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Improving Linguistic and Pragmatic Knowledge of Hedging Strategies in EFL Undergraduate Students: A Dynamic Assessment Approach

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ABSTRACT

Dynamic assessments originated from Vygotsky's ZPD theory have been widely accepted and employed as an effective contribution to linguistic development in EFL classrooms in recent years. With this in mind and due to the importance of hedging devices in qualifying academic writing and the fact that EFL writers experience difficulties in acquiring and applying them appropriately in their writings, the present study aims at exploring the effectiveness of dynamic assessment approach on developing the Iranian EFL learners' linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies. To this end, thirty seven undergraduate students majoring in different fields were randomly assigned into an experimental and control group. The participants in the experimental group received the dynamic assessment mediation. Both groups attended a pre-test and a posttest. Consequently, the obtained scores were analyzed using SPSS V. 22. The results of descriptive analysis as well as t-tests indicated that the participants in the experimental group improved significantly and meaningfully regarding linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of modal auxiliaries. The results also showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in acquiring and employing the given hedges in their writing tasks. The interpretations and the implications of the study have also been discussed.

Keywords: dynamic assessment, hedging devices, academic writing, modal auxiliaries, ZPD

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1. Introduction

Language testing and assessment has improved along with the improvements of language learning theories and with the emergence of different perspectives toward language throughout the last century. This development has been roughly illustrated in the Spolsky's developmental model of language testing in the twentieth century. Spolsky (1976) classified the development

of language testing into three different periods: prescientific period, psychometric/structuralist period, and integrative/sociolinguistic period. The last period has witnessed most of the developments and new trends in language testing which has been labeled as 'a paradigm shift' and 'a heresy' in language testing by Davies (2003, p.357). The academic discussion on communicative competence which is commonly believed to begin with Hymes (1972) was the incentive for the moving away from the traditional discrete point tests towards alternative tests. Dynamic assessment having emerged from the work of Vygotsky and Feuerstein has been adopted in language testing as an alternative approach to static traditional assessments which have mostly been conducted as a relatively separate process from instruction. In dynamic assessment, however, assessment and instruction are interactively integrated into a unique developmental activity which can be perceived as a real formative assessment. Since dynamic assessment focuses on the learning process rather than on the results of learning, a large number of educators and researchers have been interested in employing some different forms of it as a contributor in instructing various language features and skills. The present study also aimed at investigating the effects of employing one approach of dynamic assessment (sandwich format) on ESP students' learning and applying some problematic forms of hedging devices (modal auxiliaries) as a vital feature of academic writing.

Academic writing as an important subcategory of written discourse is experiencing a new era of development and research in its own history. This is mostly the result of emerging a tremendous number of novice researchers throughout the globe who incline to communicate the results of their studies to the community members using English as the lingua franca of academic communities. The ability to write academically like any other language ability requires the writers to become familiar and equip themselves with the prerequisites and the ingredients of that specific skill in order to communicate effectively and efficiently with the established members of the community who are mostly experienced colleagues and are aware of the conventions and the features governing academic discourse. As a result, students and researchers need to gain fluency in the conventions and values of English academic discourses to comprehend their disciplines, establish their careers in the community, and successfully share their findings (Hyland, 2009). However, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies have indicated that inexperienced writers—specifically non-native ones—experience problems in manipulating these features and characteristics while writing for academic audience (Cabanes, 2007; Chen, 2010; Hyland, 2002a; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Shokouhi & Talati, 2009). The situation even becomes worse when it comes to the EFL authors (Hyland 2002a). A number of reasons have been presented in the literature for this non-qualification some of which have to do with the culture effect, first language transfer, and low English proficiency. One major solution to this problem suggested by different researchers—specifically in EFL contexts—is explicit instruction of the problematic features and aspects to EAP students (Hyland, 1996; Jalilifar, 2011). Consequently, the present study determined to approach one of the prominent features of academic writing most of authors—

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specifically EFL ones—face difficulties in applying them appropriately and in accordance with the community norms naming hedging devices. It was assumed that dynamic assessment might have the potential to be a positive contribution to the acquisition of these 'polysemous' and 'poly-pragmatic' markers (Chen, 2012; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Lorenzo, 2008) which cause difficulty for the novice academic writers to be an established member of the community. So it was particularly tried to investigate the possible effect of sandwich format of dynamic assessment on the ESP students' learning and applying modal auxiliaries as hedging devices.

