

Shrestha, P. N. (2020). *Dynamic Assessment of Students' Academic Writing: Vygotskian and Systemic Functional Linguistic Perspectives*

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Dynamic assessment (DA) is one of the central applications of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) in language education, strongly informed by Vygotsky's discussions of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978). Rooted in Vygotskian praxis (Lantolf and Poehner, 2014) and being a ZPD activity in which assessment and teaching are dialectically related, DA seeks to identify learner abilities in the process of maturing, and guide learner development through the provision of systematic mediation. As Antón (2019) noted, DA has successfully informed the assessment and teaching of all language skills. Of these, however, writing, especially academic writing, has been the focus much less than speaking, listening, or reading. Hence, Shrestha explored dynamic assessment of academic writing of distant students of business studies, which includes a unique context in terms of the kinds of mediation and its mode of delivery. Another novelty is merging DA with systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to track and guide the students' development.

Based on the data coming from only six students, four in the DA group and two in the non-DA group, the book is remarkably detailed and logically develops its narrative across its eight chapters. At the opening of each chapter, the

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author briefly discusses what the chapter will focus on and links the chapter with the overall aims of the book. This, together with a summary at the end of each chapter, makes the book extremely coherent. There is, at times, repetition, which the reader can find excessive. However, it does not distract from the otherwise fluent and coherent narrative.

In Chapter 1, Shrestha sets the rationale for using dynamic assessment in university academic writing courses and introduces central themes and conceptualisation in the book. As he states, there have been changes occurring in higher education globally, bringing with them growing students' dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback. There has also been dissatisfaction with traditional forms of language assessment, mostly testing (see also Antón, 2019). These changes have coincided with and fuelled the growing interest in dynamic assessment in language education. This sets the basis of the following discussion of assessment in academic writing. Shrestha, namely, discusses formative feedback on, diagnostic assessment of, and dynamic assessment of academic writing, identifying gaps in the application of the three assessment frameworks in the (academic writing) classroom. To give an example, the author notes that formative feedback lacks systematicity, is oftentimes unidirectional, and reinforces unequal power relations in the classroom. Dynamic assessment, in turn, while addressing limitations of formative feedback, has largely focused on single features of learners' performance and lacks a comprehensive theory of language use. Perhaps, some confusion on the part of the reader can arise due to the author broadly classifying DA under the umbrella of formative assessment, as DA and formative assessment are based on different understandings of development, which leads to different ways formative assessment and DA are conducted and their results are interpreted (Antón, 2019; Lantolf and Poehner, 2004).

In Chapters 2 and 3, the author discusses Vygotskian sociocultural theory and systemic functional linguistics respectively. These chapters are essential for understanding the rest of the book, as the author elaborates on the theoretical concepts informing the study described in the book. The author starts Chapter 2 by outlining (1) the origins of SCT and how it made its way into the Western scientific tradition, (2) dialectics, functioning as the metatheory for SCT, (3) human development as understood in SCT, (4) semiotic mediation, and (5) genetic method, specifying that the study falls within its microgenesis domain. This is followed by a discussion of writing as a socially mediated activity and the role of the teacher as facilitator of learners' writing development. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of DA. Two general approaches to DA, interventionist and interactionist (the focus of the book), are discussed. The author's discussion of interactionist DA (or flexible DA, as the author refers to it) is especially commendable. Shrestha, namely,

gives a detailed account of Feuerstein's Mediated Learning Experience (MLE), in which interactionist DA approach roots. He, furthermore, discusses the central concepts of MLE (reciprocity, transcendence, and mediation of meaning) which are important for understanding and interpreting the study reported in the book. The author's account of interventionist DA, however, is cursory. While the focus on interactionist DA is understandable, more space could have been given to interventionist DA, which would have strengthened the understanding of a reader unfamiliar with the DA framework of both DA approaches. Otherwise, the chapter is very comprehensive and can indeed help the reader to develop their understanding of DA.

Chapter 3 gives an account of systemic functional linguistics and how it informed the study. The author notes that SFL was above all used as an analytical lens to trace the development of students' academic writing. However, as he also notes, 'the SFL perspective enables a DA researcher to not only analyse student assessment texts but also support students with overcoming any problem linked with any of these meanings as construed in their written texts' (p. 65). Hence, he also argues for the complementarity of DA and SFL to guide students' development. The author then discusses the case study analysis genre as a key genre in business studies (the context of the research reported in the book) and lists features of this genre, including its social purpose (i.e., demonstrating understanding of business concepts, models, and theories), generic stages of it (e.g., orientation, application of the selected framework, evaluation, and recommendation), and lexicogrammatical features (e.g., present tense, specialist lexis, relational verbs, and declarative mood). Like the author's account of SCT and dynamic assessment in Chapter 2, the author's description of SFL serves its function – tracing and guiding learner development alongside the DA framework – very well.

