A Study on the Design and Implementation of Dynamic Assessment in Senior High School English Writing Instruction

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[**Abstract**] With the emphasis on core competencies in the "English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, Revised in 2020)", there is an urgent need to break through the limitations of traditional assessment practices in senior high school English writing instruction. Drawing on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory and Feuerstein's Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) theory, this study explores the design and implementation of dynamic assessment in senior high school English writing pedagogy. The research selected two parallel classes of Grade 11, comprising a total of 66 students from a high school in Chuzhou City, Anhui Province, and conducted a 12-week teaching experiment. The experimental class employed a seven-step dynamic assessment instructional sequence, while the control class followed a conventional writing assessment model. Data were collected using pre- and post-assessment writing tests, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals, and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively with SPSS 26.0. The findings indicate that the dynamic assessment approach effectively enhances students' English writing proficiency, particularly in content development, linguistic accuracy, and textual organization; moreover, through teacher-student interaction, peer review, and self-reflection, it significantly boosts students' writing confidence and metacognitive skills. This study confirms the feasibility and effectiveness of dynamic assessment in senior high school English writing instruction and offers a practical pedagogical framework for frontline teachers seeking to implement formative assessment.

[**Key words**] dynamic assessment; English writing instruction; instructional design; formative assessment

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1 Introduction

Writing is an essential component of high school English instruction and a key indicator of students' overall language proficiency. The "English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, Revised in 2020)" explicitly states that English teaching should focus on cultivating students' core competencies—language competence, cultural awareness, thinking dispositions, and learning ability—and requires them to express their ideas accurately, organize their content logically, and enhance their written communication skills through revision and refinement. However, current high school English writing instruction commonly exhibits a tendency to prioritize outcomes over processes, with assessment methods largely relying on teachers' one-way feedback and numerical grading—a typical example of static evaluation. This approach provides delayed feedback, lacks meaningful teacher-student interaction, and fails to precisely identify students' cognitive challenges during the writing process, resulting in heightened writing anxiety, low motivation to revise, and stagnant writing development.

In response to the limitations of static assessment, dynamic assessment—an innovative paradigm that integrates assessment and instruction—offers distinct conceptual advantages. It advocates embedding assessment within the teaching-learning process, fostering ongoing interaction between assessors and learners to diagnose learners' latent developmental potential and provide tailored scaffolding support, thereby promoting their cognitive and skill development. Compared with traditional assessment, which focuses on "what students have already learned",

dynamic assessment places greater emphasis on "what students are capable of learning" and "how to help them learn it".

Based on this, the present study aims to introduce the theory of dynamic assessment into high school English writing classrooms and to design and implement a writing instruction sequence tailored to the cognitive characteristics of high school students. Through empirical research, the study seeks to evaluate the practical effects of dynamic assessment in enhancing students' English writing proficiency and their autonomy in learning, with the goal of providing both theoretical underpinnings and practical guidance for deepening reforms in high school English writing instruction and fulfilling the requirements of the new curriculum standards.

2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is primarily grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Feuerstein's mediated learning theory, which together provide a robust theoretical foundation for the application of dynamic assessment in writing instruction.

First and foremost, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory serves as the cornerstone of dynamic assessment. Vygotsky posited that learners' development unfolds across two levels: the actual developmental level, which refers to a learner's ability to solve problems independently, and the potential developmental level, which denotes their capacity to tackle problems with adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. The gap between these two levels constitutes the ZPD. In high school English writing instruction, students' initial drafts typically reflect their actual developmental level; however, through teacher scaffolding, peer feedback, and self-reflection, they can overcome cognitive barriers and attain higher levels of writing proficiency. Dynamic assessment, by identifying and addressing students' ZPDs, transforms evaluation into a pedagogical intervention that fosters growth, turning assessment from an end point into a starting point and a source of motivation for learning.

