

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT IN IMPROVING SPEAKING SKILLS OF UNDERGRADUATE EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

The dynamic assessment (DA) method whether based on an interventionist or interactionist perspectives has long been considered an active and effective sociocultural teaching procedure (Malmir (2020; Bahador and Mofrad, 2020; Safa et al., 2015; Khoshsima and Farokhipours, 2016; Poehner and Lantolf's, 2005; Aljaafreh and Lantolf's, 1994; Ghahderijan, Namaziandost, Tavakoli, Kumar and Magizov, 2021). However, the nature of the intervention plan, the specifics, levels, role and dose of instructor's engagement in such process is still a big gap in this field. This study aimed at investigating the role of implementing a DA-based intervention in improving the speaking skills of EFL learners. The study also attempted to deepen understanding of how this intervention was implemented more effectively. Therefore, a mixed-method based on both quantitative and qualitative data was employed to analyze the data gathered through two instruments: a speaking proficiency test and an observation checklist. The sample consisted of (30) participants distributed to two groups: experimental and control. The findings revealed that the speaking performance of the experimental group has significantly outperformed the control group with $p < 0.05$ due to the DA-based intervention. It was recommended to incorporate the DA intervention in the daily EFL teaching practices. The implications of how the intervention was implemented and related recommendation are implied.

Keywords: Dynamic assessment; Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), speaking skills, fluency).

INTRODUCTION

Mastering English speaking skills plays a vital role in helping individuals achieve their life and academic ambitions, desires, and goals nowadays. In language educational contexts, speaking skills are considered the most important in comparison to other language skills due to the central role they play as a teaching and learning medium (Parupalli, 2019; Bueno, Madrid and McLaren, 2006). In fact, the advantages of mastering these skills are unlimited educationally. For example, Parupalli (2019) believes that mastering English speaking skills enables individuals to participate actively in their daily learning activities, debates, and group discussions, develop their critical thinking, communicate effectively and interact

successfully with people from all around the globe, pursue their higher studies in foreign countries, get better future employment opportunities, use e-resources and internet effectively, acquire more knowledge, earn high respect in the society, boost up their self-confidence, improve the overall development of their personality, and many other advantages.

However, learning speaking skills is considered more difficult than learning other language skills, especially in non-English speaking contexts like that of Saudi Arabia where learners' exposure to effective speaking practices is almost confined to the classroom environment for a short period of time. To overcome the challenges associated with learning English in general and speaking skills,

in particular, many educational institutes in Saudi Arabia, for instance, provide learners with the latest physical resources and high-level competencies of native speakers of English. Nevertheless, most undergraduate Saudi EFL learners are still not up to standards in their oral production of the target language. According to recent observations in the Saudi undergraduate English speaking classrooms, most interactions are dominated uni-directionally by teachers, whereas students look hesitant, swallow their words, and are unwilling to verbally interact with teachers or peers (Bahador and Mofrad, 2020). In spite that mastering oral skills is the ultimate language learning goal (Lazarton, 2001), it could hardly be achieved by employing conventional teaching practices and techniques. In order to improve the speaking abilities of EFL learners, a high level of collaboration and deep understanding of the problems associated with this dilemma should take place in English-speaking classrooms. The dynamic assessment (DA), which is both an assessment and instructional process, appears to be a promising alternative to handle these issues. In fact, assessment, in general, has long been considered a major factor in activating the learning process (e.g., Pileh and Hidri, 2021; Estaji and Farough, 2020, Poehner, 2008).

Dynamic assessment (DA) is associated with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by which mediation plays a central role (Poehner & Lantolf, 2003) in improving thinking and learning performance especially when it takes the form of dialogic interaction between a teacher and students (Pileh and Hidri, 2021). So, ZPD is the gap between learners' current performance and that they can perform with the help or scaffolding of the teacher, both in assessment and classroom learning environments (Herazo, Davin and Sarge, 2019). Language learners, here, receive effective and sufficient assistance to do certain tasks successfully (Poehner and Lantolf, 2003), especially in improving their speaking skills, which are by nature an interactive process (Son & Kim, 2017; Willis, 2015). According to the best knowledge, observations, and experiences of the author in teaching speaking skills to Saudi undergraduate EFL learners, it is believed that DA could be one of the most effective instructional techniques that learners need to improve their speaking skills. In this context, it

is worth mentioning that many previous studies addressed DA-based reading (e.g. Kozulin and Garb, 2002), writing (e.g. Shrestha and Coffin, 2012), and listening skills (e.g. Hidri, 2014); however, DA has not sufficiently been used to improve the speaking skills of EFL learners (e.g. Hill & Sabet, 2009; Son and Kim, 2017; Ebadi and Asakereh, 2017). This is one reason why the author attempted to fill in this gap in the literature. The author is also motivated to employ a DA-based intervention in the hope to improve students' speaking proficiency levels, especially in aspects such as fluency, accuracy, lexical use, and pronunciation.

