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van der Veen, Chiel; Poland, Mariëlle

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Chapter 7

Dynamic Assessment of Narrative Competence

Chiel van der Veen and Mariëlle Poland

Language Use in Socio-cultural Practices

“Anyone who writes something down and assumes that another will be able to understand exactly what the writer means is a fool”, according to Plato (Egan and Gajdamaschko 2003, p. 84). One can write something down and feel competent in doing so, but not employ it in a socially appropriate way in order for the reader to understand it. The same holds true for the reader. One can technically be able to read the words, sentences and text, but not comprehend it in a socially appropriate way. According to van Oers (2007, p. 300), “the important point about language use is the ability to employ it in functional and acceptable ways in socio-cultural practices”. Within concrete socio-cultural practices, the cultural and personal value (e.g. Leontev 1978) of language as a communicative tool becomes evident. For example, when a pupil has to read out loud and faultlessly a list of words just because his teacher asks him to do so, there remains little to no cultural and personal value (*sense*) within this concrete activity. After all, this activity is not an ecologically valid version of a concrete literacy activity as appears in socio-cultural life (van Oers 2007, p. 301). Of course, in the context of education such activities may be simplified versions of cultural activities, but they still need to exhibit all the defining qualities of the original activity. According to Leontev (1981), neglecting

C. van der Veen, M.Sc. (✉)

Department of Theory and Research in Education, VU University Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

De Activiteit, National, Centre for Developmental Education, Alkmaar, The Netherlands
e-mail: chiel.vander.veen@vu.nl

M. Poland, Ph.D.

Educational and Pedagogical Consultancy, Wieringerwerf, The Netherlands
e-mail: info@praktijkdezilverenmaanvlinder.nl

the personal value is the main cause of alienation of pupils from schooling (see also van Oers 2010, p. 1). Therefore, both dimensions of meaning (i.e. cultural and personal) should be taken into account in educational practice. In the case of a pupil writing a letter, the value (cultural and personal) of this concrete literacy activity unfolds in the practice of, for example, a gardening company (Pompert 2004) in which this pupil has to write a letter to the local authority to ask for subsidy for the class' future garden. Due to the context of a concrete socio-cultural practice, this literacy activity is closely related to a real socio-cultural practice and therefore may have much personal value (sense) for the pupil. Without the context of a concrete socio-cultural practice we run the risk of violating both the cultural and personal value of activities in education. In this way, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) offers a solution to find the proper balance between both dimensions of meaning.

Becoming Literate

Learning to become literate and to use language in socially appropriate ways, is a complex process that needs careful and sensitive support, as it is essential for the development of thinking and cultural identity. Vygotskij argued that the development of thinking is basically a cultural and historical process, based on the appropriation of language (Vygotsky 1987; Luria 1976). In cognitive development, language functions as “the mediator, the medium, and the tool of change” (Nelson 1996, p. 350). This is in line with Vygotskij, who conceived of language as a sign system that mediates between subject and object (Vygotsky 1978, p. 40). The actions of a subject on an object are mediated through language (as a sign system). It is by language that the subject is able to focus his attention on the relevant aspects of the object(s) in question.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there has been a growing interest in language within psychological and philosophical research (see among others Bakhtin 1981; Bruner 1996; Cassirer 1957; Nelson 1996; Tomasello 2010; Vygotsky 1978, 1987). In the past, many studies have been devoted to the relationship between language and the development of memory and thinking. In these studies, language is mainly investigated on an intrapersonal level as a sign system for personal purposes, namely thinking and remembering. However, in most (educational) situations where language functions as a mediator of human activity another agent is also involved, who mediates between the subject and the situation (van Oers 2007; Vygotsky and Luria 1994). “In this case the sign activity is an interpersonal process, where an exchange of meanings between subjects takes places with the help of signs (verbal means)” (van Oers 2007, p. 303). When another subject is involved in a concrete activity, the latter has some degree of influence on the actions of the subject towards an object. For example, when a pupil is preparing a presentation on a specific topic (i.e. is preparing a concrete language activity), another subject (e.g. the teacher) can influence the actions of the pupil by using

words or gestures to guide the activity, modelling behaviour, etc. Thus, “language can be said to regulate human object-oriented activity, both on an intrapersonal and an interpersonal level” (van Oers 2007, p. 303). Using language for interpersonal purposes is what we will call communication. According to Vygotsky (1987, 1978), thinking (intrapersonal) and communication (interpersonal) are intrinsically related. In this view, language first appears on an interpersonal level and, after a process of internalisation, can also be used for thinking on an intrapersonal level. Becoming literate in this approach can be conceived of as “building up the generalised ability of using sign systems for personal and interpersonal purposes within specific cultural practices” (van Oers 2007, p. 303). This competence includes not only the mastery of written language (e.g. reading), but also forms of oral language, and theoretical thinking.

