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Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz



Research Paper

Fostering Three-Way Mutuality: A Framework for Actualizing Assessment as Learning

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Abstract

Assessment as Learning (AaL) is a pedagogical approach that promotes student learning through the integrated and mutually supportive activities of teaching, assessment, and learning. This naturalistic case study aimed to actualize AaL in practice in two courses of the Master of Arts Seminar and Thesis. Semi-structured interviews with three participating teacher-learners, supplemented by the mentor's field notes and students' reflective journals, were used as the primary data sources for analyzing the implementation of AaL. The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The findings proposed a new framework for actualizing AaL that required building three key mutualities: 'mutually constructed dialogic literacy and rapport', 'mutual understanding and engagement', and 'mutual support.' Furthermore, it was demonstrated that the growth in these three mutualities promoted the extension of interaction, with dialogic feedback being a key component. This extension illustrated the mechanism whereby learners and the teacher co-regulate their learning. Based on these findings, a framework was proposed to describe teaching as an extended interaction that results in AaL, allowing the activities of teaching, assessment, and learning to be mutually supportive. The main implication of the study is that mutualities are crucial for the successful application of AaL, providing valuable insights for educators in their implementation process.

***Keywords*:** Assessment as Learning; Co-regulated Learning; Dialogically Extended Interaction; Dialogic Feedback; Mutuality.

1. Introduction

Within the Assessment as Learning (AaL) paradigm, teaching practices are designed to cultivate procedures and mechanisms that facilitate co-regulated learning. This alignment of teaching, assessment, and learning processes aims to integrate and mutually reinforce these activities (Earl, 2012; Lam, 2016; Lee, 2016). Specifically, this harmonization enables the co-regulation of learning through "interactions and exchanges" among members as they engage in learning tasks (Chen & Bonner, 2020, p. 6). The space created allows individuals to support each other's understanding and monitor their collective progress, resulting in a more holistic learning experience for all.

Despite recent advances in understanding assessment and learning alignment, much remains unknown about how the AaL paradigm can be operationalized in actual learning contexts (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). Furthermore, recent research has highlighted the inconsistent definitions applied to the concepts of Assessment of Learning (AoL), Assessment for Learning (AfL), and AaL in educational literature (Schellekens et al., 2021). According to Yan and Boud (2021), there is a "lack of consensus regarding [the] definition and unique characteristics [of AaL] that differentiate it from other assessment approaches" (p. 11). Additionally, Torrance (2007) points out that translating AaL into classroom practice can be challenging, as teachers may misinterpret it and limit it to exam-oriented assessment activities. For this reason, AaL research may overly focus on the narrow aspect of "teachers' design and implementation of AaL" (Wang & Lee, 2021, p. 2), potentially overlooking the holistic nature of AaL as a paradigm that encourages educators to break down the traditional boundaries between teaching, assessment, and learning.

This study aimed to fill the gap by conducting a longitudinal naturalistic case study to investigate how AaL can be implemented in graduate courses and how learners experience teaching and learning in this paradigm. The study seeks to provide insights into the processes and mechanisms involved in implementing AaL as well as to identify the opportunities associated with it. Additionally, the study intends to contribute to the discourse on effective assessment and feedback practices and provide practical guidance for educators who wish to incorporate AaL into their courses.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Assessment Paradigms

Assessment is a crucial component of the teaching and learning process, and it has a significant impact on students' involvement, agency, and success in learning (Weurlander, et al., 2012). It is essential to acknowledge that teachers may not always have the freedom to choose the assessment approaches their students encounter, as external factors such as standardized testing requirements or prescribed curricula can constrain their options. However, despite these limitations, a teacher's approach to assessment plays a crucial role in shaping how students approach the learning process. Depending on the assessment approach utilized by the teacher, students may either focus on reproducing memorized information as a surface-level, unreflective task or they may engage in knowledge and identity construction as a social and collaborative endeavor (Weurlander et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important to understand the teacher's role in the assessment process, as well as to recognize the centrality of assessment itself (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

The interactive functioning of the teacher and assessment purposes, as well as the increasingly blurred boundaries between teaching, assessment, and learning, has contributed to the paradigm shifts where AoL has given way to AfL and more recently to AaL. These shifts reflect a move towards more student-centered and participatory approaches to assessment and a recognition of the importance of assessment as a tool for learning (Soleimani & Rahmanian, 2014) . For example, Black and Wiliam (2009) argue that the paradigm shift from AoL to AfL requires a change in the role of the teacher from evaluator to facilitator of learning. Similarly, Earl (2012) proposes that the shift from AfL to AaL involves a move towards more student-centered approaches to assessment, where students actively engage in the assessment process as reflective learners.