2. Literature Review

2. 1. Academic Writing and Hedging

Scientific writing is not simply a mere report of research finding through a series of impersonal assertion of fact which add up to the truth (Hyland, 1996). It is relatively a complex cultural and social activity including interaction between writer and reader. "A great deal of research has now established that written texts embody interaction between writers and readers," (Hyland, 2005, p. 173). It also includes the structures by which scholars put an attitude to their statements which is crucial to scientific argument (Hyland, 1995). Similar to any other form of social behavior, academic writing occurs within a particular community with its own set of beliefs, rules, norms, and characteristics (Hyland, 2002a). As a matter of fact, Academic writing develops in a specific social setting and, therefore, requires the researcher to have account of those rules and norms while writing (Hyland, 1994; Kelly & Bazerman, 2003; Musa, 2014). In other words, any novice inexperienced researcher needs to completely abide by such pre-established and prerequisite set of norms (Kharidar, 2014).

The norms and features governing academic writing can be of so many different forms and natures. Incorporation of hedging devices in scientific writing is one such norm which must be observed by writers (Kharidar, 2014). Hedges allow authors "to express a perspective on their statements" or the assertions of others "to present unproven claims with caution and to enter a dialogue with their audience" (Hyland, 1998, p. 6). It is the way of expressing tentativeness and possibility. Furthermore, it is central to and essential element of academic writing where assertions are rarely made categorically and where there is the need to present unproven statements with caution and precision. Essentially, hedging represents lack of certainty and is applied to describe "any linguistic item or strategy employed to indicate either a) a lack of commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition or b) a desire not to express that commitment categorically" (Hyland, 1998, p. 1).

Successful scientific writing, in other words, requires writers to evaluate their material and acknowledge alternative views since all assertions need ratification. This, at least to some extent, depends on the appropriate employment of different rhetorical and interactive resources of which hedging structures are among the most vital. The reasons for the requirement of hedging academic statements can be viewed from different perspectives. Firstly, using hedging devices, authors mitigate their assertions in order to decrease the risk of opposition through avoiding personal responsibility for statements. Secondly, writers want their addressees to know that they do not claim to possess the final word on the topic by considering hedges as means

of being more precise in presenting findings. Thirdly, hedging may be perceived as negative or positive politeness strategies in which the academic writer attempts to appear as a humble rather than arrogant figure or an all-knowing individual. The final reason can be attributed to the norms of academic writing; that is to say, a certain amount of hedging devices in standard academic writing has become normalized by the academic community.

Large body of research has documented the significant role of hedging in scientific writing in general and research articles in particular (Hyland, 1998; Nivales, 2011; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Tran & Duong, 2013; Vande-Kopple & Crismore, 1990; Varttala, 2001). However, the ability to express doubt and uncertainty properly via using appropriate hedging strategies in English is a difficult task for language learners (Hyland, 1997) since, in spite of their significant role, proficiency in this area seems to be problematic to achieve in a foreign language (Hyland, 2002b). A large number of studies have indicated that ESL learners have problems in interpreting and employing hedges appropriately (e.g. Bonyadi, Gholami, & Nasiri, 2012; Cabanes, 2007; Chen, 2010; Hyland & Milton, 1997). The difficulty of acquiring and interpreting hedging devices and modality is, to some extent, due to their complex nature, the absence of a clear-cut categorization for the structures which are involved in expressing modal meaning, the extended number of linguistic devices existing for expressing degrees of doubt and certainty, and finally, the fact that these linguistic forms are polysemous and polypragmatic (Chen, 2012; Falahati, 2004; Hyland, 1996b, 1997; Lorenzo, 2008).

Luckily, many scholars believe that learning how to interpret and use hedging devices effectively and appropriately is something that can be taught via making student writers aware of and drawing their attention to hedging resources and through direct instruction (e.g. Hyland, 1998; Wishnoff, 2000). Unfortunately, few, if any, published ESP courses include and instruct interpersonal aspects of academic writing and it still appears to be rare for EAP/ESP students to be instructed explicitly about hedging (Hyland, 1995; Wishnoff, 2000). Needless to say that hedging is a crucial discourse feature that novice academic writers must be equipped with if they expect the academic community to take their ideas and claims seriously (Nivales, 2011). As a result, Falahati (2004) suggested that it is the responsibility of EAP teachers to make the students aware of and sensitize them regarding the appropriate use of modality and hedging devices in academic discourse. He also emphasized that teachers of scientific writing should teach student writers how expert authors apply hedging devices and modify their propositions appropriately. The present study, with the aim of seeking an alternative approach to explicit instruction, attempted to investigate the effects of dynamic assessment as a beneficial contribution to language instruction on the students' acquisition and use of hedging devices.

