Group dynamic assessment of the listening skill
A ZPD-based Study of Iranian TOEFL iBT Candidates

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to assess, diagnose, and enhance the listening skill of Iranian TOEFL iBT candidates through Group Dynamic Assessment (G-DA). An interactionist format of dynamic assessment was conducted in the present study. Twenty participants took part in the G-DA program which lasted for nine weeks; one week for the pre-test; seven weeks for the enrichment mediation program; and one week for the post-test. The study revealed a significant difference between the participants' pre-test (non-dynamic) and post-test (dynamic) scores. The learning potential score (LPS) differentiated among the learners with similar pre-test scores. Finally, the analysis of the participants' interactions with the mediator along with the LPS score helped the mediator to have a thorough diagnosis of each participant's weaknesses regarding different sub-skills included in the listening section of the TOEFL iBT test. Consequently, the mediator was able to develop more fine-tuned individualized learning plans and materials for the participants.

INTRODUCTION

Dynamic assessment is an offshoot of Lev Vygotsky's idea of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the sociocultural theory of second language learning. DA proponents claim that human being is primarily social. Thus, they strongly believe that assessment and learning are two sides of the same coin (Lantolf, 2019). However, the problem of the feasibility of administering a DA procedure in terms of the limited number of the participants and the limited scope has pushed the DA scholars to find a way out of the so-called traditional DA procedures. Lantolf and Poehner (2019) suggested two ways for overcoming these two inherent problems through Computerized Dynamic Assessment (C-DA) and Group Dynamic Assessment (G-DA). So far, Many DA scholars have tried to put G-DA procedures into practice in the realm of TEFL both in Iran and abroad (Poehner 2019; Davin, 2018; ; Fani & Rashtchi, 2015; Fani, et al. 2015; Hashemi Shahraki, et al., 2015; Mehri & Amerian 2015; Shabani 2014; Zhang, 2013, Alavi, et al. 2012 among others.). These studies have addressed a wide range of aspects in language learning in the classroom context.

According to Poehner (2019), G-DA addresses groups of L2 learners' classrooms rather than individuals in a single DA procedure within which similar principles for providing mediation as individualized one-to-one DA are applied. However, in GDA, the mediator tries to construct a group ZPD through interacting with more than one participant in the process of administrating the DA procedure. Alavi, Kaivanpanah and Shabani (2012) tried to work out an inventory of the mediational strategies for teaching listening through Group Dynamic Assessment. They claimed that this inventory was conducive to tracking the learners' microgenetic and developmental trajectories over time.

Hashemi Shahraki, et al. (2015) conducted G-DA of listening comprehension across different proficiency levels of EFL students. The results of their study revealed that through GDA they could determine the developed abilities of the learners and they could also observe the development of the individual learners.

Every year, thousands of people take part in TOEFL iBT hoping to get their necessary score so that they can present their TOEFL degree to the university where they want to apply for or to the country where they want to immigrate to. Educational Testing Service (ETS) is the developer and the administrator of the test. Due to the contribution of a group of language testing scholars, it is claimed that this test enjoys the best psychometric standards in terms of the test development and framework (ETS, 2018a), the test validity, (ETS, 2018b), and the test reliability (ETS, 2018c). The test consists of four sections and addresses the four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing along with other components of language proficiency such as vocabulary and grammatical knowledge in all of the four different sections of the test. The total score range for each section of the test is between 0 and 30 and the maximum total score of the whole test is 120.

According to Alderson (2019), the listening section of this test includes listening for basic comprehension that is finding main ideas and important points, listening for pragmatic understanding which refers to the speaker's attitude, degree of certainty and purpose, and connecting and synthesizing information such as recognizing organization, understanding relationships, making inferences and drawing conclusions. Both ETS and other private organizations have provided preparation courses and books for the TOEFL iBT candidates in which they provide the applicants with strategies and plans for enhancing their readiness for attending the test (ETS, 2019; Rogers. 2017).

