

Chapter 6

Understanding L2 Development Through Dynamic Assessment

Abstract This chapter provides evidence in support of the claim that DA enhances our understanding of individuals' abilities. Specifically, examples are offered of DA interactions that help learners to reconsider and think through problems and better enable the mediator to identify the quality of learners' understanding of relevant linguistic features. The implications for educators and assessors include the following: overestimates and underestimates of learners' abilities can be avoided; the extent of a learner's problem can be determined; the proper source of difficulty can be ascertained; and sudden changes in a learners' performance can be documented and explored.

Keywords Verbal aspect, underlying difficulties, diagnosis, mediation

6.1 Introduction

Sternberg (2000, p. xiii) attempted to capture the idea that dynamic procedures contribute to our understanding of individuals' abilities in ways that non-dynamic procedures do not by likening assessment results to forms of currency. He reasoned that if one were offered US\$50 or 5000 Venezuelan bolivars, it would be best to receive both. Following this analogy, the results of non-dynamic procedures may reveal individuals' current capabilities but Dynamic Assessment provides this and much more: it also takes account of abilities that are still developing. Teachers, learners, administrators, and other assessment stakeholders are better off, Sternberg explains, with both sets of information. The goal of the present chapter is to demonstrate some of the insights into learner development that can be gained when Vygotsky's (1998) recommendations are taken seriously and we shift our focus from measuring outcomes of past learning to interpreting learners' emergent abilities and supporting their development.

Throughout this book I have argued that DA is a monistic approach to assessment and instruction based upon the fundamental principle of Vygotskian theory that understanding individuals' abilities necessitates intervention. It may therefore

strike some readers as odd that the present chapter's title announces its emphasis on *understanding* development through DA while the following chapter is devoted to DA's potential to *promote* development. By organizing my arguments in this manner I intend not to reintroduce the assessment–instruction dualism but to illustrate that it no longer has relevance in DA. The examples of mediator–learner interactions described in this chapter and the next are taken from the same DA sessions. These collaborative dialogues may be analyzed as teaching episodes in which learners are offered support sensitive to their ZPD or as assessments that reveal the full range of learners' abilities. They are, of course, both. As we have seen, the decision to emphasize one perspective over another depends upon one's goals – does a DA session need to be used to generate reports for more traditional assessment purposes such as assigning grades, certifying competencies, or holding teachers and institutions accountable? If so, then it is reasonable to emphasize how a DA interaction sheds light on individuals' present and potential future capabilities. In Chapter 8 I will suggest how mediator–learner dialoguing may be characterized for assessment purposes in a principled and systematic manner. The goal of the present chapter is to provide evidence in support of the claim that DA enhances our understanding of individuals' abilities. Specifically, we will see examples of DA interactions that help learners to reconsider and think through problems and better enable the mediator to identify the quality of learners' understanding of relevant linguistic features. The implications for educators and assessors include the following: overestimates and underestimates of learners' abilities can be avoided; the extent of a learner's problem can be determined; the proper source of difficulty can be ascertained; and sudden changes in learners' performance can be documented and explored. Each of these is discussed in the following sections.

6.2 Revising Diagnoses of Learners' Abilities

Proponents of DA have long argued that it improves validity because it provides information about individuals' abilities that non-dynamic measures typically do not (Lidz and Elliott, 2000, p. 5). In particular, those working in the Feuersteinian tradition point out that the results of their procedures go far beyond simply noting whether individuals can correctly answer test questions or whether a given hint helps them solve an item; the interaction between mediators and learners brings to light the deficiencies or problems underlying poor performance. This kind of interaction is what Vygotsky had in mind when he insisted that assessments of ability must not merely provide a label but must explain the source of the problem and suggest how it can be overcome (for further discussion see Karpov and Gindis, 2000; Lidz and Gindis, 2003). In other words, assessments should be about *prognosis* rather than simply *diagnosis*. This more nuanced view of learners' abilities enables us to go beyond simply recognizing that learners are struggling and compels us to consider *how* individuals approach specific kinds of problems and *where* in the process of solving these problems difficulties arise. Furthermore, as we will see

in the following examples of DA with advanced learners of L2 French, sometimes even the diagnosis of an individual's abilities must be reconsidered in light of what is learned through cooperative dialoguing.

6.2.1 *Mediation as a Means to Avoid Underestimating Learners' Abilities*

Budoff (1968) expressly stated that his research endeavored to uncover hidden potential among underprivileged learners, whose abilities were typically underestimated by traditional tests. As explained in Chapter 3, Budoff's work built upon the earlier defectology research of Vygotsky and Luria, which stressed the crucial observation that failure to offer learners some form of external mediation does not allow us to fully capture their abilities (Luria, 1961). By observing independent performance only, one does not see those abilities that are in the process of forming and, perhaps more importantly, one may miss the opportunity to assist the development of those abilities.

During the initial DA sessions, it became clear that one of the learners, Amanda, used only the present tense and one of the past tense forms, the *passé composé*, avoiding the *imparfait* altogether. Recall that the *passé composé* or present perfective aspect (PP), emphasizes past actions, events, or states of being as completed at some point before the present time, and that the *imparfait*, or present imperfective aspect (PI), does not. As explained in Chapter 5, verbal aspect allows speakers to frame the same event in different ways depending upon their intentions, as in the example of *John entered the room* or *John was entering the room*. In her French narration, Amanda was only producing constructions of the type *John entered the room* and *John is entering the room*. Of course, sometimes the present tense can be used in narratives of past events, as when a narrator wishes to make evaluative comments. This occurs in line 2 below ("one has the idea that ..."). However, Amanda also used the present when a past form was clearly required.

We pick up the exchange as the mediator (M) intervenes in Amanda's narration to ascertain the reason that she was not producing the PI and to reorient her to the task:

1. A: *les gens qui voudraient les enfants (...) ils ont besoin d'être préparé? pour* people who would like children (...) they need to be prepared? For
2. *leur responsabilité d'avoir les enfants et, on a l'idée que il n'a voulu pas* uh* their responsibility of having kids and, one has the idea that he didn't want uh
3. *n'a pas voulu la responsabilité pour les enfants maintenant mais pendant il* didn't want the responsibility for kids now but while he
4. M: yeah uh right he so remember you've got the two past tenses right? Okay
5. A: *pendant il a parlé Rebecca a dit qu'elle qu'elle a enceinté* et uh ...* while he spoke Rebecca said that she that she has pregnant and uh ...