Secondly, Feuerstein's theory of mediated learning experiences provides a practical framework for teacher-student interaction in dynamic assessment. Feuerstein emphasizes that cognitive development is not the result of natural maturation but rather emerges through the guidance, dialogue, and reflection facilitated by mediators—such as teachers and peers. In writing instruction, teachers no longer function solely as knowledge transmitters or grade evaluators; instead, they serve as "mediators" of learning. By offering structured support—such as writing templates and chains of questions—alongside emotional encouragement and cognitive stimulation, mediators help students internalize effective writing strategies. This mediating role goes beyond correcting linguistic forms; it prioritizes guiding students' thought processes, enabling them to progressively develop the ability to independently plan, express ideas, and revise their work.

In summary, ZPD theory establishes the "development-oriented" goal of dynamic assessment, while MLE theory offers an "interaction-based" approach. The integrated application of these two frameworks enables dynamic assessment in high school English writing instruction to achieve a deep integration of assessment and teaching, fostering students' substantial progress in writing skills through sustained mediating interventions.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Study subjects

This study selected students from two parallel classes in the second year of high school at a high school in Chuzhou City, Anhui Province, as the research subjects. The experimental class consisted of 34 students and was taught using a dynamic assessment instructional model, while the control class comprised 32 students and was taught using a traditional writing assessment approach. Both classes were taught by the same English teacher with five years of teaching experience, and their pre-test writing scores showed no significant difference ($p>0.05$), thereby ensuring the internal validity of the experiment.

3.2 Research instruments

The study employed multiple data-collection tools to ensure the comprehensiveness of its findings.

Writing tests: These included pre-tests and post-tests, with items designed to match the difficulty level and genre of past College Entrance Examination English writing prompts. Students were required to complete a 100-120-word argumentative or practical essay within 40 minutes.

Semi-structured interviews: Following the experiment, 12 students were selected from the experimental group—stratified by high, medium, and low writing proficiency—to participate in interviews, providing an in-depth understanding of their actual experiences and attitudes toward the dynamic assessment model.

Reflection journals: Students in the experimental group were asked to write reflection journals after each writing session, documenting challenges encountered during the writing process, insights gained from peer feedback, and strategies for self-improvement.

3.3 Scoring criteria and data analysis

The writing test employs an analytical scoring rubric with a maximum score of 15 points, divided into three dimensions: language (5 points), content (5 points), and structure (5 points). The scoring criteria are based on the detailed assessment guidelines for English essays in the National College Entrance Examination. Scoring is conducted independently by two trained raters, and the final score is derived from their evaluations. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 to conduct independent-samples t-tests and paired-samples t-tests, while qualitative data (interviews and diaries) were coded and synthesized through thematic analysis.

4 Research process

4.1 Pre-experiment phase

Prior to the experiment, both classes completed a pre-writing assessment. Based on their scores, students in the experimental class were divided into three proficiency levels—high, medium, and low—in proportions of approximately 27%, 46%, and 27%. This stratification not only provided a basis for subsequently organizing peer review groups but also laid the groundwork for teachers to deliver differentiated mediation support within a dynamic assessment framework.

4.2 Experimental phase: design of a dynamic assessment-based teaching process

The experimental class implemented a 12-week dynamic assessment-based writing instruction, with each writing session following the following seven steps:

Step 1: Pre-writing preparation. The teacher presents the writing task and guides students through task analysis, clarifying the genre, audience, and purpose. Students then engage in group brainstorming and use mind maps to organize their ideas. The teacher provides a relevant vocabulary bank, sentence structure scaffolds, and sample text excerpts to activate students' background knowledge and reduce cognitive load.

Step 2: Draft writing. Students independently draft their essays in a quiet environment. During this stage, the teacher provides circulatory guidance, observes students' writing processes, records common issues, and offers immediate, low intervention prompts to students facing particular difficulties—for example, "Is your argument supported?"—rather than providing direct answers.

