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Classroom Dynamic Assessment of EFL Learners' Oral Production: A Case of Female Intermediate Learners

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Abstract:

EFL learners often have problems to speak properly in English. As the purpose of teaching speaking is to improve the learners' oral production, language teaching should maximize language use in the classrooms (Haozhang, 1997), which is achieved through implementing proper teaching techniques to require learners to learn and practice the language in EFL classes actively. Jeltova et al. (2007) know dynamic assessment (DA) as a process-oriented type of assessment which necessitates teachers and learners to interact while learners are provided with mediations based on their ZPDs. This makes DA potentially ideal for evaluating and scaffolding learners to expand their oral skills which are interactive (Son & Kim, 2017). The present study exploiting a quantitative approach, studied the effects of the Interactionist DA on developing learners' oral production while they interacted to perform language tasks. An experimental and a control group were selected, taught, and tape-recorded based on the techniques of the interactionist DA and the traditional methods, respectively. After transcribing and analyzing the data, the findings revealed significant development in the oral production and performance of the experimental group.

Keywords: *Dynamic Assessment, Interactionist Dynamic Assessment, Interaction, Oral Production, Grammatical Accuracy, Fluency*

Introduction

The technique or style the English as a foreign language (henceforth, EFL) teachers use and the role they play in the classroom affect developing a supportive, motivating, and effective language learning atmosphere in the classroom (Underwood, 1999; Brown, 2007). Teaching style refers to all of the teaching activities, techniques, and approaches that a teacher utilizes in teaching a subject in the classroom (Cooper, 2001). Understanding what constitutes effective EFL teaching and how learners learn English more effectively has increased considerably over the past decades.

This article reports on the implementation of the Interactionist DA to a group of female intermediate EFL learners in Iran. The specific focus here is the use of the interactionist DA principles as a way to teach speaking skill, considering the learners' grammatical accuracy and fluency suggested for assessing the learners' oral production (Brumfit, 1979). DA, which is an approach to assessment and instruction, has its conceptual basis in sociocultural theory (henceforth, SCT), specifically in Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (henceforth, ZPD). Pohner and Lantolf propose that as a result of interaction with individuals and symbolic and physical artifacts, a higher level of thought arises. Essentially, DA focuses on a teacher's interaction with learners. In other words, the teacher intervenes to provide enough assistance for the learners to complete a task (Poehner & Lantolf, 2003). Therefore, the fundamental difference between DA and non-dynamic assessment (NDA) is the active role of the teacher and learners in the classroom, making DA potentially suitable for teaching oral skill, which is interactive (Son & Kim, 2017). Lazarson (2001) believes that many consider the ability to use a language for oral communication to be the primary aim of language learning since speaking is the principal means of human communication. Derakhshan & Kordjazi (2015) also holds that it is good to include DA in the area of speaking skill because learners are more concerned about it.

Though some studies are dealing with DA, it seems that DA has not been adequately employed to develop the EFL learners' speaking skills (Ebadi & Asakereh, 2017), which was a part of the driving force for the conducting the current study.

Theoretical framework

Luria first used DA- a colleague of Vygotsky- and then it was developed by Feuerstein (Leung, 2007; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). DA is underpinned by two main theories, SCT and ZPD, about how one usually learns materials. Sociocultural theory argues that human cognition is socially mediated through interaction with others and through the usage of cultural artifacts (Cole and Engeström, 1993; Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1985). Taking part in activities mediated by others and by cultural objects helps individuals to establish higher forms of consciousness (Poehner, 2008). DA is a process-oriented assessment, involving teachers and learners in ongoing interactions (Jeltova et al., 2007) through which higher forms of thinking can develop as a result of interaction between teacher and learners.

ZPD proposed by Vygotsky (1896-1934), at the heart of which there is mediation, refers to the difference between the real ability of individuals and their potential for carrying out a task with the assistance of a more competent person. Vygotsky claimed the level of performance a person can reach with support is a reflection of his/her future unsupported performance. This indicates that humans' actions are mediated, and they do not act directly on the world (Ebadi&Asakereh, 2017). In DA, the teacher provides the learners with assistance appropriate to their needs to complete a task, and the amount and forms of mediation in DA and the responsiveness of the learners to mediation play a major role in predicting the potential success of the learners (Poehner, 2008).