The initial reminder that there are two ways of talking about the past in French is not sufficient to produce a change in Amanda's performance. She resumes her

narration in line 5 and continues to rely only on the present tense and the PP. After a moment, M intervenes once again:

6. M: I'm just going to kind of interrupt you there for a minute and ask you to go
 7. back and renarrate it again and this time keeping in mind for example the
 8. difference between the two major past tenses in French the *passé composé* and
 9. the *imparfait*
 10. A: *Rebecca et Samuel conduisaient à la maison de leur ami Sean et pendant le*
 11. *voyage Samuel a dit que les gens qui qui avaient les enfants doit être prépare*
 12. *préparé pour leur responsabilité*
- the trip Samuel said that people who who had kids must be prepare
prepared for their responsibility

M's second intervention results in a successful change in the learner's performance. Note the extent of the mediation offered to Amanda here: M names the PP and the PI and calls the learner's attention to the fact that there are differences between the two; he does not explain these differences, nor does he provide illustrations or suggest that she reconsider her choice of aspect for specific verbs. Nevertheless, when asked to begin her narration again, Amanda shows that she is able to incorporate both the *imparfait* and the *passé composé* into her story and that she does have some control over them. Clearly, she continues to make various kinds of errors during her second attempt. The point to bear in mind that without dialogic interaction between mediator and learner it would have been difficult to discover that she did indeed have some control over verbal aspect. A non-dynamic procedure would have more than likely underestimated Amanda's level of development.

Furthermore, in some cases mediator–learner dialoguing indicated that two individuals whose performances bore striking phenotypic similarities were actually at different levels of development. One learner, Nancy, performed in ways very similar to Amanda during her initial DA. However, through interaction M determined that the reasons for her problematic performance were different.

6.2.2 Mediation Revealing the Extent of a Problem

During Nancy's non-dynamic narrative, M noted that she relied almost exclusively on the PP and the present tense. The very few instances of *imparfait* appeared with the verb *être* (to be). Immediately following this, during her first DA session, Nancy began to follow a similar approach, using the PP to construct her narrative around a series of completed events, thus avoiding important background information. Consider the following:

13. N: *elle a dit que elle va avoir une bébé. Et uh Sam non elle a réacté**
 14. M: uh *réagir*
- she said that she is going to have a baby. And uh Sam no she reacted

15. N: *réagir il a réagi il a réagi avec (...) il perd il a perdu le contrôle de la*
to react he reacted he reacted with (...) he loses he lost control of the
16. *voiture et ils ont avoir* une accident et elle a pensé que-*
car and they have to have an accident and she thought that
17. M: *il a perdu contrôle de la voiture ils ont?*
He lost control of the car and they have?
18. N: *ils ont ils ont av ils ont avoir* (laughs) *ils ont avoir* wait *ils ont avoir* uh
they have they have they have to have (laughs) they have to have
19. (...)
20. M: something about accident?
21. N: what's the past tense the past participle of *avoir*?
22. M: *eu*
23. N: *eu ils ont eu ils ont eu un accident.*
had they had they had an accident

In the above excerpt, Nancy is very clear that she wants to use the PP to state that the characters had an accident, and she receives mediation to help her do this. Later in the session, however, M questions Nancy about the conspicuous lack of PI constructions, and inquires about how she might find the PI useful when talking about the past:

24. M: I'm just going to interrupt you right there for one second because this is a
25. good transition point ... Um I noticed a couple of things with the *passé*
26. *composé* right? Um just a cou I guess it's basically just a question like *ils sont*
27. *allés dans la voiture* in the very beginning *ils ont décidé de voir leur ami et*
they went in the car they decided to see their friend and
28. *ils sont allés dans la voiture* and then later on uh *Samuel n'a pas pu croire*
they went in the car Samuel couldn't believe
29. *qu'il y a des personnes.* So what about the *imparfait*? Are there instances
that there are people
30. where you could use *imparfait* or what do you think?
31. N: um (...) yeah see I have a problem with the *imparfait* actually. I tend to
32. use it when I'm not supposed to and I forget to use it when I have to (laughs).
33. Um cause imperfect is when something is going on like so I guess I could
34. have said so if they're driving I guess I could say I could use the imperfect for
35. driving?
36. M: so then?
37. N: *ils étaient* uh no uh (?) *qu'il était* des personnes qu'il était des personnes*
they were that he was some people that he was some people some
38. *personnes qui sont qui ont des enfants* cause it didn't just happen once there
people who are who have kids
39. are people like that so I guess I could have used that. Would that make sense?
40. M: yeah that would be possible but then what about when they were in the
41. *voiture* they decided to go in the car right.
42. N: *ils sont allés*
they went
43. M: Would that be an opportunity you would have to use the *passé composé* or

44. would *imparfait* also be possible?
45. N: I used *passé composé* when I said decided to go because they made a
46. decision once and it happened once
47. M: *ils ont décidé*
they decided
48. N: *ils ont décidé d'aller* but then I don't know if I could use it probably I'm
they decided to go
49. just not thinking right but I don't know if you could use it while they're in the
50. car. *Pendant* oh I could use *pendant*. *Pendant ils (...) allaient allaient*
While while. While they were going were going
51. *allaient* is the imperfect of *aller* right?
52. M: yeah
53. N: yeah so. Yeah so *pendant qu'ils allaient à la maison de Sean Sam parle de*
while they were going to Sean's house Sam speaks about
54. *les choses et les enfants* [I guess I could have said that too
things and kids
55. M: okay okay]
56. N: okay yeah I forgot all about that one (laughs)

Through interaction with Nancy, M realized that the reason she had used the PI so little was not due to a conscious decision regarding how she wanted to narrate the events in the story. The problem, in fact, was that she was uncertain how to form the *imparfait* and she did not understand how to use it appropriately. Unlike Amanda, Nancy failed to use the PI not because she had forgotten about it but because she was unable to use it. For instance, in lines 37 and 38 Nancy produces *était* but then immediately switches to English to explain that the PI would be possible because people having children unprepared is not an isolated event. Her reasoning suggests that she may be combining two rules she had learned for using aspect: the *imparfait* is used for descriptions (“there are people like that”) while the *passé composé* is used for actions that occurred once in the past rather than repeatedly (“it didn't just happen once”). Then, in line 50 Nancy remembers the expression *pendant* (“oh I could use *pendant*”) and recalls that *pendant que* (while) is often linked to the imperfect (e.g., while I was sleeping, they went to the store). Through her verbalization Nancy finds a solution to the problem of how to express her idea (This phenomenon is discussed in detail below). Remembering the expression *pendant que*, Nancy seizes this as an opportunity to incorporate the *imparfait* into her narrative, although she has some doubt about how producing PI forms of the verb *aller* (to go).