2. 2. Dynamic Assessment

Dynamic assessment is essentially constructed on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind which strongly suggests that it is the social and cultural contexts that determine learners' cognitive development. The theory attempts to be responsible for the processes leading to learning and change in cognitive abilities. It supposes that human abilities are not static but are in

direct transactional relationships with the surrounding world (Haywood & Lidz, 2007). Learning and development are believed to take place via interactions with others. For Vygotsky cognitive abilities are not innate and static but are emergent and dynamic. It is through involvement in various experiences and activities and via being mediated by the people around them that a person develops her/his cognitive functions in specific ways (Ajideh & Nourdad, 2012). That is to say, learners require assistance of another person to carry out a new task initially and they can perform the same task independently only after internalizing it. In fact, it is a demonstration of the Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) which has been proposed as a cornerstone of the human cognitive developments. The ZPD is central to sociocultural theory of minds and demonstrates the dialogic nature of processes involved in teaching and learning (Nassaji & Cumming, 2000). Accordingly, there seems to be a distance or gap between what the individual is able to perform independently, without the help from others, and his potential ability in performing a task and solving a new problem. Vygotsky (1978) himself presents the definition of zone of proximal development as: "The distance between the actual developmental 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" (p. 24). To put it simply, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development is perceived as the difference between the individual's actual level of development and his/her level of performance which can be reached in collaboration with more knowledgeable one (Hessamy & Ghaderi, 2014).

Dynamic assessment, derived from Vygotsky's theory of the ZPD, concentrates on what a learner is capable to perform with the assistance of a teacher, and the learner's learning potential is determined by the type and amount of mediation required for a learner to come to the ability to do a task. In other words, the learner will be able to manage to solve problems by working through her/his limitations as s/he interacts and collaborates with the teacher who presents just the mediation(s) required to help the learner improve in the given activity. Therefore, dynamic assessment brings together assessment and instructional activities so that learner's development can be enhanced (Naeini & Duvall, 2012).

Dynamic assessment can be seen as a teaching approach that offers a diagnostic awareness of the position the learner is in currently and simultaneously enhances learner's development by offering him special mediations or small hints during the procedure of assessment, helping him to overcome or move beyond the limitations to problem solving (Baek & Kim, 2003; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). More specifically, dynamic assessment offers some kinds of instructional intervention referred to as mediation and is continuously attuned and adjusted to the learners' feedback to instruction. That is to say, in dynamic assessment the learner's responses are exploited as a springboard for the assessment of the learning process in a deeper and more systematic way (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). As dynamic assessment provides individuals with an opportunity to learn, it enjoys the potential to demonstrate important information about their learning processes and strategies. Therefore, it presents potentially useful implications about teaching (Baek & Kim, 2003).

Dynamic assessment observes Vygotsky's belief that the main responsibility of education is not to find and prove that there exist problems in the learners' learning procedure but to explore for the reasons underlying such problems and accordingly to assist the learners to establish new objectives for development (Zhang, 2011). Dynamic assessment emphasizes that the assessment and instruction are inseparable phenomenon (Grigorenko, 2009; Lantolf, 2009; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008) stating that instructional mediation is the essential part of a comprehensive evaluation of the learner's ability which will at the same time enhance the development of his/her ability. In turn, a careful evaluation of his/her specific ability is essential before any instruction so as to be able to guide the learner in the process of his/her development. Accordingly, dynamic assessment challenges dominant and traditional views on instruction and assessment by stating that they have to be unified into a single phenomenon in which different types of support are presented to discover the scope of learner's abilities while, at the same time, contributing to his development (Zhang, 2011). With this in mind, one can come to the conclusion that the definition which is proposed by Lantolf and Poehner (2004) can be concerned as a rather comprehensive one:

> DA integrates assessment and instruction into a seamless, unified activity aimed at promoting learner development through appropriate forms of mediation that are sensitive to the individual's (or in some cases a group's) current abilities. In essence, DA is a procedure for simultaneously assessing and promoting development that takes account of the individual's (or group's) zone of proximal development (p.50).

