



## Complementary Relationship Between Dynamic Assessment and Traditional Testing

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### ABSTRACT

*There have been different approaches to assess students' learning in language teaching classes. Traditional standardized testing and dynamic assessment have been used in language classes. While traditional testing is considered a product-oriented approach, dynamic assessment is believed to focus on the process of learning and assist it. Existing literature is replete with different definitions of dynamic assessment. However, different attempts in defining dynamic assessment mainly contrast it with traditional testing. This has resulted in the conception that these two approaches are contradictory and their complementary relationship is not well acknowledged. This article, taking a postmodernist perspective, in general, chaotic/complexity view point in particular, and advocating a relativistic perspective, is an attempt to highlight the complementary relationship between these two approaches i.e., traditional testing and dynamic assessment. In so doing, it deals with defining and comparing these two approaches and considers two views on their relationship including their contradictory and complementary relationships.*

**Keywords:** Chaos/Complexity Theory; Dynamic Assessment; Relativism; Traditional Testing

### INTRODUCTION

There has been a paradigm shift from traditional testing to assessment. Each of these approaches has its own theoretical foundations, goals, merits, and demerits. However, once popular and exclusively used traditional psychometric testing, with the advent of assessment, is being finger nagged as it has been subject to a host of criticisms. Interestingly, the criticisms highlight the advantages of assessment, and more specifically, dynamic assessment. Furthermore, these two approaches are largely considered as oppositional and the advantage of one is regarded as the disadvantage of the other. The neglected point is that these two approaches have different goals. In other words, traditional testing, having no claim about the process of learning, is quite successful in assessing learning outcomes and serves the administrative parts well; what dynamic assessment falls short of. On the other hand, dynamic assessment, taking a larger scope in education and including learning process, strives for guiding and improving learning. Therefore, this paper argues that these two approaches, rather than being considered as oppositional, are complementary; the relationship which is less highlighted in the literature. This argument is supported by chaos/complexity theory and relativism.

### PRODUCT/PROCESS-ORIENTED ASSESSMENT

According to Brown (1989, p. 224), "product-oriented approaches are those which focus on the goals and instructional objectives of a program with the purpose of determining whether they have been achieved". They focus on achieving "measurable behavioral subjects" to determine the failure or success of learning. In this regard, Gipps (1994) adds that "psychometric testing is rooted in a 'traditional' educational model of teaching and testing routine basic skills; this is based on psychological theories of learning dating from the earlier part of this century" (p.18).



Gipps (1994) considers decomposability and decontextualization as basic assumptions of traditional testing. Regarding the first assumption, Resnick (1989) contends that “traditional instructional theory assumes that knowledge and skill can be analyzed into component parts that function in the same way no matter where they are used” (p. 3). As for the second assumption, Resnick and Resnick (1992) contend “each component of a complex skill is fixed, and that it will take the same form no matter where it is used” (p. 43)

However, regarding process oriented testing, formative assessment refers to “all those activities undertaken by teachers and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (Black & William, 1998, p.10). The dynamic assessment Website “DynamicAssessment.com”, define DA as “an interactive approach to conducting assessments within the domains of psychology, speech/language, or education that focuses on the ability of the learner to respond to intervention.” According to Poehner (2008), DA signifies a paradigm shift and emphasizes ZPD and takes a prospective view of development, not a retrospective one taken by traditional testing.

Kozulin (2003, p.17) is of the idea that “instead of studying the child’s individual performance, dynamic assessment focuses on the difference between performance before and that after the learning or assistance phase.” It considers the human abilities as “malleable and flexible rather than fixed” (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002, p.1). Along the same line, Tzuriel (2003) differentiates traditional testing and DA in that the former accepts a child's disability and accommodation of the environment to fit such disabilities passively, while the latter, i.e., DA is based on active modification of the child's disabilities through intensive mediation and establishing relatively high cognitive goals. Tzuriel (2003) adds that, referring to an active process of teaching learning, thinking, and problem solving, DA strives for assessing the change in an individual's cognitive functioning. More specifically, it is aimed at assessing the actual underlying problem solving capacity and determining the specific deficient cognitive functions and non-intellective factors.