In the following we will mainly focus on the use of language as a communicative tool. Communication “is a form of social action constituted by social conventions for achieving social ends, premised on at least some shared understandings and shared purposes among users” (Tomasello 2010, p. 343). Basically, human communication functions as a means to attain and maintain joint attention and, therefore, has to follow some social conventions. After all, the addresser wants the addressee to understand his communicative utterances in order to achieve some social ends. A special feature of human communicative competence is “the ability and disposition to (re)construct and use textual representations for the purpose of clarifying meaning to oneself or others in the context of some socio-cultural practice” (van Oers 2007, p. 304). This ability and disposition is what we will call narrative competence. In Developmental Education narrative competence is considered the core of becoming literate. It encompasses abilities (vocabulary, pragmatics, grammar, and style) and dispositions (attitude, aesthetics) in one complex cultural performance.

Producing Narratives

Narratives are essential in human action, as they function as a tool for giving coherent meaning to reality. They give substance to human experiences within socio-cultural practices and, to some extent, take those experiences beyond the borders of human daily life (Engel 1999). Bruner (1986) made a distinction between logic-paradigmatic thinking and narrative thinking. In logic-paradigmatic thinking, logical relations and theoretical concepts form the basis of thinking processes. This form of thinking is occupied with founding, application, exploration and elaboration of scientific concepts (van Oers 2009). In narrative thinking intuition, associative and aesthetical evaluations, and cohesion determine the progress of thinking. According to Bruner (1990), narrative thinking is the most direct form of thinking. It is related to the situation, to emotions and a person’s own language use (van Oers 2009; Egan 2006). Not only is narrative thinking the first form of thinking of human beings, it also relates closely to concrete daily thinking and language use (van Oers 2009). Further, without narratives one is unable to construct an identity

and find a place in one's culture, one's society (Bruner 1996, p. 42). With the help of narratives one is able to build one's own consistent story with a certain motive, one's own perspective, and one's own unique role in socio-cultural practices.

The context in which one tells or writes a narrative as a means for thinking (intrapersonal) or communication (interpersonal) is essential in the process of giving meaning. It is the point of view a person takes in his narrative, which gives the listener or reader insight into the narrator's way of thinking, ideas, beliefs, values. Therefore, narrativity can be seen as an important way to understand human action (Pléh 2003; van Oers 2003; Engel 1999). If narratives are important for understanding human action, they should have a central place in educational practice, in order to gain insight into children's development and the nature of their cognitive achievements. It is by the stories children tell and write that one, for example a teacher, has access to information on a child's actual and potential level of development regarding narrative competence. Children's narratives give us a window on their beliefs, thoughts, experiences, language development, etc. (Engel 2003). Therefore, in the context of educational practices children's narratives should be collected as a means to assess their narrative competence. It is through children's narrative competence that one can enter their developmental "world", and learn about their world view, identity, and meanings.

In Developmental Education, a strategy for literacy development has been elaborated over the years which is consistent with the Vygotskian approach (Knijpstra et al. 1997; Pompert and Janssen-Vos 2003; Pompert 2004; van Oers 2007). The core of this strategy consists in adults' and children's interaction for the construction of comprehensible narratives. For elaborations of this literacy strategy in Developmental Education classrooms, we may refer to Chaps. 5 and 15 of this book. In Developmental Education, narratives are a way for children to express themselves, acquire a voice, and make themselves clear. By means of narratives, children are able to understand each other and integrate their own stories with the stories of other children, teachers, books, parents, etc. Therefore, close observation, reading and analysis of young children's narratives is an essential part of Developmental Education. However, the method of assessing children on the basis of their narratives must be consistent with the concept of Developmental Education, and should be consistent with children's learning in and through meaningful socio-cultural activities. It is in the context of these activities that one can observe in an ecologically valid way and assess children's narratives and narrative competence. In the next paragraphs we will present a way in which this can be accomplished.

