Learners' Attitudes toward Using Dynamic Assessment in Teaching and Assessing IELTS Writing Task One

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Abstract

Regarding the importance and complexity of writing among the EFL language learners, this study explored the learners' attitudes toward teaching and testing writing through Computerized Dynamic Assessment (CDA). The participants of this study were 22 Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. All the participants were adults and participated in this study voluntarily. To meet the aim of the study, the researchers developed software which contained 11 series of multiple-choice questions tests. Throughout each test, participants received feedback based on their needs and within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). After each session and test, the learners were required to write down their attitudes toward the effectiveness of CDA in teaching and testing writing. The participants wrote their attitudes in a form of diary. At the end, their diaries were analyzed and it was revealed that all the learners had positive attitudes toward the implementation of CDA in teaching writing.

Keywords: *Attitude, CDA, Writing, ZPD*

1. Introduction

In learning a foreign language writing is the most complicated skill since activities like "creating a logical idea, building a rich and proper content, demonstrating the accuracy in language and using some thinking skills such as classifying and synthesizing are involved" (Ghahremani & Azarizad,2013,p.875). Given that, teaching writing is not an easy task using a statistic way and it seems that dynamic assessment (DA) procedure holds a good potential in teaching it. Due to the importance and effectiveness of DA in teaching English skills, many researches have been done in this area (e.g., Poehner & Lantolf, 2005; Ajideh & Nourdad, 2013; Birjandi, Estaji & Deyhim, 2013; Pishghadam & Barabadi, 2012; Saeedi & Hosseinpour, 2013).

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IELTS as an International English Language Testing System provides a test that assesses an individual's proficiency in the English language across the world. According to IELTS website (2016), during the past year, 2 million tests were conducted and based on this, it can be said that IELTS is the most popular English language test for both education and migration. In more than 9000 organizations, like universities immigration departments, government agencies professional bodies and multinational companies, the IELTS test is accepted as a standard international test system for English language proficiency. Due to the importance of IELTS around the world, and the high demand of individuals for taking it, there is a need to teach it international test system for English language proficiency. Due to the importance of IELTS around the world, and the high demand of individuals for taking it, there is a need to teach it effectively. One of the important and challenging parts of IELTS exam is writing which needs to be taught properly as well.

The positive results of different studies which have shown the effectiveness of DA procedures in teaching English skills(e.g., Ableeva, 2010; Birjandi & Ebadi, 2012;Naeini & Duvall, 2012; Poehner, 2005; Shabani, 2012; Zoghi & Malmir, 2013a), led us to find out about learners' perspectives on using DA and especially computerized dynamic assessment (CDA) procedures in the process of teaching IELTS writing task one. For the purpose of this study the following research question is reformulated:
What is the attitude of participants toward CDA during the instruction sessions?

2. Literature Review

Traditionally, assessment is considered as an information-gathering activity (Poehner, 2008). Vygotsky (1998) commented on this traditional way of assessing which merely restates what was already obvious to anyone who observed the learner. Vygotsky argued that measurement must show the root of the problem and provide mediation for overcoming it.
In this regard, he introduced the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) to the field of cognitive psychology. ZPD is the distance between current level and potential level of learner which can be reduced through mediation (Ebadi & Yari, 2015).
DA derives from Vygotsky's ZPD and socio cultural theory of mind (SCT). According to Thorne (2005), "Socio cultural theory offers a framework through which cognition can be investigated systematically without isolating it from social context or human agency" (p. 393). SCT investigates the human cognition without separating it from social context (Thorne, 2005). DA is the "interaction between a mediator and a learner, which seeks to estimate the degree of modifiability of the learner and the means by which positive changes in cognitive functioning can be induced and maintained" (Lidz, 1987, p. 13).

Although DA has some advantages over static assessment (SA), it is not widely used in educational context due to its application problems (Pishghadam & Barabadi, 2012). According

to Ahmadi and Barabadi (2014), some problems with DA are its time consuming, lack of inter rater reliability and requirement of a lot of expertise on the part of teacher.

In recent years CDA has been used as a solution for shortcomings of DA. Poehner (2008, p117) mentions the advantages of CDA over DA as follows:

1. It can be simultaneously administered to a large number of learners.
2. Individuals may be reassessed as frequently as needed.
3. Report of each learner's performance is automatically generated.

The efficiency of computerized Dynamic assessment has been confirmed in previous researches (e.g.Pishghadam & Barabadi; 2012, Nosrati;2015, Ebrahimiyan &Erfani;2013). There are also some researches which have investigated the attitudes of learners toward implementing CDA in English classes.