According to Lidz and Gindis (2003), DA is "an approach to understanding individual differences and their implications for instruction that embeds intervention within assessment procedure" (p. 99). In the same vein, Hasson and Joffe (2007, p. 10) state "DA includes a range of methods and materials to assess individuals' potentiality for learning". It strives for representing the highest level of performance through providing mediation in assessment sessions. In a similar manner, Haywood and Lidz (2007) assert that DA deals with students' learning potential that is not considered in traditional standardized testing. However, traditional standardized tests provide some other valuable information about learners. DA attempts to identify and remove non-intellective variables limiting students' access to their intelligence (Haywood & Lidz, 2003). It also has the potential to obviate situational bias through providing the “rules of the game” to children (Pena et al., 2001). Despite its advantages over traditional standardized tests, DA is of limited use in educational settings because of practicality concerns as its administration is time consuming and ensuring its reliability and validity has been problem for dynamic assessment practitioners (Haywood & Tzuriel, 2002; Haywood & Lidz, 2007; Poehner, 2008). More specifically, determining reliability in DA is problematic as "one sets out deliberately to change the performance of examinees" (Haywood & Lidz, 2007, p. 329). Rather than being concerned with reliability in terms of psychometrics, DA enjoys greater consequential validity (Lantolf, 2009). According to Guterman (2002) the relevance of assessment to instruction and its being useful to learners affect its validity and reliability. Moreover, lack of adequate knowledge base and expertise in this field are some other issues raised at DA (Haney & Evans, 1999). Furthermore, Haywood and Lids (2007) argue that “because all approaches to dynamic assessment involve some effort to change examinees’ performance, the data should not be used for classification and cannot be referred to normative tables for interpretation. [Moreover] much of the interpretation of DA data depends on the skill and experience of the examiner” (p.3).



### **FOUNDATIONS OF DA**

The concept of DA stems from both Vygotsky's (1978) concept of a zone of proximal development (ZPD) and Feuerstein's (1979) mediated learning experiences theory. As for ZPD, Vygotsky himself (1978, p, 24) defines it as:

*“The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”.*

Kozulin (2003) considers three ways in which ZPD is related to DA through focusing on (1) child's emerging psychological functions; (2) assisted performance in assessment procedure; and (3) differentiating between the child's actual performance and learning potential. In this regard, Lidz and Gindis (2003) contend that “Vygotsky's major objection to standardized tests was that they confused latent capacities with developed ones” (p. 102). Likewise, Vygotsky (1998) contends “determining the actual level of development not only does not cover the whole picture of development, but very frequently encompasses only an insignificant part of it” (Vygotsky 1998, p.200). Aiming at teaching problem solving, the mediated learning experience (MLE) involves the examiner's mediating and assessing the internalization and transfer of the rules and strategies for solving specific problems on an individual basis (Tzuriel, 2003). With the intention to teach, the mediator “links the immediate task to events in the child's experience (transcendence) and enhances the child's awareness of why the task is relevant (meaning). Finally, helping the child carry out strategies for approaching a task fosters competence” (Pena et al., 2001, cited in Chu & Flores, 2010, p. 6)

### **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DYNAMIC AND NON-DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT**

According to Caffrey et al. (2008), DA differs from NDA in nature of learning, nature of relationships between examiners and learners, nature of the provided feedback. In DA, there is a supportive atmosphere, with the feedback fine-tuned to the learners' ZPD, and emphasis is on the process of learning. However, in NDA, there is a threatening environment with little or no feedback and the focus is the product of learning. In this regard, reference can also be made to the adopted table offered by Haywood and Lidz (2007, p. 6). According to the table, normative tests, as the name suggests, focus on the norms of groups, and are concerned with current level of independent functioning, deals with past experience, and does not consider affective factors. Dynamic assessment, on the other hand, taking an interventionist approach, strives for improving learning through obviating obstacles, and is mainly concerned with individuals and involves affective factors.

It should be noted that DA is not an assessment instrument or a method of assessing; it rather is a framework which conceptualizes teaching and assessment as an integrated activity aiming at understanding learner abilities and actively supporting their development (Poehner, 2008). Along the same line, Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p.331) argue that “what makes a procedure dynamic or not is whether or not mediation is incorporated into the assessment process. In other words, fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice, open-ended essay, or even oral proficiency tests in themselves may or may not be dynamic. Their status is determined by the goal of the procedure and the format in which it is subsequently administered. In other words, there are no dynamic assessment instruments per se; there are only dynamic assessment procedures”.

