



## Zone of Proximal Development, Dynamic Assessment and Learner Empowerment

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### Abstract

The use of medical metaphors of different types of language tests such as diagnostic test, a screening test, a remedial test have misled many language teachers and educators into believing that such tests are panacea for all L2 learning difficulties and ensure successful language learning. They seem to put an overemphasis on learning product rather than learners' developmental process and on language teachers' decisions instead of learners' participation. Also, they tend to be oblivious to individual and contextual differences. The incorporation of dynamic assessment embedded into the zone of proximal development is expected to give the learner ample opportunity to develop through the right format of assessment, which would make testing not only an inseparable part of learning but also an empowering one. As such, the learner will become active agents in the testing processes and progress along their own development path, as well as a product of good collaboration between the process and teaching practices.

**Keywords:** Zone of proximal development (ZPD), dynamic assessment (DA), learner empowerment

### Introduction

It goes without saying that testing is part and parcel of today's mass education. From the various medical metaphors that have been applied to language testing, such as a "diagnostic" test, a "screening" test, a "remedial" test and so on, one might be misled into believing that tests are intended to cure all the diseases that second language (L2) learners have. These metaphors are not only depressing but also indicative of the perceptions that the public at large and educators in particular have about the role of testing. Indeed, the metaphorical use of language to refer to testing, as mentioned above, may need to be re-conceptualised in order to capture accurately the role of testing in general, and assessment in particular, that should be empowering. In this essay, I argue by referring to the case of assessment in Thailand that, for testing to perform an empowering role and thus assist (L2) learners to cope with tests successfully, an alternative way of looking at tests and assessments is needed.

### Traditional Assessment and situation in Thailand

It is evident that tests and assessments play a pivotal role in many people's lives, as both a social practice and a social function (McNamara, 2001, 2008). They involve providing various services to society, including classification, promotion,



student selection, certification, tracking and especially resource allocation (Bachman & Purpura, 2008). Moreover, today, they are recognised as powerful instruments that are embedded and connected politically, socially and educationally (Shohamy, 2007). For decades, according to Bachman (2000) and Stiggins (2002), language testing priorities have involved a theoretical view of language ability as consisting of certain skills and components, most of which put an emphasis on the accountability of statistical analysis and psychometric reliability, or discovering more sophisticated and efficient ways to generate valid and reliable tests. In terms of methodology, traditional assessment focuses on learners' past development and validates the minimal intervention of examiners and their feedback on learners' performance occurring only when assessment is completed (Lantolf & Poehner, 2010). In addition, test scores or grades have been pervasively recognised as the only indicator of test-takers' performance without any attention being paid to learning and teaching processes (Birjandi & Sarem, 2012; Boud & Falchikov, 2006), in which the participation of test-takers comes into play and high scores are evidence of reaching a standard and achieving success on the part of teachers, students and the system (Stiggins, 2002). Although accurate scores from intense standardised testing are essential, Stiggins (2002) calls into question whether valid and reliable assessment instruments, procedures and scores actually help learners to learn and feel able to learn because, via such tests, many learners end up having perceptions of feeling 'left behind' or hopelessness and learning only what teachers inspect but not expect (McLachlan, 2006). Such inequality of assessment seems to affect all stakeholders across the globe. I will exemplify this with the case of Thailand.

Language teaching, testing and assessment practices in Thailand have for decades been considered problematic (Hayes, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Prapphal, 2008; Ross, 2008; Todd, 2008). Prapphal (2008) identified several issues of concern from her research conducted on issues and trends in language testing and assessment in Thailand, including "the washback effects of language tests employing inadequate methods, the use of language tests in school admission, issues of validity, the use of standardised tests, the reflection of societal values in language tests, the use of computer and technology in language testing, and the analyses of the success or failure of curriculum reform efforts" (p. 128). This is in line with Todd's study (2008) where he problematises Thai university entrance examination where good grades and scores, rather than learners' development and their active participation, were prioritised. The overemphasis on scores and grades thus exerts a powerful influence not only on English language teaching and learning practices but also learners' attitudes towards language learning. In addition, Jaturapitakkul (2013) asserts that in-class exams heavily focus on what learners can recognise and recall what they have learned while marginalising the importance of learning context, their productive skills and higher-order thinking.

