before any large-scale application of DA in EFL classrooms, on the basis of the recommendations and principles in the post method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), the context in which it is to be implemented should be studied closely; there seems to be a missing link between theoretical claims behind DA and practical realization of this alternative assessment in language classrooms.

DA in Iranian EFL Classrooms: A Post-method Inquiry

Recently, in the field of L2 education, post method pedagogy has been gathering momentum to go beyond, and overcome the limitations and shortcomings of method-based pedagogy, in which the complexity of language, language learning, and language teaching as well as the ongoing interaction of multiple factors such as teacher cognition, learner perception, social needs, cultural contexts, etc have been ignored (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Accordingly, the pioneers of post method pedagogy (see Kumaravadivelu, 2001) have delineated the parameters of 'particularity', 'practicality', and 'possibility' to insist on the importance of context-sensitivity and teachers' background, attitude, and experience in the realization of theories and methods in classroom practice. Therefore, to follow the post method pedagogy (Prabu, 1990), any attempt to implement DA should take the following points into account: First, on the premise of 'particularity' parameter, the context in which it is to be implemented should be studied. As Kumaravadivelu (2003) emphasizes, "any language pedagogy, to be relevant must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context" (p. 34). In this regard, in most Iranian EFL classrooms the number of students exceeds the standards, and teachers still stick to the traditional way of assessing learners by one-shot multiple-choice or, essay-like exams; in fact teachers are not trained enough to practice DA in this particular EFL context. Second, according to the parameter of practicality, a method should be applicable in real situation; otherwise, the practice-theory relationship cannot be approached. This parameter

argues against the existing dichotomous distinction, perceived in applied linguistics, in which the teacher is spoon-fed with whatever knowledge and theory theorist produces (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Regarding the role of teachers in Iranian EFL classrooms, often the dominant pluralistic society of Iran influences the educational contexts of EFL, which leads to ignoring teachers' sense of plausibility (Prabhu, 1990) and dictating some pre-determined set of materials and methods to be implemented in classrooms. However, this restricted view of methodology is limited mostly to school classrooms; in other language institutes, teachers have more liberty of deciding on the methodology and materials. Third, on the basis of the principle of possibility, authors encourage critical thinking of teachers and students to question the status quo that keeps them restrained on what to teach, how to teach, etc. This parameter, moreover, highlights the importance of the experience they bring to the classroom; their values and background including culture, education, language, race, and other variables, directly or indirectly, influence the content and character of classroom input and interaction (Benesch, 2001, cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006). As for Iranian EFL classrooms, the trend of critical thinking and giving teachers a voice in questioning the current methods of assessment and teaching is gradually gathering momentum, but compared to the global tempo, in Iranian EFL contexts, it is relatively restrained and slow. In fact, EFL teachers in Iran cannot cause a radical change in the existing traditional static testing, dominant in educational settings. Moreover, there is no tendency in educational settings to keep up with the pace of the paradigm shift in ELT, and replace the present system with DA or any other alternative assessment tools.

Therefore, to find out the reasons behind the reported slow trend of DA, the present paper is an attempt to study the prospect of DA practice in Iranian EFL classrooms from post method perspective by exploring the context of Iranian EFL classrooms regarding the practice of DA, teachers' perception of its practicality, and their suggestions for increasing the feasibility of DA in EFL classrooms.

Research Questions

In line with the post-method recommendations for appreciating the important roles of context and teacher in shaping the theory-practice relationship in language classrooms, the following questions were raised to shed light on the perceived gap between theory and practice of DA:

1. To what extent, Iranian EFL teachers are familiar with dynamic assessment?
2. To what extent, do Iranian EFL teachers apply dynamic assessment in their classrooms?
3. To what extent, do teachers believe dynamic assessment can be practiced in Iranian EFL classrooms.

Method

Adopting a descriptive survey research design, the researcher, on the basis of the DA principles and procedures for L2 classrooms, introduced in Lantolf and Poehner (2006), developed one 5-point Likert-type questionnaire (appendix A) and one structured interview (appendix B) to delve into the perception of 51 Iranian EFL teachers towards DA practice. Using the availability sampling, the participants as a representative sample were chosen from the three groups of EFL teachers in Tabriz city, namely university, language-institute, and school teachers.