Interestingly, Nancy's performance improved during the session. Although this kind of change does not often occur in NDA – and if it does, it is difficult to detect and interpret – it is the ideal outcome of a dynamic procedure. This point will be taken up in the next subsection, but first it is worth discussing the performance of another participant, Elaine. Elaine was unlike the other learners in that she eschewed the rule-based account of the difference between the PP and the IP, opting instead to follow her instincts as to “what sounded right.” Unfortunately, Elaine's intuitions did not always result in the appropriate structure.

The following excerpt, taken from Elaine's first DA session, suggests that she is either unable or unwilling to offer an explanation regarding her choice of verbal aspect:

57. E: ... *quand elle a dit qu'elle était enceinte il a tourné la voiture de la (?) il y a*
when she said that she was pregnant he turned the car from the there is

58. *il y avait un accident et ils ont-*
there was an accident and they

59. M: I have a question actually I just want to interrupt for a second. You said if

60. I remember correctly *il a tourné la voiture et uh il y avait un accident* so using

61. the um in the first part of the sentence the *passé composé* and then in the

62. second part the *imparfait*? Right?

63. E: *oui*

64. M: *il y avait un accident?*

There was an accident

65. E: *oui*

66. M: just asking why the change in mid-sentence.

67. E: *j'sais pas* (laughs) uh

I dunno

68. M: uh was that like a deliberate [thinking of how you wanted to

69. E: *non pas du tout* (shaking her head)

no not at all

70. M: no?

71. E: no (shaking her head)

72. M: okay

Elaine's use of the PP with the verb *tourner* (to turn) is appropriate but her switch to the PI for the verb *avoir* (to have) is not. M interrupts, seeking confirmation that she has indeed chosen the PI and then repeats her utterance aloud. Elaine appears quite confident and gives no indication of reconsidering her choice. In response to M's request she produces a somewhat flippant comment in line 67, and even in lines 69 and 71 she does not enter into a discussion with M. A moment later M again seeks an explanation:

73. M: well if this were like a test or something would you be more deliberate

74. would you have still gone with [*passé composé* and then *imparfait*? With

75. those two choices?

76. E: *premier c'est passé composé uh* (...) *imparfait je pense*

first it's PP uh imperfect I think

77. M: *imparfait*? With which verb?

78. E: *avec tout*

with all of them

79. M: *touts les deux* okay so you would say then like um what was it?

both of them

80. E: *Il avait il il tournait il tournait [il tournait la voiture*

he had he he was turning he was turning he was turning the car

81. M: *il tournait] la voiture*

- he was turning the car
82. E: *et il y avait un accident*
and there was an accident
83. M: *et pourquoi l'imparfait?*
And why the imperfect
84. E: *parce que c'est dans le passé mais ce n'est pas encore fini (...)* um I can't
because it's in the past but it isn't yet finished
85. think of the word
86. M: you can answer in English
87. E: *la scène* it's still going on
88. M: it's still going on? In the?
89. E: in the scene
90. M: okay
91. E: *mais peut-être je veux dire il a eu un accident parce que l'accident [c'est un*
but maybe I want to say he had an accident because the accident it's a
92. *action fini*
completed action
93. M: well that would] be in the *passé composé*
94. E: yeah but maybe I should have *peut-être je au je pouvais utiliser*
maybe I to I was able to use
95. M: *passé composé?* Because?
96. E: *parce que l'accident est déjà fini mais la scène [(...) va encore*
because the accident is already finished but the scene is going again

Interestingly, M has to “up the stakes” by asking Elaine to imagine that this assessment is a test with consequences before she acquiesces and engages in a dialogue. Initially Elaine decides to switch both verbs to the imperfect although the explanation she offers in lines 84–87 indicates that her understanding of aspect is vague. She then reverses her original decisions by putting the verb *tourner* in the *imparfait* and *avoir* in the *passé composé*. Her reason for changing *avoir* to the PP suggests that the PI would not be a possibility (i.e., that one could not talk about having an accident without referencing the event's completion).

Clearly Elaine has some awareness of aspect, but she does not appear to be guided by this knowledge; her reflection leads her to change both verbs with very little intervention from M. Nevertheless, her unreflective performance continues throughout the session:

97. M: *j'ai une question* so there you have *quand Christine était avec lui elle a*
I have a question when Christine was with him she
98. *voulu avoir des enfants-*
wanted to have kids
99. E: *elle voulait avoir*
she wanted to have
100. M: ah *elle voulait avoir*
she wanted to have
101. E: *elle voulait avoir des enfants [parce que c'est*

- she wanted to have kids because it's
102. M: *donc imparfait imparfait imparfait parce que?* Could you explain—
so imperfect imperfect imperfect because?
103. E: (shakes her head)
104. M: —why *imparfait* seems right?
105. E: *je ne peux pas expliquer c'est la façon dans laquelle je parle*
I can't explain that's the way I speak

In this instance, Elaine refuses to explain her choice of the PI and does not want to engage in a discussion of its appropriateness.

During another interaction, M further persisted in asking for explanations of Elaine's aspectual choices. When pushed to explain herself, the learner attempted to connect her present performance to the rules of thumb she had learned from textbooks or past instructors. In other words, she resorted to her history as a learner in the formal context of French L2 university courses, where instruction is typically heavily rule-based. The result was that her explanations sometimes were not appropriate to the case at hand. For example, in the following excerpt M asks Elaine about her choice of aspect for the verb *arriver* (to arrive):

106. E: *Et finalement ils ont arrive* ils arrivaient chez Sean et il s'inquiète il*
and eventually they arrived they were arriving at Sean's et he worries he
107. *s'inquiétait*
was worrying
108. M: And the verb *arriver* there you said *ils sont arrivés* and then *arrivaient*.
109. Why the switch there?
110. E: *ils ont arrive**
they arrived
111. M: Were you switching on purpose?
112. E: I switched back to *ils ont arrive**
113. M: *ils ont arrivé?* so um *passé composé* right?
114. E: (nods)
115. M: Because uh?
116. E: they just arrived once. Uh-
117. M: if you used *imparfait* there what would that be? Could you use
118. *imparfait* there? For *ils arrivaient*?
119. E: (...) I'm thinking you can but I'm not sure when (...) it wouldn't make
120. sense
121. M: yeah? because?
122. E: they were arriving again and again and again.