Therefore, the purpose of the present research was to find out the effectiveness of employing a DA intervention in EFL speaking classrooms and to identify how well this intervention can be described and applied. It is believed that conducting this research in the Saudi EFL context would help the concerned local educators to reconsider their methods of teaching speaking skills, provide teachers and learners with a new way for approaching their speaking practices, and provide future relevant researchers with a rich database of DA-based instruction and associated issues. In brief, this research aimed at investigating the effectiveness of DA-based intervention in improving the English speaking skills of undergraduate EFL learners whose major is English and to offer a novel speaking instructional model based on a DA intervention. To this end, two main research questions were attempted:

- a) To what extent a DA-based intervention can improve undergraduate EFL learners' speaking proficiency levels?
- b) How can a DA-based intervention improve the speaking proficiency of undergraduate EFL learners?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Dynamic Assessment Definition

Dynamic Assessment (DA) is a broad term covering a wide range of assessment procedures that are mostly dominated by a test-teach-test model (Grigorenko and Sternberg, 1997; Haywood and Tzurriel, 2002; Lidz, 1991). According to Noels, Lascano and Saumure (2019), DA is defined as a "process-oriented

approach in which assessment and learning are integrally connected rather than separate” (p. 99). For Kazemi, Bagheri and Rassaei (2020), DA is a process-concerned, future-oriented, interactive, and ZPD-sensitive instruction. The author believes that viewing DA as completely different from traditional methods of teaching may need further investigation since DA is still integrating conventional teaching strategies in implementing various kinds of interventions. For example, the speaking abilities of learners are normally measured through traditional formative scales and followed by providing learners with the necessary related feedback. The main difference between DA and traditional instruction may exist in the addition of intensive assessment practices upon which instruction is tailored as a mediator.

Thus, the aim of DA is to determine the nature of intervention that can improve learners’ performances. Learners, here, are those who are capable of improving their performances in response to appropriate instruction based on DA procedures, where the role of the instructor is to promote their abilities, give them effective feedback, regulate their behaviors, and offer meditation in line with developing their new thinking and learning skills (Haywood and Lidz, 2007). DA, in this sense, relies heavily on the assumption that learners are able to change their learning ways through offering them a significant shift from assessing their fixed cognitive abilities linked to traditional measures to a better understanding of their abilities through various instructional-based assessments. For this reason, DA is entirely different from traditional assessments, which are product-oriented, in that it focuses on assessments as process-oriented.

Historically, Lev Vygotsky (1987, 1978) created the foundation for DA by describing the socio-cultural influences on learner’s development indicating that development and learning are bidirectional-based, where thinking and learning skills originally exist outside the learner’s minds in the context of social interaction and provided to them by more competent individuals such as teachers or parents through explicit teaching or observation. This ongoing process becomes, over time, a part of the learner’s way of thinking about the world. Vygotsky (1987, 1978) introduced the term Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which describes the area

between a learner’s current abilities and the abilities of a more competent mediator indicating that mediators should measure learners within their ZPD by asking them to do certain tasks one level beyond their current levels, and then they should measure the cognitive processes that hindered their abilities to achieve the desired learning goals.

Besides that, Vygotsky was one of the first who criticized the static cognitive tests saying that we “need to concentrate not on the product of development but on the very process by which higher forms are established” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 64). Reuven Feuerstein built on Vygotsky concepts by creating formal theories and clinical tools for DA (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1997) through developing the Learning Potential Assessment Devise (LPAD) (Lidz, 1991), which aims at finding out the modifiability of the differences among individuals in order to look for strategies that can efficiently overcome the barriers imposed by these differences. Motivated by his belief that the human mind is an open and complex system that can meet the challenge of changing environmental conditions, Feuerstein also introduced the concept of Structural Cognitive Modifiability (SCM), referring to the deep-seeded changes in the way an individual learns and solves problems (Feuerstein, Rand and Hoffman 1979).

Feuerstein, further, expanded Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of human cognitive development and the ZPD by introducing his theory of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) as a central concept of DA (Feuerstein et al., 1979) describing it as an “interactional process between the developing human organism and an experienced, intentioned adult who, by interposing himself between the learner and the external source of stimulation, ‘mediates’ the world to the learner by framing, selecting, focusing, and feeding back environmental experiences in such a way as to produce in him appropriate learning sets and habits” (p. 71). This means that the DA is not a substitute for standardized testing, but an addition to them with entirely different goals that exceed diagnostic and classification to play and exploration and intervention roles (Elliot, 2003). It is worth mentioning that researchers in this area distinguished between “poor learners” from those with learning disabilities while standardized tests failed to do so (Swanson &

Howard, 2005). This means that considering “learning potential” contributes to the prediction of future performance beyond that gained through standardized cognitive and achievement tests (Caffrey et al., 2008).

