Dynamic Assessment in L2 Teaching in China: Theory, Practice, and Prospects

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Abstract: This paper reviews the development and application of Dynamic Assessment (DA) in second language (L2) teaching in China. Rooted in sociocultural theory, DA integrates assessment with instruction to evaluate learners' current abilities and developmental potential through mediation. The study examines 87 publications between 2000 and 2024, including journal papers, dissertations, and book chapters, to identify theoretical foundations, implementation models, and application outcomes in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and teaching Chinese as a second language. Results show that DA improves learner engagement, metacognitive awareness, and performance, but its implementation is constrained by exam-oriented education, large class sizes, and limited teacher training. Future directions highlight AI-assisted DA models, scalable group mediation, and professional teacher development programs to enhance feasibility and sustainability in China's L2 classrooms.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In recent decades, the field of L2 teaching has witnessed a growing emphasis on assessment methods that go beyond mere measurement of current abilities and instead focus on learners' potential for development. Dynamic Assessment (DA), rooted in sociocultural theory, has emerged as a promising approach that integrates assessment and instruction, aiming to identify and foster learners' cognitive growth. In the Chinese context, where L2 education, particularly English, has long been a cornerstone of the educational system, there has been a gradual shift from traditional standardized testing to more formative and interactive assessment practices. This shift reflects a recognition that language learning is a dynamic process influenced by social interactions, cultural factors, and individual differences.

The significance of exploring DA in Chinese L2 teaching lies in several aspects. Theoretically, it contributes to the localization of international assessment theories, adapting them to the unique educational context of China, which is characterized by large class sizes, high-stakes examinations, and a blend of traditional and modern teaching philosophies. Practically, it offers insights into how teachers can better support learners' development by providing tailored feedback and scaffolding, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of L2 instruction. Additionally, it addresses the need to move beyond the limitations of traditional static assessments, which often fail to capture learners' potential and progress over time.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

This review aims to comprehensively examine the application and development of DA in L2 teaching in China. Specifically, it seeks to achieve the following objectives:(1) To clarify the theoretical foundations of DA and its distinguishing features compared to traditional assessment approaches. (2)To map the current landscape of DA application in various domains of L2 teaching in China. (3) To identify the challenges faced in the implementation of DA in Chinese L2 classrooms and propose potential coping strategies.(4) To outline future directions for research and practice in this field. To achieve the above objectives, the review addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the core theoretical principles of DA and how do they inform L2 teaching in China? (2) In

which areas of L2 teaching has DA been applied in China, and what are the main findings from these applications? (3) What are the common models and strategies of DA used in Chinese L2 classrooms, and what outcomes have they produced? (4) What obstacles hinder the widespread adoption of DA in China, and how can these be overcome? (5) What are the promising avenues for future research and practice in DA for L2 teaching in China?

1.3 Research Methods and Data Sources

This review adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining systematic literature review and thematic analysis. The literature review was conducted by searching major academic databases, including CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), Wanfang Data, Web of Science, using keywords such as "Dynamic Assessment/DA", "second language teaching", "China", "English teaching", and "teaching Chinese as a L2". The search covered publications from Jun., 2000-Dec.,2024 to capture the recent developments in the field.

A total of 87 relevant studies were selected for analysis. These include 62 journal articles, 21 doctoral dissertations, and 4 book chapters. The data extracted from these sources were analyzed thematically, focusing on theoretical discussions, application domains, implementation models, case study results, challenges, and recommendations. Additionally, some key studies and seminal works on DA from international scholars were included to provide a broader theoretical context.

1.4 Dynamic Assessment (DA)

1.4.1 Definition of DA

DA can be defined as an interactive assessment approach that focuses on the process of learning rather than just the product, with the dual purpose of evaluating learners' current abilities and their potential for development through the provision of mediation or scaffolding. Unlike static assessments, which measure what learners can do independently at a given point in time, DA emphasizes the learner's responsiveness to guidance and support, thereby offering a more comprehensive picture of their learning potential.

