Dynamic assessment in English classrooms: Fostering learners’ reading comprehension and motivation

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Abstract: An important goal of educational research is to find out which teaching practices are effective in promoting students’ learning. Given the importance of reading comprehension in English language teaching (ELT), the current quantitative classroom-based study investigated whether the implementation of an interventionist model of dynamic assessment, using a repetitive process of pretest-teach-retest, could contribute to improving the reading comprehension, and have a positive impact on learners’ reading motivation in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context of Iran. To address the mentioned issue, two intact classes were assigned to the control and experimental group, each containing thirty-five students. This quasi-experimental study was implemented on the pre-test post-test equivalent-group design. Descriptive and inferential analyses of the collected data, over four months, revealed that the experimental group significantly out-performed the control group on the scales of reading comprehension which reflects that the use of DA appears to provide scaffolding support for the students to understand the reading texts. A change was also observed in the reading motivation level of the experimental group. On the whole, DA creates an enjoyable learning environment and confers instructional and psychological benefits to the learners. More broadly, findings pave

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The term dynamic assessment (DA) refers to an assessment, by an active teaching process, of learners’ perception, learning, thinking, and problem solving. The process is aimed at modifying an individual’s cognitive functioning and observing subsequent changes in learning and problem-solving patterns within the testing situation. DA can be regarded as a continuum through which the learner firstly is mediated by the teacher employing implicit forms of assistance and increasingly shifting to explicit ones if needed by the learner (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). DA is a practical tool for learning and assessment in educational settings, but more research should be done on the effectiveness of dynamic assessment in the field of language learning. The current study investigated the effect of dynamic assessment on EFL learners’ reading comprehension and motivation. The results revealed that dynamic assessment had a positive significant effect on students’ reading comprehension and reading motivation.
the way for practitioners to better understand and develop DA in the classroom successfully to foster both learning and motivation.

**Subjects:** Educational Research; Classroom Practice; Language Teaching & Learning

**Keywords:** dynamic assessment; reading comprehension; reading motivation

1. **Introduction**

With the manifestation of dynamic assessment, assessment of processes rather than products in learning, Tzuriel (2001) mentioned that “DA emerged from both theoretical conceptions about human cognitive plasticity and practical needs to find new diagnostic measures for individuals who for any reasons do not show their capacities in conventional tasks” (p. 5). Tzuriel (2001) also believes that dynamic assessment has bloomed because the static assessments were not adequate in reporting enough information about the differences between individuals’ learning processes, how they change ideas to actions, and also assign them to appropriate educational contexts.

Drawing on Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (SCT), Dynamic Assessment (DA) has become of the growing interest of scholars as a way through which two vital aspects of the process of teaching and learning, which are instruction and assessment being conventionally isolated, become integrated and unified to promote learners’ language development. DA can be regarded as a continuum through which the learner firstly is mediated by the teacher employing implicit forms of assistance and increasingly shifting to explicit ones if needed by the learner (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). Moving across this continuum is an indicator of a learner’s zone of proximal development (ZPD), defined as the distance between what an individual can accomplish independently and what one can accomplish with more expert assistance (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004). That is, as the learner moves forward, the types of prompts being employed by the teacher (i.e. implicit or explicit) and the frequency being needed overtime will be changed revealing the fact that the learner is shifting from a reliance on other-regulation to self-regulation; that is, achieving a greater degree of independence and increased control of the language (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf, 2012). DA, therefore, provides opportunities through which both instruction and assessment go forward hand in hand; that is the time spent on testing is also time spent on learning, boosting, and assessing learners’ abilities and development. Focusing on the process of improvement rather than merely the product or the present ability level, a DA assessor actively intervenes in the learning process, helping to develop emergent abilities as well (Poehner, 2011). However, what pedagogically amplifies the value of DA resides in the quality and purpose of support, or mediation, which is not merely to scaffold learners formulating a correct answer but rather to help them arrive at new understandings that will, in turn, reinforce future performances making the DA being known also as a diagnostic activity (Poehner, 2013).