Unlike DA, results of traditional measures may not be connected to individualized interventions simply because they have never been developed to achieve this goal. While traditional tests assess the current skills of learners, DA provides information about the learners’ capabilities to improve their learning skills once they are given the appropriate intervention (Caffrey et al., 2008). Intensive research has been conducted over the last three decades on the effectiveness of DA to provide mediated learning as an intervention accompanied by academic skills instruction and found positive improvement in student achievement (Robinson-Zañartu and Campbell, 2000; Guterman, 2002).

Using DA as a part of daily teaching practice necessitates understanding two main relevant features: the general aim of DA and the required techniques used to reach that goal (Feuerstein et al., 1979; Lidz, 1991). Setting out clear goals of the DA enables instructors to identify and document the various differences between learners’ use of their cognitive strengths and provide them with the appropriate intervention that can enhance their use of currently inefficient skills in order to maximize success. Planning for the techniques means planning for Mediated Learning (Feuerstein et al., 1979; Lidz, 1991). Mediated learning refers to the intervention or teaching provided within the context of DA with techniques that help instructors explore the cognitive functions that are obstructing improved performance. Feuerstein et al. (1979) and Lidz (1991) proposed 6 models for instructor-student interactions indicating that they are powerful in improving students’ thinking and learning skills. These interactions include the mediation of intentionality/reciprocity, mediation of a change mindset, mediation of meaning, mediation of transcendence, mediation of a feeling of competence, and mediation of self-regulation.

Generally, DA became popular among educators and speech and language pathologists due to its highly interactivity and process-oriented nature (Haywood and Lidz, 2007) that can help learners improve their performances. In this research learners’ speaking abilities may be

categorized into four main learning zones: 1) speaking abilities that exceed expectations, which belong to the Zone of Actual Development (ZADa), 2) speaking abilities that meet expectations, which belong to the Zone of Actual Development (ZADb), 3) speaking abilities that can be mastered with some help, which belong to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and 4) speaking abilities that are far away from learners’ abilities to master even with some help, which can be referred to as (-ZPD). This classification indicates that both kinds of learners who exceed expectations (ZADa) and (-ZPD) require a specific kind of intervention or mediation, which is beyond the scope of the present study.

However, learners may exceed expectations in some aspects of the speaking skills while they may fail to do so in other aspects. For example, learners whose fluency is native or native-like in certain oral interaction tasks in an EFL class belong to the first category mentioned above; however, they may fail to do so in the accuracy level of language for the same assessed oral production. This would, of course, bring them to the other categories mentioned above. Therefore, the assessment would help their instructor identify areas of strengths and weaknesses so that appropriate intervention can be tailored to meet their learning needs. One can hardly say that all learners enjoy similar levels across all speaking skills. The pretest would only identify learners’ abilities in general for classification purposes while the posttest would help compare their progress or advancement level. So, the range between the higher and lower levels of actual development indicates the ZPD where the actual instructional practices should play their role (Chaiklin, 2003; Zaretskii, 2009).

2.2 Previous Research

2.2.1 Interactionist DA vs interventionist DA

The Interactionist Dynamic Assessment (DA), which is also called Feuerstein Interactionist Model is a language teaching model that integrates assessment and instruction in a dialectical way (Poehner, 2008). This model is based on a qualitative interpretation of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which focuses on helping learners perform what they cannot do independently, and develop their abilities to the next level through

assistance and interactions with the mediator (Feuerstein and Feuerstein, 2001). Poehner (2008) believes that this teaching model emphasizes ways for learners to obtain more information since it aims at improving learners' abilities to acquire language skills and working on solving relevant problems. The interventionist model, which is also called Brown Interventionist Model, is based on the number of prompts needed to get the desired answer where the learner's potential is compared to certain scores (Gutierrez, 2000). In this model, learners are required to achieve a certain number of tips. Therefore, the two models are different. According to Poehner (2008) mediation in the interventionist DA model is implied by the teacher's command and ends with an accurate response. In this model, if a student fails to perform a task successfully, the needed tips are provided.

Since two main models of DA are addressed intensively in previous relevant research namely, the above-mentioned interactionist DA and interventionist DA, most related literature and empirical research were focused on comparing which was more effective. For example, Malmir (2020) investigated the effects of interactionist and interventionist models of DA on the accuracy and speed of pragmatic comprehension of (60) advanced EFL learners using a listening pragmatic comprehension pre-and-posttest. Results indicated that the DA groups significantly outperformed the control group in their pragmatic comprehension accuracy and speed, and the interventionist DA group did significantly better than the interactionist DA group for pragmatic accuracy but not for pragmatic comprehension speed. This indicates that both interventionist and interactionist DA has positive impacts on language learning. A recent study for Bahador and Mofrad (2020) investigated the effects of the Interactionist DA on developing EFL learners' oral production while they interacted to perform language tasks. Findings revealed significant development in the oral production and performance of the experimental group in comparison to the control group which did not receive the DA intervention.