AoL is typically viewed as a summative evaluation that reports what students have learned up to a certain point in their learning, often through midterm or end-term examinations (Chong, 2018). To be clearer, AoL is limited to examinations and does not include other forms of assessment that are more formative and integrated with the learning process. In AoL, the focus is on assessing what students have already learned, rather than on assessing their ongoing learning progress (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). AfL, on the other hand, encompasses practices involving the evaluation of students' performance, with the aim of utilizing the resulting insights to aid in their learning process (Klieger, 2016; Weurlander et al., 2012). Teachers, learners, or peers can elicit and interpret this evidence through self- or peer-assessment, and use it to make decisions about the next steps in the learning process (Black & Wiliam, 2009). While the teacher's support and feedback are crucial in this type of assessment (Hattie & Jaeger, 1998), learners and peers can also participate in the process, making it more collaborative and student-centered (Orsmond et al., 2004). Thus, AfL can be viewed as a shared responsibility between the teacher and learners, empowering learners to take ownership of their learning process.

AaL is a paradigm that extends the ideas of AfL. AaL emphasizes the formative and supportive nature of assessment while also conceptualizing learners as 'learner-assessors' who play an active and empowered role in their own learning process (Tai et al., 2018). To reach this level of operation, learners need to develop assessment abilities, which is the ability to assess the quality of one's own work (Tai et al., 2018). This involves developing a range of self-regulatory strategies, such as goal-setting and self-reflection, as well as guidance and support from teachers. Teachers can play an important role in supporting learners' development in these areas by providing feedback, modeling the use of self-regulatory strategies, and creating a supportive learning environment. Thus, assessment is not seen as a separate activity, but rather as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Lam (2016) argues that this blurring of boundaries is a key point of contrast with more traditional approaches to assessment, which view assessment as a separate and distinct activity from teaching and learning.

2.2. Dialogic Feedback in Assessment as Learning

Assessment paradigm shifts have transformed feedback conceptualizations, emphasizing the collaborative and interactive nature of feedback (Carless et al., 2011). Although it remains unclear which type of feedback is most beneficial to learners (Martín-Monje & Barcena, 2024; Mirzaee & Tazik, 2014), feedback is now viewed as a 'social act' that involves ongoing communication between teachers and students, co-created through their active engagement (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Asadi et al., 2017; Carless, 2013). Ajjawi and Boud (2017) define dialogic feedback as "an interactive process of feedback exchange that involves the learner and the feedback giver in an ongoing conversation" (p. 252). Dialogic feedback is characterized by open and non-judgmental communication, emphasizing the learner's active participation in the feedback process and their ability to reflect and respond constructively (Carless et al., 2011; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017).

Research suggests that feedback is most effective when it is received and comprehended constructively and acted upon (Asadi et al., 2017; Nicol, 2010). One way to achieve this is through cyclical feedback dialogues between tutors and pupils based on a reciprocal relationship (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017). This approach is further supported by the work of Boud and Molloy (2013), Carless et al. (2011), Nicol (2010), and Price et al. (2011), who all emphasize the importance of cyclical feedback dialogues in which feedback is viewed as a dynamic and ongoing process of communication, rather than a one-time event. Other studies also confirm that dialogic feedback promotes learners' active participation in an ongoing process of dialogic interaction to improve understanding and involvement (e.g., Carless, 2013; Evans, 2013; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017; Steen-Utheim & Wittek, 2017).

AaL requires students to take on the "learner-as-assessor identity" (Lam, 2016, p. 1906). Feedback in AaL is a dialogic process with extensive collaboration and interaction between teachers and learners (Lee, 2016; Sadler, 2010). Learners need to actively interpret and use external feedback, while also generating their own internal feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Lee, 2016).

2.3. Empirical Studies on AaL

The empirical literature on AaL has primarily been presented in two strands. First are studies which examine stakeholders' perceptions of the integration of AaL-driven instruction strategies. By way of illustration, Xiang et al. (2022) investigated Chinese students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with implementing AaL strategies in an L2 writing classroom. Analysis of the results revealed that students benefited from AaL-oriented instruction in terms of enhanced writing quality and efficacy, as it boosted their awareness of diverse genres and discourse types. AaL-centered pedagogical strategies also led to increased levels of assessment literacy given that students were demanded to develop their own assessment criteria for each text type and subsequently, analyze and modify the texts based on the agreed-upon criteria. Additionally, AaL-based tasks cultivated a sense of ownership and resilience in students since they were required to take responsibility for their own learning and assessment practices. The hassles encountered by the students also included summative assessment requirements of the curriculum and the necessity of ongoing teacher support to help them navigate the feelings of confusion and loss.

Along the same lines, Yan (2021) explored teachers' perceived challenges in enacting the AaL-centered instruction in the classroom. An analysis of data collected from pre- and post-training worksheets, classroom observations, surveys, and consultation meetings with teachers demonstrated that curriculum requirements, a lack of time and flexibility, students' diverse ability levels, their lack of initiative to involve in AaL activities, along with teachers' insufficient skill were identified as the main barriers to AaL implementation. However, the on-site training and workshops proved effective in improving teachers' understanding of AaL-related concepts, equipping them with the necessary skills, providing concrete AaL examples, and increasing the frequency and use of AaL-based strategies by teachers.