The Zone of Proximal Development

Before we elaborate a strategy to assess children's narrative competence in a way that is consistent with Developmental Education, we will first explain how we conceive of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as related to dynamic assessment of narrative competence. As will become clear, the ZPD is the foundation

on which the concept of dynamic assessment is built. Referring to Vygotsky's (1978, p. 86) well-known proposition about the ZPD, it is generally taken as the difference between what one can do independently and what one can do with the assistance or mediation of another more knowledgeable agent. Whereas this definition has received divergent interpretations (see van Oers 2011; Poehner 2008), we will further elaborate the concept of the ZPD. According to Vygotskij, imitation is actually the basis of the ZPD. "Imitation not in the sense of meaningless copying of actions but in the sense of meaningful reconstructions of cultural activities" (van Oers 2011, p. 86; see also Chap. 2 of this volume). As stated earlier, the value (cultural and personal) of those imitated activities unfolds in the context of concrete practices, such as a gardening company (Pompert 2004), editorial board of a newspaper (van der Veen 2010), etc. Of course, children are unable to participate completely independently in those imitated activities. It is by the mediation of a more capable social other that the child learns to perform certain new skills independently. The way mediation is understood determines the process leading to progress in a certain activity. For example, consider a pupil preparing a presentation on their research on a rocket that has to fly as high as possible with the aid of baking powder and vinegar. One way for the teacher to mediate this activity could be to prepare the presentation on the pupil's behalf and then simply let them read it out loud. Another option would be to guide the pupil in the process of writing the presentation (for a certain audience), practicing the presentation (mimicry, pronunciation), and finally giving the presentation in front of an audience. In the latter option, the child is involved as an active participant and as such co-regulates the activity. "The ZPD then is about co-mediation between someone who has knowledge or capacity to attain a goal and someone who does not" (Lantolf 2009, p. 359). It is about "social interaction where instruction leads development" (Poehner and Lantolf 2010). It is the task of the teacher to be sensitive to the child's actual level of development in order to mediate the activity towards obtaining some pre-described learning goals and executing a socially accepted imitation of the activity of presenting the results of research. What a child can do with assistance today, he/she can do tomorrow alone (Vygotsky 1978, p. 87). In this approach, the ZPD can be seen as a diagnostic approach to development with a two-step process. First, the actual level of development has to be uncovered. Second, based on the responsiveness of a pupil during mediation by a more knowledgeable agent, the proximal level of development can be unravelled. The former refers to a pupil's abilities that are matured, developed; the latter refers to abilities that are in the process of maturing, are developing. In order to mediate the development of children, we need to understand "the full range of individuals' abilities" (Poehner 2008, p. 42), and – as we would say – their developmental potentials in a certain domain. Developmental potential is related to the child's receptiveness to help, i.e. his capacity to benefit from the assistance he has received from more knowledgeable others.

For the purpose of this chapter, it is necessary to apply the concept of the ZPD and the implied idea of imitation to concrete language activities in which pupils use narratives in order to communicate (or think). As stated earlier, narrative

competence is about the reconstruction and use of textual representations in order to clarify meaning on an intrapersonal or interpersonal level in the context of socio-cultural practices. Becoming narratively competent is about the process of building up the ability to use sign systems for communication and thinking. In this process, children are dependent on the mediation of a more capable social other (e.g. the teacher). In the context of children becoming narratively competent, there is another agent involved who mediates between the child and the situation. The ZPD then is about the co-mediation between this more knowledgeable agent and the child to attain the co-construction of some narrative. For example, when a child and a teacher are involved in a joint activity in which they try to understand how to make a schematic representation of the castle built by the child, they co-construct a narrative, which articulates different aspects of the castle (e.g. the mathematical aspects) and helps them understand the world in a structural (mathematical) manner. The mediation of the teacher contributes to the quality of the narrative both to communicate and think about the schematic representation. In the process of co-constructing a narrative in order to understand, for example, how to make a schematic representation of a castle, the idea of imitation plays an important role. As already stated, we conceive of imitation as meaningfully reconstructing cultural activities. It is by the joint activity of narrating that the act of schematically representing a concrete building is meaningfully reconstructed from a structural point of view (see also Chap. 8 of this volume). The activity of retelling how to make a schematic representation – we will again use this example – is not something children learn to do by formal teaching; “rather the adult ‘teaches’ by leading the child through the activity” (McNamee 1979, p. 65). At some points the teacher may need to ask a lot of questions or take full responsibility for retelling the story. Gradually the child learns to reconstruct the narrative with little guidance from the teacher. In terms of the distribution of responsibilities, it is the child who moves from being a merely peripheral narrator to a more central narrator who finally takes full responsibility in the activity of reconstructing narratives.