Safa et al. (2015) also investigated the effect of the Feuerstein Interactionist Model versus Brown's interactionist model of Dynamic Assessment on (40) Iranian males and females

advanced EFL learners' speaking proficiency from private language institutes in Kurdistan. The learners' performance was found to improve significantly after the interventionist approach was implemented. The researchers concluded that both the interactionist and interventionist approaches could improve EFL learners' speaking ability. However, it was reported that the interactionist approach had greater positive effects on their speaking ability as compared to the interventionist approach. In the same scope and context, Khoshshima and Farokhipours (2016) conducted a study on the role of various methods of Dynamic Assessment (DA) with a specific focus on the interventionist DA in comparison to the interactionist mediation strategies on promoting speaking abilities of (24) Iranian EFL learners. The study employed a mixed-method design involving the participation of five intermediate female students studying English as a foreign language in Iran. Two instruments, including Poehner and Lantolf's (2005) mediation topology, were used to carry out the interventionist approach of DA in this study, and Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994) regulatory scale with 12 separate mediation steps from the most implicit to explicit ones was used. The results revealed that the interactionist model of DA does not only facilitated learning but also was more engaging than the interventionist model. It was also found that the request for repetition and verification, specifying error, explanation, and metalinguistic clues were among the most frequent interactionist strategies used during the evaluation which brought about learning in addressing speaking difficulties.

Many other recent studies attempted the DA models. For example, Ghahderijan, Namaziandost, Tavakoli, Kumar and Magizov (2021) studied the impact of two dynamic assessment (DA) models on speaking coherence, accuracy, and fluency of (90) upper-intermediate male EFL learners. The results showed that DA groups could significantly increase speaking coherence, accuracy, and fluency more than the conventional non-DA groups.

2.2.2 DA and EFL Speaking Skills

Investigating the effectiveness of the DA approach in learning oral skills was less considered in literature in comparison to other language skills. However, the effects of dynamic

assessment on learners speaking and narrative abilities have received the attention of some scholars in the field in the last decade. For example, Limmerstedt (2012) investigated the difference between narratives produced by (16) South African preschool children before and after a dynamic assessment procedure. Significant differences were found between the narratives elicited before and after the DA intervention which was based on focused questions. Similarly, Cowell (2009) assigned (66) secondary students to either an experimental or a control condition to find out if DA intervention can improve their storytelling abilities. The researcher also obtained professionals views in this regard after exposing participants to the mediation. The researcher found a highly significant improvement in both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the intervention group's narratives following the dynamic assessment and intervention phase and the group-mediated teaching sessions. It was also found that mediation strategies had helped learners with their storytelling while professionals reported an increased understanding of a mediated teaching approach besides an increase in confidence.

In a similar context, Petersen, Chanthongthip, Ukrainetz, Spencer, and Steeve (2017) investigated the classification accuracy of English DA narratives of a bilingual population. While the DA administration did not follow a standardized administration protocol, the researchers created a hierarchal mechanism for teaching cycle instruction and a rubric for scoring grammatical story elements (e.g., initiation, characters, setting, emotion, etc). The authors found DA to be a consistent, reliable, and valid measure in identifying the language level of bilingual populations. Ebadi and Asakereh (2017) studied the impact of DA on the development of speaking skills of beginner and advanced English language learners through employing a DA mediation based on their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The results indicated a significant development in the participants' cognition and movement toward further self-regulation and self-satisfaction with DA.

Research on the effects of DA on improving learners' narrative and speaking abilities proves that the DA interventions in English speaking classrooms are relatively a novel and active

teaching approach that needs further relevant investigations. To this end, Zia and Farhad (2012) investigated the effectiveness of DA in improving (40) students' use of appropriate request and apology strategies. The findings indicated that DA groups outperformed Non-DA groups and that DA groups of both high and low proficiency levels differed significantly from pretest to posttest to delayed posttest. Safa et al., (2015) studied the effects of the interactionist and interventionist models of DA procedure on the speaking skill proficiency of (40) Iranian advanced EFL learners. The results indicated that both the interactionist and interventionist models of DA had a statistically significant positive effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability.

For some researchers, DA was found not only to influence learners' speaking abilities but also their related personal drives such as attitudes towards speaking or DA instruction, motivation, self-esteem and so on. For example, Siwathaworn and Wudthayagorn (2018) investigated the impact of Dynamic Assessment (DA) on ten Thai EFL undergraduate students' speaking skills after preparing them with direct instruction, guided practice, and efficient techniques to deal with their problems when taking the test. The analysis of quantitative data shows improvement in speaking across the pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test. This test design encouraged the participants to overcome their fear or shyness and gain a more optimistic view of their speaking ability. The participants also reported that DA sessions motivated them to expose themselves more to English through watching more English movies to grasp the language, listen to western singers, and pay more attention to class lessons. The participants also expressed their positive attitudes toward DA sessions saying that such kind of instruction increases their self-esteem and reduced their feelings of embarrassment to speaking incorrectly.

In fact, the author of this research believes that DA offers both instructors and learners an open channel of communication regarding the pedagogical and learning tasks. This open window may not only be confined to classroom settings but may also extend beyond formal educational settings. This mode of instruction is believed to not only improve learners' performance in certain skills but also have its

influence on both learners; inter and intrapersonal communication skills especially with their instructors and peers. The more learner's performance is communicated; the further improvement is achieved. Therefore, the findings of Siwathaworn and Wudthayagorn (2018) appear to be reasonable.