The second strand of empirical literature frames how peer and self-assessment as fundamental AaL-based practices function in student learning. In this regard, Yin et al. (2022) found that peer assessment could result in higher speaking gains across all speaking standards of delivery, language use, and organization. Moreover, students involved in peer assessment exhibited consistent rating behavior across diverse contexts of rating sessions, speaking sessions, and peer assessment vs. self-assessment. Finally, students held positive attitudes toward peer assessment generally believing that their peers' ratings of their abilities were fair. Similar findings have been reported regarding the facilitative role of peer assessment in students' autonomy. For instance, Shen et al. (2020) identified that peer assessment enhanced student

agency by changing their view on the expected role of teacher, lowering their dependence on the teacher, and elevating their confidence in their learning abilities. Empirical data from students participating in simulated teaching and receiving peer assessment on their teaching ability also revealed that peer assessment was significantly influential in improving students' cognitive abilities advancing their cognition from common sense, basic knowledge to more professional and advanced levels (Liu et al., 2024).

2.4. The Study

There is a lack of consensus regarding the conceptualization and differentiation of AaL from other assessment paradigms, posing challenges for communication, research advancement, and practical implementation (Schellekens et al., 2021; Yan & Boud, 2021). Additionally, AaL risks being misinterpreted and reduced to exam-oriented teaching, while essential characteristics of the paradigm, such as student agency and the constructive role of dialogic feedback, are often overlooked (Torrance, 2007; Wang & Lee, 2021).

This study aims to address these issues by investigating the implementation of AaL in graduate courses and exploring learners' experiences. The study seeks to provide insights into the processes, mechanisms, opportunities, and the way AaL promotes co-regulated learning. Thus, the research question is: How can mutualities between teachers and learners be fostered to successfully implement Assessment as Learning?

A longitudinal naturalistic case study was conducted involving three committed graduate students studying English as a Foreign Language. Established methods, such as observation and interviews, were employed to collect data over time. This allowed for tracking of changes in learner attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes, thereby illuminating processes, patterns of activity and growth (Schellekens et al., 2021; Yan & Boud, 2021). The study aims to provide practical guidance for educators seeking to implement AaL and contribute to the discourse on effective assessment and feedback practices. Ultimately, the study proposes a comprehensive understanding of AaL in real-world contexts and explores its potential to enhance self-regulation in language learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Context of the Study

The study was conducted at a state-run university in Iran, focusing on a Master of Arts (MA) program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). In this program, learning is modularized with several courses that provide theoretical concepts, along with a Master's Seminar (two credits) and Thesis (six-credits). These components aim to facilitate graduate students' engagement in academic and professional discourse, as well as knowledge construction. Students are expected by the MA curriculum (designed by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology) to conduct original or replicated studies and potentially compile the results into scholarly manuscripts.

In line with the national MA curriculum, the course Seminar began in the third semester by introducing students to scholarly journals that are highly regarded within the fields of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and Applied Linguistics. These journals are recognized as authoritative sources of information and are known for having high impact factors. The purpose of introducing these journals was to help students become familiar with recent issues and trends in the field of TESOL. Some texts (e.g., Ajjawi, & Boud, 2017; Chong, 2018; Nicol, 2010) were also jointly analyzed by the students and the instructor. By analyzing these texts, the students were able to gain a better understanding of the different approaches to research in the field of TESOL and became familiar with the language and conventions of academic writing. During the course, the learners selected a research topic, established a niche in the relevant literature, and developed a thesis proposal with the educator's assistance. They also presented their work-in-progress projects and action plans at least twice.

In the Seminar course, the instructor provided written and oral feedback on students' proposals and engaged them in collaborative discussions about content, structure, and language, aiming to improve proposal quality. Discussions occurred both in and out of class, with no restrictions on communication. In-class activities were carried out in English, while out-of-class dialogues were held in Persian for the sake of convenience. The course aimed to develop proposal-writing skills and promote research understanding in TESOL and Applied Linguistics. Presentations and drafts were not graded, but a revised and edited final thesis proposal was evaluated along with students' classroom engagement.

The instructor's feedback on the thesis drafts sparked dialogic interactions between the students and the instructor. The students sought clarification or feedback on the comments, and the instructor provided further guidance and suggestions. These dialogic interactions involved engaging in discussions or conversations with peers working on their thesis projects as well as with their supervisors. The interactions focused on the students' thesis projects, and included discussions about their progress, feedback on their work, and suggestions for improvement.

Assessment was integrated with teaching and learning in the two courses to create a cohesive learning experience for students. For example, students submitted the introduction sections of their work to their teacher for feedback. The teacher provided written and oral comments, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. Students reflected on their writing in light of the feedback and made revisions accordingly. They discussed the feedback and their progress with the teacher, asking questions and seeking clarification. The teacher offered guidance and suggestions for improvement, identifying areas of progress and those requiring further work. By the end of the discussion, both the teacher and the students had a shared understanding that learning had occurred. In this example, the teacher and students engaged in reciprocal engagement and co-constructed knowledge through dialogic interactions. The teacher provided feedback and guidance while also encouraging students to take an active role in their learning process by reflecting on their own writing and seeking clarification on the feedback provided.

The instructor and students engaged in reciprocal and proactive instruction, contributing to the flow of instruction (Wang & Lee, 2021). The teacher created space for students to co-construct their understanding of course goals and their roles as researchers, which helped them reflect on their assumptions. All activities included assessment opportunities and dialogic comments, allowing students to discuss, reflect, and communicate their ideas. Students were involved in all activities and assessment practices along with the teacher. They also generated feedback on their own learning and on the teacher's instruction. Using evidence from assessments, the teacher identified gaps in learning and strategized to fill them. Details on how dialogic teaching and student agency were enacted will be presented in the Results.