However, with the need for economic development, both at national and international levels, the Thai government's policy, based on the National Act, was forced to generate tangible assessment outcomes. English Language education, teaching, testing and assessment in Thailand have been appropriated to pursue the following goals which are human resource development and professional certification, the use of IT in English language teaching and testing, language assessment and quality assurance and learner autonomy and self-assessment. Evidently, three out of

four of the set goals are dominated by external factors, and assessments are perceived as a way to respond to such language teaching and learning imposed aims, putting emphasis more on product rather than learners' developmental process, and without any changes in the practices and mindsets of those who are in charge of Thai language education. Prapphal (2008) argues that although educational quality and standards play an important role in teaching and assessment processes, Thai language assessment professionals, including teachers, learners, administrators and stakeholders, need to examine the purpose, nature, benefits and limitations of each assessment method as well as to understand the needs of each particular context. On completion of her research she suggested that to achieve the set goals and standards, teachers, rather than the tests themselves, must play a key role in observing and providing progress indicators.

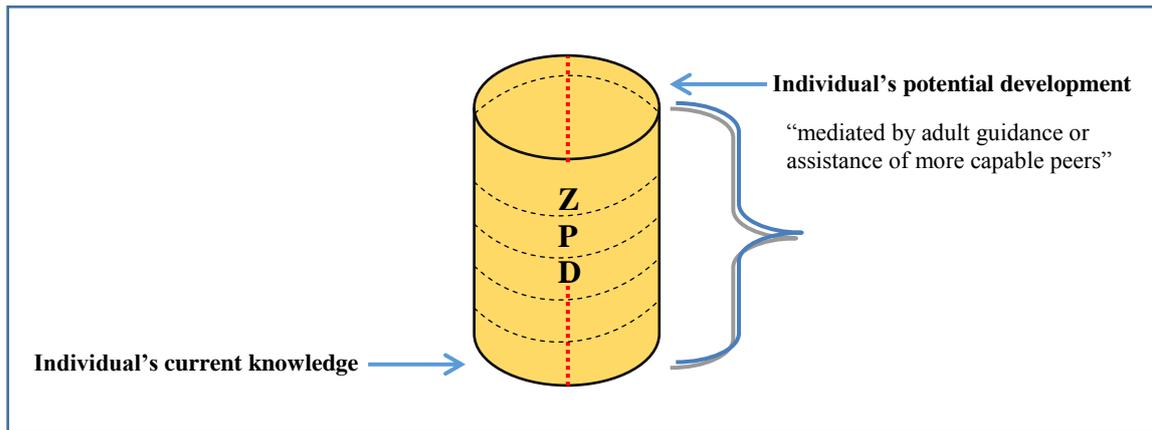
Consequently, there is a strong need for the teaching profession in general and teachers in particular to reconceptualise their assumptions about language testing and assessment and consider them in a healthier more meaningful way as a fruitful activity that integrates both the processes of teaching and learning with learners' (potential) development, provides information about students and teachers and drives the curriculum and teaching (Birjandi & Sarem, 2012). My argument here is that if we want to maximise assessment accountability and learners' development, we may need to see the assessment and learning processes through new eyes of 'dynamic assessment' (henceforth DA), which I will explain next.

### **Zone of Proximal Development and Dynamic Assessment**

Where traditional language testing and assessment is concerned, it functions more or less as a practice separate from classroom instruction (Lantolf, 2009). It seems to focus on psychometric orientation and the potential of positive washback, including isolated assessment, time-limited tasks, accuracy-oriented values and a failure to align assessment procedures with curricular and teaching pedagogy (Prodromou, 1995). Despite its positive effects on language examination and language pedagogy development, it involves the dualistic orientation of applied linguistics (Lantolf, 2009) and problematises the validity of standardised tests in classroom assessment (Poehner, 2011). In this essay, I argue for the inclusion of dynamic assessment, which integrates teaching or instruction and assessment—traditionally perceived as two different orientations or, as Poehner (2011) puts it, a unity of opposites. Indeed, dynamic assessment will support Vygotsky's proposal for the Zone of Proximal Development (henceforth ZPD), which provides theoretical underpinnings for dynamic assessment itself (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004). It is through dynamic assessment that renders the learning process developmental, socially constructed, interactive and reflective (Stoynoff, 2012).