This important pedagogical implication is consistent with some other research findings. For example, Fahmi, Pratolo, and Zahrani (2020) studied the effect of DA on speaking performance of four-university Indonesian EFL learners employing descriptive-qualitative instruments including stimulating information, pre-test, post-test, feedback and knowledge expansion, and semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that DA significantly improved participants' speaking performance. The participants demonstrated that they strengthened their self-esteem on the speaking performance and commitment and motivation to improving their speaking performance. The researchers concluded that DA is a necessary instructional tool, particularly for low-level and low self-esteem learners. Jalil and Afzali (2020) also investigated the role of Dynamic Assessment (DA) of (62) pre-intermediate EFL learners in speaking accuracy and fluency over 8 sessions. Pre-and post-speaking tests and an interview format were used to obtain the data which were analyzed using ANCOVA. The results revealed significant effects of the DA in improving speaking accuracy, but it was ineffective significantly in improving the participants' speaking fluency. The researchers concluded that "DA has a promising potential as a classroom practice" (Jalil, and Afzali, 2020, p.14) as the participants in the study reinforced and maintained a positive attitude toward DA.

Due to this recent scholar's interest in the DA impacts on improving speaking skills, analyzing the related literature was a major aim for some of them. For instance, Gilani, Ismail, Kassim, Yawen and Dan (2021) conducted a deep literature review of five international peer-reviewed articles published within the past five years on DA when implemented in EFL speaking classrooms. It was found that dynamic assessment can be incorporated in EFL classroom settings to promote the development of learners' speaking skills. It was also concluded that EFL learners responded positively to dynamic assessment when the

interactionist approach structure was applied in speaking classrooms.

To sum up, DA, whether interactionist or interventionist has proved its effectiveness as a novel approach to teaching and learning speaking skills in various contexts. It has also proved its applicability and practicality for various language learning skills and stages. Further, previous research on DA has proved its significance in improving learners' personal attitudes, motivation, self-esteem, and self-confidence when speaking in English. However, the main gap in literature remains in finding out the most appropriate and effective protocol in planning for and designing the DA intervention when dealing with learners' speaking difficulties, which is the main drive for the present research.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Design and Participants

A mixed-method based on quantitative and qualitative data collection was designed to find out the effectiveness of employing a DA-based intervention in improving four sub-categories of participants' speaking skills: fluency, lexical resources, accuracy, and pronunciation. The sample of the study, which consisted of (30) undergraduate students, was selected randomly from a population of over (250) students. The participants were distributed to two groups: (15) English major learners were assigned to the experimental group and the other (15) to the control group. The participants were studying at their level six of English major at the department of English language in one of the Saudi universities. Level six refers to the number of terms that students passed since they have enrolled at university, which is equal to three years of studying. The selected participants were involved in studying a speaking course during the Fall semester at the beginning of the academic year 2021/2022. Formal letters of consent were obtained from the Department of English at the College of Arts and the participants. A pre-test, intervention, and post-test procedure was used to achieve the objectives of this research.

3.2 Data Collection

Two main instruments were employed to collect the data of this study: a Speaking proficiency test and a DA-based observation checklist. Before implementing the DA-based instructional intervention, the speaking section of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) was conducted as a pre-test. During the intervention, both the experimental and control groups were given ten sessions with content already assigned for them in the curriculum of the current Speaking Course. However, the experimental group was exposed to the DA intervention along with the ten sessions, where the instructor closely observed learners' performances, provided them with individual and groups instruction and feedback whenever it is believed necessary to do so and in accordance with the intervention plan prepared in advance. In other words, the instructor who was teaching both groups observed every single utterance of learners and provided the experimental group with a DA-based instruction. The intervention plan was dynamic in that the instructional strategies were decided in light of the progress level of learners. In the control group, however, the instructor reacted in the same traditional manner to learners' various types of speaking errors i.e., no extension of

dialogue with learners was administered in case of errors emerged, but traditional feed-backing. The learners of the experimental groups were informed and instructed regarding the implementation of the intervention beforehand. As soon as the ten sessions which took around two months finished, the same speaking proficiency test was conducted as a post-test. So, the data of this research were collected as discussed in the below sections:

3.2.1 Pre-and-Post Speaking Test

The speaking abilities of the sample were tested using the IELTS ranking descriptors. In light of the mean scores of the pre-test results, the participants were divided equally into two groups: (No. 15) to the experiential groups and (No. 15) to the control group. For example, the number of participants whose mean score was 4.5 out of 9.0 points was 8 participants, they were equally distributed to the two groups, the same was for their counterparts who got 5 out of 9.0, and 5.5 out 9. However, the number of those who got 6.0 out of 9.0 points was 4 participants and those who got 6.5 out of 9.0 points was only 2 participants. Table 1 below shows the distribution of the participants' means scores to the experimental and control group:

Table 1: *Distribution of participants to the experimental and control groups by their pretest mean scores.*

Group	Mean Score	No.	Mean Score	No.	Mean Score	No.	Mean Score	No.	Mean Score	No.	Average	Total
Experimental	4.5	4	5.0	4	5.5	4	6	1	6.5	2	5.5	15
Control	4.5	4	5.0	4	5.5	4	6	3	6.5	0	5.5	15
Total		8		8		8		4		2		30

The same test was conducted as a post test-test.