From a discourse perspective, the border between the corrective feedback (CF) and DA is blurred due to the close resemblance between DA interactions and scaffolded, or graduated, feedback (Erlam et al., 2013; Rassaei, 2014; Sheen, 2011) which is regarded as a key component of DA and defined as “adjusted to the level of the individual learner to enable them to self-correct” (Erlam et al., 2013, p. 258). No clear distinction, therefore, can be made between DA and CF frameworks. Drawing on the present literature, Rassaei (2014) and Sheen (2011), for instance, respectively refer to scaffolded feedback as “socioculturally focused corrective feedback” (Rassaei, 2014, p. 420) and DA as “SCT-oriented CF studies” (Sheen, 2011, p. 82), arguing that how the work of M. Poehner (2008) and Poehner and Lantolf (2005) could indicate the way by which scaffolding CF helps learners to self-regulate their L2 learning by stressing the need to vary CF strategies according to learners’ developmental level (i.e., ZPD)” (p. 82). She describes this variation as “the most fundamental difference between the SCT and cognitive–interactionist perspectives on CF” (Sheen, 2011, p. 82).

Coming to the setting of L2, what is frequently regarded as an ultimate goal of reading is the ability to comprehend it (Nation, 2005) since it covers all the sub-tasks being needed for reading, so being associated to the end benefit with end benefit (Nag, 2017a). Reading comprehension is referred to as ‘the process of..."
extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language’ (Snow & the RAND Reading Study Group, 2002, p. xiii). Therefore, the ways by which reading comprehension is generally assessed are either comprehension questions being placed immediately after the passage or cloze tests including a series of phrases with words being removed that should be filled in by the correct words (Nag, 2017b). Implementing sentence-based tasks is another way that is regarded as the least common way of reading comprehension assessment (Laws et al., 2016; Leider et al., 2013; Leikin & Assayag Bouskila, 2004). Going through the related literature, a vast array of studies have been carried on in the United States and other high-income countries to examine the measurement of reading comprehension. In Low-income and middle-income countries, however, the available research is sparse; although researchers and practitioners have identified several potential problems with the common measurement assessments used in international development and research projects (Zuilikowski et al., 2019).

2. Review of literature

According to Vygotsky (1987), human mental functioning goes beyond a simple directional response to environmental stimuli being determined by biological instinct; but rather it is socially shaped as one interacts with others performing culturally organized activities. The most well-known Vygotsky’s (1987) account of mind which has been contributed to the psychology and education is his conceptualization of the “zone of proximal development,” or ZPD which is described as the difference between one's level of ability at which s/he can perform without being mediated and the opposite level at which s/he can perform in the presence of assistance. The onset of using ZPD was as an alternative to conventional IQ tests, which he argued obscured processes behind performance and failed to capture abilities that were not yet fully developed but still emerging. Decades later, this application of the ZPD captured the attention of psychologists shedding light on the first procedures described as “dynamic assessment” or DA (see M. Poehner, 2008) due to the Vygotsky’s claim that the ZPD functions as a basis for development-oriented pedagogies, reasoning that emergent abilities are most amenable to instructional intervention (Vygotsky, 1987, 1998).

There are two models namely interventionist and interactionist under which DA can be applied. Following the first model, interventionist, as its name suggests an intervention or mediation is immediately employed after the initial test to reinforce and support further learning; that is the format is in a way that firstly learner are given a test, then they exposed to the targeted teaching item which is followed by another testing session. Test-teach-retest is, therefore, the most widely used approach to DA being effectively and appropriately capable of differentiating the stronger from weaker learners. Given its influential application, a test-teach-retest protocol yields information about test-taker modifiability and responsiveness as well as gains in performance (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011; Naeini & Duvall, 2012). The prompts including leading questions, hints, examples, and identification of existing errors can be hierarchically organized from the least supportive to most. The DA is then administered to provide increasingly supportive scripted prompts to facilitate the development and demonstration of essential skills until the test taker completes the task. Occasionally, an alternate version of the task is employed to see whether or not the test taker can transfer learning to the new situation. Therefore, what needed to be captured by the scoring system are the consideration of prompts being needed, the degree of support being offered, the learner responsiveness to prompts, and the learners’ ability to transfer learning to the new contexts (Laing & Kamhi, 2003; Poehner, 2011). On the other hand, interactionist DA is based on Vygotsky’s ideas about the effective role of cooperative dialogue. In this approach, assistance is completely coordinated with the learner’s ZPD and can be identified based on the interaction between the learner and the mediator. Interactionist DA is not concerned with the predetermined endpoint of learning or the effort needed in this process but is only concerned with the development of an individual learner or even a group of learners (M. Poehner, 2008). With integrated assessment and instruction, the mediator tries to help L2 learners perform as well as their actual competence, which they cannot do independently, and to move up to the next level through mediation, interaction, and collaboration.

