ANADOLU ÜNİVERSİTESİ SOSYAL BİLİMLER DERGİSİ
ANADOLU UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
Cilt/Vol.:8- Sayı/No: 1 : 301–308 (2008)

VYGOTSKY'S SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY AND DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Applying Vygotsky's sociocultural theory into assessment, 'dynamic assessment' in language learning might offer new insights to language classroom. Vygotsky's theory basically offers that if we want to understand learning and development, we have to focus on process instead of product. In other words, a Vygotskian approach to language assessment suggests that 'process of development' should be seen as a predictor of the individual's or group's future performance. This paper takes an in depth look at the issue of dynamic assessment from the standpoint of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. First the theoretical framework is drawn, and then the methodological applications of the theory are discussed.

Keywords: *dynamic assessment, Vygotsky, sociocultural theory*

VYGOTSKY'NİN SOSYOKÜLTÜREL TEORİSİ VE DİL ÖĞRETİMİNDE DİNAMİK ÖLÇME

ÖZ

Vygotsky'nin sosyokültürel teorisini ölçme ve değerlendirme alanına uygulayan 'dinamik ölçme' yabancı dil öğretimi yapılan sınıflardaki ölçme ve değerlendirme faaliyetlerine yeni bir soluk getirebilecek kapasitededir. Vygotsky'nin teorisinin temel noktası, gelişim ve öğrenmeyi anlayabilmenin yolunun sonuçtan çok sürece odaklanmakla mümkün olacağıdır. Diğer bir deyişle, yabancı dil sınıflarındaki ölçme ve değerlendirme faaliyetlerine getirilebilecek Vygotsky odaklı bir yaklaşıma göre, 'gelişim sureci' bir kişinin ya da grubun gelecekteki performansının da habercisi olarak algılanmalıdır. Bu makale, dinamik ölçme konusunu Vygotsky'nin sosyokültürel teorisinin ışığında incelemektedir. Makalede öncelikle teorik çerçeve çizilecek, daha sonra da teorinin yabancı dil öğretimi yapılan sınıflara pratik anlamda nasıl yansıtılabileceği tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *dinamik ölçme, Vygotsky, sosyokültürel teori*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Product oriented testing is one of the most widely used testing methods in today's educational environments, including the field of second and foreign language learning. Many language teachers around the world use final assessment tests in their curricula. The basic idea behind testing students after instructing them for a certain amount of time is to see how much the students have progressed on the subject they are being taught. On the other hand, it is not a rare case to hear a teacher saying that s/he does not understand why some students perform very well in the class but cannot get high grades from the tests. At this point, dynamic assessment in language learning, which applies Vygotsky's sociocultural theory into assessment, might offer new insights to assessment in the language classroom.

Vygotsky's theory basically suggests that if we want to understand learning and development, we have to focus on process instead of product. According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006, s.28), Vygotsky argued that "the only appropriate way of understanding and explaining ... forms of human mental functioning is by studying the process, and not the outcome of development". This is the critical point which distinguishes dynamic assessment from other forms of assessment. In this approach, development process is seen as a predictor of the individual's or group's future performance.

Dynamic assessment according to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory suggests that instruction and assessment should be inseparable from one another. In other words, if teachers want to see how their students really progress in their classes, their assessment should not focus on testing the students' performance with a final achievement test per se. The real focus should be on what students can achieve with the help of the teacher or peers during the class activities because what is achieved with the help of others shows the potential progress for achievement without any help. That is, if students are able to achieve a task with others today, this shows that they will be able to achieve it by themselves in near future because being able to achieve it with others proves that the internalization process has already begun. On the other hand, what teachers generally do in language courses is to assess students' actual development after some time of instruction, and to decide on the potential development by looking at the results. However, according to Vygotsky, this process should be the other way around because "the potential development varies independently of actual development, meaning that the latter, in and of itself, cannot be used to predict the former" (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006, s.328).

This paper takes an in depth look at the issue of dynamic assessment from the standpoint of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. First, the theoretical framework is drawn, and then the methodological applications of the theory are discussed.

2. WHAT IS DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT ACCORDING TO VYGOTSKY'S THEORY?

Dynamic testing is basically defined as an approach which understands individual differences and their implications for instruction, and which embeds intervention within the assessment procedure. In dynamic assessment procedures, the focus is on the process rather than the products of learning. In other words, the 'dynamic' nature of this approach is based on Vygotsky's observation that a body can show what it is only in movement (Lidz and Gindis, 2003).