This study was an attempt to apply the principles of DA in a preparation course established for the enhancement of the listening skill of TOEFL iBT candidates in Iran. Review of the related literature revealed that such a study is unprecedented whether in Iran or abroad. Since the present study was conducted with one group of participants, the best DA model which meets the requirements of the course is Group Dynamic Assessment.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Firstly, this study is significant as it tried to integrate DA principles into a TOEFL preparation course because DA principles imply that a complete picture of a learner's ability in any aspect of second language learning is obtained only when both (ZAD), the abilities that are fully internalized and the Zone of proximal development and the Zone of proximal development, and (ZPD) the abilities that are partially internalized, are accounted for (Lantolf, 2019). In traditional (static) assessment only the ZAD abilities are assessed and reported while ZPD abilities are left untouched. Dynamic Assessment accounts for the ZPD of the participants through providing graduated and contingent mediation which will result in enhancing the individual and the group ZPD Poehner, (2019). Moreover, a comparison of the non-dynamic and dynamic scores of the participants will show how a DA procedure can enhance the scores of the participants in the listening section of the TOEFL iBT. Delving into the previous literature illustrated that this issue has not been studied so far. Shabani (2014) conducted a G_DA of listening ability of learners using VOA video and audio files and reported the quantitative results of his study in terms of the number of the idea units (IU) elicited by the participants and compared the pre-test and the post-test scores of the participants. However, in the present study the rater gives a score to the participants based on their performance on two equivalent but different TOEFL iBT listening test samples just like what happens in the original test.

This study is also significant in that it tries to show how the ZPD score, i.e. the learning potential score (LPS) of the participants, can differentiate among the learners with the same static (ZAD) score in the pretest. Kozulin and Garb (2012) developed a formula for calculating the LPS score which is a function of both Dynamic and no-dynamic scores of the participants.

$$LPS = \frac{(spost - spre)}{MaxS} + \frac{Spost}{MaxS}$$

Spost stands for the dynamic scores; Spre stands for the non-dynamic scores; and MaxS stands for the highest dynamic score. LPS is an important factor through which DA scholars prove the insufficiency of traditional (static) assessment in depicting a complete picture of the learners' ability. In other words, two so-called similar students in a static test may gain different LPS scores which shows that they are not similar if they receive mediation during a DA procedure. To put it another way, LPS accounts for the responsiveness of the participants to the mediation offered in a DA procedure. This was first done by Kozulin and Garb (2012) who conducted a dynamic assessment of reading comprehension. Barabadi (2020) and Mehri (2018) have shown how LPS can differentiate among the participants with the same static (traditional) scores while assessing their English reading skill and their grammatical knowledge. As for Shabani (2014) and Hashemi Shakeri, et al. (2015) who conducted a G-DA of listening, they did not report any findings about the LPS issue. This study is an attempt to address the listening skill of group of TOEFL iBT candidates through G-DA.

The third significant issue addressed in this study is the potentiality of the G-DA procedure in diagnosing the weaknesses of the participants and designing remedial courses and materials in order to overcome these problems. This is what Poehner as well as Zhang and Lu (2015) did in a computerized dynamic assessment of the Chinese language listening. A careful analysis of the response patterns of the participants targeting particular component features of comprehension along with the comparison of the DA and NDA scores of the learners not only helped them diagnose the development of the participants but also provided valuable information for choosing and designing subsequent teaching and learning for different learners. Hashemi Shahraki, et al. (2015) ran a G-DA of listening comprehension focusing only on the pragmatic understanding of conversational implicatures. In this regard, they tried to find the problematic areas related to pragmatic understanding through analyzing the mediation sessions. However, they limited themselves to one aspect of the listening comprehension skill, that is, the pragmatic understanding through the participants' responses to multiple choice questions. This study aimed at covering all sub-skills related to listening comprehension which are tested in TOEFL iBT such as basic comprehension questions (gist-content, gist-purpose, detail); pragmatic understanding questions and connecting information question (understanding organization, connecting content, making inferences). Moreover, unlike Hashemi Shahraki, et al (2015) who used only multiple choice format listening test, this study assessed the participants' listening skill using the four question formats present in TOEFL iBT including the traditional multiple choice format with one correct answer, multiple choice questions with more than one correct answer, questions that require the testee to order events or steps in a process, and questions that require the candidates to match objects or texts to the categories provided in a chart (ETS, 2019). This study tapped into this diagnostic feature inherent in DA procedures first, by analyzing the response patterns of the participants in their pretest and post-test and second, by recording and transcribing the mediation sessions in order to find out the development pattern of each individual and also discover the special areas and components of the test in which an individual needs to go through more help in terms of the remedial courses and materials.

