



From Other-Regulation to Autonomy: Tracing Emergent Abilities Through Interactionist Dynamic Assessment in EFL Contexts

Ehsan Zolfaghari Younesi¹, Roya Khoii²

¹Islamic Azad University, Tehran North Branch, Islamic Republic of Iran

²Islamic Azad University, Tehran North Branch, Islamic Republic of Iran

Abstract

This study investigated the role of Interactionist Dynamic Assessment (DA), grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, in the emergence of latent abilities in EFL learners, while focusing on their speaking skill. The participants were 46 upper-intermediate EFL learners at a language institute in Iran. They were exposed to three DA modalities, Individual, Peer, and Concurrent Group DA, over 13 sessions. All mediations were embedded in speaking tasks, which provided the context for observing the learners' developmental changes, and the collected qualitative data were analyzed to capture cognitive, meta-cognitive, and affective growth. To explore the development of their emergent abilities beyond observable performance gains, qualitative data were collected through post-intervention semi-structured interviews and ongoing researcher field notes. Using an inductive coding approach, the data were thematically analyzed, yielding key patterns related to affective, cognitive, and meta-cognitive shifts experienced during the intervention. The participants frequently described increased self-regulation, reduced anxiety, and heightened willingness to communicate across both interviews and field notes. The thematic analysis of the data revealed the dominant presence of emergent and unanticipated developmental outcomes such as improved self-awareness, strategic learning behaviors, and reflection. The findings underscore the transformative impact of DA as not only a diagnostic tool but also a developmental scaffold that could shape EFL learners' maturing abilities and dispositions.

Keywords: *Dynamic assessment, Emergent abilities, Autonomy, Interactionist DA, EFL, Sociocultural theory*

1. Background

The journey from other-regulation to learner autonomy stands at the heart of language education, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in resource-constrained environments. Historically, language assessment methods have focused on measuring L2 learners' static, already-developed competencies, often overlooking the dynamic processes by which potential abilities might emerge and mature within social interactions. This limitation is particularly pronounced in traditional approaches, where assessment serves primarily to rank or sort learners rather than to facilitate development.

Dynamic Assessment (DA), especially in its interactionist form, might be a response to such shortcomings. Rooted in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), DA positions learning and development as fundamentally social processes. According to Vygotsky, higher-order psychological functions are first formed on the social plane through interaction and only later internalized by the individual [1]. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the gap between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with support, underpins this approach. Accordingly, the focus of assessment shifts from what is already known or mastered (actual development) to what is ripening or possible (potential development) through guided mediation [2].

Dynamic Assessment is distinguished by its integration of intervention within the assessment process, allowing the teacher or mediator to provide graduated and contingent support tailored to each learner's emerging needs. Unlike static testing, DA does not treat assessment and instruction as separate domains. Instead, it views every assessment moment as an opportunity to diagnose and scaffold development, thus encouraging the gradual internalization of new strategies, knowledge, and behaviors. This paradigm not only uncovers learners' latent abilities but also catalyzes their transition from dependence on external regulation to autonomous, self-directed learning [3].



During the past decades, several modalities have emerged within the DA context, each reflecting unique interactional patterns and opportunities for development. Interactionist DA foregrounds dialogic mediation and feedback, aligning closely with Vygotsky's emphasis on social learning. In practice, interactionist approaches to DA can manifest through Individual, Peer, and Concurrent Group modalities. Individual DA offers one-on-one, highly personalized mediation; Peer DA relies on collaborative scaffolding among learners; and Concurrent Group DA enables teachers to orchestrate whole-class mediation, drawing on the collective resources and dynamics of the group [4].

These modalities are not merely technical variations but have significant implications for how learners experience and benefit from mediation. Individual DA accelerates the internalization of strategies through targeted support; Peer DA fosters co-construction of knowledge and the development of social-interactive skills; and Concurrent Group DA broadens the repertoire of strategies available by exposing learners to multiple forms of mediation and interaction.

The theoretical rationale for employing interactionist DA in EFL contexts lies in its potential to address not only cognitive and linguistic development but also affective and meta-cognitive dimensions. As learners participate in scaffolded tasks, they gradually shift from reliance on teacher or peer support (other-regulation) to self-regulation, developing the confidence, strategies, and reflective skills necessary for autonomous language use [5]. The literature underscores that such transformation is not merely a byproduct of repeated practice, but a direct result of purposeful, responsive mediation embedded within meaningful social interaction [6].

In summary, Dynamic Assessment, rooted in sociocultural theory and operationalized through interactionist modalities, provides a powerful framework for tracing and fostering emergent abilities in EFL learners [7]. It reframes assessment as a developmental process, foregrounding the role of dialogic mediation in guiding learners from other-regulation toward autonomy, a trajectory that is central to effective language education and the focus of this study.

2. Method

2.1 Research Questions

The original research questions guiding this study were:

1. Which abilities might emerge as a result of employing individual, peer, and concurrent group Dynamic Assessment of L2 speaking?
2. In what ways does interactionist Dynamic Assessment affect Iranian EFL learners' transition from other-regulation to self-regulation in L2 speaking-based classes?