3.2.2 DA-based Observation Checklist

This instrument was developed by the author in light of previous literature on measuring speaking skills with specific use of IELTS descriptors. However, this checklist took also into account the intervention plan and specifications. It was important to identify the intervention procedure before setting out the checklist items and measures as follows:

3.2.2.1 Intervention Description

Since speaking is considered multifaceted language skills covering four different categories of integrated skills, namely fluency, lexical resource, accuracy, and pronunciation, utilizing DA to evaluate these multifaceted skills would definitely help the instructor in deciding the direction for intervention planning (Petersen, Chanthongthip, Ukrainetz, Spencer, and Steeve, 2017). DA is often structured as a pretest-teach-posttest model, which provides insight on current learning ability rather than current skillset. Every intervention provided by the

instructor should be given and governed by the duration or frequency and specification of that intervention. Such conditions are referred to as a dose (Justice, Logan, and Kaderavek, 2017) in deciding the quantity of the necessary intervention at one time and the specification of the repeated exposure (i.e., daily, weekly, monthly, etc). Whether it is called a duration or a dose, both terms refer to the instructor's engagement which can only be specified in terms of time allotted or characteristics by the instructor in accordance with the learner's actual need for development (Williams, 2012). The engagement is represented by the current level of the learner in producing a certain speaking skill such as accuracy and that provided by the instructor for instance level B2 according to CEFR. In fact, research on engagement is still being developed since the implications of interventions in terms of amount, quantity and exposure are still little (Hassink and Leonard, 2010), especially in the context of EFL.

Therefore, a dynamic assessment intervention could systematically be built around several organized steps or processes: 1) identifying weaknesses of learners in speaking skills using conventional testing; 2) implementing the mediated learning to improve learners' speaking

skills; 3) recording the level of engagement given by instructor; 4) deciding the level of learners' progress in achieving the goal of the intervention, and 5) repeating the mediated learning for those below expectations. Therefore, the proposed DA-based intervention could be well clarified as follows:

1. In light of the formal testing of the speaking skills of participants, areas of weaknesses were determined and found to be focused in the four categories: fluency, vocabulary, accuracy, and pronunciation. In fact, these weaknesses were different from one individual to another. This means that all participants were found to belong to the ZPD. What made developing this intervention plan more difficult is the fact that these weaknesses vary in level even in every individual. For example, some participants were found to be good at their fluency, maybe due to personal factors such as being exposed to intensive study in an English-speaking country before, while this learner showed an apparent weakness in the accuracy category.

2. Based on step 1 mentioned above, a mediated learning plan covering the strategies to be used, the purpose to be achieved, and examples to be implemented on each is decided as shown in table 2 below:

Table 2: *The Intervention Plan.*

Strategy	Purpose	Example
Intentionality	To improve learner's speaking skills	Fluency, lexicon, accuracy & pronunciation of learners are to be tested and improved every session.
Meaning	Improving speaking skills of learners is important to achieve their success in the major.	Learners' implementation and commitment are crucial in effective application of the plan.
Transcendence	Most speaking activities and feed backing should be suitable for learners' current speaking levels. In some cases, speaking activities should be raised one level.	In case of failure to achieve the goal of any activity, learners are required to repeat it.
Application	Most activities will take the form of debate, where the teacher will provide mini speaking lesson, observe, and intervene when necessary to modify errors.	All participants will be required to declare their opinions in the debatable topics along the ten sessions.

Competence	Evaluation of improvement of learners' speaking skills session by session.	Asking learners to repeat what they already acquired in the previous sessions (consolidating learning)
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Note: This plan was developed according to BI LINGUISTICS website: (<https://bilinguistics.com/dynamic-assessment/>).

3. During the implementation of the intervention plan, the dose provided by the instructor should be recorded in light of the observation every session. This record should indicate the learners who demonstrated high responsivity and acquisition of the targeted speaking skills and thus received the minimal intervention, those who show moderate learning

of the required modification and received the moderate intervention, and those who could hardly catch up or pick up the required level of the targeted skills and given a maximum intervention by the instructor. This engagement of the instructor can be illustrated in the table 3 below:

Table 3: *Level of engagement or dose given by the instructor during the intervention*

Minimal	Moderate	Maximum
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repetition • Rephrasing • Slowed rate • 1-2 presentations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeling • Demonstration • Multiple presentations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct verbal imitation • Non-verbal illustration • Reduced content • Performs task for learner

Note: This plan was developed according to BI LINGUISTICS website: (<https://bilinguistics.com/dynamic-assessment/>).

