Lack of Assessment Savviness or Policy Tradition? Libyan EFL Teachers' Conceptions of Dynamic Assessment

Abdallah Ali Elmahjoub

The Libyan Academy/ Misrata Branch
a.elmahjoub@lam.edu.ly

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Abstract

This paper focuses on assessment practices in the views of Libyan preparatory and secondary school teachers and the factors that impinge on their assessment practices. This study attempts to explain the position of dynamic assessment (henceforth DA) in the Libyan Basic and Secondary Education level from the teachers' perspectives. The aim is to uncover these teachers' understanding of assessment and their preparedness to implement kinds of assessment congruent with the curriculum, with special reference to dynamic assessment. A total of 26 teachers responded to an open-ended questionnaire. Analysis followed an interpretative, thematic approach which yielded themes that emerged from literature and participants' responses. Paramount of these was the testing culture that highly governed these teachers' practices and their assessment beliefs. The paper concludes by attempting to respond to these difficulties.

I. INTRODUCTION

Paran (2010, p.2) states "our view of language learning and language competence is strongly influenced by our understanding of language testing and assessment". Therefore, assessment can govern our choice of teaching methods and techniques. This, as illustrated below, is strongly connected to the modes of instruction prevalent in a certain context. That is, as assessment and instruction are inseparable (Black & William,1998), assessment and instruction will follow the same paradigm of instruction and assessment. That is, instruction that follows traditional paradigms will be accompanied by tests that are based on traditional paradigms as well. In the context of this study, it can be argued that instruction and therefore assessment are

typical of the behaviourist theory of learning paradigm, where assessment and instruction are considered separately (Willis, Adie & Klenowski, 2013). However, about more than a decade ago, material based on communicative language teaching has been introduced which does not only require or necessitate a shift in teaching and learning but also a change in modes of assessment, where reform or at least intentions of it are presumed to have existed. Therefore, this paper explores teachers' perceptions of assessment, whether it is viewed only for of measuring learners' knowledge or is also used for teaching.

The paper follows a qualitative research design by exploiting an open-ended questionnaire for basic and secondary school levels teachers. The most appropriate way to investigate assessment is by delving into the socio-cultural context where assessment takes place (Rea-Dickins, 2007). This study aims to investigate the topic within its social and cultural context through attempting to see the respondents' beliefs and views of the implementation of assessment and factors that affect this as well as how they perceive the connection between assessment, particularly DA and teaching.

The data collected for this study are from teachers. In Libya, teachers at the preparatory and secondary levels are required to hold a B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) or B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education) in English language teaching to be admitted to teaching English. The number of questionnaire respondents was 26 teachers from different schools. Choosing different schools was because of the small number of English language teachers in each school and to investigate different school environments as precautions for unknown factors that might influence teachers of one certain school.

II. DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT: ORIGIN AND DEFINITION:

According to Poehner, Davin and Lantolf (2017), DA "departs from the traditional distinction between formative and summative assessment, as it understands teaching to be an inherent part of all assessment regardless of purpose or context". (p. 243). Also, Poehner and Lantolf (2005) argue for the similarity between DA and FA (Formative Assessment). The main difference between them is that while in FA the support is provided during a specific task, in DA such support is intended for long-term development. Therefore, I present a brief background about formative and summative assessment paradigms. In this regard, Grigorenko and Sternberg (1998) consider dynamic testing as only a part of the larger process of dynamic assessment, where testing refers to traditional, static forms and assessment refers to dynamic assessment.

First, it should be noted that assessment of learning/summative assessment, and assessment for learning/formative assessment derive from different

philosophical principles. While assessment of learning stems from a positivist, traditional paradigm, assessment for learning is rooted in constructivist socio-cultural tradition (Inbar-Lourie, 2013). Assessment that has been used as a means to test or evaluate the outcome of what teachers teach to students falls under the old paradigm which states that in such tests the focus is on language, teachers are in control, product is emphasised at the cost of process and such tests test only rather than teach (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p.335). However, they add that assessment has witnessed considerable change in direction where the focus is on communication, tests are now learner-centred, and skills are integrated rather than each skill being tested separately for evaluating students' product, as was the interest in discrete-point assessment. Looney (2008) defines formative assessment as "the frequent assessment of learner understanding and progress to identify needs and shape teaching. Formative assessment is sometimes referred to as assessment for learning, distinct from assessment of learning" (original emphasis, p.22). Summative assessment, on the other hand, "means gathering and using information about student achievement for "final" judgments - at least, for judgments that are final for a certain point in time" (Brookhart, 2009, p.728). Summative assessment is usually referred to as traditional, whereas formative assessment is sometimes christened alternative assessment.