Reviewing the literature on the incorporation of DA in L2 setting indicate the exploration of DA implementation and L2 English reading comprehension (Hamavandi et al., 2017; Naeini & Duvall, 2012), speaking (Davison et al., 2009), writing (Nassaji & Swain, 2000), grammar (Sadeghi &
Khanahmadi, 2011), and vocabulary (Hessamy & Ghaderi, 2014). Naeini and Duvall (2012), for example, used a pretest-teach-posttest design with the aim of English reading comprehension assessment among English university learners. Following this format, they administered a reading comprehension passage test, being followed by three 30-minute pedagogical interventions concentrating on a specific reading comprehension strategy which was held in English. L1 merely was used to check comprehension. The results of the post-test confirmed the significant progress being made by the learners (Naeini & Duvall, 2012). Congruent with this line of studies, in 2017, Hamavandi, Rezai, and Mazdayasna conducted research to support the effectiveness of DA use in the improvement of L2 English learners’ reading comprehension at an intermediate level. Moreover, the study yielded the information about a DA of morphological knowledge which functions as a better predictor of learners’ reading comprehension than a traditional assessment. Considering other aspects of L2 learning, it was proved that for L2 English writing, collaborative prompts tailored to the learners are more effective than non-collaborative prompts resulting in the proliferation of consciousness occasions of language learning (Nassaji & Swain, 2000). To assess English speaking skills among Japanese university students, Davison et al. (2009) used four successive Das. The findings treated as evidence of progress in speaking skill, less variability in speaking performance, and increased occasions of recasts. Concluding, the literature of past studies is the best anchor of how DA can successfully combine assessment and learning for ELT and reinforce the related areas such as metacognition and strategies. All in all, DA is a practical tool for learning and assessment in educational settings, but more research should be done on the effectiveness of dynamic assessment to realize DA’s potential contributions to the development and motivation of language learners’ language skills especially reading comprehension in this study. More specifically, the present study adds to such a line of inquiry by using DA in the context of an EFL class. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How can DA affect EFL learners’ reading comprehension?
2. What effect does DA have on EFL learners’ reading motivation?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants
This research took place in an EFL classroom in a state school in Iran located in a common area of the city of Kerman. To test the hypotheses underpinning the research model, two intact classes of female intermediate students were assigned to one experimental and one control group (35 students in each group). To ensure that the participants of the study were at almost the same level of English proficiency, the researchers applied the Longman Placement Test (LPT) at the first session of the project. Longman Placement Test (LPT) was used to have almost homogenous groups. At the time of the study, one of the researchers taught five English classes daily, and the current study took place in two of her 11th-grade classes, consisting of 70, female students. All participants were 16 years old and had roughly the same English language learning experience concerning the number of years they had received EFL instruction. The students were reassured that participation in the project was voluntary and unrelated to their school issues.

3.2. Instruments
To collect the required data before and after the program, the researcher utilized a quantitative research method applying a test and a questionnaire as the instruments of this study. A description of each instrument is presented here. They were collected at the beginning and end of the study.

3.2.1. Longman Placement Test (LPT)
To choose almost homogenous participants in general terms of the English language, LPT, a criterion-referenced measure developed by Pearson Longman ELT (2006), was used. This test system contains 100 written multiple questions and places students as follows:
00–20 Below Elementary
21–35 Elementary
36–60 Pre-intermediate
61–85 Intermediate
86–100 Upper-Intermediate

3.2.2. Reading comprehension test
30 multiple-choice teacher-made reading comprehension test items (adapted from the book of “Select Readings, intermediate level”) were used to assess the reading comprehension level of the learners. The multiple-choice test assessed the comprehension of text content. Participants were given 30–40 min to answer the multiple choice questions. The test was piloted with 10 intermediate students and the reliability was calculated through Cronbach’s alpha (0.797).

3.2.3. Motivation scale for English reading learning
The learner motivations for the reading questionnaire (LMRQ) designed by Erten et al. (2010) was used to assess participants’ motivation for reading comprehension practices. The questionnaire included 31 items to which participants responded using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The questionnaire was translated into Persian to avoid the risk of misunderstanding or misconception. The questionnaire and the test were reviewed by three experts (two in English Language Teaching and one in data and information retrieval). The feedback received led to revisions such as reformulations of some of the questions and clarity of instructions. The questionnaire was also pilot tested with a population similar to that in the study to test its validity and reliability. The overall Cronbach’s alpha for the questionnaire was 0.840 which demonstrated good internal consistency of the scale.