Ebadi and Yari (2015) investigated the attitudes of learners toward DA procedure in Vocabulary Knowledge Development". In this study, six English language learners attended 15 DA sessions. To find out their perspective toward these sessions and DA, the researchers conducted a post-study and semi-structured interview at the last session of instruction. The result of the study showed that participants had positive attitude toward DA and found it effective in teaching English language skills.

In another study, Taheri and Dastjerdi (2016) conducted a study with 35 low intermediate Iranian EFL learners to explore both the effect of DA on writing skill of learners and the attitudes of learners toward DA and providing feedback during writing procedure.

The result of the study indicated that DA had significant effect on writing skill of the learners. In the second part of the study, a Persian questionnaire was administered to find out the learners' attitudes toward prompting procedure of DA. The results of this part showed that learners' attitudes toward this method were positive.

Zoghi and Malmeer (2013) explored the effect of DA on intrinsic motivation of Iranian EFL adult learners. The participants of this study were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. In this study, the researchers implemented an inter-actionalist model of DA in reading comprehension for experimental group and Non -dynamic approach in reading comprehension for control group. In order to find out the intrinsic motivation of learners, after the implementation of treatment, the learners were asked to answer an intrinsic motivation questionnaire. Analysis of the obtained data showed a significant difference between the intrinsic motivation of students in experimental group and control group. Based on the results of the study, there was a significant difference in students' intrinsic motivation when a dynamic assessment procedure is implemented and it has positive effect on intrinsic motivation of learners. In fact, learners in experimental group were more motivated and had less stress during the assessment.

The aim of this study is to find out the learners' attitude toward teaching IELTS writing task one through a developed software and CDA.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 22 upper-intermediate EFL learners with the mean age of 25. These students were chosen based on their scores on TOEFL ITP placement test. The first language of all the participants was Persian and their foreign language was English.

3.2 Instrument

TOEFL ITP tests are paper based and have academic content to evaluate the English language proficiency of nonnative English speakers. . The TOEFL ITP test consists of three sections of Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression and Reading Comprehension. For the purpose of this study, only Structure and Written Expression and Reading Comprehension were administered to the students and listening part was not used. The reliability of Structure and   Written Expression and Reading Comprehension based on TOEFL scores between January 2009   and December 2009 (Educational testing service, 2012) are 0.90 and 0.88 respectively, which shows the high reliability of these two sections as well.

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Administration Procedure

In the first phase of the study, the pretest of IELTS writing task 1 was given to all participants.   After students developed their pre-writing task 1.

In the second phase of the study all the participants took part in the 11 instruction sessions. These instruction sessions were held using the software developed for the purpose of improving the participants' IELTS writing task 1 score. The developed software of this study is a package of multiple choices questions, which is capable of dynamically assessing the writing skills of test takers by offering predetermined hints in the case that the participants make a mistake In each session, the learners had to first answer the multiple-choice questions and then write an essay and answer to IELTS writing task 1 question with the help of multiple choice questions and their hints. After each treatment session entailing the participants were required to write down their attitudes toward CDA in the form of diary. A diary is a method for collecting qualitative data to understand learners' behavior in a process such as attitudes,

changes in behavior and activities (Flaherty, 2016). According to Farrell (2016), open ended questions can be used for exploratory studies such as diaries. Therefore for the aim of diary gathering, the researcher adopted three open ended questions from Ebadi and Yari's (2015) work.

The open-ended questions are as follows:

1-What is your opinion about CDA? Do you think learning through CDA was easier?

2- How the multiple-choice tests were effective / helpful in developing your writing?

3- What is your opinion about the mediations and hints of the test? How were they effective?

In order to organize the participants' answers to three above questions, the researcher divided the learners into three groups, namely low-score students, average-score students and high-score students. This classification of students was based on their actual (non-dynamic) scores.

Those students whose scores fall between plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean were considered as average score students. Students whose scores were above plus one standard deviation from the mean were called high-score students and those whose scores fell below minus one standard deviation from the mean were considered as low-score students.

In phase three, the learners were required to answer another genuine model of IELTS writing task1 as posttest. At the end the scores of pretest and posttest were compared through paired sample t-test to find out the significance effect of CDA on IELTS writing task one.

3.3.2. Scoring Procedures

To calculate actual score, the learners get the maximum point, which is (3), or the minimum point, which is (0). The learner receives 3 if he or she can find the correct answer in the first attempt; otherwise he or she will receive no point. On the other hand, in the mediated score, for each prompts that learners use, one point is reduced from the maximum points of that item which is 3. Thus, for each item, the learners' actual score is either 0 or 3 and the meditated score is any number between 0 and 3.