The questionnaire had two sections; section A was used to collect the demographic characteristics of the respondents plus the degree of their familiarity with DA as well as their use of DA in EFL classrooms while section B consisted of 15 items exploring the practicality of DA in EFL classrooms. Moreover, the structured interview was conducted with 5 informed teachers who indicated having a profound knowledge of DA in their responses to the questionnaire.

Validity of the Instrument

The content validity of the questionnaire was sought first through a review of the related research literature (see Poehner, 2008) and piloting it in a similar group of 12 English language teachers. To avoid ambiguity and any leading item, the technical terms were deleted and the items in the section B were designed in a way that implicitly represented the steps required in the main approaches of DA (interactionist and interventionist). At the end, the reliability index of 0.79 was gained using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient to find about the internal consistency of the items in the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Survey methods of research are descriptive and exploratory in nature, so to gain quantitatively statistical information, the data was tabulated and analyzed using SPSS and Microsoft Office Excel to calculate frequency counts and percentages of the participants' responses to the research questions in the questionnaire.

Results

To obtain information about Questions 1 and 2 of this research, one questionnaire was assigned to the participants intended to tap into both the degree of Iranian EFL teachers' familiarity with DA and their utilization of DA in EFL classrooms. In addition, to answer Question 3 regarding the possibility of applying DA in EFL classrooms, an interview was conducted only with those participants whose responses to the questionnaire indicated a high degree of familiarity with DA.

Questionnaire

The participants' responses to Questions 7 and 8 in section A of the questionnaire indicated an overall lack of familiarity and training about dynamic assessment both at the theoretical and practical level. The mean of 0.56, as shown in Table 1, represents

this point clearly. Therefore, it can be stated that most of the teachers participating in this study were not familiar with dynamic assessment because they had not received any training in DA. However, when looking specifically at the first part of question 7, it reveals that almost 33% of the teachers had some basic information about the theoretical foundation of DA but this familiarity did not extend to the operational level of DA.

Table 1

Familiarity/Training of Iranian EFL Teachers with Dynamic Assessment

Assessment					
The question	f / %	f / %	f / %	Mean	
To what extent are you familiar with dynamic assessment?	1 most	2	3 least	1.00	
	Theoretical	3	23	25	0.39
	Procedural	1	13	37	
Have you got any training in dynamic assessment?	Yes	No		0.2	
	5	46			

Grand mean: 0.56

Regarding the practicality of DA in EFL classrooms from the participants points of view, for most of the statements, the majority of the responses (approximately 70.8%), are on the difficulty side (as shown in Table2), which implies that most of the teachers consider the implementation of DA steps difficult and demanding. On the other hand, the remaining side (approximately 29%) indicates that the teachers believe in the possibility of partial implementation of DA; this can particularly be inferred from the given responses to the items relating to the interactionist approach of DA (The items marked with * symbol reflect the steps required in the interventionist approach).

Table 2
Iranian EFL Teachers' Perception of Dynamic Assessment Practicality in EFL Classrooms

No	The degree of DA practicality in Your classrooms	Very difficult	difficult	Not difficult/easy	easy	Very easy
1*	The application of pretest-teach-posttest model	16%	36%	35.4%	11%	1.6%
2	Identifying every student's ability level of English before teaching	20%	33%	36.7%	7.3%	3%
3	Identifying every student's needs, goals, and learning problems before teaching	31%	39%	21%	5%	4%
4*	Preparing graduated (easy-to-difficult) activities and tasks before teaching	26%	40%	21%	8%	5%
5*	Providing implicit-to-explicit standardized feedback	6.4%	31.6%	48%	10%	4%
6*	Recording the amount and kind of feedback (assistance) needed for every individual student	31%	49%	16%	4%	----
7	Getting continuous feedback about students progress	18%	38%	27.5%	15%	1.5%
8	Adapting teaching to the students' responsiveness	17%	31.2%	33%	9%	9.8%
9*	Managing the time to interact and work with every individual student	18%	35%	37%	10%	---
10	Managing the time to integrate teaching with assessment	9%	13%	49%	29%	...
10	Managing the available resources such as pair-work, group work, etc to have students help each other	26%	25%	32%	13%	4%
11	Utilizing the computer-assisted instruction and other technological tools in scaffolding students	4%	40%	44%	9%	3%
12	Determining students' learning potential	17%	22%	47%	9%	5%
13*	Administering several tests to measure students' ability to extend their knowledge and skills to new situations	20%	41%	34%	3%	2%
14	passing or failing students on the basis of the DA results	23%	29%	40%	7%	1%
15	Replacing the current practice of static tests with DA	26%	43%	25%	6%	----

Interview

In response to Question 1 in the interview, regarding whether Iranian EFL teachers are familiar enough to practice DA in their classrooms, all the participants unanimously asserted that such familiarity is confined to the academic settings and teachers at schools and institutes have not received any specific training in this regard.