3.3. Procedure
During the 30-session experiment, the experimental group was taught using an interventionist model of DA, while the control group was not taught with any DA program. The learners (C&E) were enrolled in a semester course of English reading course for EFL learners. The main objective of the course was the improvement of the students’ proficiency in reading comprehension skills. Participants in the control group read the texts silently and answered the attached reading comprehension questions. However, in the experimental group, DA was regarded as a continuum through which the learners firstly were mediated by the teacher employing implicit forms of assistance and increasingly shifting to explicit ones if needed by the learners. We used a repetitive process of pretest-teach-retest. A pretest was given to discover what information the students already know. The teacher let the student try without assistance. A teaching time on the unknown material followed the pretest. Then, the teacher repeated the part of the statement where the mistake(s) was (were). The teacher emphasized the mistake (word(s)) questioning. Next, the teacher asked a question that might provide the clue for the student to realize the point. Later, the teacher directly pointed out the mistake(s) and gave explicit explanations. Finally, another similar test was given. Finally, after four months, progress was evaluated by comparing the reading comprehension and motivation of the control and experimental group.

4. Results
A basic quantitative research design was adopted to collect and analyze the data in the present study. To identify whether a significant change occurred in the reading comprehension of each group between the beginning and the end of the study, the researcher conducted the paired samples t-test and independent t-test. The result of paired sample T-Test analysis (Table 1) did not show a significant difference in the mean scores for the pre-test and post-test of the control group. But the result strongly supported a significant difference in the mean scores for the experimental group in pre-test and post-test and the effect size was $ES = 1.62$ and $r = 0.630$. 
The result of the independent T-Test analysis (Table 2) did not show a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the pre-test. But the result strongly supported a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the post-test and the effect size was $ES = 2.01$ and $r = 0.708$.

The result of the paired sample t-test analysis of reading motivation (Table 3) did not show a significant difference in the mean scores for the pre-test and post-test of the control group. But the result strongly supported a significant difference in the mean scores for the experimental group in pre-test and post-test and the effect size was $ES = 3.68$ and $r = 0.878$.

The result of the independent t-test analysis (Table 4) did not show a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the pre-test. But the result strongly supported a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the post-test and the effect size was $ES = 2.01$ and $r = 0.708$.

### Table 1. Paired sample T-test of reading comprehension

| Time       | N  | Mean | Std. Deviation | T-Test | Df  | P-Value |
|------------|----|------|----------------|--------|-----|---------|
| C-G pre-test | 35 | 67.09| 5.78           | 1.29   | 34  | 0.2     |
| C-G post-test | 35 | 66.45| 5.46           |        |     |         |
| E-G pre-test | 35 | 69.46| 5.65           | -11.45 | 34  | 0.000   |
| E-G post-test | 35 | 76.70| 5.75           |        |     |         |

### Table 2. Independent T-test of reading comprehension

| Time       | N  | Mean | Std. Deviation | T-Test | df  | P-Value |
|------------|----|------|----------------|--------|-----|---------|
| C-G pre-test | 35 | 67.09| 5.78           | -1.04  | 68  | 0.3     |
| E-G pre-test | 35 | 69.46| 5.65           |        |     |         |
| C-G post-test | 35 | 66.45| 5.46           | -8.64  | 68  | 0.000   |
| E-G post-test | 35 | 76.70| 5.75           |        |     |         |

### Table 3. Paired sample T-test of reading motivation

| Time       | N  | Mean | Std. Deviation | T-Test | Df  | P-Value |
|------------|----|------|----------------|--------|-----|---------|
| C-G pre-test | 35 | 84.05| 11.20          | 2.30   | 34  | 0.03    |
| C-G post-test | 35 | 83.89| 9.31           |        |     |         |
| E-G pre-test | 35 | 88.14| 12.20          | -13.35 | 34  | 0.000   |
| E-G post-test | 35 | 116.16| 4.13         |        |     |         |

The result of the paired sample t-test analysis of reading motivation (Table 3) did not show a significant difference in the mean scores for the pre-test and post-test of the control group. But the result strongly supported a significant difference in the mean scores for the experimental group in pre-test and post-test and the effect size was $ES = 3.68$ and $r = 0.878$. The result of the independent t-test analysis (Table 4) did not show a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the pre-test. But the result strongly supported a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the post-test and the effect size was $ES = 2.01$ and $r = 0.708$. The result of the independent t-test analysis (Table 4) did not show a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the pre-test. But the result strongly supported a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the post-test and the effect size was $ES = 2.01$ and $r = 0.708$. The result of the independent t-test analysis (Table 4) did not show a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the pre-test. But the result strongly supported a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the post-test and the effect size was $ES = 2.01$ and $r = 0.708$. The result of the independent t-test analysis (Table 4) did not show a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the pre-test. But the result strongly supported a significant difference in the mean scores for the control and experimental group in the post-test and the effect size was $ES = 2.01$ and $r = 0.708$.
supported a significant difference in the mean scores for control and experimental group in post-test and the effect size was ES = 5.01 and r = 0.931.