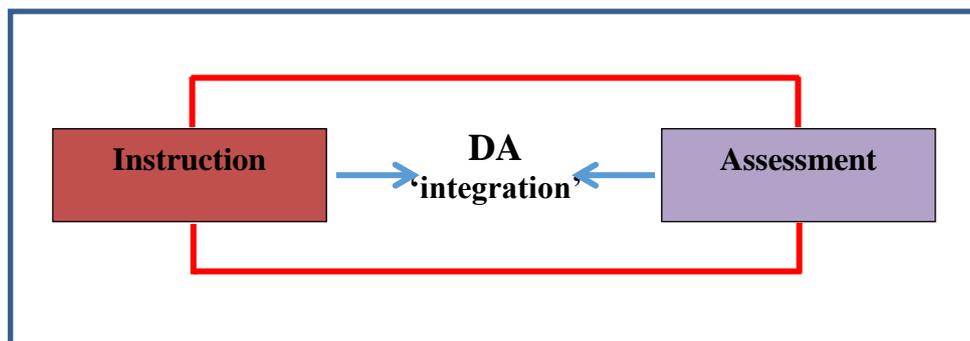
As defined by Vygotsky (1978), ZPD is 'the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (p. 86), as depicted in Figure 1, by which development moves from other to self-regulation, where the individual can have control over his or her own performance (Lantolf & Poehner, 2010). Thus, when it comes to teaching, its goal within the ZPD, according to Poehner (2011), is the provision of instruction that

is “beyond an individual’s current level of development and that is oriented to emerging abilities [and] may maximally impact [on] and guide development” through collaboration between teacher and learner via various forms of learner response and mediation offered by the teacher (mediator). This shift comes with the hope that improvement in classroom assessment will make a great contribution to classroom learning (Black & William, 1998).



**Figure 1: Zone of Proximal Development**

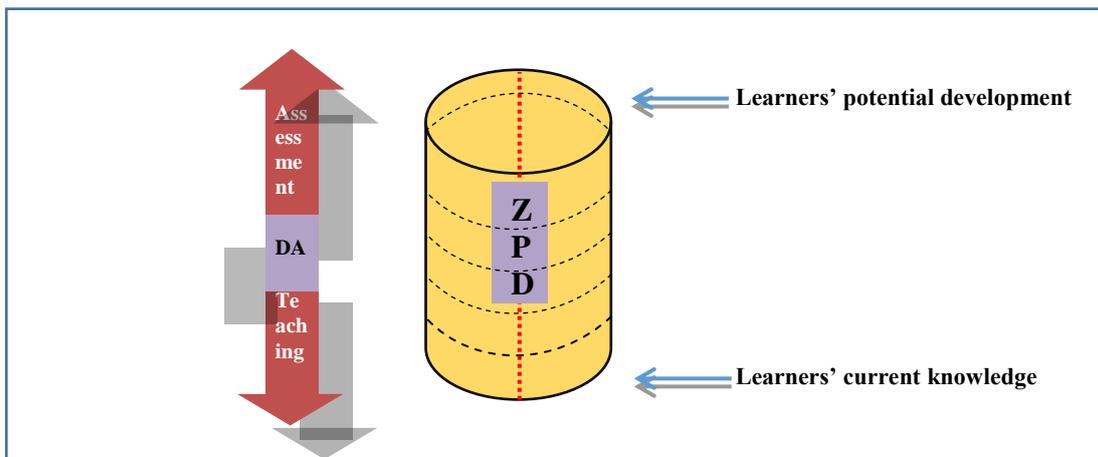
According to Lantolf (2009), dynamic assessment (DA) thus offers a new perspective on the relationship between instruction and assessment. Unlike traditional assessment which dichotomises instruction and assessment, for DA, it exists in a dialectical relation (Lantolf & Poehner, 2010) by integrating teaching/instruction and assessment as a single activity, as shown in Figure 2, with the use of mediation to reveal learners’ ZPD and move it forward (Poehner, 2011).