3.3.3. Piloting the Questions

The researcher piloted the questions with 22 students. They were asked to answer the questions and explain their understanding to ensure that the questions were clear and their interpretations matches the researcher intentions. Then participants' responses to these questions were analyzed through theme analysis. Theme analysis, which is considered as the general methodological framework for data analysis, is defined as "a method for identifying,

analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

4. Results

4.1. Data Analysis

At first paired sample t- test was run to find out whether there was a significant difference between pretest and posttest scores of participants. As the result of test reveals (Tables 4.1 & 4.2), there is statistically significant difference between the mean of pretest scores (M = 17.40, SD = 3.50) and mean of posttest score (M = 20.18, SD = 3.08), t (21) = -12, p = .000. Base on this, it can be concluded that CDA has significant effect on improving the English language the learners' writing ability.

Table 4.1 The Results of Paired-Sample T-Test for the First Research Question.

| | | Paired Differences | | | | T | Df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 — Pretest score post test score	-2.72	1.02	0.21	-3.22	-2.32	-12.74	21	. 000

Table 4.2 The Results of Descriptive Statistics for Paired-Sample T-Test

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest score	17.40	22	3..50	.74
	Post test score	20.18	22	3.08	.65

Then in order to analyze learners' attitudes toward CDA, the participants were put in to three groups of low, average and high score students based on their actual score in CDA test. Table 4.3shows the minimum, maximum and standard deviation of actual and mediated scores of the participants.

Table4.3 Minimum, Maximum, Mean and Standard Deviation of Actual, Mediated score

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Actual score	22	156.00	273	223.5	35.39
Mediated score	22	225.00	307	267.68	25.17
Valid N (list wise)	22				

4.2 Diary Analysis

In order to elicit participants' attitudes toward CDA the answers of the participants to three above mentioned questions were analyzed and the following results were obtained:

In answer to the first question "what is your opinion about CDA? Do you think learning through CDA was easier?", all the participants at the end of the 11 sessions had positive attitudes toward learning through testing and declared that it was an interesting method and found it a highly-new one. One of the average score learners considered this method of teaching and testing as an advanced and qualified method in comparison with conventional ones. One of the high-scored learners mentioned that learning through testing is one of the strengths of this method; yet it would cause anxiety for those who cannot answer the questions in the first few attempts. On the other hand, the average-score learners mentioned that getting the correct answer immediately after the tests is the positive point of this method .

Two learners who had high scores in both pre and posttest stated that they mostly preferred the traditional way of teaching and testing. They pointed out that they could not adapt to the software very well. They did not think this method would improve their writing. Having four sessions passed and noticing progress in their writing they changed their mind and declared that using computer and software along with traditional way of teaching in class would lead to the good results.

Some other learners of low-score group stated that this method was easier and more convenient way of teaching and testing writing than the traditional one. They pointed out "there was no need to go to class because learning took place at home and the software would be your teacher". Another learner maintained that this method is convenient because it is less time-consuming and one can do whenever he or she is in the mood or inspired. Most of the learners hinted at one of the advantages of this method as time flexibility, that is they could do it

whenever they like. After seven high score students also stated that the software and the method was very helpful in improving their writing skill.

In response to the second question" how the multiple-choice tests were effective / helpful in developing your writing skill?" the learners whose actual scores were average and low declared that the tests were effective in helping them develop their writing skill. In many instances, they declared that the tests were easy, effective and interesting. After passing two or three sessions, their answers became more meticulous and precise. Most of the learners in the aforementioned groups declared that the tests were useful in terms of demonstrating how to organize the content of the writing and its different parts (i.e. introduction, body and conclusion) and what points are of primary importance and should be included in the writing. They also mentioned that the tests were helpful in finding the main idea and organizing the data and writing in a proper way about different types of graphs (i.e. bar graphs, line graphs, etc.). One of the learners whose score was average affirmed that the tests were practical and of relevance to the process of writing. The other one within the same range of score as the previous one asserted that this type of teaching and testing is a good criterion for assessing writing skill. One of the low score learners also mentioned "the tests helped him how to start writing and then develop the related ideas and concluding them".