There are two general approaches to DA, interventionist and interactionist. The former is based on Vygotsky's quantitative explanation of ZPD and the latter, which is our focus in the current study, is based on his qualitative explanation of ZPD, which focuses on instruction-learning over measurement (Poehner&Lantolf, 2005). In the critical review of DA research by Minick (1987), he argues that the ZPD should not be seen as a measure of learning potential and effectiveness, as suggested by the interventionist DA proponents. Vygotsky's interpretation of the term is, in Minick's opinion, a way of gaining insight into the types of psychological processes that the child may be capable of in the next or proximate phase of development and a way of recognizing the kinds of instruction or assistance that will be needed if the child is to recognize such potentialities. Vygotsky (1998) believes that the individual should not be measured;

instead, they should be explained, and this can only be done through interaction and collaboration with the individual. The interactionist approach to DA is based on this more clinical perspective on the ZPD. According to Orikasa (2010), the interactionist DA is a pedagogical language method that combines assessment and instruction dialectically to co-construct a future between the learner and the mediator. It helps learners to achieve and develop to the next level through support and interactions with the mediator, which they cannot do individually otherwise. The interactionist DA focuses on improving individuals irrespective of the effort required and regardless of a predetermined goal.

There are some distinctions between DA and traditional testing. DA is not designed to replace traditional testing but can be seen as a supplement to it since traditional testing focuses on the actual skill of individuals, and DA predicts the potential performance of individuals (Anton, 2009) and their learning procedure (Tzuriel, 2001). As was stated earlier, assessment and instruction are combined as a single activity in DA, while these two are considered distinct activities in traditional testing (Poehner, 2007). The other difference which gives DA the property to be considered as a teaching method is the active role of the teacher and the learner. On the one hand, the teacher actively intervenes to bring changes in the learners' cognitive function (Ebadi & Asakereh, 2017), which leads to new learning and the learners, on the other hand, actively and purposefully participate in problem-solving and reach a conclusion using the clues and interactions with the teacher.

Language is a communication device. We communicate with others, express our thoughts, and also understand the ideas of others. In a variety of situations, we are using language. The speakers of a language need to be specifically and intentionally trained in speaking skill for the smooth running of any system. Given its significance in the current life, many EFL learners are far from even beginning basic communication in the target language, which in turn makes speaking teaching a central issue for educational policies in many EFL contexts. Speaking as the toughest skill to master is more than just learning grammatical and semantic rules of a language. Speaking is complex because speakers are engaged in a rapid and dynamic process involving “a high element of doing various things at the same time” (Johnson, 1996, p. 55). To be competent, they should incorporate various skills, knowledge, and processes that take into account production contexts and result in speech that is culturally and socially relevant, acceptable and understandable to their interlocutors (Burns, 2005). Besides its complexity, actual circumstances in language learning environments are not especially supported; instead, it is taught within the framework of a school or university class, which acts as the only environment for learners to practice English. This issue is making it hard for EFL learners to gain proficiency.

Teaching speaking is challenging for many teachers because of the complexity of the spoken interaction, and the lack of agreement about what principled approaches to teaching speaking should be followed (Bygate, 2001). It is observably proved that the teaching method in many EFL contexts is the traditional method in which learners are quiet and good listeners who do not challenge the teacher and themselves and the teacher is the dominant speaker and authority in the class. This condition makes both the teacher and learners tired. Irresponsibility makes the learners tired, increases their sense of impracticality and decreases their self-confidence. The teacher also becomes tired because of too much responsibility s/he has in the classroom and the one-way atmosphere of the class. Nakatani (2011) believes it is significant that researchers perceive that learners are able to enhance their oral production by developing learning techniques which provide them opportunities to become independent learners. Willis also states (1996): “Learners need to say what they think or feel and to experiment in a supportive atmosphere using language they have heard or seen without feeling threatened” (p. 7). The interactionist DA, integrating instruction and assessment provides a highly interactive atmosphere in which learners have many opportunities to use and practice the language while learning it. It also provides them with supports relevant to their needs whenever they need. Moreover, through the DA, teachers will have find out how far learners can go ahead while they are provided with assistance. The DA informs teachers what is being developed currently (Shahbazi Tochahi & Rahmani Sangani, 2015).