Here Elaine's explanation is based on a rule she had learned linking single occurrences of an action to the PP and repeated occurrences to the PI. Such rules are often presented to learners to teach them to differentiate aspect but to Elaine it is not clear why the forms are associated with these functions. She does not have a full understanding of verbal aspect, and so when prompted to verbalize her reasoning she does the only thing she can – she attempts to explain her choice by connecting

it to a rule she had learned, although this leads her to the odd conclusion that using the *imparfait* would imply that the people arrived several times.

Later in that same session, Elaine is once again asked about her choice of aspect. At this point she becomes quite agitated, possibly because she is not accustomed to thinking in depth about the differences between the PP and the PI:

123. M: go ahead you can go back through it now real quick in French just the

124. part where you were setting it up?

125. E: *C'étaient dans la voiture rouge et ils ont ils ont conduit.* Rebecca a

It was in the red car and they they drove

126. *je pense que j'ai dit elle a compté dans la calendrier*

I think that I said she counted on the calendar

127. M: uh huh *elle a compté et ils ont conduit* so *passé composé* and then how she counted and they drove

128. come *passé composé* there cause [you used it again there

129. E: I don't know it just it just is is that a good explanation? Because it just

130. sometimes that's how you say it?

131. M: well I mean sure I guess we've always got that instinct there or

132. something like that but I was just wondering if there was something else

133. like a conscious decision going on or if that's just what came out

134. E: No it kind of just came out [I really didn't think about it

135. M: okay okay] ...

In lines 125 and 126 Elaine is not completely certain which forms she had used and yet she insists that her choice of the PP is correct. She is resistant to the idea of giving careful thought to the selection of aspect. However, when urged to think through her decisions, her response is striking:

136. M: ... and if you were to go back and do it now or to write it as you said?

137. E: I would probably use the imperfect

138. M: oh instead of *passé composé*?

139. E: (...) yeah. If I was writing it I might have just picked one of the two

140. and then stuck with it for the whole thing.

141. M: one of the two? Like either imperfect or *passé composé*?

142. E: yeah

143. M: and stuck with it for everything?

144. E: yeah for the most part of it.

145. M: hmm. How come? Cause that's kind of

146. E: Maybe that's the wrong thing but that's what I was always taught

147. M: That you should be consistent? If you're using imperfect you should

148. use it through if you're using *passé composé* you should use it through?

149. E: (nodding) yeah

150. M: rather than mixing them? Like using some *passé composé* and some

151. *imparfait*?

152. E: yeah unless like it's really indicated you should use one or the other.

153. M: and based on what we've done here and what you've done in your class

154. and stuff what would be like the major indications where it would be like
 155. it's flagged oh it's definitely one versus the other in this case
 156. E: *Passé composé* being the action it happened once either it happened
 157. once or it happened completely and it's over a habitual action where it
 158. keeps on going or it's still going uh it's still going on
 159. M: okay okay alright so in this case would it be like she was counting and
 160. was driving the car and stuff using the *passé composé* there because it was
 161. um?
 162. E: She did it and she was done. I don't know if that's right or not but
 163. M: I'm just trying to delve down into where students are at because it's not
 164. E: that's what they teach that's what they teach here for the most part for
 165. the difference between those two.

It is difficult to imagine that a French instructor would advise students to select only one verb form to use rather than encouraging them to use both in their writing. The instruction was more likely concerned with verbal tense and the importance of carefully sequencing tenses. Moreover, Elaine herself did not follow an either-or approach to aspect but instead made use of both forms in her narratives. Her comments regarding the instances when one should clearly use a given form also provide support that her selection of aspect is based upon descriptive rules rather than a conceptual understanding. It is also noteworthy that Elaine repeats that she does not know if the rules are "right or not" and that she defends herself against possible criticism by stating that she is simply following "what they teach," that is, following the rules.

6.2.3 *Mediation and Sensitivity to Change During the Assessment*

Recall from our discussion above of Nancy's first DA session that her interactions with the mediator prompted her to begin considering how she might effectively use the PI in her narrative. During the remainder of that session, Nancy made several attempts to produce PI constructions, and these choices were generally appropriate and the forms correct. In the following excerpt, she is struggling to choose the most appropriate aspect to indicate that the character Sam was surprised by his wife's announcement that she was pregnant. Nancy clearly understands that her choice of aspect will have an effect on the meaning she is expressing, and she has some understanding that an action or state of being can be talked about in different ways, each highlighting a different aspect:

166. N: ...*il était très surprise c'est une c'est une surprise pour Sam*
 he was very surprised that it's it's a surprise for Sam
 167. M: remember in the past
 168. N: oh uh *c'était? une surprise pour Sam? C'était? (...)*
 it was? A surprise for Sam? It was?
 169. M: using *imparfait?*

170. N: *imparfait* um or *çaaaa* I guess *c'était* so *c'était*-
 171. M: because? You're not certain?
 172. N: well it's a surprise for the whole time for him or was it a surprise right
 173. away (exasperated sigh)
 174. M: I'm sorry was it a surprise right away or?
 175. N: for him I'm trying to say it was a surprise for Sam
 176. M: okay
 177. N: and I'm trying to think if I want to put it in *passé composé* or imperfect
 178. M: well if you put it in imperfect because that was your first instinct what
 179. would that how would that come across what [would that mean?
 180. N: because it was] a surprise for him it wasn't like surprise okay over it
 181. was a surprise it lasted that was what caused them to get into an accident

Her comments suggest that she understands that being surprised could be used in the narrative in the PI, stressing how Samuel was feeling when they had the accident but that it could also be used in the PP, emphasizing that Samuel was surprised by the news he heard and then the accident took place.