Dynamic assessment can be viewed as an umbrella term referring to a variety of and sometimes heterogeneous approaches all of which share one common essential element: instruction or mediation and feedback are offered as inseparable part of the process of assessment (Elliott, Grigorenko, & Resing, 2010). Dynamic assessment refers to administration procedures rather than assessment instruments; in fact, any type of test can be administered as dynamic or non-dynamic. Supporting this view, Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p. 331) argue that "what makes a procedure dynamic or not is whether or not mediation is incorporated into the assessment process".

Several approaches to dynamic assessment have been proposed by different scholars. The models generally differ from each other in the way they approach mediation (Poehner, 2008). Lantolf and Poehner (2004) propose the terms interventionist and interactionist to describe two approaches to dynamic assessment. With interactionist dynamic assessment, mediation is emergent; that is, it is formed from the cooperative interaction between the assessor and the test taker. Interventionist dynamic assessment, on the other hand, "uses standardized administration procedures and forms of assistance in order to produce easily quantifiable results …" (Poehner, 2008, p. 18).

In a different categorization of dynamic assessment studies, Sternberg and Grigorenko (as cited in Elliott, Grigorenko & Resing, 2010) distinguish between the two important types of mediation—the sandwich and the cake formats. In the sandwich format, the mediation occurs between a pre- and post-test. However, they describe the 'cake' format as ongoing

procedure in which mediation is done throughout assessment and assistance is presented as soon as an important problem is emerged item by item over the testing session.

Dynamic assessment as an effective instructional approach has been warmly welcomed by second language practitioners and researchers (e.g. Ableeva, 2010; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Poehner, 2008; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). As a result, a great number of studies have been conducted aiming at probing the effects of dynamic assessment on different aspects of language learning including reading comprehension (Ajideh & Nourdad, 2012; Birjandi, Estaji, & Deyhim, 2013; Naeini & Duvall, 2012), listening comprehension (Ableeva, 2010; Hashemi-Shahraki, Ketabi, & Barati, 2015; Hidri, 2014; Shabani, 2014), writing tasks (Ghahremani & Azarizad, 2013; Thouësny, 2010; Zhang, 2011), vocabulary learning (Fatemipour & Jafari, 2015; Hessamy & Ghaderi, 2014), etc. Most of the studies conducted on applying dynamic assessment in teaching second or foreign language learning features have reported the relative successfulness of the approach in language learning classrooms.

With this in mind, and due to the fact that modal auxiliaries as an important resource of hedging strategies are polysemous and polypragmatic causing problems specifically for EFL learners, the present study intended to apply and evaluate dynamic assessment as a powerful alternative to teaching approaches in instructing this problematic language feature in EFL situation. To this end, it adopted the sandwich format of dynamic assessment to instruct modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies to EFL undergraduate university students since it was assumed that the carefully designed mediations of a dynamic assessment may be particularly efficacious in promoting the knowledge of modal auxiliaries successfully. Therefore, the following research questions will be addressed in the study:

1) Does dynamic assessment-based instruction have any significant impact on the improvement of the given hedging knowledge of the Iranian EAP undergraduate students? If yes, to what extent?
2) Is there any significant difference in the development of the EAP learners' knowledge of the given hedging devices between the experimental and control groups?

The significance of the present study is taken for granted since, to the best knowledge of the researchers, no study has been reported in the literature to examine the effectiveness of dynamic assessment on the hedging devices acquisition so far particularly in Iranian EFL situation.

3. Methodology

3. 1. Participants

The thirty seven participants of the study were all senior undergraduates majoring in different fields and studying at Islamic Azad University in the city of Gonabad. They enrolled in an English academic writing course for undergraduate students which were held by the researcher in one of the language institutes in the city to increase their academic discourse pragmatic awareness and improve their ability to understand and apply epistemic modality markers as hedging devices appropriately. For all of the participants English was a foreign language. All students were checked for the same cultural background and nationality (Iranian) and were L1 speakers of Persian to control the possible differences attributable to cultural and linguistic background. They ranged in age from 21 to 24, with twenty one females

and sixteen males. All of the students were required to have taken and passed all their ESP courses at their universities as a prerequisite for participating in the study to ensure the relative homogeneity regarding academic writing knowledge. Moreover, they all were checked for not having any other experience in attending EAP classes other than their mandatory courses at university. The students were then randomly assigned into the experimental and control group through applying a table of random numbers. The experimental and the control group consisted of nineteen and eighteen students respectively. All of the participants were required to attend the classes regularly. The students in the two groups attended the classes three sessions a week for a period of five weeks. In the experimental group, sandwich format (test-mediation-retest) of dynamic assessment was practiced whereas in the control group only non-dynamic or traditional assessment-based instruction was conducted.