It is worth noting that the educator in the study applied AaL principles without explicitly training the students. It was assumed that the students' language proficiency and understanding of language learning and assessment would enable effective AaL engagement. The educator's familiarity with the students also facilitated their inclination towards AaL, with necessary assistance provided when required.

3.2. Participants

Three out of the seven students majoring in TEFL at the graduate level were purposefully selected. The selection of participants was purposeful because they were graduate-level EFL teachers with relevant experiences in teaching, assessment, and participation in the course, which aligned with the study's focus on AaL practices. These three students were selected using homogeneous and intensity sampling strategies (Creswell, 2012) due to their engagement in the AaL-focused course and their ability to reflect on and articulate their experiences. As practicing or prospective EFL teachers, their professional backgrounds and prior exposure to assessment practices provided valuable insights into how AaL principles could be operationalized in real-world teaching contexts. Their active participation in the course and dialogic interactions further ensured the richness of the data, allowing for an in-depth exploration of AaL implementation and its impact on their professional practices. This deliberate selection enabled the study to generate meaningful and contextually relevant findings. In effect, the sample was not meant to be representative but to generate AaL-oriented practices for analysis. The researchers obtained both oral and written consent from the male students, aged 24-26, and ensured confidentiality by using pseudonyms (Iliad, Mahan, and Parsa). The participants were informed of the study objectives and their right to withdraw at any time.

3.3. Data Collection

The study lasted twenty-four months from January 2019, with data being collected from the start of the Seminar. Students kept reflective journals to document their experience of drafting proposals, conducting research, and writing theses, while the instructor compiled field notes based on their drafts and comments. This continued until after all three students defended their theses. The students were interviewed using a protocol that had been previously piloted with the second researcher (see Appendix). The topics explored in the semi-structured interviews included teacher learners' evaluation of the instructor's feedback practices and interactions about feedback; their perceptions of feedback as a reciprocal process; their views on how the feedback process fostered mutual understanding and engagement; the impact

of dialogic feedback on their learning autonomy and co-regulation skills; the way students construed their roles as learners, researchers, and assessors within the AaL framework; their perceptions of their own agency in advancing their learning; their reflections on building mutuality (rapport, understanding, and support) with the instructor; and their experiences of co-regulated learning and interactive teaching practices in the course. The interviews were conducted in English and on average lasted four hours for each student over the course of the study (2 years). The interviews were conducted as semi-structured, face-to-face sessions and spanned over several points during the study to capture participants' evolving experiences comprehensively. Each participant attended a total of four interview sessions: one during the Seminar course, one shortly after its conclusion, and two during the thesis research and writing phase. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, ensuring accurate data capture for analysis. This phased approach allowed participants to reflect on their experiences at different stages, providing richer insights into their engagement with AaL activities. By distributing the interviews over the two-year study, we minimized reliance on long-term recall and ensured detailed accounts of specific activities and interactions.

Supplementary data were collected through three key methods: students' reflective journals, mentor's field notes, and participant comments. The use of interviews as the main method in this approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of students' perceptions and experiences, while the integration of reflective journals and field notes provided complementary perspectives and triangulation of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The use of reflective journals was a well-established method for collecting data on students' experiences, thoughts, and feelings throughout the learning process, while field notes captured the instructor's observations. This approach ensured a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the students' experiences, including their engagement with feedback and assessment, and increased the validity and reliability of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Over the two-year study period, a total of 22 journal entries were collected from the three participants, with each entry capturing insights into their evolving engagement with interactive teaching and dialogic feedback. The mentor's field notes, totaling 35 entries, provided contextual observations and documented key moments of dialogic interaction during the AaL-focused sessions. Additionally, participant comments were systematically gathered during informal discussions and formal feedback exchanges. These multi-source data not only supported triangulation but also offered a robust foundation for analyzing themes such as interactive teaching, dialogic feedback, and co-regulated learning practices.

3.4. Data Analysis

The interview data were transcribed, and along with other data (reflective journals, field notes, and comments), were subjected to cyclical coding (Säldana, 2009). We prioritized the participants' own interpretations of their experiences (following Spradley, 1979) to ensure that their unique perspectives were central to the analysis. In addition, we focused on themes related to interactive teaching, assessment and learning practices including dialogic feedback as experienced by the participants. This approach helped us gain a deeper insight into their experiences in the AaL-focused program. The study utilized an inductive qualitative approach to analyze data. Drawing on techniques including initial, focused, and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006), we identified the major themes from the emergent codes. The initial line-by-line coding resulted in examples such as: "developing rapport," "building connections," "understanding perspectives," "engaging in discussion" (through questioning and responding), "asking questions," "providing feedback," "offering assistance," "supporting learning," and "encouraging participation", etc.

Axial coding of these initial codes generated categories within the theme of "mutually constructed dialogic literacy and rapport":

1. Building Connections (including developing relationships through openly sharing of personal experiences and backgrounds, as well as creating a comfortable collaborative environment through mutual trust and respect).