A large number of Iranians take part in TOEFL iBT preparation courses annually. They all try to enhance their abilities in all four skills. However, as Iran's English education system is inclined towards reading and writing skills, the two remaining skills, speaking and listening, are more challenging for the candidates. That is why a G-DA of the listening skill was chosen so that the participants could receive ZPD-sensitive mediation in order to enhance their English listening ability.

A major problem related to administering any DA procedure is the limitations of the number of the participants and the scope of abilities that can be tested in a single DA procedure. For instance, Lantolf and Poehner (2004) conducted their DA study with five participants who received mediation individually. As Lantolf and Poehner (2019) posited a way out of this problem, they conducted a G-DA procedure through which a class-number of participants could receive mediation simultaneously in which the mediator tried to primarily enhance the group ZPD along with the individual's ZPDs. Thus, the G-DA format of dynamic assessment was focused in this study in order to deal with a larger number of participants.

Both the cumulative and concurrent formats of G-DA were used because sometimes the nature of the problem is best addressed by the concurrent format in which the teacher dialogues with the entire group. In some other occasions, cumulative G-DA is best where "the teacher conducts a series of one-on-one DA interactions as the group works towards the mastery of a problem" (Poehner, 2019: 478).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

To collect the required data for this study, 20 TOEFL iBT candidates were recruited in a TOEFL preparation course in Parax language institute in Mashhad. The proficiency level of the participants was be based on the institute's placement test in which the participants had been qualified for taking the TOEFL IBT preparation course. The sample consisted of 7 males and 13 females. Their age ranged between 17 and 47. Moreover, the researcher herself was in charge of running the G-DA procedure for the group.

Instrument

A sample of TOEFL iBT listening test from ETS (2019) was run in order to check for the homogeneity of the participants of the course. Based on the mean score of the participants, the participants who fell between one standard deviation above and below the mean were finally qualified for taking part in the study.

The pre-test and the post-test were taken using the ETS original test samples. In this study, the listening sections of authentic TOEFL iBT practice tests from ETS (2019) were used as the pre-test and post-test. Based on ETS (2018b), all TOEFL iBT tests have been designed and developed on the basis of ECD which guaranties the validity of the test. Moreover, the listening section of the TOEFL iBT tests enjoy a reliability of 0.85. The treatment phase of this study started when the G-DA procedure was put into practice.

Procedure

Following the literature of DA of listening in general and G-DA of listening in particular by DA scholars such as Alavi, et al (2012), and Hashemi (2015), the G-DA study was conducted in 9 weeks. The procedure scheme is as follows:

> Week one: the pre-test test
> Week two-eight: treatment; the enrichment phase (Mediation phase)
> Week nine: the post-test

The same procedure was followed in the present study. In week one, an authentic practice test of TOEFL iBT from ETS (2019) was administered as the pretest. Then, the participants' answering scheme in terms of their points of strength and weakness was analyzed in order to work out the best mediation possible for the enrichment phase which lasted for seven weeks. Based on the results of the analysis of the participant's performance on the pretest, the participants showed a general weakness in all the sub-skills included in the test. More importantly, their performance on the factual, inferencing and topic/purpose questions was more problematic.

According to the information obtained from the analysis of the learners' pretest results, a general scheme for the entire enrichment phase as well as a specific scheme for each enrichment session were designed. The present study worked out the most optimal ZPD-based general mediation scheme based on Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994); Ableeva and Lantolf (2018); Alavi, et al. (2012); Davin (2018); and Hashemi et al. (2015) who worked on providing graduated and contingent hints and prompts in their interactionist DA studies in Iran and abroad. Then, the situation was examined in terms of the learners' specific problems and the content of the course including the sub-skills and components. Finally, as shown in Table 1, the best possible general mediation scheme was come up with based on the rich literature of the previous interactionist DA studies and the specific situation in which the study was conducted. Having this general scheme in mind, the content of the hints, prompts and other mediational strategies varied from one session to another depending on the very situation in which the course-related problems happened. In other words, this scheme was put forward in order to make sure that the mediation process is ZPD sensitive moving form the implicit to the explicit. The teacher/mediator was the final person who decided how to fit the scheme into the learning event and the participants that are involved in the DA program. To clarify, sometimes the teacher/mediator would

decide to omit or merge one or some of the tentative stages of mediation phases.