At the end of this DA session, Nancy's comments to M offer further evidence that their interaction has led her to reconsider how she uses the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*. She is beginning to see how aspectual choices impact meaning:

182. M: *voilà voilà. Une chose* just one thing that I was thinking about was that's it that's it. One thing
 183. you said towards the end um *il pensait que les femmes sont comme des* he was thinking that women are like
 184. *mantis de prière* right? *Il pensait*. Why um imperfect there? praying mantis He was thinking
 185. N: Cause he was thinking. I thought maybe it's not something he thought
 186. about once it's the way he thinks like in the in the I guess that's (laughs)
 187. the way he feels about women
 188. M: alright okay. And before that you had said *il n'était pas prêt d'avoir* he wasn't ready to have
 189. *des enfants*. Using *imparfait* again. Because? kids
 190. N: Because again he's right now and then he's not ready for it.
 191. M: Okay but you also said *il n'a pas voulu avoir des enfants* [using *passé* he didn't want to have kids
 192. *composé*
 193. N: I used both didn't I?
 194. M: well no I'm just curious I'm just trying to figure out your process
 195. N: because it's what I meant was whenever they had a conversation I guess
 196. whenever Sean and Christine had their conversation he didn't want kids
 197. right then and there (slapping one hand against the other). He doesn't.
 198. want kids but when he was explaining what happened it's because he's not
 199. ready for kids. That's why.
 200. M: okay. So like that *imparfait* and then that one moment in time (...)

When M first questions her use of the *imparfait* with the verb *penser*, Nancy's answer is somewhat ambiguous. Her response that "it's the way he thinks" could imply that she is continuing to follow a rule, such as using the PI to give descriptions, without really understanding aspect. However, the distinction she makes between using *être* in the PI and *vouloir* in the PP does indicate a more principled understanding. In the case of *être* she explains that at the time of action "he's not ready for kids," and she contrasts this with *vouloir* when, during the conversation, "he didn't want kids right then and there." This is noteworthy because *vouloir* refers to a state of being and so is often used in PI constructions, although its use in the PP is certainly grammatical and would indicate some change in state, as Nancy suggests.

As explained in Chapter 4, any change to the ability being assessed is problematic in NDA, where assessment instruments and procedures are often designed with considerable thought given to the difficulty level and discriminatory power of tasks or items, and this is predicated on the assumption that what learners find difficult or easy at the outset of the assessment will be the same at its conclusion. DA, as we have seen, reverses this assumption because it understands abilities as dynamic and therefore amenable to change during the procedure. Thus, the shift we see in Nancy's performance during her initial DA session is not problematic, and in fact suggests that the interaction met with some success.

However, it would be a mistake to regard DA as a silver bullet that can miraculously enhance learners' abilities. Recall that in Vygotskian theory, development is a complex and often unpredictable process. In Nancy's case we see that even though she begins to rethink the *passé composé* – *imparfait* distinction, she also persists in using a more formulaic, rule-based approach to selecting verb forms. For instance, at one point in her interaction with M she expresses concern that using the same aspect twice in a sentence might violate a rule:

201. M: (...) uh huh yeah if you could just back up and try to redo it
 202. N: okay it is a hard part
 203. M: it is tough yeah but you're doing a good job
 204. N: okay *pendant qu'ils attendaient le service pour réparer la voiture ils*
 while they were waiting the service for to repair the car they
 205. *ont ils ont parlé oh uh ils ont parlé-*
 they spoke oh uh they spoke
 206. M: were you thinking of something else?
 207. N: I was going to think of imperfect but then no they can't be both
 208. imperfect in a sentence can it?
 209. M: two?
 210. N: two imperfects
 211. M: two imperfects in a sentence? I suppose it depends on what you mean
 212. N: because [well I
 213. M: it depends on what you're trying to say right?
 214. N: yeah I'm going to go with *passé composé* so it's *pendant qu'ils*
 while they
 215. *attendaient le service pour réparer la voiture ils ont parlé de la situation*
 were waiting for the service to repair the car they spoke about the situation

216. *des enfants*
concerning children

In lines 214–216 Nancy decides to use the PI in the clause beginning with *pendant que* (while) but to put the verb *parler* in the PP. There is no indication that this decision is based on the meaning Nancy wants to communicate. Rather, she appears to be following a formulaic construction typical of rule-based approaches to teaching aspect (while event A was taking place, event B occurred). It appears, then, that Nancy is simultaneously referencing a rule-governed system for thinking about the *passé composé* – *imparfait* distinction but also the start of a more conceptual understanding of aspect.

A related example involves another learner, Donna. At the end of the program, when she repeated the initial DA narration task, Donna experienced a similar struggle between a concept-based and a rule-based approach to aspect. For Donna, these two conflicting ways of understanding resulted in inconsistencies in her performance. This meant that her interactions with M became even more important as a means of understanding her choices and, consequently, her level of development. In the following excerpt, Donna has just finished her narrative and M questions her about her difficulty deciding which aspect to use with the verb *commencer* (to begin). Her response reveals how she was approaching her selection of aspect at that point:

217. D: yeah I can't make up my mind about that one he started to have he
218. started to imagine a situation and so it begins you taught me something I
219. hadn't realized before that you can use the *passé composé* to indicate a
220. specific beginning of something that happened in the past and not be really
221. clear about when it ends and so that rule that you taught me was making
222. me use *passé composé* but my gut was to use *imparfait* so that's why I
223. couldn't make up my mind
224. M: and why *imparfait*?
225. D: because it was something he imagined for a period of time but I think I
226. should override my instinct and in this case use *il a commencé* to indicate
227. that there was a definite place when he started to imagine uh the story that
228. his friend had told him

In the end, Donna chooses to use the PP, but it is interesting that she was torn between, on the one hand, the rule she had learned which states that the PI is used for events that occur “for a period of time,” and on the other hand a new “rule” that emerged from her interactions with M, namely that the PP can be used to emphasize the beginning of an action. Donna’s “gut” instinct was to follow the old rule even though she was not sure it was an appropriate expression of how she wished to talk about the film – “he started to imagine a situation.” In effect, the rules Donna had learned were actually constraining her. That is, since she did not understand the underlying concept that allowed such descriptive “rules” to be generated in the first place, she did not realize that they were inappropriate in this context. In particular, without understanding that the PI is used to emphasize the ongoing, incomplete aspect of actions, the rule she had learned about the connection between this form

and events that endure “for a period of time” did not make sense to her. Thus, when trying to describe the act of imagining something, she erroneously considered the *imparfait*, reasoning that an act of imagining goes on “for a period of time.”