2. Demonstrating Care and Respect (such as valuing differing perspectives through active listening and seeking to understand different viewpoints and experiences).

3. Communicating Openly (e.g., actively sharing feedback through discussions, asking questions to clarify misunderstandings, developing knowledge exchange and integration).

4. Sharing Knowledge and Experiences (discussing literacy journeys, interests and challenges to establish a common ground).

The categories developed for the theme of "mutual understanding and engagement" included:

1. Shared Goal Setting (through collaborative planning, establishing outcomes, and jointly monitoring progress).

2. Externalizing Thoughts (expressing ideas, perspectives, points of confusion, and co-constructing insights).

3. Reflecting on Perspectives (considering social, cultural and individual viewpoints).

4. Co-Constructing Meaning (collectively building upon contributions to develop shared interpretations).

Lastly, under the theme of "mutual support," categories that emerged were:

1. Guidance and Feedback (encouragement, suggestions, formative reviews, and areas highlighted for discussion and growth).

2. Action Planning for Achievement (jointly establishing targets, identifying gaps, and creating action plans).

3. Understanding and Clarification (addressing questions, checking progress, and building comprehension).

4. Reflection and Formative Assessment (formative commentary and a review of ongoing work).

Analytic memo writing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) was employed to record the researchers' thoughts and reflections throughout the coding process. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, a second researcher worked independently alongside the emergent categories and any occasional disagreements were resolved through discussion. Trustworthiness was further ensured through member checking (Säldana, 2009), constant comparative analysis, and cyclical data analysis (Säldana, 2009). Finally, verbatim quotes were selected to illustrate key points.

4. Results

The study found that AaL requires the cultivation of three mutualities: 'mutually constructed dialogic literacy and rapport', 'mutual understanding and engagement', and 'mutual support'. The study also found that the enhancement of these three mutualities facilitated increased interaction, with dialogic feedback serving as a crucial element. Additionally, the study demonstrated how learners and teachers co-regulate their learning through this enhanced interaction.

4.1. Mutually Constructed Dialogic Literacy and Rapport

During the operationalization of AaL, the mentor and learners developed a three-way mutuality as the cornerstone of extended interaction. Learners emphasized the value of building a constructive relationship with their supervisor, which maximized interaction space and further improved teacher-student relationships. The mutual development of dialogic literacy and rapport between the mentor and learners served as the cornerstone of extended interaction. Participants emphasized the importance of building a constructive relationship with their supervisor to maximize interaction and improve relationships.

Initially, some learners had "reservations about openly communicating with instructors", as a positive rapport had not been established beforehand (Mahan, semi-structured interview). Learners tended to attribute "lack of clarity and poor performance to their own inability", rather than realizing that effective learning depends on interactive work between themselves and the educator (Iliad, semi-structured interviews).

During the courses, learners had increased opportunities for mutual engagement with their supervisor, facilitated by the educator's approachability. As one participant explained, "The supervisor was easy to meet and talk to, as he was

always available whenever I wanted to share my understanding or communicate my challenges...Whether he was commenting or praising, I was eager to talk to him" (Iliad, Journal).

The positive mentor-learner relationship was crucial for effective interaction and mutual benefit. This involved negotiating meaning, welcoming diverse opinions, setting realistic expectations, aligning performance with goals, and making collective decisions. As one learner noted, the mentor "talked to me, explained with examples, and reviewed my work to ensure clarity. He welcomed my imperfect opinions" when providing feedback (Mahan, Journal).

The mentor also benefited from mutual interaction. A positive rapport enabled constructive discourse and cooperation. The dialogues helped the mentor understand the learners' perspectives and adjust their teaching accordingly. The feedback negotiation created shared knowledge. The mentor "acknowledged learners' contributions and was realistic about imperfections, creating a more collaborative environment" (Mahan, semi-structured interview). Ultimately, this mutual interaction allowed for a more effective teaching and learning experience for both parties.

4.2. Mutual Understanding and Engagement

The findings of this study revealed several key observations. Initially, the learners' goals in drafting a thesis proposal were primarily driven by the need to meet departmental expectations. However, through feedback interactions with their supervisor, their understanding of the course goals became more nuanced, aligning their objectives with those of their mentor. "When asked to review current literature in high-profile journals to focus on their theses, the learners were initially unwilling … and viewed themselves as thesis collectors and defenders rather than researchers" (Kian, field note).

Another significant finding was the transformation in learners' perceptions of themselves as mere collectors and defenders of theses to embracing the role of researchers. The establishment of positive mentor-learner relationships provided a platform for learners to externalize and verbalize their thoughts, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of various aspects of their research. This shift in mindset empowered learners to review current literature, share their understanding, and identify research gaps, leading to valuable contributions as researchers.