Dynamic Assessment

In the preceding, we conceived of the ZPD as a concept that helps us understand how to define mediation between a more knowledgeable agent and a child in some socio-cultural practice. This is in line with Vygotskij’s dialectical interpretation of instruction and assessment. It is this integration of instruction (as a way of supporting development) and assessment (as a way to understanding development) that we will call Dynamic Assessment (DA) and which is basically a “pedagogical instantiation of the ZPD” (Lantolf 2009, p. 359). The dialectical interpretation of instruction and assessment distinguishes DA from so-called non-Dynamic Assessments (NDA) which are based on a dualistic interpretation of both instruction and assessments (Poehner 2008). As a consequence, non-Dynamic Assessment characteristically takes assessment outcomes as distinct data, disconnected

from the instruction that children have received. Non-Dynamic Assessment at best produces static descriptions of the children's actual level of development.

The term DA was first used by Luria, a colleague of Vygotskij, in the context of identifying children with disabilities for placement in the appropriate school setting (Luria 1961). According to Luria, Vygotskij's elaboration of the ZPD (zone of proximal development) requires that appropriate assistance be given during the actual assessment in order to gain (1) insight into the child's use of assistance and (2) the degree to which the child's performances improved when given assistance (see also Poehner 2008). The assistance of a more knowledgeable agent is aimed at moving "the individual toward independent, agentic performance and to be able to transfer what is appropriated in a given circumstance to future situations" (Poehner and Lantolf 2010, p. 316). This is in line with Vygotskij's notion that higher mental development is originated in interpersonal activity (Vygotsky 1978).

Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002) describe DA as an approach that "takes into account the results of an intervention. In this intervention, the examiner teaches the examinee how to perform better on individual items or on the test as a whole" (p. vii). DA helps the teacher to gain insight into the "developing abilities through intervention" (Lidz 1991, p. 6). When the assessor (i.e. the teacher) gains insight into the developing abilities of the child through a successful intervention, this produces suggestions for future interventions that may promote the development of the child. Over the past decades, two general approaches to DA have been developed (Poehner 2008; Lantolf 2009). "In both approaches instruction as mediation and assessment are fused into a single activity with the goal of diagnosing learning potential and promoting development in accordance with this potential" (Lantolf 2009, p. 360). The two general approaches are mainly distinguished by their conception and realisation of mediation. In the first approach, known as the *interventionist approach*, mediation is based on a standardised and fixed set of clues, hints, and feedback that are offered to the child as they move through a test task. The hints are scaled from implicit to explicit, so the assessor gains insight into the extent of the child's mastery of the task. The use of mostly implicit hints is associated with a higher degree of control over the task (Lantolf 2009). "Thus, the expectation is that as learners move through the test they will require fewer hints and less explicit mediation" (Lantolf 2009, p. 360). This latter tendency is an indication that learners are internalising the skills involved, for example, constructing the correct order in a series of events on the basis of a number of related pictures. This skill may be helpful when they want to compose a message or a short story in a more independent way later on. The great advantages of the use of standardised hints and clues within DA is that (1) it can be executed with high numbers of children simultaneously, and (2) because of the standardised feedback it is possible to express children's abilities in a quantitative manner with the use of psychometric techniques to compare scores. Examples of interventionist DA are elaborated by Guthke and his colleagues (Guthke et al. 1986), Budoff (1987), Carlson and Wiedl (1992), and Brown and her colleagues (Brown and Ferrara 1985; Campione et al. 1984). As Dynamic Assessment is by definition about intervening in developmental processes, we think that *interventionist DA* is a somewhat misleading term. Therefore, in this chapter we will speak of *standardised DA*.