Some scholars (e.g. Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2002) discussed the concept of dynamic assessment by differentiating it from non-dynamic assessment. The crucial point here is that dynamic assessment, contrary to non-dynamic assessment, does not separate instruction from assessment but instead considers them as two sides of the same coin. According to Sternberg and

Grigorenko (2002), in non-dynamic assessment the examiner presents items and the examinee is expected to respond to these items successively, without taking any kind of feedback or intervention. At some point in the future the examiner receives the only feedback he or she will get: an individual score or a set of scores. By that time, the examinee is already studying for one or more future tests. On the other hand, dynamic assessment is a procedure which takes the results of an intervention into consideration. During the intervention, the examiner teaches the examinee how to perform better on individual items or on the whole test. The final score is either the learning score representing the difference between pre-test (before learning) and post-test (after learning) scores, or the score on the post-test alone.

Dynamic assessment is basically grounded in Vygotsky's innovative insight that in the zone of proximal development instruction leads development. Before Vygotsky, the general view about assessment was that the independent problem solving was the only valid indication of mental functioning, but Vygotsky argued against this view by suggesting that independent problem solving reveals only a part of person's mental ability, his actual developmental level. Yet a person's potential developmental level is as important as the actual developmental level. Vygotsky argued that responsiveness to assistance is an indispensable feature for understanding cognitive ability because it provides an insight into the person's future (potential) development. Vygotsky (1956, s.447-448) exemplified his view with the following example:

> *"Imagine that we have examined two children and have determined that the mental age of both is seven years. This means that both children solve tasks accessible to seven-year-olds. However, when we attempt to push these children further in carrying out the tests, there turns out to be an essential difference between them. With the help of leading questions, examples, and demonstrations, one of them easily solves test items taken from two years above the child's level of development. The other solves test items that are only a half-year above his or her level of development. From the point of view of their independent activity they are equivalent, but from the point of view of their immediate potential development, they are sharply different. That which the child turns out to be able to do with the help of an adult points us toward the of the child's proximal development. This means that with the help of this method, we can take stock not only of today's completed process of development, not only the cycles that are already concluded and done, not only the processes of maturation that are completed; we can also take stock of processes that are now in the state of coming into being, that are only ripening, or only developing".*

Then, we can say that looking at the instant performance and deciding on the achievement of any particular student not only gives us an incomplete picture of that student's performance, it also misleads us about the future actions we plan to do based on the results of the current test (Day et al., 1997).

3. METHODOLOGICAL REALIZATION OF DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT - HOW TO PUT THEORY IN ACTION?

Although Vygotsky suggested the theoretical framework of dynamic assessment, he did not mention any methodological guidelines about using it in real educational settings, simply because he was studying psychology, not education. Most of the methodological realizations of dynamic assessment were suggested by scholars within the field of language learning. These scholars have taken Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as their reference point and they have applied it into the specific requirements and

needs of assessment and evaluation in language learning. In order to show the general methodological realization of the theory in all educational settings, Sternberg and Grigeronko (2002) summarized the methodological differences between dynamic assessment and non-dynamic assessment in three main points. Table 1 below compares the two views from the practical perspective:

Table 1. Methodological Differences Between Dynamic and Non-Dynamic Assessment

Non-dynamic assessment (NDA)	Dynamic Assessment (DA)
1. NDA focuses on the outcome of past development.	1. DA foregrounds future development.
2. Examiners are expected to adopt a neutral and disinterested stance as a means of minimizing measurement error.	2. The examiner intervenes in the assessment process.
3. Examinees are given little or no feedback on the quality of their performance until assessment is complete; to do otherwise would threaten test reliability.	3. A specific form of feedback (mediated assistance) is provided and this is the crux of the assessment process.

Maybe the most striking item in the above comparison is the third one. What is seen as a threat to test reliability in non-dynamic testing is seen as the most important part of the testing process in dynamic assessment. This crucial difference is also the main reason why dynamic assessment procedures are taking so much resistance in today's educational settings. Modern educational systems are constructed on the idea of testing student knowledge objectively and reliably. Offering a process which 'violates' one of the basic principles of the existing system naturally brings endless criticism, rejection, and resistance with it. The same discussion can also be made on the concept of validity in assessment (Meijer and Elshout, 2001). Some testing institutions might criticize dynamic assessment as a process which lacks validity, but according to Guterman (2002) any assessment is valid when it is relevant to instruction and useful and beneficial to learners. In other words, if we take 'validity' and 'reliability' out of the context of standardized testing and look at the underlying meaning of these two concepts, we can see that they are both realized in the procedures of dynamic assessment. Lidz and Gindis (2003, s.103) put all this discussion into words with a simple sentence: "DA [dynamic assessment] begins where standardized testing ends".