4. Once the learners' weaknesses and strengths become clearer, it will be the time for the instructor to address weaknesses and qualify the required achieved skills. By the time, the engagement of the instructor will be reduced to the minimum.

implementation period. Appendix A shows the observation checklist which was a simplified version of the IETLS descriptors.

5. Finally, continuous observation and recording of learners' performances as well as the instructor's level of engagement should result in the completion of the teaching-learning cycle.

3.3 Data Analysis

Two main methods were used to analyze the collected data: first, the quantitative approach was used to analyze participants' performances in the pretest and posttest. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were used to distribute participants equally to the two groups of the study. Then, in order to ensure an acceptable level of consistency between the experimental and control group before the intervention start, Cronbach alpha was employed and found to be 0.858 which indicated an acceptable level of internal consistency between the two groups. In order to find out the statistical differences between the mean scores of participants' performances before and after the experiment, a t-test was employed. This test was used since it enabled the author to find the effectiveness level of the intervention, especially in that both the mean scores of the experimental and control group were consistent before the experiment.

3.2.2.2 Observation Checklist

As mentioned above, a DA-based observation checklist was developed in a format of simplified IELTS descriptors. This simplification aimed at facilitating recording participants' speaking performances along with the ten session of the intervention. The checklist was validated by a group of experts in the field and its reliability was established by the author before conducting the intervention through implementing it twice along two weeks on a group of learners who were not within the sample. All sessions, then, were videotaped, transcribed, coded, and organized for further analysis later on. The checklist was used to collect the data about learners' progress in acquiring speaking skills during the intervention

The data collected through the observation checklist were coded and qualitatively analyzed.

Samples of the analysis can be found in the appendices.

4. Results

The main concern of this research was to find out whether a DA-based intervention could improve EFL learners' speaking abilities and to highlight how such intervention could improve learners' speaking skills effectively in the case positive findings were revealed. Therefore, this section addresses the findings of the speaking proficiency tests mentioned above as an answer to the first research questions as follows:

- First: To what extent a DA-based intervention can improve undergraduate EFL learners' speaking proficiency levels?

The analysis of the experimental and control group's performance in the speaking proficiency posttest revealed that there were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group in favor of the experimental group. This finding indicates the significant effect of the DA-based instruction in improving the four categories of learners' speaking abilities. It also indicates that this improvement in was attributed to the intervention. Table 4 below shows the descriptive analysis of the experimental and control groups by mean scores of the posttest.

Table 4: *Descriptive analysis of the experimental and control groups by mean scores of the posttest*

	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pre-test				
Between Groups	.033	.033	.086	.771
Within Groups	10.833	.387		
Total	10.867			
Post-test				
Between Groups	1.240	1.240	2.903	.099

Within Groups	11.963	.427
Total	13.203	

Table 4 indicates that the improvement received by experimental group was significant P.099.

The micro-analysis of the participants' speaking performances in the four categories of speaking skills: fluency & coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range & accuracy, and pronunciation in their posttest revealed considerable differences between the averages of the experimental group's performances and those of its counterpart for the favor of the experimental group. For example, the average of the experimental group's performance in fluency & coherence was 6.2 out of 9.0 points in comparison to only 5.5 out of 9.0 points for the control group. Similarly regarding the participants' performances in lexical resources and accuracy where the experimental group achieved averages of 6.6 and 6.0 out of 9.0 points respectively in comparison to only 5.6 and 5.5 respectively out of 9.0 points for the control group. However, the differences between groups' performances in the pronunciation category were not that significant in spite that it was better achieved by the experimental group as can be seen in table 5 and 6 below:

Table 5: *The micro-analysis of the experimental groups' performances in the four speaking skills in the posttest.*

Students' Numbers	Fluency & Coherence	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range & Accuracy	Pronunciation
S1	5.5	7	7	5
S2	4.5	5.5	6.5	5.5
S3	6	6	5.5	5
S4	5.5	6.5	6	4.5
S5	5.5	7	6.5	5.5
S6	6.5	6	6	5
S7	7	7	5.5	5.5
S8	7	7.5	6.5	6.5
S9	7	7	6.5	6.5
S10	7.5	7	5	5.5
S11	5.5	6	5	5
S12	6	6.5	5.5	5
S13	6	6	6.5	5.5
S14	6.5	7	5.5	6
S15	7	7	6.5	6.5
Average	6.2	6.6	6.0	5.5

Table 6: *The micro-analysis of the control groups' performances in the four speaking skills in the posttest.*

Students' Numbers	Fluency & Coherence	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range & Accuracy	Pronunciation
S16	6.5	6.5	7.5	5
S17	4	5.5	5.5	4.5
S18	5	5	5	4.5
S19	5	5.5	5	4.5
S20	5.5	4	5	5
S21	5	4	4.5	5.5
S22	4.5	6.5	6	5
S23	5.5	7	6	5.5
S24	6.5	7	6.5	5.5
S25	6.5	7	6	5

S26	5	5	5.5	5
S27	5	4	5	5.5
S28	5	5	4.5	5
S29	4.5	5	5.5	5
S30	5	7	5.5	6.5
Average	5.2	5.6	5.5	5.1

- Second: How can a DA-based intervention improve the speaking proficiency of undergraduate EFL learners?