Each session started with playing an audio-file followed by asking the participants to answer one of the questions related the file. Then, the participant's answers were checked. In case of finding inability of one or some of the participants in answering the questions, the ZPD-based mediation process would start in terms of providing graduated (moving from implicit to explicit) hints and prompts. After the mediation process for the first question, a second audio-file was played and the related question was put forward and if needed the mediation process would start. This procedure went on for the next audio-files and questions until the class was over. As mentioned before, this G-DA study followed the interactionist approach of DA as there was no standardized pre-specified mediation process prepared beforehand.

Table 1. A general scheme for presenting the hints and prompts.

1. Informing the participants who could not answer correctly and asking them to try again
2. Explaining the nature of the question and asking them to try again
3. Providing the relevant strategies for answering the specific type of question based on the insights from the TOEFL iBT guide books and asking them to try again.
4. Limiting the search space through cutting the listening audio-file into a shortened files and asking them to try to find the answer again.
5. Playing the very sentence or phrase that contains the answer and asking them to try to find the answer again.
6. Providing the participants with the correct choice and replaying the audio file while explaining again about the nature of the question and how one should answer such questions.

In the case of the multiple-choice questions, the mediation process would become ineffective if the participants were presented with the choices in which the number of the choices would reduce after they received each ZPD-based hint or prompt since it would increase the chance of guessing.

Thus, it was decided to omit the choices from the questions and ask the participants to find the answer to the question through recalling the answer(s) from the oral text they heard. Table 2 is an instance of concurrent G-DA mediation for a main point, main topic question.

As pointed out before, the teacher/mediator decided on running concurrent or cumulative G-DA. Although the bulk of the mediation process was performed in the concurrent format in which more participants as either primary and secondary interactants were involved directly in the mediation process, in some specific cases cumulative G_DA was run in order to make sure that the very participant with whom the mediation had started, had come up with a full grasp of the nature of the question and its answer.

Table 2. A representation of a ZPD-based interaction

In other words, the emergent needs and problems of the group were paid attention and online mediation was provided. In this regard, the hints were decided and presented in an online and negotiated manner relying on the very responses of the learner/ learners involved in the mediation process.
Listen to a conversation between two students. (the participants listen to the audio file once)
Q: What is the main subject of the speakers' conversation?
Hamid: Tina's Vacation to Europe?
Teacher: No, Your answer is wrong. Listen again please. (Hint one)
Hamid: Tina's class… .
Teacher: No. this is a main topic/main point question. Listen to a shorted piece of the conversation please.(Hint two)
Reza: I can't find it!
Teacher: Ok. When answering main point/main topic listening questions you need to pay attention to the whole listening file and search for a leading question or sentence that speaks for the main point or the topic of the conversation. (Hint three)
Reza: Tina's discovery in ……a class
Teacher: Your answer is wrong again. You can guess the main point if you focus on what comes after this clause " ….she called me up and asked if I'd like to be a volunteer ….." (Hint four)
Reza: the archeology class

> Teacher: you know it's about aecheology but after you hear this part of the
>   conversation:" ….she called me up and asked if I'd like to be a
>   volunteer …. It has always been a dream of mine to be an
>   archeologist…" you understand that the main subject of the
>   conversation is about Tina's volunteer work for Professor Grant (Hint5)

As the participants showed more weakness in the areas of inferencing, answering the factual and main topic/purpose questions in the pretest, two sessions were allocated to each of these areas of problem. Session 1 and 4 focused on working on inferencing, sessions 2 and 5 worked on answering factual and negative factual questions, and session 3 and 6 focused on practicing main topic/purpose questions. In the seventh session, week 8, other types of questions included in TOEFL iBT were practiced.

In week nine, the second authentic practice test of TOEFL iBT from ETS (2019) was used as the post test.

Data Collection

This study consisted of two phases. In the quantitative phase the learners' scores in the pre-test and the post-test were elicited. Moreover, the LPS of each learner, i.e. a function of both pre-test (non-dynamic) and post-test (dynamic) scores was also calculated. In the qualitative phase of the study, all the interactions in the classroom during the enrichment phase were recorded and then transcribed. SPSS was used in order to analyse the quantitative data. First, normality of the data was checked. In order to answer the first research question, the paired sample t-test was run comparing the learners' pre-test and post-test scores. In order to check for the second research hypothesis, based on the Kozulin and Garb's (2012) formula, the LPS of each leaner which was a function of both the pre-test and the post-test was calculated. Then through a graphical representation, it was shown how LPS could differentiate among the learners with the same ZAD (non-dynamic) score. In order to check for the third research hypothesis, the qualitative data, i.e. the transcription of the interactions in the enrichment sessions and the points of strength and the weaknesses, were analysed.