The second approach to DA is known as the *interactionist approach*. This approach focuses on assistance that emerges from the interaction and cooperation between assessor and assessee in order to interpret the development of the latter. Mediation is not standardised and fixed, but rather “negotiated with the individual, which means that it is continually adjusted according to the learner’s responsivity” (Lantolf 2009, p. 360). Teacher and pupil cooperate in order to lay down – to use Elkonin’s (1998) train metaphor – new tracks leading toward a station that is potentially always relocating. One well-known example of interactionist DA is the Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) which is elaborated by Feuerstein and his colleagues (for example Feuerstein et al. 2003).

Undoubtedly, interactionist DA fits the concept of Developmental Education as it focuses on cooperative dialoguing. However, in the Dutch educational context schools are obliged to use at least some forms of standardised testing that make use of psychometric techniques. The quality of such tests is controlled and registered by the national committee of test matters (COTAN, Commissie testangelegenheden Nederland) in order to evaluate the quality of public schools (i.e. the more registered tests a school is using, the higher the quality of the school is evaluated by the national inspectorate of education). The problem for Developmental Education is not the use of such non-Dynamic Assessments itself, but rather the need for assessment strategies that can be used by teachers as an instrument to understand the full range of children’s abilities and potentials (i.e. matured abilities as well as abilities that are in the process of maturing). Without further discussing the different, mostly paradigmatic elaborations of interventionist and interactionist DA, we will show how the two approaches can be combined. Our goal in doing so is twofold. On the one hand (as already stated) a Dynamic Assessment strategy for narrative competence should fit the concept of Developmental Education. On the other hand, we also need a reliable description of the actual level of development of children’s narrative competence. Moreover, given the Dutch educational context, we aim at the construction of a Dynamic Assessment strategy that meets the political requirements and thereby the requirements of the national inspectorate of education. In combining both standardised and interactionist DA, we started out from a sandwich format (or test-train-test design) for dynamic tests in which the assessee first takes a standardised pre-test, followed by an intervention (i.e. instruction), and finally the assessee is tested again on a post-test (Sternberg and Grigorenko 2002). However, we want to go one step further and elaborate the notion of intervention beyond the idea of short-term, more or less standardised assistance or scaffolding. We lengthen the intervention from task intervention, which is often short and bound to a specific task, to an intervention period of several weeks. The main reason for this lengthy intervention is that the development of narrative competence takes more than just a task; it is a competence that develops over time. During this intervention period interactionist DA is used to gain insight into the full range of children’s abilities and the development of those abilities over time with the use of cooperative dialoguing. Standardised DA is used to standardise guidance and feedback during the pre-test and post-test before and after the intervention period. (An example of this approach in Developmental Education can be found in Chap. 6 of this

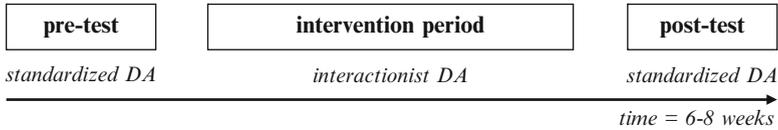


Fig. 7.1 Standardised and interactionist DA integrated in a sandwich format

volume with regard to vocabulary assessment). Both pre-test and post-test produce quantitative information which can be used in addition to the qualitative information gathered with interactionist DA. Together, standardised and interactionist DA give the teacher a valid and reliable image of the actual and potential level of the child's development, as well as the child's sensitivity to certain ways of future instruction. In Fig. 7.1 our integration of standardised and interactionist DA is shown as a sandwich format.

In Developmental Education teachers try to monitor children's literate activities and development by means of an observation system called HOREB (Action-oriented Observation, Registration, and Evaluation of Basic Development; see Chaps. 4 and 14 of this volume). Generally, HOREB aims to observe and register children's development when participating in meaningful activities, in order to monitor their development as well as to gain insight into possible future developmental steps. Therefore, we can consider HOREB as an instrument for DA of children's development. However, an appropriate instrument to measure narrative competence is not available yet. Because we want to give serious attention to the value of narratives, we want to do more than just close-observation. In the next section we will explain the procedure of DA of narrative competence in the context of Developmental Education.

Dynamic Assessment of Narrative Competence in Developmental Education

In Developmental Education, the core lies in the imitation of meaningful socio-cultural practices in which children can and want to participate. Concretely, this means that teachers – together with children – build up a theme over a period of 6–8 weeks. All communication and language learning is embedded in thematic activities that make sense for the children. As an example we will refer to the practice of a restaurant. Within this scenario children play roles and use language that is associated with their role. The waitress tells the customers about the menu, makes phone calls, writes down reservations, etc. The chef writes a shopping list, makes a new seasonal menu, gives oral instructions to the other cooks and the waitresses, etc. In the development of a theme, children learn knowledge and skills related to that specific theme and their roles within it, which enable them to become

more central participants. This means, for example, that they learn to read and write a menu, make a telephone reservation for dinner, write down the personal experiences they have had when they visited a restaurant, etc.