To illustrate, consider the following interview samples:

Only its theoretical foundation, Vygotsky's theory of ZPD is studied in university MA and PHD courses, out of this context there is no teaching and training. (Teacher 1)

As for familiarity, it is limited to books, so most of the teachers even have not heard about it let alone practicing it. (Teacher 2)

We only hear about it when we attend some seminars lasting for only one day and then nothing more. (Teacher 3)

Most of the teachers know about it, ...they are aware of the fact that teaching should be level-specific which demands initial and final assessment,... (Teacher 4)

DA is a new concept with which the teachers are not familiar enough to...(Teacher 5)

For Question 2 regarding whether Iranian EFL teachers practice DA in their classrooms, the participants had different points of view; some believed in partial implementation of it but others, for example teacher 1 and 2 rejected the practice of DA procedures in their classrooms.

Some examples of the answers are provided below:

Here, we don't apply it [DA]. It requires a lot of interaction with students and scaffolding; this is like clinical treatment of students; that never works in a class of 20 students (Teacher 1)

In classrooms the common assessment of students' progress is limited only to mid-term and final tests which function as summative tests. (teacher 2)

Professional development and the lure of alternative assessments sometimes motivate us to apply new methods and techniques, but in reality it is the class that determines what to teach and how to teach. DA is not an exception. (Teacher 3)

I believe DA is not something new; it is the same ongoing assessment that teachers have before and after teaching to see what students need. In classrooms teachers continuously assess the impact of their teaching and students' understanding of their instruction. (Teacher 4)

I believe teachers actually practice DA in classes, though they themselves are not aware of this fact and it is partial application. (Teacher 5)

The last question exploring the participants' points of view about the possibility of implementing DA in EFL classrooms indicated the same negative perception, perceived in the teachers' responses to the questionnaire. It also cast light on the underlying factors hindering the practice of DA in Iranian EFL contexts. Some of the given comments and responses are as follow:

DA is appealing in theory but challenging in practice. while teaching, I can only occasionally focus on an individual learner; the class time should be devoted to all... (Teacher 1)

....DA requires so much time for pre-testing, selecting what to teach, planning how to scaffold, revising your teaching on the basis of the feedback you receive, post-testing, and at the end finding any change in the performance and ability level of every individual student ... (Teacher 2)

...It would be really nice to attend to the ZPD of the students and work on them to reach their potential provided that we as teachers are motivated enough, or educated enough to do so (Teacher 3)

Basically DA is catered for an individualized instruction (clinically interactive approach). ... the interventionist approach is too idealistic; simply standardizing your tasks, hints, feedback before teaching takes too much time without utilizing computer, web,... (Teacher 4)

DA can be applied to Iranian EFL classroom if we first of all standardize our educational system; reduce the number of students, equip the classrooms with computer, train teachers and provide them with DA guideline (as far as I know there is none) , convince the examination board, parents to change the traditional system of measurement. (Teacher 5)

Discussion

Following the recommendations made in the post method pedagogy, the results of the study revealed the following points about the context of Iranian classrooms:

The number of students exceeds educational standards.

The familiarity of the teachers is limited to the theoretical level; at the operational level there is no profound familiarity with DA procedures.

Teachers have got no training in DA.

There is only a partial implementation of DA.

Teachers' attitude towards the practicality of DA is negative.

There is no DA guideline for EFL classrooms.

Comport-assisted instruction or web-based opportunities are not utilized.

The traditional static tests are still in practice and supported by the authorities.