Step 3: Self-assessment and peer assessment. The teacher first explains the assessment rubric and demonstrates how to provide constructive feedback. Students then conduct self-assessments based on the rubric, followed by peer assessments within heterogeneous groups (comprising high-, medium-, and low-performing students). Peers are required to offer specific suggestions for revising content, language, and structure, and to complete a written feedback form. This stage partially delegates assessment authority to students, thereby fostering the development of critical thinking.

Step 4: Revision of the second draft. Students integrate self-assessment with peer feedback to revise their initial drafts. Teachers encourage students not only to correct linguistic errors but also to restructure the logical flow of their content. This process exemplifies "collaborative learning" within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) framework, with peer feedback serving as a temporary scaffold.

Step 5: Teacher feedback. The teacher conducts a multi-dimensional evaluation of the second draft. Unlike

traditional marking, the teacher's feedback follows an intermediary model of "affirmation + issue + suggestion", for example: "Your paragraph transitions are very smooth (affirmation), but your second point of evidence seems to stray from the topic (issue). Could you try supporting it with a specific example (suggestion)?" In addition, the teacher uses after-class time to engage in brief face-to-face discussions with students, offering personalized guidance.

Step 6: Finalizing the draft. Students make their final revisions based on the teacher's feedback. In class, the teacher showcases exemplary work and pieces demonstrating significant improvement, highlighting their strengths and reinforcing positive feedback.

Step 7: Reflective learning. After class, students write reflective journals, answering questions such as "Which piece of peer feedback was most helpful to me today?" and "What new challenges did I encounter during the revision process?" to foster metacognitive monitoring.

4.3 Teaching procedure for the control group

The control group followed the traditional model of "teacher-assigned tasks→timed in-class writing→teacher-graded after class→classroom analysis of model essays". Teacher feedback focused primarily on error correction and scoring, with little emphasis on pre-writing scaffolding or post-writing interactive revision.

4.4 Core differences and the post-experiment phase

The core distinction between dynamic assessment and traditional assessment lies in the following: the former is interactive and developmental, with assessment integrated into teaching, whereas the latter is unidirectional and summative, with assessment separate from instruction. Following the completion of the experiment, post-tests were administered to both classes, and interview and journal data were collected from the experimental class to provide material for subsequent analysis.

5 Research and analysis

5.1 Theoretical rationale of instructional design

The seven-step design of dynamic assessment aligns closely with the theories of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Mastery Learning Effectiveness (MLE). Pre-writing preparation and the initial draft define students' actual developmental level; peer review and teacher feedback constitute the core of mediated intervention, precisely targeting students' ZPD; the second draft revision and final draft completion represent the process by which students internalize scaffolding and realize their potential developmental level. Reflective journals make this developmental process explicit, thereby fostering the enhancement of metacognitive skills. The entire sequence forms a closed loop of "diagnosis-intervention-development-reflection", achieving an organic integration of assessment and instruction.

5.2 Transformation of the teacher's mediating role

In dynamic assessment, the teacher's role shifts from that of a "grader" to a "facilitator" and a "mediator". Interview data reveal that students generally perceive teachers' feedback as "more empathetic" and "more specific". Rather than simply pointing out, "This is wrong", teachers now use questions to guide students in reflecting on "why it is wrong" and "how to correct it". This mediating function not only addresses linguistic issues but also fosters students' awareness of writing strategies, thereby embodying the principles of "transcendence" and "meaning construction" central to MLE theory.

5.3 Role of peer assessment and self-assessment

Peer assessment plays a distinctive role in dynamic assessment by serving as a "zone of proximal development". Because peers share similar cognitive levels, their feedback is often more readily accepted and understood than that of teachers. In their reflection journals, several students noted, "Seeing my peer's mistakes made me aware of the same issues myself". Self-assessment, meanwhile, encourages students to examine their own writing from the reader's perspective, fostering self-monitoring skills. This involvement of multiple evaluative agents breaks the teacher's monopoly on assessment and helps build a learning community.