**Figure 2: Function of Dynamic Assessment**

Based on Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development, dynamic assessment (DA) involves offering appropriate forms of mediation that are sensitive to learners’ current ability in order to help learners perform beyond their level of independent functioning, while simultaneously promoting development of their ability by taking into account their zone of proximal development, and thus dialectically integrating teaching and assessment as a single activity (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004; Poehner, 2011), whereby the existence of one constitutes the other, and their

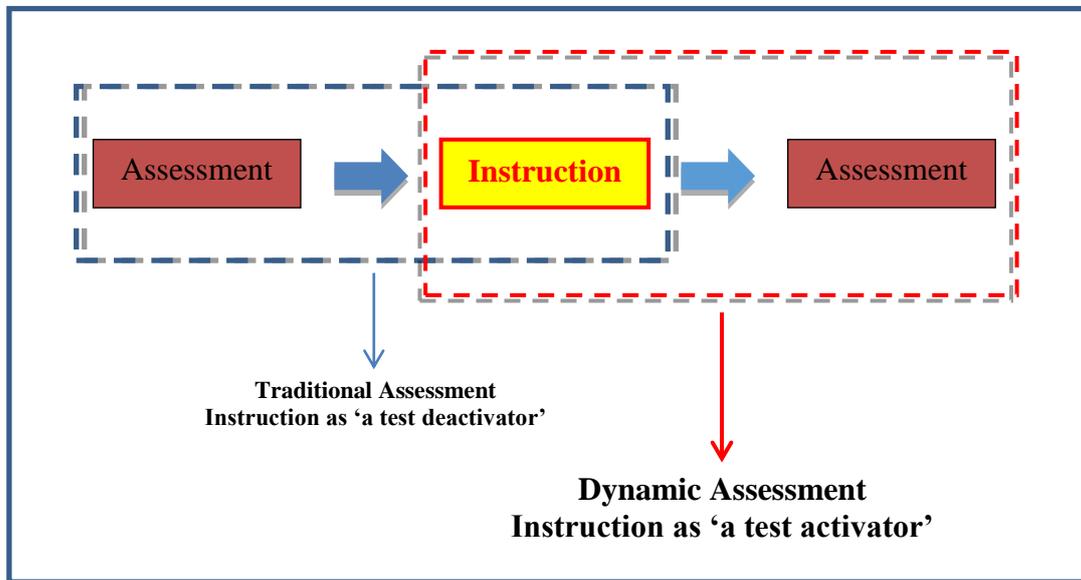
differences generate the strength of their interrelationship and form a unified, development-oriented activity (Poehner, 2011). Figure 3 illustrates the role of dynamic assessment in the ZPD. The integration primarily aims to optimise instruction in order to determine how different learners respond to instruction and how different processes of teaching enhance learning, and to encourage learners' active participation in instructional processes (Allal & Ducrey, 2000). Because mediating and maximising learners' potential development lie at the heart of DA, Lueng (2007) asserts that teachers play a central role in providing support and appropriate guidance.



**Figure 3: The role of DA as a mediator in**

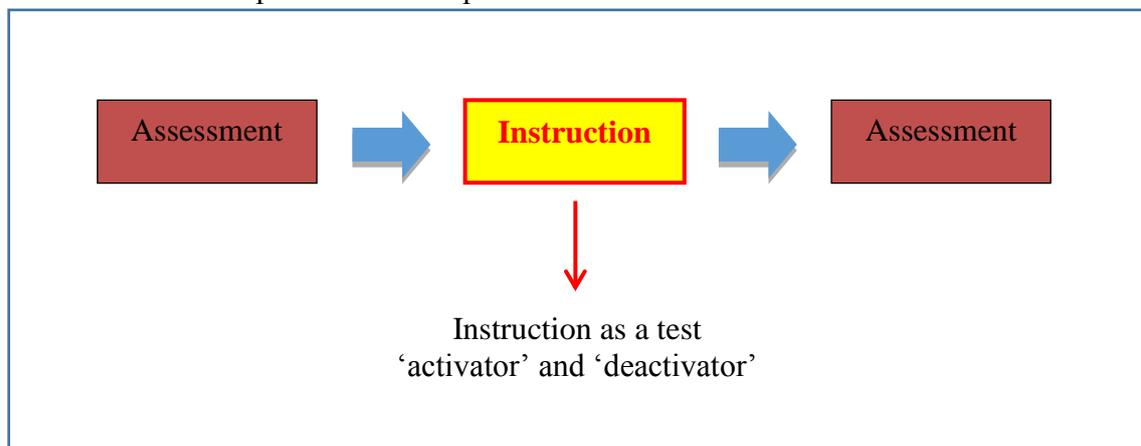
### **Instruction, Dynamic assessment and learner empowerment**