1.4.2 Comparison between DA and Traditional Assessment

DA differs from traditional static assessment in several fundamental ways, as summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. Key Differences Between Traditional Static Assessment and Dynamic Assessment (DA)

Aspect	Traditional Static Assessment	DA
Purpose	To measure current level of achievement	To assess potential development and promote learning
Focus	Product (what learners know/can do independently)	Process (how learners learn and respond to support)
Role of assessor	Neutral evaluator	Active mediator and instructor
Interaction	Limited; one-way (learner responds to tasks)	Interactive; two-way (dialogue between assessor and learner)
Feedback	Often delayed and summative	Immediate, formative, and tailored
Scaffolding	Rarely provided	Central to the assessment process
View of learning	Fixed ability; individualistic	Dynamic process; socially constructed
Outcome	Score or grade indicating current performance	Insights into potential; guidance for development

Traditional assessment approaches in L2 teaching are typically summative, focusing on evaluating learners' mastery of specific content at a particular time. In contrast, DA is inherently formative, using assessment as a tool to drive learning. Another key difference is the role of the teacher. In traditional assessment, the teacher's role is primarily to administer and score tests, with limited interaction during the assessment process. In DA, the teacher acts as a mediator, engaging in dialogue

with learners, adjusting the level of support based on their responses, and providing immediate feedback to promote understanding. Furthermore, traditional assessment tends to treat learner ability as a fixed trait, while DA views it as malleable and influenced by social interactions. This shift in perspective has important implications for teaching, as it encourages teachers to focus on learners' potential rather than their current limitations, fostering a more growth-oriented mindset.

2. Theoretical Basis of DA

2.1 Sociocultural Theory

DA finds its primary theoretical foundation in sociocultural theory (SCT), developed by Lev Vygotsky and his followers[1]. SCT posits that human cognition and development are socially constructed, with social interactions and cultural tools playing a central role in shaping learning.

Three core concepts of SCT are particularly relevant to DA: the zone of proximal development, mediation, and internalization. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as the gap between a learner's current level of independent performance and their potential level of performance with the assistance of a more capable other (e.g., a teacher, peer, or tutor). This concept highlights the importance of assessing what learners can achieve with support, as this indicates their developmental potential. In DA, the ZPD is operationalized through the interaction between the assessor and the learner, where the assessor adjusts the level of support based on the learner's responses. Mediation refers to the process by which social and cultural tools (e.g., language, symbols, artifacts) and social interactions facilitate cognitive development. In DA, mediation takes the form of the support provided by the assessor, such as prompts, questions, or feedback, which helps learners move from assisted performance to independent mastery. The quality and timing of mediation are crucial, as they need to be tailored to the learner's current level to be effective. Internalization is the process by which external social interactions and mediated activities become internalized as mental processes. Through repeated mediation in DA, learners gradually incorporate the strategies and knowledge provided by the assessor into their own cognitive systems, enabling them to apply them independently in new contexts.

These concepts underpin the practice of DA, emphasizing the role of social interaction, tailored support, and developmental potential in assessment and teaching.

2.2 Modes of DA

2.2.1 Interventionist DA

Interventionist DA is characterized by the use of standardized, pre-determined prompts and scaffolding strategies to assess learners' potential. It typically follows a test-intervene-retest format, where learners first attempt a task independently, then receive structured support, and finally complete a similar task to measure progress. In Chinese L2 teaching, interventionist DA has been widely used in vocabulary [2] [3].The advantage of interventionist DA lies in its structured nature, which allows for comparison across learners and contexts, making it more compatible with the assessment culture in China, which often values standardization. However, it may be less flexible in addressing the unique needs of individual learners compared to interactive approaches.

2.2.2 Interactive DA

Interactive DA is characterized by ongoing, dialogue-based interaction between the assessor and the learner, with scaffolding tailored to the learner's responses in real-time. It is more flexible and context-dependent than interventionist DA, emphasizing the quality of the interaction rather than standardized procedures. In Chinese L2 classrooms, interactive DA is commonly used in classroom discussions, group work, and one-on-one conferences[4][5] .The strength of interactive DA lies in its ability to adapt to the dynamic nature of classroom interactions and address individual learners' needs. However, it requires high levels of teacher expertise and may be challenging to implement in large classes, which are common in China.

3. Application Status of DA in Chinese L2 Teaching

China's L2 assessment regime remains heavily anchored in high-stakes standardized testing. Exams like the Gaokao, CET-4/6, and TEM-4/8 dictate curricular priorities, resulting in a product-oriented focus where accuracy in grammar, vocabulary, and discrete-point knowledge outweighs process skills like communication strategy or metacognition [6][7]. Consequently, teacher-centered pedagogy dominates, with limited room for formative feedback cycles. While recent reforms advocate competency-based assessment, implementation lags due to institutional inertia, resource gaps, and teachers' limited training in alternative evaluation methods[8].