It seems that a teacher intending to practice DA is overwhelmed by the prospect of implementing all DA steps which requires preparing not only what to assess but also what to teach. As Haywood et al. (2007) believe, the interpretation of DA data mostly depends on the skill and experience of the teacher as examiner; the teacher is engaged with appropriately interpreting students' ability level, needs, problems, and progress to determine their learning potential. This heavy reliance on the meditational skill of teachers both as mediators and examiners necessitates training teachers in DA and utilizing possible resources in and out of classroom in order to provide both level-specific instruction and accurate assessment

However, as the existing research literature (see Elliott, 1993; Lidz 1991) indicates, DA is not yet widely practiced and is still virtually unknown to many educators and psychologists. Similarly, the gained results reflect lack of academic training of DA for Iranian EFL teachers, and subsequently the extent of teachers' familiarity with DA is limited to the theoretical realm and there is no guideline for following DA procedures in the classroom. Of course, this is not inclusive to Iranian contexts, as

Haywood et al. (2007) admit, so far training in DA has been done mostly in professional workshops limited to graduate programs in school psychology, clinical psychology, and special education, offering credit-bearing courses in DA at universities.

Moreover, the available facilities in this particular context of EFL do not meet the requirements of DA application. Some of these resources are inherent in EFL classrooms such as peer-assessment, group scaffolding (Donato, 1994), but some others are context-specific and potentially available, which can be drawn on in EFL classrooms if financially feasible. These potential resources can be accessed via computer-mediated and information communication technology (ICT) tools which include computer-based testing (CBT) or computer-adaptive testing (CAT), and Web-based assessment. Nowadays, as Wang (2010) reports, these tools have been already used to help teachers administer assessment and provide learners with timely feedback and more learning opportunities. In this regard, ICT can assist teachers in providing individualized instruction generally there is no large-scale utilization of ICT resources. Cost-effective policies of the educational authorities hinder exploiting the potentials of these technological resources.

The negative attitude of the teachers towards the applicability of DA can be attributed to having a large number of students in most classes (an average of 18). This condition is in contradiction with the underlying assumptions of the clinically-oriented interactionist approach of DA, according to which individuals with learning problems can be assisted by applying interactional skills and strategies to locate and maximize individual learners' ZPDs. On the other hand, language students bring with themselves their own individually different learning styles, strategies, goals, motivations, background, etc to the class, thereby creating a context in which we can expect students with various ability levels, needs, problems and learning potential (Brown, 1994). Therefore, in a large class any attempt to apply DA needs considering all these variables while assessing and assisting every individual learner.

Thus, any teacher contemplating over these requirements finds DA too demanding and challenging. According to Bachman (1990), whenever the available recourses do exceed the required ones, the practicality of a testing tool can be secured, so, currently the practicality of DA in Iranian EFL classrooms can be questioned pedagogically. Moreover, considering the lack of DA training among EFL teachers in Iran and the restricted amount of educational facilities, any hasty attempt to implement DA in large scale would be in vein if the contextual restrains are not improved.

These findings, in general, confirm the findings of Murphy and Maree (2006) whose research into the practicality and trainability of DA in the educational context of South Africa indicated a limited implementation of DA due to lack of time, costs, inefficiencies and also confusion as to what dynamic assessment entails. In particular, the results can justify why there are few practice examples of DA in L2 field in foreign countries (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994).

Conclusion

The implications of the post method pedagogy inspired the researcher to investigate the possibility of implementing DA in EFL classrooms from the teachers' own critical point of view. The findings of this research revealed pedagogically time-restrained and demanding nature of the DA. For a full-fledged implementation of DA, most of EFL teachers in Iran mostly lack the following ingredients: time, standard class, training, guideline, support of educational authorities to provide supplementary resources such as computer-assisted instruction, etc. In addition, the findings indicated that at least Iranian EFL teachers believe in the overreliance of DA on the instructional, interactional, and assessment skills of teachers, which highlights the important role of teachers' attitude and experience in shaping the link between underlying theories of DA and its practical implementation. This asserts that any ignorance of teachers' attitudes and points of view can question the validity of any attempt to implement DA in EFL classrooms.

Moreover, the framework followed in this study, on the basis of the principles of the post method pedagogy, namely particularity, practicality, and possibility can be utilized in critical appraisal of implementing any new model, method, or approach that is introduced into L2 classrooms. More research on this framework can delineate a clear-cut guideline in which contextual elements such as class size, available resources, teacher and students' roles, experiences, attitudes, background, etc are considered and evaluated before any hasty large-scale application or overgeneralization of findings in ELT.

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