The notion of a theme over a period of 6–8 weeks is what forms the foundation of our assessment strategy. The following cyclic steps are taken to assess children's narrative competence within those themes: (1) theme planning, (2) pre-test, (3) intervention period, (4) post-test and, (5) interpretation and evaluation. We will further elaborate each of these steps and explain certain steps with examples taken from a theme in which children participate in the practice of a travel agency (see van Oers 2007). We will focus on DA of narrative competence with children aged 4–8. Most children of this age are not (yet) able to write a story that has the qualities of a well-developed written narrative. Therefore, young children are assessed on their narrative competence by telling a story (orally).

The first step is to choose and plan a theme that has cultural as well as personal value for the children. Based on the actual development of the children, possible language activities are planned that could lead to the realisation of certain educational goals. One of these activities could be the making of advertisements for the travel agency with the use of written language. Results on past narrative competence assessments, as well as teacher's classroom observations regarding the narrative competence of children, are taken into account when planning a theme. Second, all children individually take a pre-test in which their actual level of narrative competence within the context of the theme is assessed. In this pre-test the teacher asks the child to tell a story, a narrative about the travel agency. In order to support the child in telling a story, the teacher uses richly illustrated pictures from storybooks which have a central place in the theme. The teacher as co-teller is allowed to ask questions in order to guide the child through the activity of narrating. It is important to observe how much help the child needs and what kind of help or instruction (i.e. modelling, questioning) is needed in order for the child to tell a well-organised narrative. Six different criteria (with sub-criteria) are assessed with help of a score sheet (see Table 7.1), namely: (1) use of a suitable title, (2) addressivity, (3) quality of the story itself, (4) vocabulary and sentences, (5) empathy and imagination, and (6) attitude. Scores on all criteria are added, so the narrative competence of every child can be calculated.

Narrative competence is expressed in an ability score with three levels, namely: high, average, lower than average. The assessment gives the teacher quantitative as well as qualitative information about the development of the child regarding his/her narrative competence. Based on this information, the teacher can reconsider the theme planning to make it fit to the needs of the children and to the aim of contributing optimally to the development of the children's full narrative potential. Third, children (as well as the teacher) participate in different thematic activities which are related to the practice of the travel agency and which are within the children's ZPD. This third step is what we will call the intervention period as it strives to intervene in the children's actual level of narrative development in order to reach their full potential. In this intervention period the teacher plays an essential role in guiding and observing the children's development. Teachers' observations

Table 7.1 Dynamic assessment of narrative competence: some elements from the score sheet

Criteria	Subcriteria	Score
1. Use of a suitable title	Does the child give a name to the story or does the child make clear what the main theme of the story is?	Yes: 1
2. Addressivity	Does the child want to make itself clear?	Yes: 1
3. The story itself	Is it a coherent story, is it fragmented, or is it an enumeration?	Enumeration: 1 Fragmented: 1 Coherent story: 2
	Does the child tell about: who, what, where, and when?	Who: 1 What: 1 Where: 1 When: 1
4. Vocabulary and sentences	Are the sentences logically and grammatically correct?	>80%: 1
	Does the child use jargon related to the theme?	Yes: 1
5. Empathy and imagination	Does the child expresses feelings, thoughts, needs, or wishes?	Yes: 1
	The story is primarily aimed at objects, acts, and events in the present	1
	The story transcends the present	2
6. Attitude	Is the child actively involved in telling the story?	Yes: 1
	The child is eager to tell about the theme or his experiences.	Not: 0 A little bit: 1 Very: 2