3. 2. Instruments

Four instruments were employed in the current study to collect the necessary data to answer the research questions posed previously. A 25-item multiple choice test was designed by the researchers to assess the participants' semantic and linguistic knowledge of the modal auxiliaries as hedges (See Appendix A). To assess the students' knowledge of pragmatic and use regarding the same devices, they were also supposed to complete an academic writing task designed by the researchers and bring it in before the treatment. In other words, they were given some prompts according to which they were required to write at least a paragraph (See Appendix B). Both of these were regarded as the pre-test of the study. The post-test phase also included a parallel form of the multiple choice test used as pretest as well as a second writing task. The two parallel multiple choice tests were checked for item characteristics and reliability in a pilot study conducted on twenty nine students of the relatively similar qualifications of the sample of the study. The content validity of the tests was also ensured by two related experts. Of course, after the pilot study, some items were revised and some were omitted. Finally, it is noteworthy that the instruments for the post-test were designed in parallel with the pre-test ones in terms of content, length, and level of difficulty.

3. 3. Procedure and Data Analysis

Prior to the mediation, baseline data on the participants' use of hedging devices and their knowledge of epistemic modality markers were gathered from both the experimental and control groups investigating samples of their academic writings as well as exploiting the results of the 25-item pretest administered at the first session class of the two groups. To quantify the data in the writing samples one score assigned for each case of the properly used hedging device in the context. In the experimental section, dynamic assessment approach was applied in class after the pre-test stage. Dynamic procedure in the experimental group included mediation performed by the teacher (the researcher) including explanations, suggestions, hints, prompts, and more vitally leading questions by the teacher. The mediation program was provided based on the participants' performances in the pre-test. It was aimed at supporting the participants in their improvement of conceptual understandings of epistemic modality markers that would assist them in applying hedging strategies in their academic writings. The control group only received the regular instruction. In

other words, they were only provided with the static assessment procedure. To see if the mediation of dynamic assessment procedure led into any improvement in participants' knowledge and behaviors, the two groups of participants were asked to sit for the post-test and do their second academic writing tasks. The writing samples were then collected and investigated for the appropriately occurred instances of hedging devices. The relative frequency of epistemic modal auxiliaries per one thousand words was considered as the score obtained by the student in each writing sample.

So as to find answers to the given research questions of the current study, the data collected through pre- and post-test stages were analyzed using SPSS version 22. At first, the pre-treatment data for both the control and the treatment group which included the gained scores from the first academic writing task and the 25-item pre-test were examined in order to make sure that the two groups of participants were roughly equivalent. Therefore an independent sample t-test was calculated (Table 2) to identify the possible discrepancies between the two groups regarding their gain scores. Furthermore, a two-tailed dependent sample t-test was also calculated to determine whether the participants in the experimental group made any progress from their pre-test to post-test regarding the given hedging devices (Table 3). Finally, the obtained scores by the experimental group after the mediation in their post-test tasks were compared to the scores gained by the control group performing an independent sample t-test to identify the differences between the two groups in improving the given knowledge (Table 4).

4. Results

As mentioned before, the two main research questions are to be responded through the study. To this aim, the collected data for the participants of the study attending the control and experimental groups from both the pre- and post-test stages were analyzed using the SPSS Version 22. Table 1 represents the main descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test scores for the two groups in this study. This table demonstrates the number of students, the mean scores, the standard deviations, and standard error of means of the experimental and control group.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for control and experimental groups

	group	number	mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PRETEST	Experimental	19	9.42	3.74	0.60
	Control	18	9.06	2.95	0.58
POSTTEST	Experimental	19	28.32	2.63	0.86
	Control	18	23.44	2.46	0.70

As Table 1 indicates, the two groups in pre-test tasks gained approximately similar mean score, 9.42 and 9.06 for the experimental and control groups respectively. However, the obtained mean scores in the post-test tasks for the two groups reveals a considerable difference (28.32 for the experimental group vs. 23.44 for the control group). This shows that the experimental group outperformed the control group in developing the academic hedging knowledge and their use after the treatment as the result of the dynamic assessment mediation. The table also reveals that the two groups of participants improved their hedging knowledge of epistemic modal verbs considerably from the pre-test stage to the post-test stage.