$$LPS = \frac{(S_{post} - S_{pre})}{S_{max}} + \frac{S_{post}}{S_{max}} = \frac{2S_{post} - S_{pre}}{S_{max}}$$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was an attempt to conduct a G-DA process for the listening skill of the Iranian TOEFL iBT candidates. First, the LPS score and gain scores which were functions of both pre-test and post-test score were calculated. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for pre-test, post-test, LPS and gain scores.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for pre-test, post-test, LPS and gain scores of the participants

	Pre-test Score	Post-test Score	LPS	Gain score
N	20	20	20	20
Mean	13.2	20.1	0.89	6.9
Std. Deviation	4.18	4.24	0.19	2.77
Minimum	6	11	0.53	3
Maximum	23	27	1.20	13

The comparison of pretest (non-dynamic) scores vs. post-test (Dynamic) scores

As for the first research question, a paired sample t-test was run to compare the pre-test and post-test scores of the participants. The result showed that there was a statistically significant difference (t= 11.139, p= .000, Cohen's d = 2.49) between the pre-test and post-test scores, indicating that the G-DA process worked for the betterment of the participants' abilities in answering the listening section of the

TOEFL iBT test. Cohen's d of 2.49 reported a very strong magnitude of the difference between the pre-test and post-test. Table 4 and Table 5 report the results of the paired sample t test in more details.

Table 4. Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	posttest score - pretest score	20	.784	.000

Table 5. The results of the paired samples test

		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	posttest_score - pretest_score	6.900	2.77014	.6194	5.60353	8.19647	11.139	19	.000

Moreover, the significant difference between the pre-test score which was the counterpart of the traditional (non-dynamic) score, i.e. the participants' independent level of performance or their ZAD and the participants' post-test score which was the counterpart of their mediated (dynamic) score or their ZPD, proved that DA in general and G-DA in particular gave a more comprehensive and rewarding picture of the participants' listening abilities accounting for both the ZAD (independent performance) and ZPD (mediated performance). To put it another way, as DA claims, a true representation of the participants' abilities happens only when both the fully internalized abilities (ZAD) and the abilities partially internalized (ZPD) are accounted for. The result of this study was in line with major DA studies such as Kozulin and Garb (2012) and Poehner et al. (2015) in which the learners improved their abilities after receiving the ZPD-based mediation. However, while in Poehner et al. (2015) a very high and negative correlation between the pre-test (actual) scores and the gain scores was reported, indicating the less capable learners benefited more from the mediation process, in the present study a moderate correlation ratio of -0.31 was reported. Table 6 reports the results of the Pearson correlation between the pre-test and gain scores of the participants.

Table 6. The Pearson correlation between the pre-test score and the gain scores

		pretest_score	gain_score
pretest_score	Pearson Correlation	1	-.311
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	20	20
gain_score	Pearson Correlation	-.311	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	20	20

The contribution of the LPS score to participant's non-dynamic scores

The second research question addressed the capacity of the LPS score in differentiating among the leaners with the same independent level of functioning (the same ZAD) through presenting a vivid picture of their learning potential. While in traditional testing these participants were regarded as similar and were put in the same category of listening ability level, DA differentiates among them on the ground that they have not behaved similarly when they received mediation. This is in line with the most important criticism of Lev Vygotsky (1978) as the founder of DA levelled at traditional psychometric testing where he exposed two children with the same so-called IQ scores with problems (questions) that were above IQ level. Any of them could solve the problem independently, however, one of them could come up with the answer with the first and very implicit help on the part of the mediator while the second one could not solve the same problem until he/she received substantial help in terms of many implicit and explicit hints and prompts. In other words, the results of the present study revealed that LPS could provide the teacher with information about the participants' listening ability that was not obtainable through standardized (non-dynamic) examination. Other DA studies such as Poehner et al.

(2015); Kozulin and Garb (2012); Barabadi (2020); and Mehri (2018) have reported similar results in this regard.

According to Kozulin and Garb (2012) LPS could also help the teachers develop individualized learning plans for different learners. That is, in the case of participant 2 who had a somehow mid pre-test score and a low LPS, we should provide him with learning and information processing strategies, meaning we should teach them how to learn and then how to take the test. For participant 4 who had a low pre-test score and a high LPS of 1.17, because his current level of listening ability is on the verge being fully internalized, we should provide him with more challenging materials, that is, the materials that are higher than his current level of functioning. This way, one could develop special learning plans for each individual.