Given that the intention of dynamic assessment is to promote and generate learners' self-regulation, then collaboration or co-regulation between teacher and learner exerts a powerful influence on moving the learner along their potential developmental path. In this way, the teachers' role and their interactive instruction in the classroom are highlighted. Traditionally, washback (the influence of tests on teaching and learning) is a determinant of how learning is conducted. Assessment from a traditional perspective plays a leading role in the way classroom teaching is managed, the role of teachers is set, and how learners are instructed in order to ensure that they achieve valid and reliable test scores (Stiggins, 2002), with a summative role of how well teaching practices are organised. Instruction is thus recognised as 'a test deactivator' which is activated by assessment. In other words, the instruction is designed according to test requirements or, in this case, testing determines teaching practices. In contrast, DA focuses on learners' development from interaction between the response and feedback of learner and teacher, both inside and outside the classroom (Lantolf & Poehner, 2013), so how learners respond to instruction is a reliable measure of learners' development (Poehner, 2011). Unlike traditional washback-oriented practices, instruction, when seen through a dynamic assessment lens, plays an active role in determining learner assessment. As such, assessment has a formative role in generating learners' development (as shown in Figure 4).



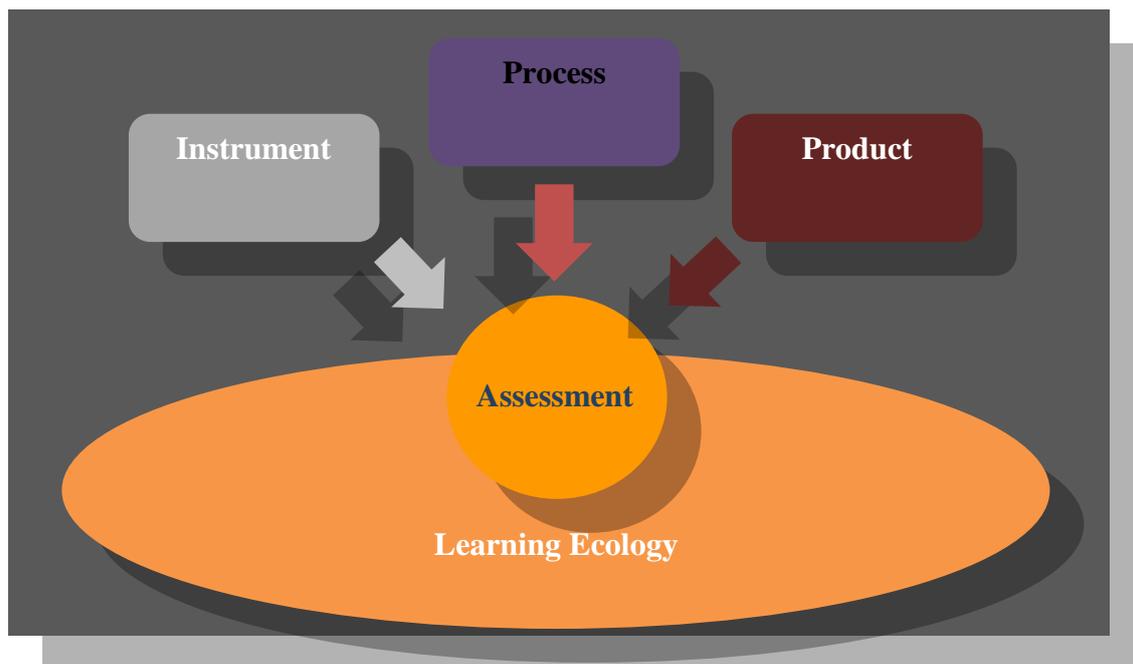
**Figure 4: The different role of instruction**