Despite her confusion, the act of verbalizing her decision-making, even though M said very little, was beneficial for Donna. This mediational role of verbalization is discussed in detail below, but for now a single example of its benefits is relevant to Donna's case. Immediately following their discussion of the verb *commencer*, M moved on to the next verb, *avoir* (to have), in order to see how Donna would approach reconsidering her use of the PI:

229. M: and then you said that he had a nightmare *il avait un cauchemar* using

230. *imparfait*?

231. D: yeah

232. M: because?

233. D: well it should be he had a nightmare so that would be *passé composé*

234. but he was having a nightmare when he woke up so maybe I want to

235. indicate that it was something that had gone on for a while and then it

236. woke him up

237. M: oh okay

238. D: which would be *passé composé il avait un cauchemar et tout à coup il*
he was having a nightmare and all of a
sudden he

239. *est réveillé* il s'est réveillé* and that would be *passé composé*
woke up he woke up

This time Donna switches to English in lines 233–236 and mediates herself by considering how the meaning of *avoir un cauchemar* (to have a nightmare) and its connection to *il s'est réveillé* (he woke up) change when *avoir* is switched from the PP to the PI. She considers the consequences of both aspects and decides that her original choice of the PI is most appropriate for how she wants to portray the events in the narrative. Thus, Donna has clearly benefited from the enrichment program by deepening her understanding of the relationship between tense and aspect. Nevertheless, this control and understanding is not complete as it now conflictively coexists with her earlier, rule-based understanding of aspect, and the divergence between these two ways of perceiving temporal states and events sometimes results in errors. Before considering in more detail the importance of verbalization during DA I will discuss an additional advantage of providing mediation, namely that it brings to light problems that lie outside the focus of a given interaction.

6.2.4 *Mediation and the Identification of Additional Problem Areas*

Although Donna was not always certain how to use the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*, this did not account for all of her verb-related problems during DA.

In the following protocol, M targets Donna's choice of aspect, but through their interaction it becomes clear that another area was in need of attention – the formation of the PP of pronominal verbs:

240. D: ...*et les quatre les deux femmes les deux hommes ils se présentaient*
and the four the two women the two men they were introducing themselves
241. *l'un à l'autre et um et—*
242. M: they do what? I'm sorry
243. D: *ils se présentaient l'un présentaient*? se présentaient?*
they were introducing themselves the one was introducing? Were
introducing oneself?
244. M: right it's yeah well you've got *se présenter* to present each other—
245. D: *l'un l'autre**
the one the other
246. M:—right but um what about the verb tense there?
247. D: *a présenté ont présenté*
presented presented
248. M: and it's *se* as well right?
249. D: *sont présentés ils sont présentés*?*
presented they presented?
250. M: but you still have to keep the *se* in there remember? it's reflexive
251. right?
252. D: yeah *ils s-apostrophe-o-n-t?*
253. M: oh right I see what you're saying remember with reflexive verbs they
254. always use the other auxiliary right (...) because you're using a form of
255. *avoir*
to have
256. D: uh huh
257. M: *ont*
have
258. D: *ont*
have
259. M: but they're always going to be using the other one because it's
260. reflexive
261. D: oh oh it's *être*
to be
262. M: *être*
to be
263. D: so it's *ils se sont présentés*
they introduced themselves
264. M: *voilà ils se sont présentés*
that's it they introduced themselves

M begins by targeting Donna's choice of the PI for the verb *se présenter* but her responsiveness, particularly her difficulty putting the verb in the *passé composé* beginning in line 249, leads M to shift his attention to the use of pronominal verbs.

The rest of the exchange deals with placement of the pronoun *se* and selection of the appropriate auxiliary. This was not the intended focus of the intervention, and in a non-dynamic procedure the problem may have never been identified; instead, the use of *se présenter* would have simply been marked as an appropriate or inappropriate use of aspect. In fact, even in an interventionist approach to DA, with its comparatively rigid framework for mediation, a mediator may have identified the actual problem but would not have been free to interact with the learner to resolve the difficulty. Only in an approach that allows for mediation to be negotiated and for the focus of the assessment to be always emergent can a mediator be fully committed to promoting development in the ZPD.

Our analysis so far has examined the valuable insights into learners' abilities that can be gained by offering mediation when they encounter difficulties. A form of mediation first proposed by Carlson and Weidl (1992) in their *Testing-the-Limits* approach to DA entails asking learners to explain their thinking after or even during the procedure (see discussion in Chapter 3). As we will see in the next section, this proved an extremely useful technique for bringing to light the extent of learners' understanding and identifying sources of poor performance. At the same time, the act of verbalizing their reasoning helped learners to step back from the task at hand and reflect on their performance, which in some cases further promoted development.

6.3 Learner Verbalization

In the preceding examples, M has often assumed a very active role in the collaborations, offering hints and suggestions, pointing out errors, and providing information. In the exchanges discussed below, M's participation is much less, and is often limited to clarification requests and confirmation or acceptance of learner responses. His primary contribution is to ask learners to explain, in English, the ideas they were attempting to express in French and why they chose certain structures and lexical items. The resulting verbalizations reveal much about learners' level of understanding and where confusions or problems occur, and in some cases this reflection helps learners to overcome the difficulties.