5. Discussion
As mentioned earlier, the present study investigated the effectiveness of implementing DA in EFL classes. By administering a questionnaire and a test, quantitative data were gathered. Regarding the research questions, the results of this study contributed to shed some light that implementing DA can boost reading comprehension and motivation of EFL learners. The improvement in the reading comprehension and motivation of the experimental group in this study supports findings in (Ableeva, 2008; Hamavandi et al., 2017; Kozulin & Garb, 2002; Naeini & Duvall, 2012; Pishghadam et al., 2011; M. Poehner, 2008) according to which the use of DA appears to provide a unique opportunity for the students to notice, analyze, and understand reading texts. However, what pedagogically amplifies the value of DA resides in the quality and purpose of support, or mediation, which makes the DA being known as a diagnostic activity (Poehner, 2013). From the perspective of the learner, in line with the current study, DA is generally viewed as less stressful than traditional testing methods. Learners experience an assessment environment under DA, which is encouraging and supportive, as well as instructive. In this way, students remember the guidance questions and prompts presented during DA, and report that this feedback encouraged reflection on paths for improvement (Shrestha & Coffin, 2012). On the whole, DA pays dividends in triplicate, yielding immediate assessment results, creating an enjoyable learning environment, and conferring an instructional benefit to learners. Traditional testing methods put the learner’s development on hold: Learning during testing is superficial at best (Naeini & Duvall, 2012). Conventional assessment-oriented approaches do not provide a direct benefit to the learner during the testing phase while dynamic assessment approaches are designed to do that and also provide an immediate change in the learner’s cognitive, psychological, and educational functioning. Accordingly, dynamic assessment is an assessment tool to measure current ability, predict future ability, and design interventions (Caffrey, 2006). There is a shift of emphasis in language methodology from the products of language learning to the processes through which learning would take place.

6. Conclusion
The current study confirmed DA as an effective and achievable support in EFL reading comprehension classrooms. Pedagogically, the value of DA is not just to scaffold learners so that they produce a correct answer but rather to help them arrive at new understandings that will in turn construct their future performances. Therefore, DA is a systematic, development-oriented framework for teaching in EFL settings. DA, integrating instruction and assessment, has offered numerous avenues of advancement for teachers, students, and researchers. The bidirectional nature of DA interaction is particularly well aligned to existing models and practices in the EFL/ESL classrooms. Traditional assessments, designed to measure the present level of learners’ performance, provide feedback for the teacher to design the instructional material or even sometimes suggest the place for substitution in a correct place based on the learners’ current level of knowledge. Unlike

Table 4. Independent T-test of reading motivation

| Time          | N  | Mean | Std. Deviation | T-Test | Df  | P-Value |
|---------------|----|------|----------------|--------|-----|---------|
| C-G pre-test  | 35 | 84.05| 11.20          | -0.76  | 68  | 0.4     |
| E-G Pre-test  | 35 | 88.14| 12.20          |        |     |         |
| C-G post-test | 35 | 83.89| 9.31           | -20.46 | 68  | 0.000   |
| E-G Post-test | 35 | 116.16| 4.13           |        |     |         |
traditional assessments, the ultimate and final goals of dynamic assessment are promoting learning and motivation based on the mediations provided by the teachers following the most salient concept of ZPD, developed by Vygotsky (Rashidi & Bahadori Nejad, 2018). In short, it can be concluded that dynamic assessment provides suitable information about the problem source, development, and the potential ability of learners to help teachers in designing more efficient courses, which, based on Ajideh et al. (2012), is the ultimate goal of education. However, ELT has not fully harvested the fruits of DA. The present study is a small step toward DA implementation in reading comprehension classes, in part because of its small sample size, lack of control of extraneous variables, and quantitative nature. A very interesting line of future research is to understand the nuanced effects of the program when implemented in different cultures and various environments to determine if the findings of this study will be sustained. But it is hoped that the findings in this study will help future researchers study this issue with more learners in more depth. It should be also admitted that the quantitative data for the present study is only based on the self-report questionnaire and multiple-choice questions. Despite these limitations, it may well be concluded that the findings of this study provide useful information concerning the reading comprehension development and motivation of Iranian students. The findings of this study provided additional support for Vygotsky’s ZPD and the nature of development. The participants’ progress from the pretest to the posttest pinpointed the developmental moves of the participants’ ZPD to the zone of actual development.

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