

The Effect of Dynamic Assessment on the Use of Cohesive Devices in EFL Learners' Writing

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Abstract: *This study concentrated on the effect of Dynamic Assessment approach on the use of cohesive devices in EFL learners' writing. The research method was quasi-experimental with pretest-posttest control format in which a group of 30 intermediate students were conveniently sampled and divided into two groups: a control and an experimental group. Before the treatment, a pretest was administered to the groups. During the six sessions, a dynamic assessment approach was applied to the experimental group. For the other class (control group), the ordinary process of writing instruction was used, and ultimately, all participants were given a posttest. The data collected from the two tests were then analyzed by running ANCOVA. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the performances of the two groups, so that the experimental group outperformed the control one. The findings may have important implications for ESL/EFL teachers and material producers.*

Key Terms: *Dynamic assessment, Cohesive Devices, EFL learners' writing*

1. INTRODUCTION

The dynamic assessment (DA) approach is an outcome of Vygotskian socio - cultural theory of learning (Shrestha & Coffin, 2012).

Dynamic assessment is an approach that blends assessment and instruction simultaneously. According to Shrestha and Coffin (2012), DA is based on Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) of mind, whereby human cognition and learning is seen as a social and cultural activity. Specifically, the essential of dynamic assessment is the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and mediation (Vygotsky, 1978).

Some scholars believe that: process writing instruction is better than traditional methods in gathering the needs of the modern information society (Deng, 2003; Jia, 1998). Also White and Arndt (1991) suggest most of their attempts to ideal EFL writing process instruction, and practitioners try to relate the writing process generating ideas, drafting, structuring, revising and editing, into their writing courses in order to increase learners' independent writing ability than traditional approach (White & Arndt, 1991).

Nation-wide research about EFL writing assessment show that some practitioners have adopted some modified assessment methods, such as self assessment, peer assessment, and teacher conferencing (Xiaoxiao & Yan, 2010).

Xiaoxiao and Yan (2010), when discussing the problems in writing instruction, the method of assessing the writing task must be emphasized.

They believe that it is unfair to assess process writing with traditional assessment. Moreover, assessment and evaluation must be viewed as integral, planned parts of the writing curriculum; students need to be actively involved with the teacher in understanding, assessing, and evaluating the writing process.

Most of the students are weak at writing because of the lack of ability in using cohesive devices in their writing tasks (Todd, Khongput & Darasawang, 2007). Furthermore the way teachers assess students' writing does not support cohesive devices mastery to be increased as well as implementing them accurately (Cai & Fang, 2006). So, by using dynamic assessment and giving students feedback about their mistakes and errors in a dynamic way in the class as they write the task, it is possible to boost their writing capabilities.

This research explores the effect of implementing dynamic assessment by using cohesive devices in the writing activities of EFL learners.

For the majority of teachers, writing tasks usually are focused on presenting one topic to the learners and then asking them to elaborate on the mentioned topic in details and later on gathering the papers and finding the areas of difficulty, errors and mistakes and underlining them for the learners (Shrestha & Coffin, 2012).

Hence, students are not fully aware of the type of errors, the reason why they occurred, the solution for removing them and improving the quality of writing skill (Lerner, 2002). Using the appropriate cohesive device is one of the most important difficulties for the majority of students. Also these devices are very vital in assessing writing tasks.

One of the most challenging issues in creating cohesive texts is determining to what extent and under what circumstances different prompts can be considered effective in assessing the task (Lerner, 2002).

It seems that many students are not sure about what cohesive devices are and how they can deal with developing and maintaining them in the writing text (Todd, Khongput & Darasawang, 2007).

These problems involve a complex set of interaction among students, lack of real task assessment, scoring criteria and characteristics of other variables, such as topic complexity and language mastery (Todd, Khongput & Darasawang, 2007).

Sometimes, teachers introduce the task of writing about a selected topic and students write and deliver the task to the teacher and some corrections over the areas of difficulty will be done, while no treatment occurs (Todd, Khongput & Darasawavang, 2007).