Another important point related to methodological conceptualization of dynamic assessment is the fallacy of reducing dynamic testing methods into a couple of ways of testing. Portfolio assessment is a good example for illustrating this issue. Many teachers and researchers around the world think that portfolio assessment is the one and only way of using dynamic assessment in the language classroom. However, the notion of dynamic assessment does not refer to any particular way of testing. In fact, dynamic assessment is a whole different approach, or an umbrella term (Elliott, 2003), to the issue of testing in the language classroom and this approach can be applied to any way of testing ranging from multiple choice to essay writing, and with a great variety of student backgrounds from monolingual

environments to linguistic diversities (Haney and Evans, 1999; Laing and Kamhi, 2003). Emphasizing this aspect of dynamic testing, Lantolf and Thorne (2006, s.331) state 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". Then, we can clearly say that reducing the methodological applications of dynamic assessment into one or a couple of specific testing instruments such as portfolio assessment not only means disregarding the overall theory of dynamic assessment, but it also misleads language teachers and test innovators.

Although a lot of discussion has been made at the theoretical level of dynamic assessment in language education, the number of empirical or practical studies which could provide guidance for methodological applications are very limited. In one of those studies Kozulin and Garb (2002) focused on dynamic assessment and second language reading achievement. The researchers developed an instructional curriculum that included a dynamic assessment component focusing on helping learners develop general reading comprehension strategies. In the pre-test session of the study the students were asked to read a simple passage in English and to answer a set of comprehension questions. In the mediation session, classroom teachers, who had been trained on mediation, reviewed the test with the students, mediating for them the reading strategies required in each item. For the post test purposes, following the mediation, students completed a post-test that closely paralleled the pre-test. Based on the analysis of the data, researchers devised a formula to calculate what they call 'Learning Potential Score' which quantified the gain between the pre- and post-tests. They argued that this score provided a more complete picture of the students' ability than merely focusing on the final achievement tests in reading.

In another study, Anton (2003) focused on dynamic assessment as a placement procedure. He studied how dynamic assessment can be used to place students in a Spanish undergraduate language program. During the student placement oral exam, the examiner prompted students who had made some mistakes in order to give them the opportunity to revise their performance in appropriate ways. Students who could revise under prompting were considered to be more advanced than the students who could not, and all the students were placed in the program according to results related to their response to mediation, or, in other words, according to their potential for learning.

In a similar study, Poehner (2005) focused on dynamic assessment in advanced second language learning classrooms. In the study, first, learners constructed an oral narrative in the target language after watching a short video clip, they received no mediation in the first task. Then they were shown a second clip from the same story but this time they received hints, leading questions, suggestions, and explicit feedback when constructing their oral narratives. The assessment which focused on the performance differences between the first and second tests were used as the basis for an individualized instructional program in which participants were tutored in areas that had been identified during the dynamic assessment sessions as needing special attention. In other words, students' level of performance with the help of a mediator determined whether or not they need special attention in the language learning process.

Limited number of studies mentioned above with all the promoting results imply that more studies are needed in the field of language learning in order to better understand the effects of dynamic assessment on language learning, and in order to provide more guidance to language teachers who wish to use dynamic assessment in their language classrooms.

4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to take an in depth look at the issue of dynamic assessment in terms of its theoretical frame and its methodological applications.

The review of current literature revealed that dynamic assessment is a useful framework to be used in the language classrooms as it focuses on potential rather than final achievement. Then, as a general suggestion, we can say that language teachers should include more forms of dynamic assessment into their curricula if they want to assess the real development of their students. However, almost at the same breath we also have to admit that this is easier said than done. First of all, dynamic assessment is a relatively new concept in the field of language learning, and research on dynamic assessment in the language classroom is limited to a couple of studies. This prevents language teachers from having practical guidelines about how to incorporate dynamic assessment into their curricula. Secondly, many countries around the world use standardized high-stakes language tests. Most of the students' (and their parents') general expectation from language teachers is to prepare learners to those high-stakes tests. Offering a new and radically different form of assessment in the classroom would take many rejections from learners and their parents. To conclude, dynamic assessment has a great potential to be a useful tool of learning and assessment in the language classroom, but it should be supported by more research, and the use of standardized testing should be reduced or eliminated.

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