Chapter 4 describes the study's context and methodology. The author precedes his account of how the genetic method was utilised in the research by discussing the non-linearity in the students' developmental process (see also Lantolf et al., 2016). Understanding this nonlinearity is essential for others to adopt the procedures described in the book. Shrestha's decision to include two students who did not experience the DA is commendable, as this allowed for meaningful comparisons between the DA-group students' development trajectories with those in the non-DA group. The qualitatively different approach to addressing student challenges in the two conditions was no doubt the main reason for the differences between the two groups, though the varying amount of engagement with the instructor in the two groups, should, too, be taken into account. Triangulation of the analysis of learner texts and DA sessions with student interviews and other tutors' views on the students' writing was a great decision and so was basing the analysis of mediational and

reciprocity moves on existing typologies (above all, Poehner, 2005) while not adhering to these when the data suggested otherwise. Overall, the chapter provides ample details to serve as a blueprint to adapt the procedures to other academic writing contexts.

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to a detailed account of tracking and guiding the students' development informed by SCT and SFL respectively. In Chapter 5, Shrestha explores teacher-learner interactions as intentionality-reciprocity cycles during the DA session and discusses the insights this offers into students' development. The asynchronous nature of teacher-student interactions is useful to keep in mind when interpreting the mediational moves and students' reciprocity that the author identified in a thematic analysis of interactions. The mediational moves are presented for the reader as a typology, and so are the students' reciprocal moves. Both typologies are supplied with descriptions of each move as well as interaction examples to help the reader understand how these moves occurred. In my opinion, these are indispensable for those who would like to apply the typologies in their contexts. Tracing changes in frequency of both mediational and reciprocal moves between the first and the second DA session, Shrestha builds a strong argument for the DA guiding the students' development. He also demonstrates that mediation and reciprocity varied from learner to learner in type and frequency, indicating differences in students' ZPDs even when students' independent performance was similar.

In Chapter 6, Shrestha tracks students' writing development through SFL. The analysis of students' performance is, again, very detailed, supplied with sample texts produced by the students and other tutors' evaluations of the students' texts. The analysis of two DA and one non-DA students' performance added to the comprehensiveness of the picture drawn by the author. My only concern is, perhaps, insufficient explanation of the macroThemes and hyperThemes concepts up until later in Chapter 6. While I understood that introductory paragraphs were referred to as macroThemes and topic sentences, as hyperThemes, my understanding of these terms was fragmentary until later in the book. What could have been featured more in this section is an explicit discussion of how the students' conceptual development and use of macroThemes hyperThemes were mediated in the DA interactions. There is some discussion of this in the section titled *Academic Writing Support in the ZPD*, but I feel that an explicit discussion in Chapter 6 would have helped the reader draw a clearer picture of a synthesis of DA and SFL. Overall, however, the author builds a coherent argument that DA combined with SFL had the potential to develop students' academic writing.

Chapter 7 covers an important topic of transfer/transcendence. Acknowledging various traditions in the study of transfer and particularly

the argument for the concept of transcendence being more closely in line with SCT (Poehner, 2007), Shrestha uses the term ‘transfer’ to refer to both ‘transfer’ and ‘transcendence’. While I understand the focus of this chapter, considering the author’s commitment to making the book a detailed resource on how principles of DA and SFL can be used to trace and guide the development of students’ academic writing, I wonder if a more detailed account of transcendence in DA could have been given. In my view, accounts of development through transcendence in Poehner (2005) and Ableeva (2010), for example, would have helped the reader to follow the author’s argument and interpretations in this penultimate chapter better. Still, through his analysis, Shrestha creates a powerful argument for using SFL as a lens to trace the development of students’ independent performance. For example, SFL allowed him to establish that while the DA participants generally transferred the novel abilities and knowledge to more complex tasks, the non-DA student’s performance on the transfer assignment suggests that further development of her abilities was needed. Overall, this is an excellent chapter providing a further example of how SCT and SFL can together inform tracing and guiding learner development.

The final chapter accomplishes more than just summarising the main findings of the study. I found Sections 8.3 (Implications for Academic Writing Practitioners) and 8.4 (Implications for Academic Writing Researchers) particularly useful for the two major target groups of the book – practitioners and researchers. For both of these reader groups, I argue, the most significant implication of the study lies in a combination of SCT-informed dynamic assessment framework with systemic functional linguistics. Dynamic assessment served as a systematic framework to track and guide students’ development. Systemic functional linguistics served as a lens to understand this development and a means to mediate it, focusing not on single linguistic, grammatical, etc. features, but on construction of whole texts.

Students’ interviews and tutors’ comments diversify the voices represented in the book. The DA students, for example, noted their growing confidence in writing, as well as the affective role of the DA, referring to DA as ‘personal communication and interaction’ (p. 226). The focus on emotional experiences emerging from the interaction of the mediator and the learner is often overlooked by DA researchers, even though *perezhivanie* (emotional lived experience) is intimately related to development, determining the influence that the environment has on the individual (Vygotsky, 1994).

Overall, this book provides a detailed blueprint for designing and implementing dynamic assessment in academic writing courses. It, furthermore, sketches fruitful directions for further research. This book is, therefore,

undoubtedly valuable to both academic writing practitioners interested in dynamic assessment and academic writing and DA researchers.

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