Exploiting the obtained data presented in Table 1, the study strived to answer the research questions posed earlier. However, before that, the researchers needed to make sure that the two groups involved in the study are roughly equivalent

in terms of their previously achieved knowledge of modality markers as hedging devices as a prerequisite for having a safe comparison in later stages. Accordingly the obtained scores of the pre-test tasks were put into an independent t-test to see if there is any significant difference between the two groups. It is noteworthy that all the related assumptions have also been met in advance. The outcomes of performed t-test are presented in the Table 2.

Table 2. The result of independent t-test for the control and experimental groups in pre-test

		Levine's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (two-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Dif.	95% confidence Interval of the Dif. Lower	Upper
Hedging_pre	Equal Variances Assumed	.130	.721	.436	35	.666	.36550	.83872	-1.33720	2.06819
	Equal Variances Not Assumed			.437	34.995	.665	.36550	.83716	-1.33404	2.06503

As Table 2 indicates, the experimental group did not differ significantly from the control group at the start of the study with regard to their knowledge of the given hedging devices ($t(35) = 0.436$, $p > 0.05$). This is an indicator of the fact that the two groups of participants entered the study with relatively equivalent knowledge of the given hedging strategies.

Subsequently, in order to answer the first research question, that is, to explore whether employing dynamic assessment process produces any significant influence on the improvement of the participants' knowledge of the given hedging devices the paired (dependent sample) t-test was run on the obtained scores from the experimental group's pre- and post-tests. The results of the comparison are demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3.The result of paired t-test for the experimental group in pre- and post-test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% confidence Interval of the Dif. Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 pretest-posttest	-18.895	3.9985	.91733	-20.822	-16.9675	-20.598	18	.000

As the results presented in Table 3 shows, the participants' hedging knowledge in the experimental group have been affected significantly by the dynamic assessment mediation they received ($t(18) = -20.598$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, they progress considerably regarding the given hedging devices as the result of the dynamic assessment mediation.

In order to detect the mean differences concerning dynamic vs. non-dynamic assessment effect, an independent sample t-test was computed comparing the control and experimental groups' mean scores on the post-test. Table 4 reports the results of the independent sample t-test for the two groups' post-test scores.

Table 4. The result of independent t-test for the control and experimental groups in post-test.

		Levine's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (two-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Dif.	95% confidence Interval of the Dif. Lower	Upper
Hedging_post	Equal Variances Assumed	.829	.369	4.38	35	.000	4.8713	1.1127	2.61242	7.13027
	Equal Variances Not Assumed			4.41	33.929	.000	4.8713	1.1056	2.62440	7.11829

As the Table 4 illustrates, the result of independent t-test shows a significant difference between the two groups' mean scores on the post-test ($t(35) = 4.38$, $p < 0.05$). This could put us on a safe ground to claim that applying dynamic assessment as a contribution to instructing hedging devices is more effective and beneficial than merely conducting non-dynamic assessment for the undergraduate EFL learners having attended in the study.

5. Discussion

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The current study was designed to investigate if the students' knowledge and use in terms of hedging devices in their academic writing can be affected by performing one specific format of dynamic assessment (sandwich format) in class. To this end, a sample of undergraduate students majoring in different fields were enrolled and assigned into the experimental and the control groups to see the possible facilitative effect of dynamic assessment mediation and its impact on the participants' knowledge of hedging as pragmatic strategies in academic discourse. The findings uncovered that the dynamic assessment approach exploited in the study produced a significant and meaningful influence on the participants' acquisition and employment of modality markers as hedging strategies. The general implication is that dynamic assessment-based mediation can be beneficial in improving linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of hedging devices in Iranian EFL learners. The findings of the present study are in concordance with the results of previous studies in the literature which confirmed the positive effectiveness of dynamic assessment procedures on learners' developing different language skills and language components (e.g. Ajideh & Nourdad, 2012; Birjandi, Estaji, & Deyhim, 2013; Hessamy & Ghaderi, 2014; Naeini & Duvall, 2012; Poehner, 2008). Moreover, the results of the study provide additional support for ZPD, that is, Vygotsky's ideas about the nature and process of development.