The analysis of the participants' interactions in the enrichment sessions

While LPS score proved very conducive to planning a specialized learning plan for each participant, the analysis of the individual participant's interaction during the enrichment (mediation) phase can also help the teacher/ mediator know about the specific areas of problem for each individual learner. In other words, the analysis of the interaction of the participants with the teacher /mediator could help us trace both the development and the weaknesses of each participant regarding different sub-skills that were practiced in the mediation phase. Thus, all the mediation sessions in the enrichment program were recorded and transcribed. Below is an extract of the interaction between the teacher and Sara (pseudonym) in the first session which was managed to practice inferencing questions. Sara got 13 in the pre-test and 22 in the post-test. Her LPS score was 1.03 which put her in the mid-learning potential sub-group according to Kozulin and Grab (2012).

Session1 (inferencing)

The whole class listened to a part of a lecture in a biology class. Then they were asked to answer this question:

What does the speaker imply about the adult moose?
        T: now, you Sara, what's the answer?
        S: I don't know it was too fast!
        T: listen again please. (listening to the complete file for a second time)
        S: I understand the subject it's about animals in the Taiga, for example the moose.
        T: right but what is implied about moose? Implied means not directly stated.
        S: I could not understand.
        T: Ok, this time listen to a shortened part of the lecture and try to find the answer. (listening to the shortened file for the third time)
        S: I'm sorry I cant….
        T: Ok: Did you hear: " …so a predator would have been pretty desperate to take on one of these…..". What can you infer from this part?
        S: It has a difficult vocabulary! Desperate!? Take on!?
        T: desperate here means suffering from an extreme need such as extreme hunger and the best meaning for take on here is to attack.
        S: so, this means that they attack adult moose rarely, right?
        T: Yea, that's the answer.

As it is evident, Sara's inability in answering the question is because of her weak command of vocabulary. That is, she needs to work on her vocabulary in order to be able to answer these types of questions correctly. In other words, the teacher should provide him with appropriate remedial materials focusing on enhancing Sara's vocabulary and grammatical knowledge before taking the TOEFL practice test. Another example is an extract form Javad who had a good command of English. He got 20 in the pre-test and 25 in the post-test with an LPS of 0.97 which is considered as a low mid one. He did not show a sharp improvement in his scores. However, the analysis of his interactions in the mediation sessions revealed that while his knowledge of English vocabulary, grammar and idioms was

satisfactory, he lacked familiarity with the special kinds of questions that usually happen to be used in the listening section of the TOEFL iBT test.

Session no.2 main-point/main-topic questions

The whole class listened once to a conversation between a student and a librarian. Then they were required to answer the following question:

What is the main topic of this conversation?

> J: the main topic!? It's about a girl in a library.
> T: No, this is not the main topic. You need to listen again please.
> J: I think I understood the file. It's about Professor Quinn's class
> T: When answering main point/main topic listening questions you need to pay attention to the whole listening file and search for a leading question or sentence that speaks for the main point or the topic of the conversation. Listen again to the shortened conversation.
> J: is it about the time she could go the library?
> T: No, You can guess the main point if you focus on what comes after this clause " I have never checked out for the reserve materials, so….." listen again to even a more shortened piece of the conversation.
> J: how…to use the reserve materials?
> T: that's right. "I have never checked out for the reserve materials, so….…so what do I need. Do I need a library card or what do I have to do? You can find the main topic of the conversation from this part of the conversation.

In session 5 which was the second session allocated to practicing main-point/main-topic questions the teacher mediator once again referred to Javad, below is the interaction between them.

Session no.2 main-point/main-topic questions

The whole class listened once to a conversation between two students. Then they were required to answer the following question:

What is the main topic of this conversation?

> T: Ok, Javad go ahead.
> J. well it's about Professor Lyle's photography class.
> T: this not the main topic. Listen to a shortened part of the conversation.
> J: about the art portfolio!?
> T: No, these are all mentioned in the conversation but they are not the main topic. You can guess the main point if you focus on what comes after this clause " ….for any of those advanced classes ….." listen again to a more shortened piece of the conversation please.
> J: what they need to enter a photography class?
> T: excellent. " ….for any of those advanced classes …..you have to get……..well I think it's said so in the course catalog." From these pieces of the conversation one can understand that the main topic is about the requirement for getting into a photography class.