The analysis of the observation checklist, which aimed at collecting data on the progress of both the learners' speaking performance and the instructor's level and quality of engagement along the ten sessions of the study, indicated that the learners' need for immediate mediation on the part of the instructor varied according to their level of speaking proficiency in the four speaking categories and changed over time according to their progression. The analysis indicates that the vast majority of participants (13 out of 15 participants) needed the maximum level of the instructors' immediate mediation in the first three sessions. These participants demonstrated a poor to average level of performance in the four categories of speaking skills: fluency, lexical resources, accuracy, and pronunciation. Only two participants showed good to excellent command of these skills and thus required minimum engagement from the instructor along these sessions.

During these sessions, it was observed that most maximum, moderate and minimal engagement teaching strategies were used. For example, most participants needed direct verbal imitation and modeling to improve their fluency and pronunciation abilities, non-verbal illustration to lead learners' lexical command and accuracy, demonstration, audio and video presentations to consolidate and enhance their fluency and pronunciation skills.

From session four to session seven the instructor's engagement was observed to be reduced. Most participants showed apparent progression in both lexical resources and accuracy. However, these participants' fluency and pronunciation skills were still poor to average. During these sessions, the instructor

employed strategies such as rephrasing, modeling and demonstration more frequently than the maximum level of engagement through the use of direct imitation except with apparent struggling learners regarding their fluency and pronunciation skills. The last three sessions witnessed learners' significant progression in the four categories of the speaking skills except. Few examples showed the minimum level of progression, especially in terms of improving their fluency and pronunciation skills.

Generally, the analysis of the observation checklist proved significant improvement of most participants' speaking skills during the intervention period. The performance of participants in the accuracy and lexical resources was found to improve apparently, whereas their pronunciation and fluency were slightly improved due to the intervention.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In light of the findings mentioned above, the learners' speaking abilities improved gradually over time as a result of the intervention. The DA-based intervention could improve the speaking proficiency of the undergraduate EFL learners. Since the four categories of participants' speaking skills were investigated, most participants demonstrated some weaknesses in their fluency during the first few sessions of the speaking classes. The instructor intervened by immediate feed backing depending on the level of individual learners' performers. For example, learners whose fluency level was poor to average and who participated with very short utterances and relied mostly on using only the adjacency pairs in response to extended involvements were encouraged to add further information, to clarify, to paraphrase, and so on. Sometimes, the instructor used the interactionist approach by

discussing the reasons for these short participations with the learners. Learners who were involved in frequent repetitions of their own utterances or self-repairs were given immediate feedback on how to extend their talk even if they thought they made some mistakes. Learners whose pauses during their talk were frequent were also encouraged to break ice by direct engagement of using various communication skills. Few examples of good participants showed a limited need for the instructor's direct engagement. Such findings are consistent with previous research (Jalil and Afzali, 2020; Gilani, Ismail, Kassim, Yawen and Dan, 2021)

As for the development of learners' use of lexical resources, those who showed poor or limited command and inappropriateness of vocabulary, it was noticeably improved by direct frequent engagement of instructor's modeling, illustrations and presentations. The same can be said regarding learners' speaking accuracy. However, learners' pronunciation, and to certain extent fluency, were hardly improved maybe due to the strong influence of the learners' mother tongue and limited exposure to the target language which was confined to the classroom practices.

Therefore, employing a DA-based intervention to improve EFL learners' speaking proficiency level proved its validity and usefulness, especially when implemented regularly and systematically on the basis of a process consisting of testing, teaching, and testing again and so on (Haywood and Tzuril, 2002; Lidz, 1991). The nature of the intervention required a high level of teaching professionalism and dedication through ongoing provision of testing and feedback that focus mainly on developing thinking and learning skills of learners (Haywood and Lidz, 2007) with a socio-cultural learning atmosphere. However, it should bear in view that the learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that the instructor should work on is complicated to a certain extent. The individual differences between learners' speaking abilities and those within one learner requires a high level of instructors' awareness of these differences and ongoing planning for their development (Elliot, 2003; Swanson & Howard, 2005; Caffrey et al., 2008).

Instructors are also recommended to be flexible when implementing a DA procedure to improve

learners' speaking proficiency levels. For example, one intervention plan may interactionist perspective to be more effective in helping learners perform what they cannot do independently, and develop their abilities to the next level through assistance and interactions with the instructor (Malmir (2020) (Feuerstein and Feuerstein, 2001). Poehner (2008) (Poehner, 2008). Finally, further research on the role of DA in improving learners' speaking proficiency is still demanding, especially the instructors' level and quality of engagement.

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