The outcomes of the study also support the idea that dynamic assessment can be a beneficial instructional alternative to other teaching approaches and methods. However, although it seems to be a successful approach in developing learners' knowledge in different language areas it does not mean that it can be used as a replacement for static assessment, but as a complement procedure with traditional methods of assessing students. By using dynamic assessment mediation with standardized test instruments, we can gain more insight into the learning potential of the learner in that specific area of language under study. This would lead to identification of the learner's ZPD which, in turn, can help the mediator to present hints and assistance adjusted to the learner's knowledge level.

The findings of the present study along with the other dynamic assessment research imply that assessment is not only a phenomenon employed in education for merely assessing learner's knowledge and achievement and comparing him with the other learners or a criterion, but also a process for helping him learn and develop his knowledge of specific areas of difficulty and complexity. Dynamic assessment emphasizing on the assessor's appropriate mediation and adjusted interaction with the learner in his specific ZPD attempts to explore the limitations and detect hindering factors in development process, improves them as much as possible, and tries to push the individual a step further in the learning process. So, this fact can be a good reason why hedging knowledge—as an accepted area of difficulty—of the participants in experimental group of the current study increased significantly after performing the dynamic assessment procedure.

Another important characteristics of dynamic assessment that can be adopted as a logical interpretation of the findings of the study is its individualized look towards learning. As each individual attends the class with a unique ZPD regarding the skill and knowledge to be learned, s/he must be dealt with individually and provided with individual and unique hints and guidance

appropriate to his/her ZPD during the instruction. Comparing the performance or learning potentials of each learner with other learners and providing all learners with the same instructional material and strategies does not seem logically to be as effective as the processes involved in dynamic assessment which enjoy an individualized vision to learning and try to improve the performance of each individual learner a step above his/her current stage of ability.

The findings of the current study are also an indicator of applying a kind of mediation which is considered by the dynamic assessment as appropriate since any kind of mediation for helping the learners effectively or even assisting them only in carrying out a specific task without informing them of the proper strategies or providing them with the basic points about that task cannot be viewed as the type of appropriate mediation intended by dynamic assessment (Poehner, 2008). The dynamic assessment mediation should be adjusted to the test taker's appropriate level as indicated by his ZPD. Moreover, the aim of the mediation in dynamic assessment is not to assist learners to accomplish a specific task successfully but it is aimed at helping them learn how to perform the given task and transfer their ability to perform other similar tasks independently in later times. The acceptable performance of the participants of the present study in the mediated group in their post-test as a similar task to the pre-test without the help of the mediator indicates that they have been provided with appropriate mediation.

Another important implication of the study which can be inferred from the findings is the fact that although the linguistic competence seems to be the necessary prerequisite for the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999), it does not guarantee an equal level of pragmatic competence. The participants' linguistic proficiency in this study seemed to be at an appropriate level to enjoy an equal level of pragmatic competence regarding proper employment of hedging devices in their discourse since they seemed to have the linguistic abilities to comprehend the purpose and meaning of the hedging markers as presented to them through the mediation, and to apply them in their writing tasks in a larger number than they had in their pre-test. However they seemed to lack that competence at the beginning of the study as it was demonstrated by their low performance in the pre-test tasks. Hence, it can be implied that the pragmatic knowledge such as the acquisition and use of hedging devices in academic writing, needs to be dealt with in specific instructional approaches one of which can be referred to as dynamic assessment mediation. To put it in simple words, dynamic assessment procedure can be safely applied in EAP classes as a successful approach for developing learners' pragmatic competence in general and the way to use hedging devices properly in academic texts in particular.

6. Conclusions and Implications

The results of the current study indicated that dynamic assessment had a significant and meaningful influence on enhancing the student's achievement in pragmatic knowledge of modal auxiliaries as hedging strategies in academic writing. It was also revealed that participants who had benefited from dynamic assessment mediation had a higher gain score of hedging devices in comparison with those who did not experience the mediation procedures in the control group. These findings lend more empirical support for the

theory of ZPD and dynamic assessment approaches. They also implied that the pragmatic awareness of EFL learners specifically in the area of hedging academic claims does not necessarily develop with the improvement of linguistic competence of the learners but needs to be dealt with through special instructional approaches such as dynamic assessment mediation.