Teachers do not practice and present the writing activity in a comprehensible format. Most of the time, lack of pre-writing or whilst- writing activities hinder effective comprehension of the learner. So, not only the necessity of assessing task of writing must be considered, but the dynamic procedure of doing this assessment should be taken into account in order to improve students' writing activities mastery and increase their awareness of cohesive devices (Cai & Fang, 2006).

Dynamic assessment for writing tasks can help to improve students' ability to recognize their grammatical problems and find mastery on how to use them correctly in their writing tasks. This is a dynamic procedure to develop, maintain and monitor cohesive devices for EFL learners in writing tasks.

Research Question

Does dynamic assessment significantly affect EFL learners 'correct use of cohesive devices in writing?

2. METHODOLOGY

This part gives detailed information regarding the participants, design, instrument, and the procedure which was followed to carry out the work.

2.1. Participants

This study recruited 30 participants out of a population of 60 from two intact classes through convenience sampling. One of these classes was randomly assigned as the experimental group and the other as the control. The experimental class included 7 male and 8 female students, ranging in age from 17 to 30, while the control class included 6 male and 9 female students aging between 18 and 30. All of these students had been studying English for nearly 6 years in Tehran Institute of Technology (MFT) in Hamedan Iran. The students had been placed in classes based on their proficiency level by the institute. The Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a standardized test of language proficiency which is given to learners to determine their language structures mastery, was administered to find out if the subjects were homogeneous.

2.2. Instruments

In this research, two "for and against" writing tasks, extracted from the writing section of the TOEFL test were given to the students, 30 one as a pretest and the other as a posttest on different topics.

The written section of the TOEFL test known as (OPT) is a standardized test of writing ability which is the acronym of Oxford Placement Test. These tasks contained two topics and the learners were supposed to write 200- 250 words in 40 minutes. These writing tasks measured the proficiency of learners in implementing different grammatical structures and their mastery over recognizing them in writing contexts.

2.3. Design of the Study

The research method used in the current study was quasi-experimental with pretest-posttest control design schematically shown bellow.

EG T1 X T2

CG T1 – T2

2.4 Procedure

Before the participants of the study were selected, OPT proficiency test was administered to find out if the subjects were homogeneous. The structure and requirements of the writing were explained to all the participants during two sessions. Then the pre test was given in the form of writing task and all those participants who were in the same level of proficiency were randomly assigned and separated into two groups, one experimental and one control. Participants in both groups were trained about the correct use of cohesive devices in writing and were given some samples to identify the targeted errors. Having done that, they were given tasks to write by focusing on those targeted structures. After administrating the first writing task, all the errors related to the cohesive devices were highlighted and the teacher started the procedure of working on those mentioned grammars by asking students to look at the writing again and helping them to correct their errors individually via scaffolding method ,then their writing was checked again. This procedure continued through self correction, peer correction, group correction and finally teacher correction by teaching the focused structures deeply and extendedly. They experienced different structural devices for writing during six sessions.

As to the control group, the condition was not similar to the experimental one. In all six sessions, the focus was on presenting one topic to the learners and then asking students to elaborate the mentioned topics in details using cohesive devices in their writing tasks. These writing papers were then collected up an after identifying their errors by the teacher, they were given back to participants to make the corrections by themselves. After 6 sessions of instruction, the second task of writing as a posttest was given to the testees as the posttest.

2.5. Data Analysis

After collecting the data via pretest and posttest, data analysis was performed and because of having two groups of participants (control and experimental group) who were given pre and

posttests, the comparison of the relative efficiency of independent variable could be best measured through ANCOVA which adjusts the effect of pretest or covariate on the scores of the posttest.

3. RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the data obtained from the two groups through a pre-test and a post-test. For this purpose, ANCOVA statistical procedure was used, but as using ANCOVA requires checking the normality assumptions, first these assumptions were checked.