With the practicality of DA in mind, some studies were conducted to explore the impact of DA on EFL language learners’ speaking skills. For instance, Ebadi and Asakereh (2017) investigated the impact of DA on the development of an advanced and a beginner language learner’s speaking skill. The findings revealed a significant development in the participants’ cognition and their movement toward further self-regulation. Besides, the results of the interviews demonstrated the satisfaction of the participants with DA.

Son and Kim (2017) explored the potentials of dynamic assessment (DA) for the development of English language performance in Korea. Results showed that the mediation feedback of the mediator and the reciprocal movements of the learner shifted in tandem, resulting in a decrease in the explicit feedback of the mediator and an increase in the proactive movements of the learner. Also, a microgenetic and qualitative analysis revealed a close relationship among the learner's evolving linguistic profiles, dynamic reciprocating movements, and cognitive and collaborative meaning-making strategies.

AhmadiSafa, Donyaei, and MalekMohamadi (2016) investigated the effect of different DA models on the speaking skills of Iranian English learners. Three groups of advanced English language learners who received interventionist DA, interactionist DA, and non-DA were selected for the study. The findings showed those who received the interactionist DA outperformed their counterparts.

Motivated by the findings of the researches mentioned above and the need of the context of the current study to try out a more active and supportive method for teaching and to learn the speaking skill, the present study inspects to find out possible improvements on the learners' oral production when applying principles of the interactionist DA in the classroom. Therefore, the following research question guided the current study:

RQ: Do learners' oral production improve when applying the principles of the interactionist DA in the classroom?

Accordingly, the research null hypothesis is:

There is/there is no relationship between applying the interactionist DA and the improvement of learners' oral production.

Methodology

Design

A quantitative method of data collection was designed to investigate the effect of the interactionist DA on the improvement of the learners' oral production. Learners were divided into two groups: 10 learners were assigned to the experimental group and the other 10 to the control group. The present study has used a pre-test, mediation, and post-test procedure to see the possible effects of the interactionist DA on the learners' oral production. Before the initiation of the instruction, the speaking section of the Preliminary English Test (henceforth, PET) was administered as a pre-test. Then, there was the application of the interactionist mediation of DA to the experimental group in which there was a task in each session of the instruction to be performed. The learners first were taught a lesson and then were asked to do a related task. In both teaching and doing tasks processes, the teacher intervened the learners' speech whenever there was something wrong. However, in the control group, the teacher explicitly reacted to the learners, which is common in the traditional method. Finally, the same proficiency pre-test was applied as the post-test.

Participants

The participants of the current study who were studying at the Velayat University of Iranshahr were selected through the following process. First, fifty BA female learners of EFL sat for the PET. The PET generally addresses four language skills; speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. To select twenty learners out of fifty, the mean score and the standard deviation (SD) of learners' scores were computed and were divided into three parts; higher than (+1 SD), lower than (-1 SD) and between (+/-1 SD). Accordingly, those learners who scored 1SD higher or lower than the mean score and, in other words, were in the intermediate proficiency level formed the population of the present study. Overall, the participants of the study were fifty junior BA EFL female learners of Velayat University. The learners aged between 19 and 21 majoring in English Literature or English Translation. It is notable to mention that the BA learners in the second semester, in both fields, all take basic English modules, including English Reading Comprehension, English Grammar, English Conversation, and English paragraph writing. They were assigned randomly to two groups, ten in the experimental group and ten in the control group.

Speaking tasks

The speaking skill in the present study was taught throughout some lessons, each one focused on different speaking tasks. During the lessons, the learners were required to perform the following tasks:

- 1) Describe and find the differences.
- 2) Discuss views and opinions.
- 3) Solve problems and find the solutions for given situations.
- 4) Conduct interviews to obtain information from each other.
- 5) Exchange information throughout the tasks.
- 6) Narrate stories to their peers guided or not guided by pictures.
- 7) And, role-play situations to practice social/interactional functions.