It is tempting for me to equate instruction with both an activator and a deactivator, as shown in Figure 5 where learners are assessed, instructed and reassessed (test-teach-retest method). Such process has a strong tendency to allow teachers not only to assess but also to follow their students’ development and the necessity of provided support. As such, in a classroom setting, instruction for dynamic assessment plays a central role in responding to both test requirements and learners’ ongoing developmental process. In fact, although assessment anxiety is sometimes believed to be a great intimidator to determining the status of learning and generating a desire to learn, the processes that occur during classroom instruction also promote greater learning (Stiggins, 2002). The question as to whether instruction can activate or be activated by assessment may thus not be as important as the reality that there is a strong relationship between instruction and assessment, a unified activity that enhances learners’ potential development.



**Figure 5: The complementary role of instruction**

If assessment is intended to help students want to learn and feel able to learn, as well as to maximise their achievement, then language educators, educational authorities and teachers themselves may need to pay far greater attention to the integration of “assessment as learning”, “assessment of learning” and “assessment for learning” in language classroom practices. In other words, assessment itself should perform its functions as ‘an instrument’ to judge or measure students’ learning achievement (assessment of learning); ‘as information or feedback’ to inform teachers of their teaching processes to support student learning (assessment for learning); and as ‘information’ to help students’ achieve their potential to regulate or monitor their own learning (assessment as learning) as illustrated in Figure 6. In order to optimise learning practices, generate ‘true learning’ or ‘long-term learning’ and empower learners, assessment needs to play its role not only as a tool for learning but also as a process and a product of learning development, all of which are dynamically adjusted to appropriate individual learning and the learner’s context. Thus, assessment of the individual learner’s achievement needs first to consider itself as a tool causing learning to occur, as a process whereby learning develops over the course of time, and as a product when learning and learner’s development grow and mature.



**Figure 6: The integrated role of assessment and learning ecology for learner**

My argument here does not have the intention of replacing traditional assessment with a dynamic one. Rather, I want to emphasise the realisation of different aims for different assessments which need to be construed in the learning ecology or context according to the context. Given that the learner is not an empty container and does not live in a vacuum, but rather comes to the classroom with a learning history to access available learning resources, learning goals, learning opportunities, academic professionals and even local language policy, then we should not delude ourselves into believing that any single assessment or test can serve all



purposes. Standardised assessments of learning may still yield the best results when it comes to detecting improvements in the level or rate of students' achievement and when the assessment aim is to allocate limited resources or serve as a gatekeeper for high-stakes decisions, while alternatives to static approaches may play a pivotal role if the assessment aims to optimise assessment, diagnose students' needs and difficulties during their learning development, allocate instructional resources and manage the learning process (Allal & Ducrey, 2000; Stiggins, 2002).

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the traditional testing or assessment format does a disservice to its stakeholders, notably the learner. To strike a proper balance, we need to turn testing into something that is conducive to learning and development, hence testing not functioning as a gatekeeper but as a door-opener. The incorporation of dynamic assessment embedded into the zone of proximal development should give the learner ample opportunity to develop through the right format of assessment, which would make testing not only an inseparable part of learning but also an empowering one. It should be clear from the above discussion above no longer will the learner be perceived as having a disease; no longer will a test serve as a medical instrument; and no longer will the testing scenario look like an operating room to be watched over meticulously by medical personnel.

Indeed, it is not an overstatement to assert that dynamic assessment and the zone of proximal development offer a new approach to testing and assessment by integrating teaching and assessment to form a unified learning activity and push the learner to achieve their potential development via various forms of feedback and responses from teachers and learners. Learners will no longer fall prey to testing and assessment or to a washback-oriented approach. Instead, they will be active agents in the testing processes and progress along their own development path, as well as a product of good collaboration between the process and teaching practices.

## About the Author

*Anuchit Toomaneejinda* works at the Department of English and Linguistics, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University. He is on a study leave and is currently pursuing a PhD study in Applied Linguistics at Lancaster University, the UK. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in Linguistics from the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Thammasat University and his Master's in Language and Communication (honours) from National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA). His research interests are mainly in the areas of second language acquisition, pragmatics, English as a lingua franca and intercultural communication.



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