



Investigating the learning transfer of genre features and conceptual knowledge from an academic literacy course to business studies: Exploring the potential of dynamic assessment



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ABSTRACT

Academic literacy courses aim to enable higher education students to participate in their chosen academic fields as fully as possible. However, the extent to which these students transfer the academic skills taught in these courses to their chosen disciplines is still under-researched. This article reports on a study that investigated the potential of dynamic assessment (an assessment approach that blends instruction into assessment) in the transfer of genre features and conceptual knowledge among undergraduate business studies students in a UK public university. The data includes three students' written assignments ($N = \text{nine}$), interviews ($N = \text{three}$) and business studies tutor ($N = \text{three}$) feedback. Drawing on Vygotskian sociocultural theory of learning and a genre theory based on Systemic Functional Linguistics, the data were analysed. The findings suggest that dynamic assessment may contribute to the transfer of genre features and conceptual knowledge to a new assessment context. Implications of this for academic literacy instruction and assessment design are presented.

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1. Introduction

The value of the transfer of learning in academic and professional contexts is widely recognised (Engle, 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2013). A large number of studies (e.g., Butler, 2010; Butler, Godbole, & Marsh, 2013; Foley & Kaiser, 2013; MacRae & Skinner, 2011; Thompson, Brooks, & Lizárraga, 2003) have been carried out in education and psychology in order to understand the nature of transfer with regard to learning over the last century, and yet, it is still unclear how and why learning transfer occurs or not (e.g., see Day & Goldstone, 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2013). Importantly, there are only a small number of studies on learning transfer in discipline-based academic literacy (AL) courses (Baik & Greig, 2009). Given that a key purpose of such a course¹ in higher education is to enable students to participate in their chosen academic communities as fully as possible, the role of learning transfer from such courses to other disciplines is paramount.

In the context of higher education, many of the higher order skills and knowledge such as problem-solving are expected to be transferable by educators. For instance, in business studies, skills like structuring a case study analysis and the application

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¹ The terms 'course' and 'module' are used interchangeably in this paper.

of business frameworks are those higher order skills that are required for all business studies modules (e.g., see [QAA, 2007](#)). Business graduates are assumed to transfer the skills and knowledge including cognitive, social and communication skills from their studies to their workplace as well ([Jackson, 2013](#)). Therefore, sustaining these skills and knowledge is central to learning and disciplinary writing development. Despite learning transfer being a key purpose in discipline-based AL courses, research in the transfer of language and academic skills has only recently started to emerge ([Baik & Greig, 2009](#); [Cheng, 2007](#)).

In this paper, I report on a study that investigated the potential of a *dynamic assessment* (DA) approach in the transfer of genre features and conceptual knowledge among undergraduate business studies students in an open and distance learning context. DA is defined as an “approach to understanding individual differences and their implications for instruction ... [that] embeds intervention within the assessment procedure” ([Lidz & Gindis, 2003](#), p. 99). In this article, I begin by explaining dynamic assessment (DA) and transfer as used in this study, and then briefly review the literature with regard to ‘learning transfer’ in EAP and DA. Next, the research context and the research methodology are explained. Key findings are reported and discussed using the concept of ‘transfer’ in DA in relation to generic stages, macro-Themes, hyper-Themes and conceptual development. I conclude by highlighting the significance of DA in learning transfer.

2. Dynamic assessment and transfer

2.1. Dynamic assessment (DA)

DA is based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) of mind ([1978](#)) whereby human cognition and learning is seen as a social and cultural – rather than an individual – enterprise. In particular, central to DA is the Vygotskian notion of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) and mediation. The ZPD can be defined as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” ([Vygotsky, 1978](#), p. 86). From a Vygotskian perspective, it is important to know what a learner may be able to do in the future in addition to what they can do at present. By working in the learner's ZPD, it is possible to find out both their actual and potential abilities which is at the heart of DA. DA is grounded in the notion of ZPD, and thus assessment, as a process rather than a product.

While the ZPD is about the individual's potential development, *mediation* provides an opportunity for enhancing such development. Mediation is defined as a process that humans employ in order to regulate the material world, others' or their own social and mental activity by using ‘culturally constructed artifacts, concepts and activities’ ([Lantolf & Thorne, 2006](#), p. 79). In other words, from the Vygotskian SCT perspective, any human activity (i.e., higher mental functions) is mediated by objects (e.g., computers), psychological tools (e.g., text) or another human being ([Kozulin, 2003](#); [Wertsch, 2007](#)). In the context of this study, mediation refers to the intentional and reciprocal interaction between a tutor (and/or written texts) and the learner in relation to the problems experienced by the learner and the developmental support given by the tutor, taking into account their ZPDs. Thus, mediation, which in this study is referred and operationalised as *DA procedures*, allows the tutor to collaborate on an assessment task more closely with the learner, thereby enabling the tutor to move the learner to the next level of their ZPDs.

The study reported in this article followed a DA model known as interactionist DA as described by [Lantolf and Poehner \(2004, pp. 58–60\)](#). In this model, assistance is expected to emerge from the interaction between the learner and the teacher-examiner, thus responding to the learner's emerging abilities. Both the tutor and the student work together to reach the goal (i.e. in this study, writing academically valued texts in business studies).

Interactionist DA has certain basic procedures that practitioners need to follow (see [Haywood & Lidz, 2007](#)). These include: (1) identifying learners' current abilities through their independent performance; (2) identifying their problems and challenges; (3) designing intervention tasks to address these problems and challenges; (4) working jointly with learners to complete the task by offering feedback targeting their ZPD; (5) ending on a positive note of successful completion of the task; and (6) checking learners' application of newly acquired skills and knowledge to progressively complex tasks and contexts. These procedures were followed in the current study (see section 3.2).

To date, DA research has not employed a theoretically-based linguistic framework to analyse DA data despite previous studies clearly focusing on language and communicative aspects such as investigating aspects of listening (e.g., [Ableeva, 2010](#)), speaking (e.g., [Poehner, 2008](#)) and writing (e.g., [Alavi & Taghizadeh, 2014](#)). To track the potential effect of DA on academic writing, there is a need for using a robust language theory. This study aims to address this gap by using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) for this purpose because SFL has a well-established descriptive framework to examine language use in social contexts to achieve particular goals (see Section 5.1).

2.2. Transfer

Transfer refers to learners' ability to recontextualise their learning in a new context. There are two similar terms used in DA: *transfer* and *transcendence*. While *transfer* was used by Brown and her colleagues (e.g., Brown and Ferrara 1985 cited in [Poehner, 2007](#), p. 338) to describe more complex tasks than those used in DA tasks, *transcendence*, is associated with Feuerstein's interactionist DA approach (e.g., [Feuerstein, Falik, Rand, & Feuerstein, 2002](#)). Although DA scholars appear to use these two terms interchangeably, it has been argued that the concept of transcendence has been more robustly developed in the DA literature and is more closely in line with Vygotskian theory ([Poehner, 2007](#)).

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