Procedure

The study had three main stages. At the outset of the study, there was a test of speaking proficiency to determine the learners' proficiency level. Fifty BA female EFL learners participated in the PET test. Twenty intermediate learners were selected based on the test results and their availability at the time of the research. It was believed that learners at intermediate learners were proficient enough to interact with their partners to perform the tasks and would also have the considerable potentiality for succeeding linguistic development. Moreover, the learners were informed about the process and purpose of the research, and the participants completed informed consent. Furthermore, they were told that the results of the study only would be used for research purposes, and their withdrawal at any stage of the study was optional.

In the first stage, the PET speaking test was administered to the learners as a pre-test to make sure that the progress achieved by the learners could be attributed to the instruction they had been exposed to.

The PET speaking test took about twelve minutes to be answered. Every learner took the test with a partner. The researcher-mediator and another examiner were present, but only the mediator, as an examiner, talked to the learners. To guarantee the reliability, both examiners scored the learners, and a mean score of the two was the final score of any participant. The PET speaking test consists of four parts. What follows is a brief description of each part.

Part 1: The learners interacted with the examiner and gave some personal information about themselves as; where they live, their interests, their major, etc.

Part 2: The examiner gave the learners a drawing and asked them to talk about a situation described by the examiner. In this part, learners were supposed to interact with each other, state preferences, and make suggestions.

Part 3: The examiner gave each learner a photograph. The learners were asked to show the photograph to their partners and describe it.

Part 4: The examiner asked the learners to talk with each other about the subject of the photograph in part 3. They were supposed to tell each other their opinions or describe their experiences.

All the above process was tape-recorded, then transcribed and finally scored by the two examiners. The given score was according to some criteria which were interpreted at the PET level. For example, vocabulary and grammar, pronunciation, and interactive communication. To confirm the reliability of the rating process, inter-rater reliability was computed, which was 0.85 and appeared as an acceptable value of inter-rater reliability.

In the second stage, both the experimental and the control group participated in ten sessions each one lasted for 90 minutes. The same teacher taught ten learners in each group. After teaching a lesson in both groups, the learners were asked to perform some tasks. The experimental group learners' understanding through teaching and their performances on the given tasks was ascertained and mediated by the teacher based on the interactionist DA. In other words, whenever the learners made errors, the teacher mediated in their speech to help them to become aware of the errors they had committed and assisted them until they could correct themselves. However, there was no mediation in the control group, and the teacher reacted to the learners' explicitly. This stage of the study also was tape-recorded and then transcribed in detail. There are instances of the implemented teaching styles in the experimental and the control group. The first one is an example of the teachers' mediation, demonstrating the quality of the teacher's interactive mediation (T) with one of the learners (L). The topic and focus of this session was

simple past tense.

L: Did you **studied** at our university?

T: Ask your question again, please.

L: Did you studied at our university?

T: Is there anything wrong with your sentence?

L: Did?

T: No, that is right. What is the tense of your sentence?

L: Simple past.

T: Yes. What is your main verb here?

L: Studied.

T: Yes. And what is the form of the main verb in simple past?

L: Base form. It should be study!

T: Yes, it is correct.

And an example about the control group:

L: I **had not** any money in my bag.

T: I did not have...

As you can see, there was no chance in the traditional methods for the learners to find their errors and correct themselves. Still, the interactionist DA provides the learners with chances to think and assistance to solve the problems, which makes the learning more meaningful for them.

In the final stage, the same PET speaking test, which was used in the pre-test was applied as the post-test. This process was also tape-recorded, transcribed, and scored as the pre-test.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the performance of the learners was tape-recorded and transcribed precisely. The current study was an attempt to investigate the effect of the interactionist DA on the learners' oral production considering their grammatical accuracy and fluency. Researchers in applied linguistics and instructed acquisition of the second language have always been interested in measuring the performance of the second language, including oral production. On the one hand, Brumfit (1979) suggested accuracy and, on the other, fluency as two important aspects of language use.