Regarding DA, Raegan (2011) argues that "The history of dynamic assessment has disparate origins depending on how it is viewed" (p. 3). Poehner and Lantolf (2010, p.312) note that DA was first used in Vygotsky's program on defectology, which was mostly focused on children with learning and developmental difficulties. However, recently DA has been used in general education and expanded its scope to include adults with regard to instruction in second languages in particular (Poehner & Lantolf, 2010). Lidz and Gindis (2003) argue that DA is based in the socio-cultural theory (SCT) where cognitive, language and social functioning

are not innate but are formed in interactive ways. Therefore, they add, assessment becomes an integral part of instruction and hence development. Central to this process is the notion of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) within which interaction between the more capable and the less capable can elevate the latter to higher levels of cognitive abilities. Therefore, literature widely attributes the origin of DA to the works of Lev Vygotsky through the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (e.g. Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1998; Lidz, 1995; Poehner, Davin, & Lantolf 2017; Poehner, 2008; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005; Raegan, 2011), where the learner receives assistance from the teacher whenever the former is unable to function independently. Therefore, the "teacher or assessor, referred to as a mediator, engages cooperatively with learners and intervenes when difficulties arise and their performance breaks down" (Poehner, Davin, & Lantolf 2017 p.244). Shepard (2000) defines DA as "finding out what a student is able to do independently as well as what can be done with adult guidance" (p. 10), which resonates the zone of proximal development. Therefore, DA presents a unification of instruction and assessment (Poehner, 2008) rather than considering the two notions in opposition. The two notions are considered inseparable (Willis, Adie & Klenowski, 2013).

Grigorenko and Sternberg (1998)manifest differences between static and dynamic paradigms of assessment. First, dynamic testing emphasises quantifying the psychological processes with which learning and change occur, while in static testing emphasis is put on products resulting from pre-existing skills. The second difference shows the absence of feedback in static testing where an examiner presents problems graded to which the test taker responds separately. In dynamic testing, after the presentation of tasks the examiner provides feedback to the test taker in certain degrees till the examinee performs the tasks successfully or abandons. Thirdly, the two paradigms differ in their neutrality between the examiner and the

examinee. In dynamic testing, the relationship between the examiner and the examinee is not static but developing and modified according to the assistance provided according to the test taker's needs. In static testing, however, the examiner demonstrates neutrality non-involvement to sustain standardised measurement. Lidz (1995) notes that one of the important features of DA is its interactive nature which differentiates the examiner's role from that of static, traditional, standardised testing. Here, the examiner helps learners to move to a higher level of competence. Therefore, as Grigorenko and Sternberg (1998) argue, the purpose of assessment is to evaluate, intervene and change (p. 76).

III. THE PURPOSE OF ASSESSMENT:

The purpose of assessment holds divergent conceptions depending on the traditional understanding and the concept of dynamic assessment. McNamara (2004) argues:

Language testing is a process of gathering information about test-takers from observed performance under test conditions...in order to draw inferences either about the likely quality of performance by the test-taker under non-test conditions, or about the test-taker's standing in relation to a relevant domain of knowledge and abilities. (p.765)

This stance deals with assessment as traditionally as it might be that tests are a means to measure the sum of knowledge learners gain. This can result in teaching practices—such as teaching to the test and narrowing down the material—that are "distinct from, and perhaps even at odds with, the goals of teaching" (Poehner, 2008, p.4), since tests can direct how teachers teach (Shepard (2000). Stiggins (2008) present two purposes of assessment: "to gather evidence to inform instructional decisions" and "to encourage students to try to learn" (p. 3). It can be seen Stiggins' first goal of

assessment reflects an emphasis on traditional summative testing, while the second goal refers to formative, dynamic assessment. It is rational, then, that different purposes of assessment highly determine the roles of teachers and learners (Rea-Dickins, 2007) and the relationship between them. The field of assessment in language education has been affected considerably at the advent of communicative language teaching. The focus of assessment has become the communicative use of language rather than mastery of rules. This current of change shifted the roles of teachers and learners where the tests became learner-centred and skills integrated (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p.335). This shift, therefore, necessitated change not only in tests but also in teaching, power relations and roles of teachers and students (Looney, 2008), where learners are co-creators of knowledge. The purpose of DA is different from other paradigms of assessment in that it aims to promote learners' development, that is, to extend mediation from a specific task to further tasks and contexts, rather than to help them perform well in a specific task (Poehner, Davin, & Lantolf, 2017). Therefore, DA presents an alternative to the oft-criticised traditional, psychometric approaches to testing (Lidz, 1995). What distinguishes DA is that it functions as a diagnostic tool to the learner's current capacity and an aided instructional tool for the learner's future potential given appropriate assistance. Therefore, teaching is a principal part of DA.