3.1 Analysis of Application Fields

3.1.1 English Listening and Speaking Teaching

Studies have demonstrated the potential of DA in English listening and speaking teaching. Ableeva explored DA in L2 listening comprehension, showing that providing learners with graduated hints during listening tasks can help identify their ZPD and improve their listening ability[9]. Building on this, conducted a study with Chinese university students, adapting Ableeva's model to the Chinese context[10]. The results indicated that DA not only improved learners' immediate listening performance but also their ability to apply listening strategies independently in subsequent tasks. In the area of speaking, Wang implemented an interactive DA approach in English oral classes, where teachers engaged in dialogue with learners, providing prompts and feedback to help them express themselves more fluently and accurately[11]. The study found that this approach led to significant improvements in learners' speaking fluency, lexical diversity, and grammatical complexity. Moreover, learners reported increased confidence in speaking English, as the supportive environment of DA reduced their anxiety.

Another study by Chen & Liu explored the use of DA in English public speaking courses, focusing on how teachers can scaffold learners' ability to organize speeches, use appropriate language, and engage the audience [12]. The findings highlighted the importance of ongoing interaction between teachers and learners, with feedback tailored to individual needs, in developing speaking competence.

3.1.2 English Reading Teaching

English reading instruction has emerged as a critical domain for DA implementation in China, with researchers exploring how mediated scaffolding can enhance learners' comprehension strategies, critical analysis, and metacognitive awareness. In a study with 120 university students, this approach increased reading comprehension scores by 28% and significantly improved learners' ability to transfer strategies to unfamiliar texts [13]. Zhang Yanhong applied DA principles to high school reading classes, emphasizing ZPD-aligned teacher mediation and the result revealed that overly directive mediation reduced inferential thinking, while contingent scaffolding—adjusted in real-time based on learner responses—boosted critical analysis skills by 37% . Peer-mediated DA has also been adapted for reading contexts[14]. Li & Wang implemented collaborative reading circles in large classes (N=200), where trained peer leaders: Facilitated group discussions using DA prompts. Results showed a 22% increase in reading speed and accuracy, with 91% of learners reporting enhanced self-monitoring skills[15].

3.1.3 English Writing Teaching

English writing has been one of the most active areas for the application of DA in Chinese L2 teaching. Peng conducted a study on the application of DA in college English writing classrooms, developing a DA model in which teachers provided graduated scaffolding, starting with more explicit hints and gradually reducing support as learners demonstrate improved competence [13]. The results showed that this approach significantly improved learners' writing organization, vocabulary use, and grammatical accuracy, as well as their metacognitive awareness of the writing process. Zhangfocused on the role of teacher intervention in DA for English writing among high school students and found that teachers' strategic questioning, error correction, and content suggestions during the writing process helped learners identify their weaknesses and make targeted improvements [14] . Other

studies (e.g., [13]) have explored the use of peer-mediated DA in writing classrooms, where students provide feedback to each other under teacher guidance. This approach was found to promote collaborative learning, enhance learners' ability to revise their own and others' work, and reduce the teacher's workload, making it more feasible for large classes common in China.

3.1.4 Teaching Chinese as a L2

With the growing international interest in learning Chinese, there has been a rise in research on DA in Teaching Chinese as an L2 (TCSL). Zhang designed a DA framework for TCSL, emphasizing the integration of cultural factors into the assessment process [16]. The framework involves assessing learners' language proficiency alongside their understanding of Chinese culture, with teachers providing scaffolding that addresses both linguistic and cultural challenges. A case study implementing this framework found that learners showed greater progress in both language skills and intercultural competence compared to those in traditional classes. Wang focused on DA in Chinese character learning, a particularly challenging aspect for many L2 learners [17] . His study developed a set of scaffolding strategies, including stroke order hints, radical explanations, and contextual examples, to help learners master character writing and recognition. The results showed that DA significantly improved learners' character acquisition and retention, as well as their motivation to learn. Other studies in TCSL have explored DA in areas such as grammar teaching and reading comprehension [18], consistently finding that tailored mediation and feedback enhance learners' performance and development.

4. Challenges and Barriers of DA in Chinese L2 Teaching

However, the implementation of Dynamic Assessment (DA) in China's L2 education also faces multifaceted challenges including systemic constraints, teacher-related barriers, learner-related factors as well as resource and logistical challenges.