6.3.1 *Verbalization and Mediator Presence*

At one point during her repetition of the original DA at the end of the program, Donna momentarily paused in her narration and focused explicitly on her selection of aspect for the expression *être en colère* (to be angry). She initially used the verb *devenir* (to become) in the PI, but after deciding to switch to an alternative expression with *être* she began to reconsider her choice of aspect:

265. D: ...*elle devenait* uh *elle avait* *elle devenait* *fâché* *elle devenait* *elle a été*
 she was becoming uh she was having she was becoming she was
266. *elle était en colère* *quelle était la mieux?*
 she was angry which was the better one?
267. M: well uh—
268. D: she became angry
269. M: she well uh do you want to use *imparfait* or *passé composé* how do
270. you want to do it?
271. D: she became angry she was being angry she became angry that's what I
272. want to say
273. M: right well um you could use the verb *se fâcher* [but would it change
 to be angry
274. sort of how you
275. D: (to self) it's a verb]
276. M: you know what you're emphasizing if you're using *imparfait* or *passé*
277. *composé* like um if you were saying just here a second ago she got angry
278. D: there was a definite point where she became angry so that would be
279. *passé composé*
280. M: yeah
281. D: *elle s'est fâché? Elle s'est fâché et uh juste après ça...*
 she got angry? She got angry and uh just after that

Donna enlists M to help determine the appropriateness of the forms she has produced, and in lines 268 and 271 she provides a translation in English of the idea she is trying to express. She has already determined the meaning in English and she is aware that the aspect she chooses could alter that meaning. The problem may be due in part to the fact that the verb “to be” is very often used to translate the French PI constructions into English (e.g., she was talking), and so students often mistakenly equate this verb with the *imparfait*.

Unlike in the earlier DA interactions we considered, here M does not provide clues or reminders to help Donna. In fact, his only response to her question is to simply ask which aspect she would like to use, attempting in this way to help her consider the difference in meaning between the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*. Donna assumes a leading role in the exchange, using English to mediate her focus on meaning, as she and M had done frequently throughout the DA program. She arrives at two versions of the statement, one using the PP and the other the PI. In this way, Donna illustrates that she does indeed understand the changes in meaning that result from both forms. Once she has settled on the PP, M then addresses her lexical choice of the verb *devenir*, suggesting instead the more common *se fâcher* (to be angry) in line 273, and Donna can be heard making a mental note that the adjective form *fâché* she had used earlier also exists as a verb. Before moving on, M ascertains whether Donna also understands how her choice impacts upon the portrayal of events in the story. In lines 278 and 279 Donna explains her decision, describing her choice as emphasizing the change in the character's state of being.

In this instance, M's role was that of a sounding board as Donna considered the linguistic structure she needed. It was Donna who constructed the meaning and,

based on her understanding of tense and aspect, selected the PP to link the events in the narrative. Of course while Donna's performance here was largely independent, it is not certain how she would have performed had the opportunity to interact with M been removed. That is, simply having M present appears to have made a difference for Donna. This finding is supported by Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994), who argue that a learner performing a task in isolation is qualitatively different from that individual engaging in the same task in the presence of another person, even when the latter is not overtly providing any interaction (p. 471). According to the authors, both activities are social from a Vygotskian perspective but only the latter activity is collaborative. This is so because the presence of another person results in a "collaborative posture" whereby the learner's orientation to the task shifts. The expectation is no longer that the learner will work independently but will be able to interact, the partner's presence thus representing "the minimal form of other derived help available to the learner" (ibid.). In the example involving Donna, M was not needed to lead her to a correct response or provide hints to help her form the target structure; instead, he was simply present to prompt her verbalizations and serve as an interlocutor to whom she could ask questions, even though she ended up providing the answers herself.

An additional example of a similar interaction occurred during Donna's first transcendence (TR) session, as she narrated a scene from *The Pianist* in which the protagonist eludes German soldiers:

282. D: *il savait bien qu'il y a quelqu'un qu'il y avait quelqu'un qu'il y avait*
he knew well that there is someone that there was someone that there was
283. *quelqu'un dans l'atelier mais le soldat ne peut* trouver donc tout à fait—*
someone in the attic but the soldier can't find therefore completely
284. M: *il savait bien qu'il y avait quelqu'un dans l'atelier mais il?*
he knew well that there was someone in the attic but he?
285. D: *il ne pouvait pas trouver il ne pouvait pas le trouver, c'est mieux que il*
he couldn't find he couldn't find him, that's better than he
286. *n'a pas pu le trouver?*
couldn't find him?
287. M: I guess it depends on the meaning right? *il ne pouvait pas trouver* or *il*
288. *n'a pas pu trouvé* either is grammatical...
289. D: *je peux faire l'imparfait je crois*
I'll do the imperfect I think
290. M: alright
291. D: *il ne pouvait pas trouver—*
he couldn't find
292. M: you see the difference in meaning between the two?
293. D: well he couldn't find him and then he stopped looking for him would
294. be the *passé composé l'imparfait* would be he couldn't find him but
295. there's no it doesn't imply a time when the soldier stopped looking for
296. him
297. M: right so it kind of like depends I think on what you follow it up with

Donna initially used the verbs *savoir* (to know) and *avoir* (to have) in the past but then slips into the present in line 283 with the verb *pouvoir* (to be able to). M interrupts to request that she repeat that part of her utterance, and when Donna complies she changes her present-tense construction with *pouvoir* to the past, but vacillates between the PP and the PI. She requests further assistance from M who, rather than answering that one is better than the other, reminds her that her choice is necessarily linked to meaning and that either aspect can be used with *pouvoir*. Donna settles on her first choice, the PI, and when asked to verbalize her reasoning, she explains in lines 293–296 the different implications for the story of using one aspect over the other.

Again, M's reduced role in all this must be stressed. Donna's performance in both these episodes provides evidence of her conceptual understanding of tense and aspect and her conscious control over these throughout her narratives. Her performance though is not completely independent, as she continues to look to M for guidance. Her performance at this point is primarily being mediated by the presence of another, as she uses this as an opportunity to pause and reconsider the meanings she is expressing.

6.3.2 *Verbalization and Online Reasoning*

In other instances, learners may function somewhat less autonomously, but by talking about the narrative and their use of the language they are able to think through specific linguistic forms and arrive at a more appropriate selection relative to the meaning they wish to convey. While such verbalizations might be prompted by a request for clarification or explanation from M, they usually do not involve M asking leading questions, providing hints, or offering explanations. Of course, as discussed above, his presence may affect learners' orientation to the task. However, at the overt level, his primary contribution is encouraging learners to reflect on their performance. As we will see, this form of "talking it out" is an important form of mediation.