5.4 Differentiated support strategy

Dynamic assessment provides differentiated support for students at different proficiency levels. For lower-proficiency learners, teachers offer more language-level scaffolds, such as sentence templates and vocabulary cues; and for higher-proficiency students, the focus shifts to enhancing logical depth and rhetorical devices. Heterogeneous grouping in peer review also ensures that each student receives appropriate assistance through interaction, thereby addressing the issue common in traditional classrooms where high-achieving students feel underchallenged and low-performing students struggle to keep up.

5.5 Student experience and affective factors

The interviews reveal that formative assessment significantly reduces students' writing anxiety. One student remarked, "I used to dread writing essays because I feared my teacher's criticism, but now that I know I have the support of my peers and my teacher, I dare to put pen to paper." This supportive classroom environment aligns with the principles of "belonging" and "competence" in MLE theory, fostering students' intrinsic motivation to write and transforming writing from a mere "task" into a "need for expression and communication".

6 Research conclusions and pedagogical implications

6.1 Main conclusions

This study confirms that the seven-step teaching procedure for dynamic assessment, grounded in ZPD and MLE theories, is both scientifically sound and effective in high school English writing instruction. This model not only significantly improves students' writing performance but, more importantly, fosters their self-regulated learning skills, critical thinking, and metacognitive strategies through sustained teacher-student interaction, peer collaboration, and self-reflection, thereby facilitating a shift from "teaching writing" to "teaching students how to write".

6.2 Pedagogical implications

Based on the research findings, the following implications are proposed for high school English writing instruction:

First, foster a supportive classroom climate to reduce writing anxiety. Teachers should move beyond the stereotype of being "error-correctors" and cultivate a culture of "tolerance for mistakes", helping students recognize that errors are opportunities for learning. By encouraging peer review and providing positive feedback, they can create a safe, trust-based learning environment. Second, implement differentiated instruction that attends to individual differences and provides personalized scaffolding. Teachers must keenly identify students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and offer mediating support that is "timely, appropriate in degree, and appropriately scaled". For students at different proficiency levels, the content of the scaffolds and the timing of their withdrawal should vary, thereby truly achieving teaching tailored to each learner's needs. Third, strengthen formative assessment and establish a diversified evaluation system. Integrate assessment throughout the entire writing process, incorporating self-assessment, peer review, teacher feedback, and other methods. Assessment criteria should be open and transparent, empowering students to become active participants in the evaluation process rather than passive recipients. Fourth, cultivate students' reflective awareness and their capacity for autonomous improvement. Reflection serves as a bridge between experience and learning. Teachers should, through methods such as reflection journals and post-mortem discussions, guide students to focus on the writing process rather than merely on scores, gradually fostering their abilities in self-planning, self-monitoring, and self-regulation, thereby laying the foundation for lifelong learning.

7 Final remarks

Although this study has yielded certain findings, it still has limitations. First, the sample is drawn from only two classes at a single high school, resulting in a small sample size; thus, the generalizability of the conclusions requires further validation. Second, the 12-week experimental period is relatively short, leaving the long-term impact of dynamic assessment on students' writing skills unclear. Finally, this research relies primarily on human mediators; under a traditional classroom setting, teachers find it challenging to provide adequate personalized

support to all students simultaneously. Future research could explore the following avenues: first, expanding the sample to conduct confirmatory studies across diverse regions and school levels; second, extending the experimental duration to track the long-term effects of dynamic assessment; and third, integrating intelligent technologies—such as AI-based writing-correction systems—to augment dynamic assessment, leveraging technology to handle some language-error correction and basic feedback tasks, thereby enabling teachers to focus more on cultivating higher-order thinking and providing emotional mediation, and ultimately realizing a new paradigm of "human-machine collaborative" dynamic assessment.

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