In the current study, the communication units (henceforth, C-units) were used to segment speech into suitable units for analysis. Many, but by no means all, investigated spoken language data using C-units. For example, Pica et al. (1989) defined C-unit as "utterances, for example, words, phrases, and sentences, grammatical or ungrammatical, which provide referential or pragmatic meaning" (p. 72).

Accuracy, as an influential factor in determining the purpose of the study, is defined by Ellis and Yuan (2003) as "the extent to which the language produced conforms to target language norms" (p. 2). This means "being able to speak in the L2 as the same standard of a native speaker concerning the number of mistakes or errors made when speaking". Many studies have been measured accuracy in terms of global accuracy. It refers to whether or not a unit includes any type of errors (tense-marking, third-person-singular verbs, article use, and prepositions, etc.). Studies by Foster and Skehan (1996), Iwashita et al. (2001), and Robinson (2001) are examples of the studies that report global accuracy, namely, the ratio of error-free clauses to all clauses and the ratio of error-free C-units to a total number of units. The tasks in the present study were not

limited to any specific point; therefore, the global accuracy; the ratio of error-free C-units to a total number of C-units is taken into account here.

Lennon (1990) described fluency as “the ability to process the second language with native-like rapidity” (p. 390). According to Philp et al. (2006), for the fluency of the learners’ oral production to be measured, the total number of C-units; independent clauses including a finite verb and isolated noun phrases without verbs with communicative value, was taken into account. In the present study, Philp et al.’s approach (2006) was adapted for investigating fluency.

Results

The current study aimed at finding whether the interactionist DA can improve grammatical accuracy and fluency of learners’ oral production. In this study, the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) model was used to determine whether the means of the experimental group scores and the control group scores are equal or not. In this model, we consider post-test PET scores as the dependent variable, pre-test PET scores as covariate and kinds of treatment, including the experimental group and the control group, as an independent variable. The null-hypothesis (H0) and alternative-hypothesis (H1) of this test are as follow:

$$\begin{aligned} H_0: \mu_1 &= \mu_2 \\ H_1: \mu_1 &\neq \mu_2, \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Where, μ_1 and μ_2 are the means of the PET scores in the experimental and the control groups, respectively. Before using ANCOVA, we should check some assumptions of this model. Also, we perform all the tests using SPSS software. The first assumption is the normality of the residuals of this model. Since the P-value of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test equals 0.200 and is greater than 0.05, using the test verify that residuals of the ANCOVA model have a normal distribution with zero mean. The test statistic and degree of freedom are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for Normality of ANCOVA Residuals

	Statistic	df	p-value
Residuals	0.151	20	0.200

The second assumption is the homogeneity of variances. Levene’s Test of Equality of variances is applied to verify this assumption. Since the p-value of Levene’s test equals 0.520 and greater than 0.05, using the test verifies that variances of the groups are equal. The test statistics and the degrees of freedom are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Levene’s Test of Equality of Variances

F	df1	df2	p-value
0.520	1	18	0.480

So, we can apply the ANCOVA model correctly. According to the outputs of the ANCOVA model reported in Table 3, since the p-value of the test equals 0.000, being less than 0.05, we can reject the null-hypothesis (H0) in (1). In other words, the experimental group (78.4 ± 6.98) significantly have better performance than the control group (57.6 ± 7.87) in the post-test. On the other hand, effect size equals 0.778 and near one. This information indicates that the proposed method –the interactionist DA- in the experimental group outperformed the traditional teaching method, which was used with the control group.

Table 3

SPSS Outputs for ANCOVA Model

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	2543.781 ^a	2	1271.890	35.088	0.000	0.805
Intercept	347.513	1	347.513	9.587	0.007	0.361
Pre	380.581	1	380.581	10.499	0.005	0.382
Group	2163.200	1	2163.200	59.677	0.000	0.778
Error	616.219	17	36.248			
Total	95640.000	20				
Corrected Total	3160.000	19				

a. R Squared = .805 (Adjusted R Squared = .782)

For visualization, the means of pre and post PET exam has been plotted for the experimental and the control groups as a box-plot in Figure 1. Furthermore, we have plotted means of pre and post-tests with separated lines of two groups in Figure 2.