Swain and Lapkin (2002) have also noted the pedagogical value of verbalizations about the difficulty of a particular task as a step toward problem solution. They have referred to this phenomenon as "talking it through." Working within a Vygotskian theoretical framework, these researchers argue that the dialogue that emerges between learners as they engage in an instructional activity can be viewed as an externalization of thought, which in its spoken form is more easily scrutinized. Following Gal'perin's recommendations for the various stages of internalization, Swain and Lapkin suggest that, within the domain of language learning, externalization of thought can facilitate learners' comprehension of language form and lexical choice (p. 285). In their work with French immersion students, these authors have observed dyads engaged in collaboratively analyzing written narratives in the L2 and found that the learners' discussions of the linguistic forms led to improved individual performance on subsequent assessments. Appel and Lantolf (1994), in their study of language learners' recall and comprehension of written

texts, also point to the self-mediational quality of verbalizations in the L1 and L2. Situating their work within a broader discussion of private and social speech, they point out that complex problems often result in individuals relying on verbalizations to mediate themselves as they complete the task. Interestingly, the authors cite a study by O'Connell (1988), who noted that the nineteenth century German writer Heinrich von Kleist made a similar observation about the powerful role of speech in resolving problems. In one of von Kleist's revealingly titled stories, *On the Gradual Working Out of One's Thoughts in the Process of Speaking*, one character advises another on a useful method for understanding a situation: find someone who will listen as you describe the matter in detail (Appel and Lantolf, 1994, p. 438).

The following excerpt from Amanda's DA narrative at the end of the program illustrates von Kleist's argument about the importance of telling another person about a problem or difficulty as a means of resolving it. Amanda uses the verb *être* (to be) in the *passé composé*, but she reconsiders this choice while formulating an explanation for M:

298. 1A: *et um Samuel lui a demand demandé um si sa femme Christine a été**
and um Samuel ask him asked um if his wife Christine was
299. *enceinte um quand elle est partie*
pregnant um when she left
300. M: *que sa femme?*
That his wife?
301. A: *a été enceinte*
was pregnant
302. M: *a été* using *passé composé* because it was?
303. A: because it was if she was pregnant when she left so at that time (...)
304. M: right
305. A: it would be *était enceinte*
was pregnant
306. M: yeah I think *était enceinte* because it's we're not really about the
307. beginning or the end or something it's just if she was pregnant or not

It is in responding to M's request for an explanation that Amanda pauses and considers the explanation she is giving and what she knows about aspect. While she is thinking, M acknowledges her explanation in line 304, and Amanda connects the meaning she is trying to express to the form that will allow her to do so, settling on the PI of *être*, which she produces correctly in line 305.

A similar example occurred with Donna as she completed the same task. In this instance, she was trying to explain that the character Samuel was shocked to learn that his wife was pregnant. Initially, in line 309, she oscillates between the PI and the PP of *être* and M interrupts to determine which aspect she believes is most appropriate and why:

308. D: *...en traîn de compter dans un livre tout à coup elle a dit à Samuel ah*
in the process of counting in a book all of a sudden she said to Samuel
309. *bon je suis enceinte et Samuel était très choqué a été choqué était choqué*
well I am pregnant and Samuel was very shocked was shocked was shocked

310. M: which one?
 311. D: (laughs) okay
 312. M: *était, a été?*
 313. D: *c'était un choque à lui cette nouvelle donc il était choqué et ça juste*
 it was a shock to him this news so he was shocked and that just after
 314. *après ça—*
 that
 315. M: *il était choqué—*
 he was shocked
 316. D: *il était choqué à cause de cette nouvelle*
 he was shocked because of this news
 317. M: okay, using *imparfait*
 318. D: using *imparfait*
 319. M: because?
 320. D: *parce que il était choqué* he was shocked he started to be shocked and
 321. continued to be shocked by this news but I think I first chose *passé*
 322. *composé* to note that at a very distinct point he started to become shocked
 323. M: so emphasizing that?
 324. D: right so maybe what I want to say *is il a il a été choqué*
 325. M: and I think if you were to add something like *par ces nouvelles* [by this
 326. news you know
 327. D: *par ces nouvelles*]

Both aspects are frequently used in such constructions. Consequently, M accepts Donna's use of the *imparfait* but questions her reasoning. The explanation that she provides M leads her to reconsider her initial decision as she realizes that the PP more appropriately expresses the meaning that the character "became shocked." Once again, the decision of how to portray the events in the narrative rests with the learner. M's contributions encourage Donna to reflect on the most appropriate linguistic form that will allow her to express this meaning. The performance, then, is still distributed, as Donna continues to be mediated by M. However, this mediation is not aimed at pointing out an error and helping the learner to correct it. Instead, Donna has taken on enough responsibility for the performance at this point that her dialogue with M now serves to help her step back from the narrative and consider the changes in meaning that result from the PP and the PI, and this better positions her to decide which form matches the meaning she is constructing.

6.4 Conclusion

As explained in Chapter 2, Vygotsky (1998) argued against the general view that the purpose of assessment should be to *measure* an individual's knowledge or abilities, proposing instead that the goal should be to correctly *interpret* learners. Vygotsky's position resonates particularly well in classroom contexts, where teachers

are ideally less concerned with where learners' test scores fall in a normalized distribution than they are with actually understanding the processes of learners' development and the causes underlying poor performance.

In this chapter I have presented mediator–learner interactions that illustrate DA's potential to provide a much more detailed view of learners' L2 development than would be likely to emerge from non-dynamic approaches. It is difficult to conceive how, for example, a non-dynamic procedure would have revealed Donna's confusion over producing PP forms of pronominal verbs or the reasons behind Nancy's initial avoidance of the PI and her subsequent struggle to overcome a rule-based understanding of the *passé composé-imparfait* distinction and to follow a conceptual understanding of verbal aspect. Such diagnoses were only possible through mediator–learner cooperative dialoguing in which mediation was carefully calibrated to the individual's ZPD. In some cases, this meant that the mediator provided very explicit and detailed comments about specific features of learners' narratives while in others it simply entailed asking learners to verbalize their reasoning.

Of course, the DA interactions considered in this chapter also showcase that for Vygotsky diagnosis involves not simply documenting a problem's existence but also active intervention. In effective, the dialectic integration of instruction and assessment means that diagnosis is only possible through intervention, or that promoting L2 development is the only path to fully understanding it. In Chapter 7, we will examine mediator–learner interactions to track learner development as it emerges both over time (i.e., across DA sessions) as well as within a single session. To borrow Feuerstein's term, learners' "modifiability" through DA is a powerful argument in favor of redefining assessment as an activity that asks not which learners have succeeded or might succeed but that accepts the reality that all learners can succeed when offered appropriate mediation.