The outcomes of this study may offer insightful implications to those involved in EAP educational administrations specifically EAP instructors and test developers as well as EAP syllabus and curriculum designers and also under- and post-graduate students who are interested in developing their ability in acceptable academic reading and writing.

Even though the study firmly supported the useful and positive role of intervention-based dynamic assessment (sandwich format) in promoting the learners' pragmatic knowledge of modal auxiliaries, there is of course a need for further research to be conducted not only in the area of modality markers but also with other sources of hedging strategies as well as any other kinds of pragmalinguistic strategies in academic writing with learners of different linguistic competence to better uncover the relative contribution of dynamic assessment to the pragmatics learning process. It is also suggested to compare the relative impact of different types and formats of dynamic assessment on the leaners' development in the given area in future studies.

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Appendix 1: A 25-Item Multiple-Choice Instrument

Read each item carefully and choose the one alternative that best completes the statement.

1. When Jack was a teenager, he …… swim very well. He won a lot of medals in different competitions!

a. had to b. can c. could d. was able to

2. Their company …… go bankrupt if they don't try to find more financial sources quickly!

a. should b. would c. shouldn't d. may
3. The manager's trip took more than two weeks. He …. exhausted after such a long trip.
a. must be b. can be c. had better be d. is
4. The CD-player isn't working. It … damaged by the children.
a. should have been b. has been c. may have been d. must have been
5. I've redone this physics problem more than ten times all of which I came to the same answer which did not correspond to the answer key. The answer in the book …… be wrong!
a. have to b. may c. must d. should
6. Sara didn't answer my telephone yesterday. She …… asleep at home at that time.
a. might be b. was c. could be d. may have been
7. Michael was late for school this morning. He ……been on time.
a. had to b. should have c. could have d. must have
8. Susan ……the job of taking care of her younger sister when her mother went to work.
a. must have gotten b. would get c. should get d. had better get
9. I ……to the post office yesterday. I passed right by it.
a. could go b. could have gone c. went d. may have gone
10. "Don't worry, your son ..... eventually succeed", the teacher assured us.
a. might b. would c. will d. could
11. My old aunt is unreliable. What she says ….. be believed.
a. might not b. may not c. cannot d. must not
12. If your sister wants to pass her exams, she ..... study very hard.
a. may b. must c. will d. can
13. Teacher: Well. Now imagine that you are on a trip to Paris, what ..... you do there?
a. would b. can c. will d. may
14. Jenifer was quite definite about it. So, she assured me that she ..... come.
a. will b. shall c. would d. should
15. You said that your father would come over right after work, so he …… be here by 8:00.
a. should b. could c. have to d. can
16. I think I … hold my breath longer than you?
a. can b. may c. must d. would
17. Librarian: All right. You ..... study here as long as you don't make any noise.
a. can b. could c. will d. might
18. I think Jack …… at least offer to help you. After all you've done for him, it's only fair.
a. must b. may c. might d. would
19. Epistemic modal auxiliaries …… convey a wide range of meanings.
a. should b. can c. may d. will
20. The fact that the non-native student writers do not moderate their assertions sufficiently …..be due to inadequate language proficiency.
a. should b. would c. must d. will
21. By making such fair laws, it …. be possible to remove other unfairness and discrimination from the society.
a. might b. must c. could d. will
22. It seems that the only real solution to the managerial problems …. be to let the teachers choose their own efficient manager.
a. should b. would c. shall d. will
23. Explicit instruction … therefore help accelerate its acquisition.
a. will b. must c. should d. may
24. Such differences in use … make non-native writers vulnerable to the risk of not following the community conventions.
a. should b. can c. would d. must
25. It can be concluded that adverbs ….. easier for novice writers in handling certainty.
a. are b. may be c. have been d. could be

Appendix 2. A Writing Task Test

Read the following prompt carefully and write as much as you can (at least a paragraph) about what you are asked.

Cancer is known as an abnormal growth of body cells. There are more than one hundred types of cancer, including lung cancer, skin cancer, and breast cancer. Cancer causes and symptoms mostly vary depending on the type. Cancer treatment, nowadays, may include various methods. Besides, there are different ways to prevent many cases of the disease in large groups of people. It is also believed that more than half of cancer deaths could be prevented.

Write an essay on the potential causes of cancer, its symptoms, and the ways it can be prevented and cured.