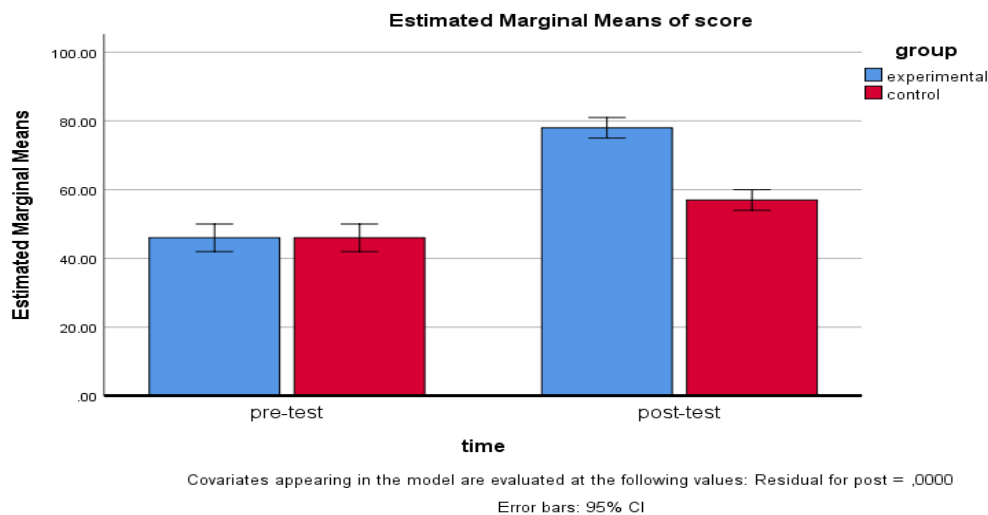


Figure 1. Means of pre and post PET exam for experimental and control group

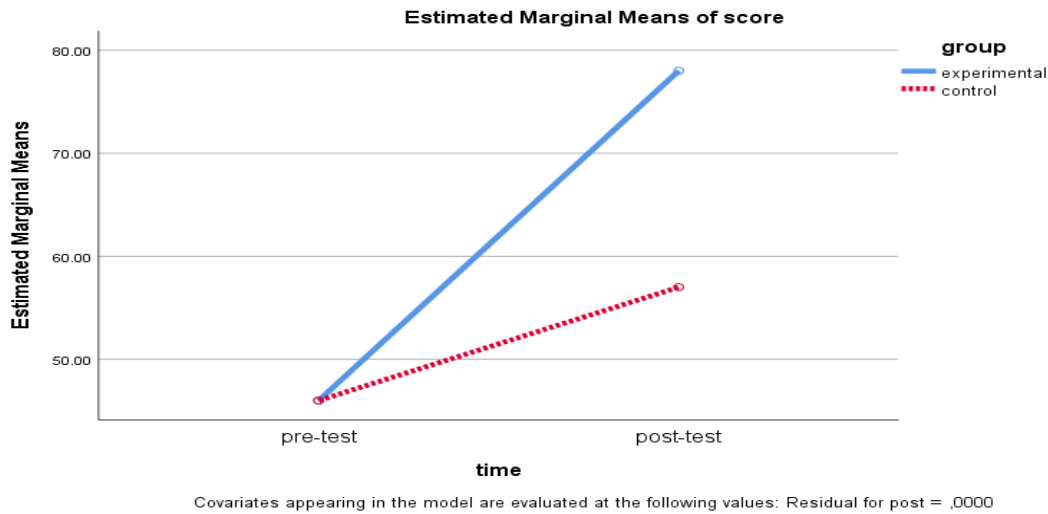


Figure 2. Means of pre and post PET exam for separated lines of two groups

Discussion

The statistical analysis of the results reveals that the null hypothesis is rejected, which means the interactionist DA improved the learners' oral production. The findings of the current study are in line with those by Ebadi and Asakereh (2017), Son and Kim (2017), and AhmadiSafa et al. (2016), which showed DA had a significant positive effect on the learners' speaking skill. In addition to the results provided in the tables and figures above, mediations provided by the teacher, the learners' responsiveness to the mediations provided by the teacher, the decrease of explicit mediations during the instruction, and, more important the learners' self-regulation confirmed the obtained results. Self-regulation refers to the self-recognition and self-correction of an error (Ebadi&Asakereh, 2017). An example of self-regulation can show a part of the effectiveness of the interactionist DA. Consider this example:

L: ... the alarm rang one hour (short pause) ranging, no wait, was ranging!