are executed and registered with help of the instruments from HOREB (Janssen-Vos et al. 2007). The focus of these observations is on the narrative skills that children exhibit while participating in different activities. These observations are action-oriented, which means that the teacher is at the same time participating in the activity in order to guide the development of the children towards the realisation of their full potential. In this way, instruction and assessment are integrated in an interactionist manner. Fourth, the children take a post-test at the end of the intervention period (theme) in which their level of narrative competence is again assessed. The format of this post-test is the same as the pre-test, as we want to gain insight into how the development of the children has been affected by the intervention. Fifth, the scores on the pre-test and post-test as well as teachers' observations are evaluated and interpreted. Difference scores on the post-test and pre-test evaluate to what extent the child has become more competent in telling a narrative over the intervention period. Together with the observations, these difference scores give the teacher both qualitative and quantitative information regarding the narrative development of the child. Based on this information the teacher identifies a child's developmental potential and needs in order to promote development in accordance with this potential (Lantolf 2009). In the next theme (first step), the teacher can co-construct new activities with children, in which they are offered the help they need for building up their full narrative potential. Based on available time, teachers can

choose whether they repeat the whole cycle every theme or only take post- and pre-tests once or twice a year. Of course, observing the development of children's narrative competence in an action-oriented way is something teachers should do throughout the whole year.

Some Preliminary Experiences

“Our experience up to now shows that it is possible to make a valid and reliable instrument, although many trials still have to be done before we can definitely qualify the instrument” and get the instrument registered by the national committee of test matters (COTAN) (van Oers 2007, p. 311; see also Poland 2005). Based on a few pilot studies the following preliminary results can be presented:

- The present instrument to assess children's narrative competence turned out to be reliable (Poland 2005);
- Validity is high, because the instrument directly measures what it is supposed to measure, namely children's ability to tell or write narratives. Because of the active role of the assessor (guidance, feedback, questions, modelling) – which is closely related to Vygotskij's notion that a child's level of performance with help is indicative of his/her future independent performance – children are able to demonstrate their full narrative competence. Complicating factors for the child's narration, such as memory, attention, and subject-related knowledge, are excluded or taken over by the teacher who gives guidance and/or temporarily deals with difficult episodes in the storytelling. The focus is meant to be exclusively on children's narrative competence *per se*;
- Dynamic Assessment of narrative competence is consistent with the concept of Developmental Education as it is a whole-language approach. Many other language tests fragment language into several sub-skills such as spelling, vocabulary, attitude, etc.;
- Inter-rater reliability turned out to be acceptable for the instrument as a whole, as well as for most of the six different sub-scales (the criteria). Reformulating the criteria in scale five (empathy and imagination) is necessary as the inter-rater reliability for this scale is low;
- Teachers are positive about the instrument because it also gives them information to evaluate their own instruction. In addition, the instrument is of great help when planning future educational activities that promote children's narrative development;
- Since our instrument tends to be subjective, i.e., it has no definite or standard answers for the way teachers have to score the different criteria in an objective manner, the standardisation of the scoring procedure is a point of issue. The instruction manual as well as the different criteria have to be rewritten with the addition of concrete examples, so that teachers understand how to score the criteria as objectively as possible and avoid multiple interpretations;

- Teacher's skills are of great importance for the proper use of the instrument as assessment and instruction are integrated. This dialectical view of instruction and assessment, although fitting the concept of Developmental Education, is new for most teachers. Therefore, teachers should be guided in assessing children's narrative competence by trained professionals (see for example Chaps. 12 and 13 of this volume) in order to change their view of and attitude towards assessment;
- Finally, we have to point out that using this instrument can be time consuming. Many teachers in our pilots were unfamiliar with Dynamic Assessment (see also the previous point) and were not aware of the importance of narrative competence and therefore they did not always see the advantages. Because most of the teachers were obliged to use some standardised and COTAN registered tests, they could not fully focus on assessing children's narrative competence.

In the near future the instrument will be further developed in order to make it suitable for a wider group of teachers. Objectivity, reliability, and validity will be reconsidered in several pilots. In those pilots teachers will be specifically trained to use the instrument in a proper manner in order to develop children's full narrative potential.

Final Remarks

In Developmental Education, Dynamic Assessment of narrative competence is an important activity in which both teachers and children are active participants. This instrument offers schools an alternative to standardised tests which only provide information about children's matured abilities. Dynamic Assessment of narrative competence helps teachers to understand children's full range of abilities and potentials. Undoubtedly, our current instrument has great advantages for both children and teachers; children can show their full narrative potential and teachers gain insight into children's abilities, as well as their own instruction that may lead to the development of children's potential. However, future research is necessary for the improvement of the instrument and to make it more practical for use in classroom situations.

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