> I was initially worried about selecting a new topic due to my perceived limitations. However, after discussing my thoughts with my supervisor, I realized the importance of reviewing current literature, sharing my understanding, and identifying gaps. As a result, an associate professor from North America offered to be my advisor, and I felt empowered as a researcher with valuable contributions to make. (Mahan, Journal)

Furthermore, dialogic interaction played a crucial role in shaping the assessment and feedback processes. Initially, learners perceived assessment and feedback as solely under the supervisor's control, positioning themselves as passive recipients. However, through dialogic interaction, both learners and mentors were able to evaluate their commitments and roles in advancing learning. Learners became more self-reflective, evaluating their own performance and progress, while mentors reflected on their agency in supporting student development. Through dialogic feedback, Parsa was able to select the appropriate statistical test for his research project:

> The supervisor suggested a specific test and explained how to use it. After sending the results to the supervisor, we discussed them over the phone and concluded that they were not appropriate. We decided to study similar cases and articles, and shared our findings with each other … Eventually, I found a suitable test … (Parsa, journal)

The significance of dialogic interaction is exemplified by the case of Parsa, who, through dialogic feedback, was able to select the appropriate statistical test for his research project. The iterative process of exchanging ideas, discussing results, and investigating similar cases led to a more informed decision and a suitable test for Parsa's study. This finding exemplifies how the mentor and the student generated assessment and feedback through dialogic interaction.

4.3. Mutual Support

The findings of this study revealed a positive and reciprocal relationship between the supervisor and the students, characterized by mutual support. The supervisor took proactive measures, such as providing feedback, reviewing studies, and facilitating discussions, to empower students and enhance their learning experiences. In turn, the students actively contributed to the supervisor's work by engaging in shared goal-setting, identifying gaps, and improving assessment efficacy. This mutual support was facilitated through dialogic interaction and feedback generation, which promoted the

co-construction of meaning and increased student engagement. In particular, the supervisor's commitment to voluntary acts and the students' active participation in the feedback process created a collaborative learning environment that facilitated the exchange of ideas and knowledge. Specific examples further illustrate the concept of mutual support. For instance, Kian's field notes highlight how the supervisor recommended examining current articles from reputable journals and proactively offered help to support students' pursuit of perfection. As a result, students shifted towards seeking feedback and exchanging ideas with enthusiasm, leading to fresh insights and improved learning outcomes.

> My students pursued perfection, so I anticipated common difficulties. To support them, I recommended examining current articles from reputable journals and offered help proactively. Gradually, they shifted towards seeking feedback and exchanging ideas with enthusiasm, thereby resulting in fresh insights. (Memo, Kian, field note)

The supervisor's pre-performance comments and dialogues were also found to be effective in helping students understand the generic features of viva presentations, as reported by Iliad and Mahan in their journal entries. By providing guidance and demonstrating effective engagement with the audience, the supervisor helped students overcome uncertainties and excel in their presentations. "Before my viva presentation, I was unsure about what to include and emphasize. However, my supervisor demonstrated how to engage with the audience effectively by providing me with sample presentations to follow..." (Iliad, journal).

Furthermore, the learners actively aided the mentor by expressing their thoughts and sharing their new understandings, shifting the focus from merely the final product to the work-in-progress. This reciprocal co-construction of understanding between the learners and the mentor fostered a collaborative learning environment.

> Iliad asked for an early presentation, and after reviewing his manuscript, I thought it was ready. Nonetheless, during an informal presentation and conversation over tea in my office, we both recognized that there was room for improvement. By emphasizing the manuscript's strengths, I persuaded him to revise his already excellent writing (Kian, field note).

The described practice is in line with AaL principles. Specifically, the supervisor's voluntary acts, feedback provision, and encouragement of shared goal-setting and gap identification align with AaL's idea that assessment should involve learners in all aspects of the assessment cycle. The dialogic interaction between the supervisor and students, which facilitated the co-construction of meaning, provides evidence that the practice was informed by AaL principles.

5. Discussion

The study aimed to actualize AaL by adopting a dialogic teaching approach in two courses of Seminar and Thesis. The approach involved dialogically extended interactions through feedback loops and other interactional activities, such as repetition, rephrasing, summarizing, and confirmation. This allowed the teacher and learners to engage in focused and sustained discussions (Mercer & Howe, 2012), making feedback comprehensible and actionable. By doing so, the feedback process became a collaborative and reciprocal process that involved active participation and engagement of both parties (Ryan & Henderson, 2018).

Parsa's development of the best statistical test provides evidence of how cyclical assessment practices and feedback interactions can replace one-way transmission of information. The supervisor engaged in reciprocal dialogue with Parsa and offered ongoing feedback and guidance throughout the process. This approach allowed Parsa to review relevant papers and share their findings with the supervisor, leading to a collaborative approach to assessment.

Extended dialogic interaction characterized by mutuality, enabled the mentor to use their authority to stimulate interest and involvement, while also supporting co-regulated learning among students (Andrade & Brookhart, 2020). To use Chen and Bonner's (2020) words, co-regulation happens when "learners' self-regulation is influenced […] by their interactions and exchanges with others" (e.g., teachers) during their learning or engaging in tasks" (p. 6). These findings suggest that the mutuality embedded in extended dialogic interaction is an example of co-regulation. The mentor utilized their authority to promote engagement in extended dialogic interaction and mutual feedback. This collaborative approach enabled the mentor and students to regulate their learning processes collectively. Parsa's case shows that students' ability to appreciate and act on feedback is a skill co-constructed through reciprocal engagement between educators and learners

(Carless & Boud, 2018). The supervisor recommended a test and provided guidance, while Parsa engaged with the feedback. This led to the successful implementation of the test, demonstrating the effectiveness of collaborative feedback interactions in improving feedback literacy. These findings support the current understanding that "student engagement with assessment feedback is not a student responsibility alone" (Price et al., 2011, p. 884). Rather, the mentor's sustained engagement in interaction, assessment, and feedback is essential for student engagement.