IV. APPROACHES TO DA:

There is no single procedure or technique to DA, it is rather "a "family" of different procedures that share a set of principles and formats." (Lidz & Gindis, 2003, pp. 103-104), which also "includes an attitude related to how to think about an assessment." (Lidz, 1995, p. 144). However, since the goal of DA, according to Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002), is "to see whether and how the participant will change if an opportunity is provided" (p.30), a variety of procedures to presentation of such opportunity are provided. Poehner and Lantolf (2010, p.318) discuss two approaches through which

instruction, or to use the more appropriate term according to ZPD - assistance/ scaffolding, can be provided to examinees. The first approach is the interventionist approach where there is a previously determined, prefabricated set of clues and hints which are offered to learners as they proceed in the test items. The hints or clues are graded from implicit to explicit. The less explicit hints examinees need to proceed means they reached a level of control over a certain educational object. In this, Grigorenko and Sternberg (1998) note that "dynamic assessment is naturally linked with intervention" (p. 76). In the other approach, the interactionist, there are no predetermined clues or hints; rather any mediation required is negotiated by the examiner and examinee. This means that mediation or assistance/ scaffolding is continually adjusted and developed according to the examinee's ability to proceed. Also, Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002) classify DA according to the mode of assistance presentation. They note that instruction can be "sandwiched between a pretest and a posttest" (p.27) where examinees are given a pretest, followed by instruction either individually or in groups. After that, learners take a posttest. They call this format the sandwich format. In the other format, called the cake format, examinees are presented with one item at a time. The examiner provides mediation through graded hints as needed until the examinee is successful. However, in whatever form or degree assistance is provided, "It is important to stress that mediation is not just a matter of offering assistance, but it is a matter of offering appropriate assistance" (Poehner & Lantolf, 2010, p.316, original emphasis). In this sense, with whichever mode of DA adopted, careful attention should be paid when providing assistance or hints to examinees, an issue that lacks attention in DA literature. The term used for the appropriate time and amount of assistance is contingency which refers to "holding back when enough of the task has been grasped to allow room for initiative" (Webster, Beveridge, & Reed, 1996, p. 44).

With these differences in modes of assistance presentation, it can be argued that the interventionist approach is more formal and can therefore be adopted as a procedure in formal examinations, while the interactionist is more appropriate and convenient in less formal, classroom environment atmosphere.

V. CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS:

English language in Libya is taught from stage oneprimary school, until higher education. The presumed focus of teaching English in the context of this study is the enhancement of language ability which Schoonen (2011) defines as "the ability to perform language tasks in real life and real time, that is, the ability to convey or understand a content message through the medium of spoken or written language" (pp. 701-702).

Assessment is generally neglected in Libya. Although some reform has taken place by introducing new material based on the CLT in the early 2000s, assessment has received no due care and remained only a means to diagnose learners' sum of knowledge obtained from a certain course. Buck (2001, p. 83) notes that communicative language teaching necessitated the move towards communicative testing. Therefore, there remains a gap in the implementation of education policy that stresses the importance of employing CLT in teaching. The type of tests employed in the context of the study are merely to measure the sum of knowledge gained and these tests aim to check learners' ability to reproduce knowledge transferred to them from teachers, mimicking Freire's (2005) 'banking' model where learners are only receivers, depositories to be filled by the depositor—the teachers know everything: "Instead communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat...in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (p.72).

Assessment in the context of this study is employed, as Wiliam (2001) argues, to assess only what is claimed to be a representative of learners' knowledge, on which

basis the learners' knowledge and competence is deemed satisfactory or not. Assessment therefore is used to assess:

only limited forms of competence, ... [where] teachers are quite able to predict which aspects of competence will be assessed. Especially in "high-stakes" assessments, therefore, there is an incentive for teachers and students to concentrate on only those aspects of competence that are likely to be assessed. (Wiliam, 2001, p.165)

Ingram (2005) attributes gaps between tests and reallife, authentic use of the language to three sources. The first of these is neglecting real language performance in tests, the second is that test results are presented in ways that do not help the learner to use the language in real-life situations, and the third is that the context in which tests are implemented is different from that where the language is used in real-life situations. These seem to be typical of the state of testing in Libya.