T: Perfect!

This is an example of self-regulation by a learner who was not able to recognize her error in the first session of mediation. Consider her interaction with the teacher in first session:

L: He should a generous man.

T: He should?

L: He should a generous man.

T: Are you sure about the use of "should"?

L: Yes.

T: Can you tell me the verb in your sentence?

L: Should

T: Yeah, but it is a modal verb. We need a verb after "should".

L: (Silent)

T: A verb in base form.

L: A verb in base form?

T: Be. You need to put it after “should”.

L: He should be a generous man.

T: It is correct.

Such interactions between the teacher and learners gradually make the learners capable of self-recognition and correction. This level of ability, however, cannot be obtained as immediate as just one session of the instruction. DA results in thinking, which makes learning meaningful for learners. The method a teacher utilizes in a class determines the quality and the way learners participate in the class or out of class. Learning within the supportive and interactive mainstream of DA makes learners self-confident to challenge their learnings. It helps them to understand that doing errors or making mistakes is a part of their learning, and they should not lose their motivation.

There is another evidence that can be attributed to the effectiveness of the interactionist DA. Learners’ initiation is desirable for teachers because it shows their ability and motivation. It is more valuable when it is accurate, fluent, and a trigger to start a warm conversation. The following conversation is an example of some unplanned occasions in the class, which revealed the learners’ readiness, speaking improvement, and self-confidence. It started with one of the learners’ reactions to an example given by the teacher. As you can see, all the learners are involved in the conversation, and they are also accurate and fluent.

L1: I agree that a teacher should speak English in the class but s/he should explain everything well.

L2: Yeah. They (teachers) think presenting the lessons in English is enough and we can understand it completely. They do not explain enough.

T: Do you mean all of your teachers?

L3: Of course not. Most of them are good.

T: That is the way. Use determiners such as most of them, some of them or one of them.

L4: I do not agree.

L2: But you had complaint about it.

L4: Yes, but I do not have any problems with my teachers. I think the syllabus is not good.

L5: I agree, too. For example; having paragraph writing in the first semester is not fair.

L6: I agree. Writing and French were difficult for me. It was hard to study two languages at the same time.

L7: There was another problem, too. When teachers (short pause) a few of the teachers are teaching, they only ask from good students and leave the others.

T: What do you mean by “good students”?

L7: Uh ... the students with good marks.

L6: Capable students. Yes, I agree.

L8: One of them do not ask from the capable students even.

L9: We need to practice more in the class but the number of students is a serious problem.

T: Do you gather together in dormitory to practice more?

L10: In dormitory we just read one of our lessons together. There are some grammar and reading classes in university apart from our main lessons (courses) but we do not participate in them always.

Conclusion

Speaking instruction should receive more attention in our EFL classes, and more time and effort should be put into improving this skill and its sub-skills. Learners should be at the forefront of the learning process and share more responsibility for learning speaking skills. Therefore, they should be offered opportunities to learn and practice the speaking language in a way that motivationally interact with their classmates and teacher and also receive assistance from their teacher. The findings of the present study proved that DA could fulfill the purposes mentioned above which suggests that English language teachers and material developers need to take EFL contexts' features and the EFL learners' needs into account. Though in a class, all the learners with different proficiencies perform the same tasks, using DA, all learners can benefit from appropriate assistance based on their needs.

These findings of the current study can pave the way for more research into DA-speaking skills across different language proficiency to further highlight the diversity of language learners' needs. Like any quantitative study, the current study cannot explain the learning process in-depth, therefore qualitative studies can give a full picture about learning process and practicality of DA.

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Competing Interests

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