2.2 Instruments

The following instruments were utilized to ensure rigorous data collection and to address the study's objectives:

- **Researcher Field Notes:** Prepared to record observations of learner behavior, including their participation, interaction, and strategic choices during speaking-based classroom tasks.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Conducted post-intervention with selected participants to explore affective, cognitive, and strategic changes experienced throughout the intervention while engaging in speaking-based DA activities.

2.3 Participants

Forty-six upper-intermediate male Iranian EFL learners, aged 15 to 19, participated in this study. They were enrolled in six intact classes at a private language institute in Tehran and randomly assigned to three experimental groups: Individual DA ($n=10$), Peer DA ($n=19$), and Concurrent Group DA ($n=17$). To ensure rich, detailed, and credible qualitative findings, 15 participants (five from each experimental group) were purposively selected for post-intervention interviews. This sample size was selected to achieve data saturation, the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews, while also ensuring representation across all DA modalities.



2.4 Procedure

The instructional intervention spanned over 13 sessions, during which each group received a specific form of Interactionist DA implemented through speaking-based communicative activities. The Individual DA group enjoyed one-on-one, teacher-learner mediation, with the teacher providing tailored dialogic scaffolding during the speaking tasks.

- The Peer DA group worked in pairs or small groups, where learners provided mediation for one another with occasional teacher facilitation, allowing for the co-construction of understanding and strategies.
- The Concurrent Group DA group participated in teacher-led whole-class mediation, during which the teacher offered graduated support and guided interaction among multiple learners simultaneously in oral exchanges.

During the intervention, the researcher prepared comprehensive field notes, documenting observed behaviors, affective shifts, strategic learning behaviors, and notable verbalizations in the course of communicative tasks. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample from each group to elicit detailed reflections on their developmental experiences, self-regulation, and emergent abilities.

All qualitative data (field notes and interview transcripts) were subjected to inductive coding and thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of major patterns related to cognitive, meta-cognitive, and affective development as the learners moved from other-regulation toward autonomy [8].

3. Results

At the end of the intervention, all qualitative data from field notes and post-intervention interviews were coded and analyzed to capture cognitive, meta-cognitive, and affective changes in the learners during the DA process. The coding of the field notes produced 466 codes, with affective emergent abilities being the most frequent (325 codes), followed by meta-cognitive abilities (91), cognitive abilities (34), language proficiency improvements (260), evolving mediation practices (115), barriers to participation (94), and classroom dynamics (45). The interviews generated 223 codes, highlighting affective shifts (83), meta-cognitive shifts (56), strategic behaviors (34), unanticipated positive outcomes (30), and criticisms or suggestions for improvement (20).

Thematic analysis revealed four main themes shared across both data sources. First, there was a clear movement from other-regulation to autonomy, as learners increasingly self-corrected and relied less on teacher prompts. One participant remarked, *"At the beginning, I was always waiting for the teacher's hint. But later, I could find my own mistakes and fix them while speaking."* This shift was also reflected in field notes, which described students independently initiating self-repair and supporting peers. Second, the emergence of meta-cognitive and strategic awareness was evident, with learners reporting more reflective and deliberate language use. As one noted, *"Watching my video made me notice my repeated mistakes. Now I try to think before I speak and check myself more."* Third, affective growth and increased willingness to communicate were prominent; the students expressed feeling less anxious and more motivated, with a learner saying, *"Now I raise my hand without thinking so much. The classroom atmosphere became more supportive and energetic, with more frequent participation."* Finally, both data sources highlighted unanticipated positive outcomes, like increased motivation, closer peer relationships, and greater curiosity about English, with one learner sharing, *"I started liking English more because I felt I could actually learn."*

In summary, all three DA modalities supported the emergence of latent cognitive, meta-cognitive, and affective abilities in learners. In fact, the qualitative evidence showed that learners developed greater self-regulation, reflective thinking, and motivation, key indicators of maturing, autonomous abilities nurtured through mediated interaction [9].



4. Conclusions and Discussion

This study found that all three modalities of Interactionist Dynamic Assessment, Individual, Peer, and Concurrent Group, effectively fostered greater learner autonomy, reflective thinking, and affective growth among Iranian EFL students. The learners became more independent in their language use, more confident, and more engaged in classroom activities. These results can be attributed to the supportive, scaffolded environment created by DA, which encouraged self-correction, collaboration, and risk-taking. Overall, the findings suggest that integrating DA into language classrooms can support not just language proficiency, but also holistic learner development [10].

The group and peer mediation approaches, in particular, helped build a sense of community and promoted the use of strategic and meta-cognitive skills. The unexpected benefits observed, such as increased curiosity, closer peer connections, and more positive attitudes toward English, likely resulted from the combination of structured support and meaningful interaction. However, some students preferred more individualized feedback or found group work challenging, highlighting the need for teachers to adapt DA methods to diverse learner needs.

In summary, the findings suggest that incorporating DA principles into language classrooms can support holistic learner growth, and that future research should investigate the sustainability and adaptability of these gains across varied contexts and learner profiles.

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