### **INTEGRATION OF ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING**

Significance of DA in enhancing learning is highly reflected in the literature (e.g. Berry et al., 2019) and more and more studies report its role in enhancing students' language skills such as reading proficiency (Yang & Qian, 2022), writing (Afshari et al., 2020), and oral skills (Estaji & Farahanynia, 2019). Unlike traditional standardized tests in which there is no dialog between learner and teacher, DA considers assessment and learning as integrated, rather than separate processes requiring cooperation between teachers, or mediators, and learners (Wasilliams & Burden, 1997; Haywood & Tzuriel, 2002; Lidz & Gindis, 2003; Haywood & Lidz, 2007; Poehner, 2008; Lantolf, 2009; Poehner & Ableeva, 2011). In the same vein, Lantolf (2009), emphasizing the entailment of assessment and learning, suggests “a successful education must be sensitive to learners' zone of proximal development and this requires the dialectical integration of instruction and assessment into a seamless and dynamic activity” (p. 355). He further claims that these two, in fact entail each other. In much the same manner, Chastain (1988, p.338) is of the



idea that assessment is “an aspect of learning”. In much the same vein, Glaser (1990) argues for the supportive role of assessment in learning.

In DA, regarding the developmental focus, learners are considered “as coparticipants in the activity, jointly responsible with the assessor/teacher, or mediator, for assessment performance and its interpretation....”, that is, to assume greater responsibility for the tasks and to rely less on mediator support (Poehner & Ableeva, 2011, p. 17). Moreover, Tzuriel (2003), argues that DA is especially useful when low scores are gained in static tests. Along the same line, Ajideh and Nourdad (2013) refer to the significance of learner needs and capabilities as distinguishing factors in DA. Most significantly, Poehner (2008) proposed the importance of “learner reciprocity which is concerned with learner responsiveness to mediation and their active attempts to elicit and negotiate support during DA”. Unlike traditional testing emphasizing the neutrality of the relationship between testees and test-takers (Greenfield, 1997, cited in Murphy & Maree, 2009) dynamic assessment focusing on the learners, brings about greater fairness and predictive validity (Ferrara, Brown, & Campione, 1986; Resing, 1997). Furthermore, dynamic assessment can be beneficial in reducing test bias due to cultural and linguistic differences (Pena et al., 1992).

### **OPPOSITIONAL RELATIONSHIP**

In the literature, DA is presented or understood, either explicitly or implicitly, as contradicting opposition to traditional testing. To give but some examples, reference is made to some literature. “Discussions of classroom-based language assessment have traditionally involved some elaboration of the terms summative and formative assessment, usually portrayed in an oppositional relation wherein the former is associated with ongoing and often informal teacher-implemented assessments in the classroom and the latter is shorthand for large-scale, high-stakes standardized testing” (Poehner & Ableeva, 2011, p. 15). Along the same line, Moya and O’Malley (1994) acknowledge the paradigm shift offered in the constructivist post method era and the shift from outcome-based teaching to process-based learning and refer to them as incompatible. Likewise, Poehner (2008) proclaims that DA challenges conventional views on teaching and assessment. Considering the fact that DA “stands in stark contrast to the more product-bound approaches of mainstream psychometric and edumetric assessment (Craig, 1991; Gupta & Coxhead, 1988b; Resing, 1993; Slenders & Resing, 1997)” (Murphy & Maree, 2009, p. 420), Murphy and Maree add that dynamic assessment is an alternative which is “quite dissimilar from the traditional mode of assessment” (p.420). They more specifically content that “theoretical frameworks ... employed in dynamic assessments ... do not necessarily cohere with other traditional approaches” (p. 420). Similarly, Lidz and Gindis (2003, p.103) argue that “DA begins where standardized testing ends”.