Students became active participants in the learning process, rather than just consuming feedback from their supervisor. Using Parsa's development of the best statistical test as an example, the learners in this study were able to assume the role identities of learner-as-assessor and assistant seeker, effectively using and generating feedback while partnering with their instructors to deepen their understanding of the material (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Accordingly, through ongoing co-regulation with their instructors, the learners developed a range of self-regulatory skills such as reflection, feedback-seeking, and self-assessment of their learning enabling them to take an active role in their learning process. Among these skills, assuming the role of assessor was important and aligned with research showing that dialogic interactions can promote students' active involvement in assessment and learning (Tan et al., 2020).

The three-way mutuality between the teacher and learners enabled shared responsibility for eliciting, communicating, and receiving evidence, providing strategic assistance, generating and acting on feedback, and satisfying established criteria. This collaborative experience helped the learners progress from dependent learning to co-regulated learning (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). In other words, the three-way mutuality facilitated a gradual shift from reciprocal to combined reciprocal and proactive involvement (Reeve et al., 2020; Wang & Lee, 2021). These findings on mutuality distinguish AaL from other assessment paradigms in practice (Schellekens et al., 2021; Yan & Boud, 2021).

The findings and evidence from the study align with the principles of AaL. Iliad benefited from the mutually constructed dialogic literacy, which enabled him to reconstruct his understanding of success criteria (Wang & Lee, 2021). Similarly, Mahan recognized the role of the teacher as a lifelong learner. In addition, Mahan, Iliad, and Parsa understood their task as contributing to the literature rather than just submitting an assignment, which aligns with the goal-setting ability of learners within the AaL context. Parsa's case exemplifies the principle of proactive learning within the AaL context, as he redefined his role from a passive recipient of assessment to an assessor with agency in his own learning. Together, these cases demonstrate the principles of reciprocity and proactivity within the AaL context as well as a continuous process of self-positioning and re-positioning in the learning process (Rashidi & Esmaeeli, 2023).

The third way of mutuality, mutual support, provides evidence of blurring the boundaries between teaching, assessment, and learning. The educator predicted potential challenges for the viva presentation and provided guidance tailored to the learners' needs, rather than waiting for the completion of the assignments. Iliad also supported the teacher by presenting his work-in-progress and externalizing his current understanding for assessment. This effective collaboration between the teacher and learner intertwined their individual levels of understanding, expectations, and activities, blurring the boundary between their teaching and learning. By building on each other's insights, they contributed to the flow of instruction.

The findings of our study on three-way mutuality underscore the importance of creating a community of learners to achieve AaL (Clark, 2012; Xiao & Yang, 2019). This three-way mutuality provides insights into how conditions for proactive and reciprocal engagement are created to enhance co-regulatory learning, which is a desired outcome of AaL. Our study offers practical examples of this approach in action, such as the dialogic approach taken by the mentor with Iliad, which enabled the mentor to highlight Iliad's strengths and identify areas for improvement. This approach helped Iliad become both interdependent and proactive in his learning. Additionally, our study noted changes in the feedback-seeking behaviors of the three students over time. In Parsa's case, the supervisor's guidance regulated his decision-making, empowering him to make informed decisions and take appropriate an action. The findings align with Wang and Lee's (2021) argument that reciprocal and proactive learners constructively contribute to the flow of instruction. These practical examples can help educators better understand how the principles of AaL, particularly with regard to agentic engagement, which is defined as "proactive, constructive, and reciprocal actions", can be realized in real-world classroom settings (Reeve et al., 2020, p. 2).

The literature has identified AaL as a coherent system of interrelated components, including agentic engagement, dialogic feedback, and co-regulation, among others, that occur within a community of learners (Dann, 2012; Yan & Boud, 2021). However, implementing AaL without considering its essential components can impede a clear understanding of AaL in theory and practice. Despite previous efforts to define and implement AaL, a lack of consensus about its definition and practice persists, which has limited its translation into classroom practice. To address this gap, our longitudinal study allowed the components of AaL to interact and popularize, offering a more nuanced understanding of how AaL can be implemented in real-world classroom settings.