According to the low score students the tests provided the correct model of writing about the graphs through multiple-choice test items and it could be attributed to another benefit of this form of testing. They maintained that the questions and their choices further exposed them to positive input that means accurate statements both lexic-wise and grammar-wise. For instance, one of them stated that the tests were helpful as far as it provided well-formed sentences that he previously had difficulty in finding them. The tests were also found to be valuable in demonstrating how to compare and contrast the graphs. Another point mentioned by the learners in subsequent sessions about the tests was that they found the multiple-choice form of the questions very innovative in teaching and practicing writing. With tests being in the form of multiple-choice questions and having an absolute correct answer, the learners had easier time in understanding their weaknesses. One of them is quoted as saying, "as far as the tests are in the form of multiple-choice and there is access to the answer of the tests at the same time, it could be very effective in identifying the writing errors".

On the other hand, the answers to this question among high score students were different. In the first session, they declared that the tests could not be effective in improving writing skill. As they stated, developing writing could just happen in classroom environment with the presence of teacher. In subsequent sessions by observing progress in their writing process, they changed their mind. They attributed this progress to the test's efficiency in familiarizing them with writing about each type of graph. Based on their answers this kind of teaching and testing would be best complemented by traditional way of teaching.

To answer the third question "What is your opinion about the mediations and hints of the tests? How were they effective?" Low and average-achiever students mostly declared that the

hints and mediations were beneficial. One of the average achievers said that the challenges posed by the tests helped her to memorize the points and hints of the questions better. Other students mostly with average score declared that hints were helpful because they were informative and instructive. In the following sessions, learners also mentioned that the explanations given for correct answers were very helpful and informative since they helped them understand the reason(s) for their accuracy. The low-achiever students also declared that the method of providing hints was efficient because whenever there is a mistake, it is not necessary to ask question from the teachers or students and the hints and mediations will be given automatically. The opportunity of reviewing hints and mediations was mentioned as another advantage by low achiever group.

On the other hand, most of the high-achiever students had varying attitudes. Initially they looked for the teacher's mediations and directions. They regarded this method of predetermined hints as not of much help in developing learners' writing skill. During the next sessions, however they changed their mind. One of the learners mentioned, "This type of mediation sounds like teachers' guidance in the classroom, but the difference is that these mediations are the same for all the learners".

5. Discussion/Conclusion

In this study, the learners' attitudes toward the effect of CDA on IELTS writing task1 were investigated. To be able to answer the research question of this study, the students' answers were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that at the end of the 11 sessions, all the students had positive attitudes toward CDA for teaching and testing writing. The results of this study are in line with Ebadi and Yari's (2015) work, which investigated the learners' perceptions toward DA procedures on vocabulary development. Ebadi and Yari (2015) showed that learners had positive attitude toward DA and stated that DA is very effective in developing their vocabulary skill.

The present study also showed that low-achiever students preferred CDA more than high achiever ones and developed more positive attitudes toward it as well. To put it differently, the low achiever students' attitudes toward CDA were positive from the very beginning and it remained the same or even for some improved by the last session. On the other hand, the attitudes of high achiever learners were not positive initially and after each session, they gradually became positive. Pishghadam, Barabadi, and Kamrood, (2011) investigated the different effect CDA on high and low achiever learners. The results of Pishghadam et al. (2011)'s study showed that CDA was more effective for low achievers and they could have benefited more from hints and mediations better. According to Pishghadam et al. (2011), the failure of weak students in statistic tests is due to their specific problems in learning or lack of opportunities in learning.

The results of this part are also in line with Taheri and Dastjerdi's (2016) study. Their study indicated that the positive attitudes of students toward DA procedures result in increasing their score. The findings of the present study are also in line with many DA practitioners as well. According to Tzuriel, (2000); Haywood & Lidz, (2007) learners with low score in statistic tests would benefit more from mediations during DA than rich learning experience learners. There are also studies (e.g. Tzuriel, 2003; Tzuriel & Kaufman, 1999) which showed that in students with different socio-economic background, DA is more useful for low score students than high score achievers. The results of this study revealed that high achiever students had less positive attitudes toward CDA. This is may be due to their high self-confidence. To corroborate this finding of the study, Poehner (2008) mentioned, more knowledgeable learners have high self-confidence and are less responsive to mediations.

By comparing the above-mentioned results along with the results of current study, it can be concluded that any method of teaching English (in this case CDA) could be more effective if learners have positive attitude toward it.

At the end, we hope that our research made a contribution to the emergent research on the attitudes of learners toward DA. In addition, this research was conducted with small number of students, who voluntarily attended in this study. Therefore, further research may be needed to conduct this study in other circumstances and by inclusion of more participants.

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