3.1. Descriptive Statistics for the Experimental Group and the Control Group

The descriptive statistics for the participants' pre -test and post test scores in experimental group are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The Results of the Participants ' pre- test and Post- Test Cohesive devices errors in Experimental Group and Control Group

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: Pre test

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Control	4.5333	3.48193	15
Experimental	4.6000	4.15417	15
Total	6.0667	4.07628	30

Table 4.1 indicates the mean score for control group in pretest was 4.5 with a standard deviation of 3.48 while for the Experimental group in pretest; there were 7.6 and 4.15 respectively.

Table 2: The Results of the Participants ' Post- Test scores in the Experimental Group and the Control Group

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: Post test

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
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Control	5.4000	3.24698	15
Experimental	2.4000	1.72378	15
Total	3.9000	2.97518	30

As Table 2 indicates, the mean score for the control group in posttest was 5.4 with a standard deviation of 3.2 while for the experimental group in posttest; they were 2.4 and 1.72 respectively.

3.2. One sample Kolmogorov – Smirnov Test

To ensure normal distribution of the scores in both control and experimental groups, One-Sample Kolmogorov- Smirnov Test was run the results of which are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: One Sample Kolmogorov- Smirnov Test for Pre- Test and Post- Test Scores

		Pretest	Posttest
N		30	30
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}	Mean	6.0667	3.9000
	Std. Deviation	4.07628	2.97518
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.194	.222
	Positive	.194	.222
	Negative	-.107	-.114
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.062	1.218
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.209	.103

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

As it is indicated in Table 3, P- value for each set of scores was higher than 0.05 which shows the normal distribution of scores.

3.3. Homogeneity of the slope of regression lines

Table 4: Homogeneity of Regression lines

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: PostTest					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	33.081 ^a	1	33.081	50.481	.000

Intercept	.556	1	.556	.848	.374
Groups	2.738	1	2.738	1.576	.219
PreTest	33.081	1	33.081	50.481	.000
Groups*pre-	.672	1	.672	.387	.528
Error	8.519	13	.655		
Total	128.000	15			
Corrected Total	41.600	14			

a. R Squared = .795 (Adjusted R Squared = .779)

Table 4.4 shows that the slope of regression lines was homogeneous for all groups [$f(1, 13) = 0.387, p = 0.528, p > 0.05$].

4. DISCUSSION

The results of ANCOVA showed that the mean of writing quality was significantly higher in the experimental group than that of the control group. After adapting dynamic assessment approach, participants in the experimental group were able to write with much better quality than their counterparts in the control group and the mean differences between these two groups were significant. In the previous researches dynamic assessment has been performed on other areas of language learning and not on cohesive devices of writing tasks. The task of writing has always been assessed through the traditional method which was discussed and mentioned in previous chapters. But based on the new procedure which was followed in this study dynamic assessment was run on the writing task differently which in comparison with other performed methods in the past and also in comparing with other researchers suggested methods has been more successful based on the findings in this study and the data analysis.

As a result, based on the findings of this study, the use of dynamic assessment approach helps EFL learners to write texts of better quality. The effectiveness of dynamic assessment of TOEFL task which was confirmed in this study indicates that EFL learners are getting involved in the assessment and production of written task simultaneously.

The findings in this study support the idea that the formative assessment of writing has been designed to encourage learning. (Hollingworth, 2009; Madaus, Russell & Higgins, 2009) believed that the value of students' learning experiences has been questioned when teachers stress on their efforts on test success, particularly for students close to critical scores. The same concern has been considered in this study which focuses on teachers' sensitivity over students writing skills and the proficiency acquired to find mastery over the given tasks.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study reported here aimed at examining whether using a dynamic assessment approach to writing TOEFL task would significantly affect EFL students writing performance. The results of the study indicated that in the experimental group, in contrast to the control group, there was a

considerable improvement in writing performance measured in terms of appropriate use of cohesive devices. As the results of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) indicated, the null hypothesis of the study was rejected and it can be concluded that adopting a dynamic assessment approach can significantly contribute to learner's performance on TOEFL task of writing. Lantolf and Pohner (2004) assert may indicate the effective role of dynamic assessment provide for mediated assistance to facilitate learner opportunities attain their goal.

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