Systemic constraints are primarily driven by the entrenched high-stakes testing culture, where exams like the Gaokao and CET-4/6 exert strong "washback effects," compelling teachers to prioritize test preparation over DA's process-oriented approach[6][19]. Large class sizes—often exceeding 50 students—and rigid curricula further impede individualized mediation, as teachers struggle to balance DA's time-intensive interactions with mandated content coverage [20] [8].Teacher-related barriers compound these structural issues. Over 78% of educators lack foundational training in Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and DA principles, leading to superficial implementation[21]. Heavy workloads exacerbate this gap: DA demands 2–3 times more time per student than traditional methods, intensifying role conflict as teachers shift from "knowledge transmitters" to mediators [22]. Many default to corrective feedback rather than ZPD-aligned scaffolding due to limited assessment literacy[23]. Learner-related factors also hinder adoption. Students conditioned by traditional assessment often resist DA's collaborative ethos, with 65% reporting anxiety during real-time mediation[24] [22]. Varied levels of autonomy and metacognitive skills further limit engagement in peer-mediated tasks [17], while low metacognitive awareness reduces reflection on scaffolded learning[13]. Resource and logistical challenges complete this barrier ecosystem. A scarcity of DA-specific teaching materials forces educators to adapt generic resources [25], while documenting dialogic interactions proves technically complex and time-consuming[23]. Most critically, DA's qualitative focus clashes with institutional demands for standardized metrics, complicating scalability across China's exam-driven educational landscape [26][21].

5. Prospects and Future Directions

DA holds significant promise for transforming L2 education in China, its emphasis on process-driven feedback also strengthens formative assessment initiatives, positioning it as a catalyst for pedagogical renewal.

Leveraging technology can overcome scalability barriers. AI-powered diagnostic tools offer initial ZPD identification, while algorithm-driven feedback systems provide personalized scaffolding during

writing or speaking tasks[27]. Asynchronous mediation platforms enable collaborative tasks beyond class hours, and digital portfolios systematically document learners' mediation histories and developmental trajectories. Crucially, online micro-credential courses can upskill teachers nationwide, addressing training gaps efficiently [21]. Developing sustainable models requires pragmatic adaptation. Hybrid frameworks—embedding DA cycles within summative exam preparation—can ease institutional resistance. Focused DA implementation targeting high-impact skills maximizes resource efficiency. Scalable Group DA protocols, where teachers mediate small-group tasks in large classes, balance individualization and feasibility [18-16]. Finally, developing culturally resonant DA resources—such as mediation prompts reflecting Chinese rhetorical norms—ensures contextual relevance [25]. Professional development must be prioritized. Integrating DA modules into pre-service teacher curricula ensures foundational knowledge, while intensive workshops for in-service teachers should simulate mediation scenarios. Establishing provincial communities of practice allows educators to share DA lesson plans and troubleshoot challenges collaboratively. The creation of open-access repositories for DA materials further supports implementation [28]. Research agendas should prioritize longitudinal studies tracking DA's impact on L2 proficiency and learner autonomy across diverse age groups. Investigating culturally attuned mediation techniquesis essential. Further exploration is needed on DA's role in assessing complex competencies like digital literacy and intercultural pragmatics. Technology-enhanced DA models warrant efficacy testing, while socio-cultural studies examining regional uptake barriers can inform policy interventions [21].

6. Conclusion

Dynamic Assessment (DA) represents a theoretically robust approach grounded in Sociocultural Theory, offering a transformative alternative to static evaluations in China's L2 education landscape. Its core promise—integrating assessment with instruction to diagnose and nurture learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—has been validated empirically across domains like writing, reading, and oral proficiency. Yet, practical implementation faces significant hurdles: systemic constraints from high-stakes testing regimes, teacher capacity gaps in mediation techniques, learner resistance to collaborative evaluation, and logistical challenges in large-class contexts. Despite these barriers, emerging prospects—policy alignment with Double Reduction, technology-aided scalability, and sustainable hybrid models—signal DA's potential to reshape L2 pedagogy.

DA's unique contribution lies in its ability to reveal latent potential beyond what standardized tests capture. Realizing DA's full potential demands collaborative synergy across stakeholders: Researchers must prioritize longitudinal studies on DA's long-term efficacy and culturally attuned mediation techniques. Teacher Educators should embed DA training in pre-/in-service programs, creating communities of practice for resource sharing. Policymakers need to integrate DA principles into assessment reforms, aligning them with core competencies and Double Reduction goals. Practitioners ought to experiment with focused DA implementations. DA is not merely an assessment tool but a pedagogical philosophy, offering a powerful pathway to cultivate adaptable, strategic, and confident language learners ready for global engagement.

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