Having provided a synopsis of the status quo of testing in Libya, the study attempts to investigate teachers' perceptions of dynamic assessment by posing the following questions:

What are teachers' perceptions of dynamic assessment? What, if any, hurdles prevent them from implementing DA?

This study is implemented in a number of preparatory and secondary schools in the city of Misrata, Libya. The reason for choosing this level for study is that it can be argued that at this level, learners become more prepared to be involved in the construction of their learning to which DA can considerably contribute. The number of questionnaire respondents was 26 teachers who are required to have a minimum qualification of a B.A. or B.Ed. in English language teaching to teach English.

VI. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

Brookhart (2009, p.728) notes that certain classroom practices can be affected by some cultural differences. Therefore, the most appropriate way for investigating assessment is through delving into the socio-cultural context where assessment takes place (Rea-Dickins 2007). This study attempts to investigate teachers' perceptions of DA within its social and cultural context through investigating the respondents' beliefs and views of assessment and factors that affect DA. Data collection for this study was through an open-ended questionnaire focusing on teachers' beliefs about assessment: approaching teachers' knowledge and familiarity with modes of assessment; their focus during and goals of their assessment practices; and above all whether they integrate assessment into teaching. Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to teachers who approved to participate in the study. I was grateful enough to these teachers who mostly answered the questions comprehensively.

VII. ANALYSIS:

The questionnaire questions yielded rich data. These are interpreted to provide insightful information on the issue under investigation. I followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) three steps for data analysis. At the beginning, data are reduced where certain relevant units of the data are selected, focused, and simplified and this is where the researcher decides which chunks of data to code. The second step, data display is the process in which information from the data is assembled in a certain format; this leads to the third phase; drawing a conclusion, where findings are presented, interpreted and verified. Therefore, firstly I selected chunks of data that are relevant to the focus of the study. The data then were compiled under categories relevant to focus of the study, and these were then interpreted and presented to draw conclusions. Categories and themes that emerged derive from data collected and from literature. In this way, theory is rooted in practice and practice feeds theory.

VIII. DISCUSSION:

First, it should be noted that the term DA per se has not been mentioned as DA and FA are principally similar; rather assessment practices that underlie it have been focused on so that such principles of DA could be induced from responses. Themes mostly emerged inductively from data. Therefore, these are rooted in the teachers' conceptions themselves and reflect more their views than being forced on the analysis in order not to alienate themes. Emergent themes mainly relate to a testing environment laden with traditional constructs of testing mainly symbolized by a focus on students' preparation to tests; resulting in limiting teachers' opportunities to use different modes of assessment; teachers' discontent with these paradigms and the status quo within which they find themselves helpless in following traditional paradigm of testing. This shows the power of tests imposed upon these teachers.

Focus on tests; traditionally-oriented testing:

Testing is directed towards measuring the students' sum of knowledge. This is apparently a fault in the education secretariat and the examination department to direct learning/ teaching towards passing exams by imposing a standardised forms of exams. This is also very much attributed to a testing culture prevalent in the Libyan context. There is a great concern about learners passing exams held by parents, head-teachers, and the public which leads to teachers themselves preparing students to exams through teaching test-like material. When asked about whether they prepare students for exams, some teachers noted "I try to make my exams similar to the final test [set by the education secretariat], as the students could feel that it is similar to their tests" (T 1); "I only tell students about lessons included in the test" (T 6), and

The majority [of students] care more about passing exams. I am not very sure, but it is just a tendency in our society or in the whole world in general. In our houses and as a

teacher, we used to tell them study hard to pass and get good marks so you will have a better college and work in the future! (T4)

It is clear that the view held towards the importance of exams is highly compulsive that it creates an examoriented teaching. Therefore, students attainment is judged solely through their grades. Not only so the focus on tests does, but it also deprives teachers from opportunities to exploit teaching to develop learners' competence and cognitive abilities, discussed later.