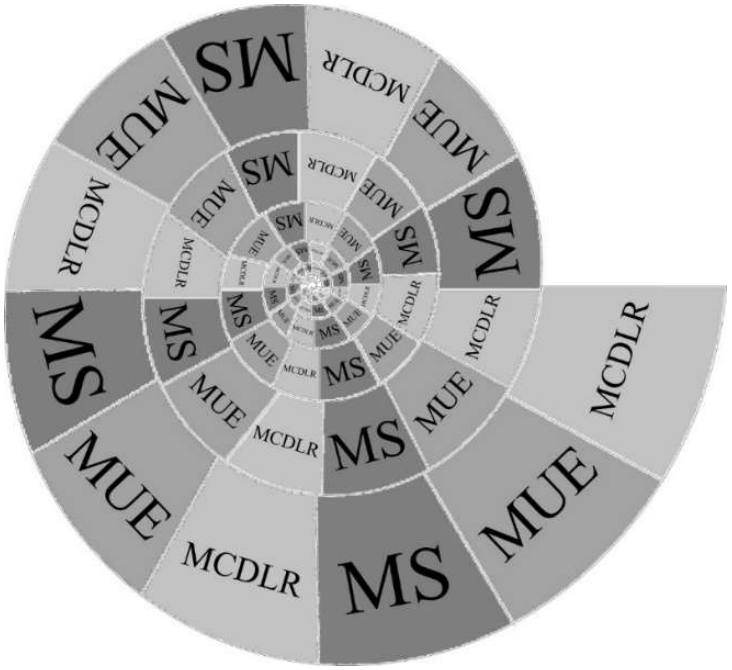


Figure 1. Growth spiral model depicting how the mutualities of mutual support (MS), mutually constructed dialogic literacy and rapport (MCDLR), and mutual understanding and engagement (MUE) can lead to extended interaction and increased learning in an Assessment as Learning (AaL) context.

This study found that three mutualities are necessary to extend interaction: 'mutually constructed dialogic literacy and rapport', 'mutual understanding and engagement', and 'mutual support'. The growth of these mutualities promotes the extension of interaction and provides a foundation for creating and using learning opportunities. The concept of three-way mutuality illustrates how learners and teachers co-regulate their learning (Hadwin et al., 2018). The Growth Spiral model can be used to depict teaching as an extended interaction process that builds upon the three mutualities. As the mutualities grow, more interaction loops are formed, leading to further learning. The size of the interaction curve increases with the volume of the mutualities, but the shape of the spiral (AaL) remains unchanged. The study's findings on the importance of the three mutualities necessary to extend interaction, practical examples, and the Growth Spiral model provide educators with a framework for operationalizing Assessment as Learning in real-world classroom settings. The model helps educators understand the process of teaching as an extended interaction that requires dialogic interaction and mutual engagement, and enables them to work towards providing effective dialogic feedback, which is a crucial aspect of AaL.

6. Conclusion

This research shows that dialogic teaching, which integrates teaching, assessment, and learning, is crucial. It emphasizes the value of feedback within ongoing interactions rather than standalone feedback. The study reveals that such dialogic interactions enhance literacy by fostering three-way mutualities. These mutualities promote reciprocity, helping students identify challenges, build shared understanding, and create learning opportunities.

The study contributes to the conceptual understanding of dialogic feedback and feedback constructiveness by illustrating its occurrence in dialogic teaching, assessment, and interaction. The proposed three-way mutuality model can serve as a coding framework for future research on dialogic feedback. Additionally, the study aligns with the growing body of research linking assessment with co-regulated learning, where learners collaborate and interact with others to become agents in their own learning (Hadwin et al., 2018).

The study has also implications for teacher professionalism. To implement AaL-oriented instructional approaches with a focus on dialogic feedback, educators may consider the following guidelines: First, foster extended interactions between learners and teachers to create a space for the reciprocal construction of mutuality. Second, exercise different agentic responsibilities to facilitate student engagement in meaning-making, such as creating opportunities for dialogue and interaction. Third, teach dialogically and scaffold dialogic feedback. Fourth, focus on the constructive function of dialogic feedback to enhance students' engagement in learning activities. Fifth, encourage learners to assume the identity of learner-as-assessor to agentically engage in co-regulated learning and then transition to self-regulated learning.

The study has limitations, including a small sample size, a focus on one-to-one tutoring, and a lack of investigation into contextual factors that may impact the effectiveness of AaL-oriented instructional approaches. Future research can address these limitations by exploring AaL in different educational settings. However, the longitudinal nature of the study has contributed to our understanding of how dialogic feedback sets the groundwork for actualizing AaL and fostering self-regulated learning. Future research can further scrutinize how AaL is operationalized in different educational sectors and age groups, and also document the impact of contextual factors such as online learning conditions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Appendix 1

Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview questions used to probe EFL students' experience of A*a*L and self-regulated learning.

1. What were your goals in the two courses of Seminar and Thesis? Did your goals change after taking these courses?
2. What did you do with the teacher's written comments on your drafts?
3. What made teacher's feedback useful, comprehensible, and viable to act upon?
4. What do you think about the dialogic feedback sessions? Why?
5. How do you evaluate your relationship with your educator? Two what extent did you interact with your educator?
6. How do you describe your assistance seeking behavior and the educator's assistance provision behavior?
7. How did you interact with/ connect to your peers? What roles did they play?
8. What were the challenges and what factors were conductive to more interaction?
9. What major roles did you expect to be fulfilled by your educator and what roles did he fulfill?
10. Who was responsible for assessing your learning and progress?
11. What do you think about your agency in your own learning?
12. How did you construe your roles as a learner, a researcher, and an academic writer?

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