While this question appeared to be more difficult than the previous one, it is clear that the number of ZPD- based hints that Javad received decreased. This could be interpreted within the development of Javad's skills in terms of answering main-point/main-topic questions, that is, through mediation he could gain mastery over this type of questions. Thus, knowing that he had an acceptable general knowledge of English, it was decided to provide Javad with more challenging materials.

DISCUSSION

As an educational psychologist, Vygotsky himself did not introduce the term dynamic assessments, however, his new account of human development which gave utmost credence to society and culture as two inseparable factors from human development as long as his harsh criticism levelled at traditional testing as being unable to show a comprehensive picture of human being's abilities through just focusing on the fully internalized abilities (ZAD) and taking for granted those abilities that are partially internalized (under construction) or (ZPD), lead his proponents to propose DA as new culture of assessment that was an attempt to endorse intervention during assessment as legitimate.

In the present study, through conducting a group dynamic assessment procedure (G-DA) those areas of the participants' abilities that are unaccounted for in traditional testing were tried to be uncovered and second, the learners were helped to develop their abilities through providing them with ZPD based mediation. The LPS score helped the teacher/mediator differentiate among the so-called similar participants according to the yardsticks of the traditional testing. However, the most crucial role of LPS was in providing the teacher/mediator with invaluable information so that they could develop the most fine-tuned learning plans for individual learners. In other words, different levels of the responsiveness to mediation of the learners who had performed similarly in the pre-test resulted in prescribing different learning plans for each of them. This was not possible in the traditional testing, that is, they were put in the same group and were provided with same materials.

The most critical issue in conducting any DA procedure is the quality of the mediation (hints and prompts, leading questions, etc.), presented to the learners. In other words, the credibility of the interpretation and the use of the LPS and the post-test (dynamic) scores would be at stake if the mediation process was done poorly. Although Aljafraah and Lantolf's (1994) regulatory scale was utilized as the point of departure for designing and providing the online hints and prompts, there is always room for the third parties to analyse and criticize the mediation process especially in the case of the present study that was an interactionist DA procedure. In other words, other researchers might come up with a different scheme of presenting hints and prompts that might be more ZPD-based and more attuned to the very level of the individuals that took part in the DA procedure.

Another issue that is an important concern of all DA studies is the teacher's knowledge and capability in conducting the DA procedure in the classrooms. No matter how rigorously a DA process has been designed, a poor administration of the DA procedure on the part of the teacher/mediators especially when the DA researchers themselves are not in charge of the process would result in futile and unusable results. As the major goal of DA is assessment and learning at the same time, training teachers, either in pre-service or in-service programs would help in conducting more effective DA procedures.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the performance of the two participants proved that DA not only shed light on the specific problematic areas of the learner ability (the case of Sara) but also it could help the teacher/mediator trace the learner's development in different sub-skills that were included in the test. The comprehensive diagnosis of the participants' points of strength and weakness developed specialized remedial learning plans and materials for the learners. Both formats of G-DA, i.e. cumulative and concurrent were used and proved to be very useful in that the teacher/mediator would use concurrent G-DA whenever her major concern was the development of the learners' abilities through involving more than one participant (primary and secondary interactants) in the mediation process for the very question that was asked, however, when the diagnostic purposes were concerned the teacher/mediator opted for the cumulative approach, i.e. she conducted the whole mediation process with one participant for the very question that was raised in order to receive a full account of the individual patrician's abilities. Most of the mediation was in the concurrent format because development of the primary goal of the G-DA process. Now that the effectiveness of G-DA was empirically revealed as being conducive to both assessing and promoting the learners' listening ability, we refer to some implications of our study for teachers, learners.

The results of conducting a G-DA procedure could help the teachers have a more comprehensive diagnosis of their learners through analyzing the learner's performance during the mediation process. Moreover, the LPS score could help the teachers have a more detailed understanding of the learners that perform similarly in the traditional non-dynamic tests. Thus, is recommended that the teachers study about DA and conduct G-DA procedures inside the classes. The learners are recommended to take part in G-DA courses in order to both come up with comprehensive understanding about their true level of listening ability and receive the kind of mediation that is attuned to the current level of functioning. An interactionist format of G-DA was followed in the present study. Another line of research could be conducting the same study following an interventionist format in that the hints are prefabricated and pre-planned before the mediation process starts and then the results of the two studies can be compared.

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