Teachers tied to traditional testing:

Again, testing-oriented teaching repeats itself through influence on teachers. Rather than rehashing its effect, this theme shows how respondent teachers are forced to follow traditional modes of testing. Teachers expressed that their preparation of their students to tests is due to some factors, the most prominent of which are students and stakeholders over-concern about exams and insufficient time. Some teachers pointed out that they attempt to reconcile focus on preparing students to tests and developing their cognitive abilities through assessment but time was an obstacle as teacher (4) explained "in some cases when I don't have enough time to finish the syllabus, I just concentrate on what is important that should be including [sic] in the exam and neglect the rest"; and teacher (10) pointed out "the length of time and school year limit my explanation. I only have to cover what's important in the curriculum and skip further explanations." However, the overarching factor is the education policy that directs testing to dominate instruction through imposing certain kinds of tests. Teacher (16) stated "sometimes I teach third year students. There is a fixed system of testing. So my teaching is sometimes influenced by this type of exams." This is twinned by different stakeholders' over-concern about tests results and considering these as the sole sign of knowledge attainment. Support to this comes from a number of teachers' comments. For example, teacher (20) adroitly pointed out "from the past until now students are reminded constantly that their grades represent how good they are and how will be [sic] their assessment."

Unrealised potential:

The focus on tests discussed in the previous themes affects teachers' performance in teaching and focus in assessment resulting in them quitting modes of assessment that are formative and dynamic. Some teachers explained they hope that they have the opportunity to transfer focus from traditional tests to more active, dynamic assessment. For example, teacher (3) stated "I wish that I only concentrate on developing their skills but I can't", and teacher (9) said "the focus on language skills is important but I prepare them for exams."

When asked whether there are any differences between tests prepared by the education secretariat and the tests these teachers prepare by themselves, most of the teachers noted that there are no differences, some of them justifying this to preparing students to the exams set by the education secretariat. For example, teacher (10) noted "My tests to a great extent look like the final exams so students get used to them", and teacher (22) explained "I try to do similar tests to that [sic] of the whole country by looking back at previous years tests so that students get used to the questions and do well in the final exams." By this, teachers are distracted from employing alternative assessment modes to focusing on traditional testing, they cannot benefit from using modern assessment due to their exams being involuntarily oriented towards preparing students to exams.

Necessity for change:

The previous themes demonstrate the power of tests prevalent in the context of the study that impinge on the education system. However, it is easing that teacher' awareness of dangers of and their discontent with the testing modes prevalent in the context of this study is clear. Teacher 22 stated "exams might have negative effects as they make students study just to pass an exam."

When asked whether assessment that helps learners learn rather than focus only on helping learners pass exams affects teaching and learning, one of the teachers replied "Yes, I think that, but our education unfortunately only focuses on the passing exams." (Teacher 3). Teachers (21) said "unfortunately they [students] care more about passing exams"; similarly teacher (22) pointed out "unfortunately, I think students care more about passing exams not about learning."

IX. CONCLUSION:

The paper investigated Libyan teachers' perceptions towards modes of assessment that integrate teaching with assessment. Responses mainly showed that they disapproved and disagreed with tests employed in the Libyan education system. They mostly demonstrated that they have the potential to employ modes of assessment that do not only measure students' knowledge but also have contribution to teaching and helping learners to learn. Respondents' complaints were mainly targeted towards the education policy through the kinds of tests given to students, especially final-year students. Another factor that showed to have considerable influence was the testing culture that plagues that society. In order for change to take place in testing and the education system in general, due care must be devoted to reforming the testing system by integrating modes of assessment into teaching and learning through allowing teachers spaces to maneuver rather than forcing them to prepare students to exams. Another step that can be taken is to lessen the over-concern put on grades and results of tests by varying modes of assessment and distributing marks to different activities throughout the semester/year rather than devoting the largest percentage of marks to semester- or year-end exams. The current exams limit the opportunity for students to do well in mainly a decisive exam at the end of the semester or year. Another point that can help reforming the testing system is the kinds of questions. Currently, exam questions contain discrete-point items such as true-false and multiple choice items where the focus is mainly on grammar and vocabulary and the skills

are separated. In addition, more professional preparation of teachers is necessary for improving the testing situation which can lead to improving English language education as well. More serious pre-service and inservice teachers programs must be a priority for the education secretariat in order to employ teachers with modern teaching and assessment knowledge appropriate for developing learners' cognitive abilities along with language skills. Reform, therefore, requires work on different levels both top and bottom, from the education secretariat by revising and updating the education policy particularly relating to assessment, to the individual teachers at the classroom level.

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