### **COMPLEMENTARY VIEW**

Considering the significance of DA in promoting higher order thinking, Gipps (1994) contends that “New assessment models alone cannot bring about the changes in learning ....., but sticking with traditional, narrow forms of testing will surely inhibit this process” (p. 30). Additionally, in shifting to a new paradigm of assessment, Gipps suggests helping “teachers to be aware of ‘new’ notions about learning, particularly scaffolding and metacognition and to work on professional development programmes which develop teachers’ skills in observation, questioning and interaction so that they can integrate this type of approach into their regular classroom teaching and assessment (p. 30 (italics added))”. Haywood and Liz (2007) also nullify the replacement of standardized tests with DA and argue that “DA is not for everybody on all occasions but instead constitutes a valuable part of the assessment repertoire when used in conjunction with other forms of assessment, including standardized testing” (p. 2). Along the same line, Tzuriel (2003) considers DA as a broad approach, not a specific test, and a complement to standardized testing, rather than a substitute for it. Quite on the same par, Pishghadam and Barabadi (2012) acknowledge that “DA can be used along with traditional tests, to fill the gap left by these tests or to correct some of their errors especially when teachers or psychologists exclusively rely on these static tests” (p. 76). They emphasize that “the inclusion of DA does not imply the exclusion of traditional tests from the system of language education” (p.91). Ebadi (2010) also shares the same view.



In this regard, attention should be given to the point that these two approaches attain different goals. This is highlighted in the Assessment Reform Group (1999, cited in Poehner & Ableeva, 2011) proposing that a dichotomy in assessment is “due to its purposes: assessment of learning, referring to assessments undertaken for administrative purposes (e.g., assigning grades, selection decisions), or assessment for learning, emphasizing assessment as part of teaching and learning aimed at informing learners of how they may improve and supporting them in doing so” (Poehner & Ableeva, 2011, p.15)

### **CHAOS/COMPLEXITY THEORY**

Regarding the chaos/complexity theory stemming from post modernism, Larsen-Freeman (2000) considers complexity as “a metaphorical lens through which diverse perspectives can be accommodated, indeed integrated” (p.173). Chaos/complexity theory encourages us to think in relational terms (Larsen-Freeman, 2002). In other words, it does blur the boundaries and avoids a univariate cause-effect link. Besides, it advocates holding a holistic view, and suggests that offering rules of thumb is not appropriate (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; 2002).

This issue can be considered from another perspective too. Unlike absolutists and rationalists, such as Berretta (1991, 1993) who try to reason that there should be few second language acquisition (SLA) theories at work and prefer few strong, untestable theories (Long, 1993), the Relativist view, as advocated by some scholars (e.g. Block, 1996; Lantolf, 1996; 2005) favors as many theories as possible. In this regard, Ellis (2012) argues for theoretical pluralism which, rather than being just a temporary feature of an immature discipline, is an attempt to avoid the problems of absolute relativism through evaluating theories in relation to their particular contexts and purposes. In addition, these two approaches can be considered as “incommensurable”, to put in Kuhn’s (1970) terms, as he rightly contends that “what differentiated these various schools not one or another failure of method— they were all “scientific”—but what we shall come to call their incommensurable ways of seeing the world and of practicing science in it” (p.4).

### **CONCLUSION**

Two prevalent approaches including traditional testing and dynamic assessment, despite having different underlying assumptions and being applied for different purposes, are largely considered as oppositional and contradictory. This paper reviews their theoretical foundations, advantages and disadvantages. In addition, more importantly, considering the chaos/complexity theory and relativism, it is suggested that avoiding dichotomies and blurring them and adopting relativistic thinking may offer a more realistic and holistic view of assessment. Besides, it should be taken into account that these two approaches are used for fulfilling different goals (Brown, 1998; Poehner & Ableeva, 2011). Moreover, considering theoretical pluralism (Ellis, 2012), and relativism (Block, 1996; Lantolf, 1996; 2005), as well as incommensurability (Kuhn, 1970), this paper argues for considering traditional testing and dynamic assessment as complementary, rather than contradictory. It should be emphasized that, this paper does not deny the disadvantages of traditional testing. In this regard, it acknowledges the advantages of dynamic assessment in enhancing learning, problem solving, and critical thinking and its taking a more realistic and holistic view towards learning. However, it is claimed that although dynamic assessment is good for such purposes, it does not fit administrative purposes as it suffers from practicality. Therefore, this paper claims for taking a complementary view regarding two different approaches, rather than holding an oppositional one and not throwing the bathtub with the baby.



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