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EFL Teachers' Critical Pedagogy Perceptions and Assessment Practices: A Needs Analysis Approach to Iranian Secondary School ELT Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

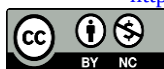
Objective: Argumentative reading comprehension requires higher-order skills such as evaluation, reasoning, and critical thinking, yet these abilities remain underdeveloped among many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Iran, where static, grammar-focused testing dominates. While dynamic assessment (DA) has been shown to enhance language skills, few studies have directly compared different group-based DA models in the domain of argumentative reading. This study investigated the effectiveness of interventionist group dynamic assessment (IGDA) and cumulative group dynamic assessment (CGDA) in comparison with static assessment (SA).

Methodology: Ninety low-intermediate Iranian EFL learners (aged 18–25) participated in a six-week intervention and completed pretests, posttests, and interviews.

Findings: Quantitative analyses revealed that both IGDA and CGDA led to significantly greater gains in argumentative reading comprehension than SA. IGDA proved most effective for fostering immediate analytical strategies through teacher mediation, whereas CGDA promoted deeper, sustained comprehension by encouraging collaborative reflection across sessions. Qualitative findings highlighted that dynamic assessment reduced anxiety, strengthened metacognitive awareness, and helped learners internalize reasoning strategies, while SA offered little developmental value.

Conclusion: These results extend DA research by distinguishing the complementary strengths of IGDA and CGDA, particularly in addressing the challenges of argumentative reading. The study underscores the need to move beyond static testing in Iranian EFL contexts and suggests that incorporating DA can cultivate higher-order comprehension and critical literacy.

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1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is considered a foundational skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This skill not only underpins academic success but also plays a significant role in effective vocabulary and grammar learning, better performance on standardized tests, and progress in university education. Moreover, reading comprehension is related to effective communication because a reader who understands texts well is more capable of producing clear and well-reasoned written and spoken messages. Among different text types, argumentative texts are more complex than narrative or descriptive texts because reading them requires learners to identify claims, evaluate evidence, and analyze reasoning structures (Kuhn, 2017; Grabe & Zhang, 2022). These processes require higher-order thinking and critical literacy, skills that many EFL learners struggle to acquire due to limited linguistic knowledge and insufficient exposure to authentic texts.

Assessment practices play a crucial role in shaping how reading comprehension is taught and learned. In many educational systems, including Iran, static assessments, such as multiple-choice tests, are still dominant. These assessments only measure learners' current knowledge and have multiple shortcomings: they cannot assess critical thinking and reasoning skills, focus on rote memorization and surface-level knowledge, ignore the learning process and learners' gradual development, and fail to provide effective and developmental feedback (Smith et al., 2021). Such practices create psychological pressure and anxiety and prevent learners from making progress during the assessment process (Stiggins, 2005). In the Iranian educational context, assessment is often based on grammar and rote memorization of content (Rahimnia, 2016). Consequently, learners have very limited opportunities to develop the reasoning skills required for argumentative reading comprehension (Ghafour & Rahimi, 2021).

Dynamic assessment (DA) was introduced as a complement to static testing. This approach is rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and emphasizes that learning takes place through mediation within the Zone of Proximal Development. In this framework, assessment is integrated with instruction so that support and feedback can be provided during the process (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Learners are guided to solve tasks that they cannot complete independently. This approach reveals not only their current ability but also their potential for development (Wertsch, 2008). Mediation can be provided through prompts, hints, or structured interaction, which helps learners internalize new strategies. Therefore, dynamic assessment is regarded as a process that promotes learning while evaluating performance.

Different approaches to dynamic assessment have been developed. Interventionist dynamic assessment uses structured mediation; support is provided hierarchically, moving from implicit hints to explicit assistance (Poehner & Lantolf, 2010). In contrast, cumulative dynamic

assessment provides repeated mediation across sessions so that learners can gradually consolidate their understanding (Kramsch, 2015). Research has shown that both approaches are effective for skills such as vocabulary and listening comprehension (Mirzaei et al., 2017; Rezai et al., 2023). However, limited attention has been paid to argumentative reading, a skill that requires more complex reasoning. Moreover, very few studies have directly compared interventionist and cumulative dynamic assessment in this domain, and the relative effectiveness of these two approaches remains unclear (Cheng et al., 2023).

This research gap is even more evident in the Iranian educational context. Although dynamic assessment has been used in areas such as vocabulary learning and listening comprehension (Safaei Asl et al., 2021; Rezai et al., 2023), its role in argumentative reading has been less explored. The number of studies that have directly compared interventionist and cumulative group dynamic assessment is also very limited. As a result, the question of how these approaches can support learners in developing argumentative reading comprehension remains unanswered.

The present study compares three assessment methods in Iranian EFL classrooms: interventionist group dynamic assessment, cumulative group dynamic assessment, and static assessment. The importance of this study lies in two things: one theoretical and one pedagogical. Theoretically, this study extends the scope of dynamic assessment to argumentative reading, a domain that requires critical thinking and evaluation skills. Pedagogically, the findings suggest how dynamic assessment can be used in Iranian classrooms to strengthen higher-order reading comprehension in learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reading Comprehension in EFL Contexts

Reading comprehension is a complex skill that involves three components: decoding text, integrating information, and critical evaluation. Researchers usually distinguish between two types of comprehension: literal comprehension, which refers to recalling explicit details from the text, and inferential comprehension, which requires interpretation, prediction, and evaluation (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2020; Kintsch & Rawson, 2021). For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, both types are challenging because they face linguistic difficulties as well as unfamiliar cultural and rhetorical conventions at the same time (Grabe & Zhang, 2022).

Vocabulary knowledge has always been recognized as a factor influencing comprehension. A limited vocabulary reduces learners' ability to decode texts and guess meaning (Zhang & Liu, 2023). Background knowledge also plays an important role, because familiarity with the topic makes it easier to infer and integrate information (Grabe & Zhang, 2022). Furthermore, effective reading requires the use of strategies such as predicting, summarizing, and

questioning. Research has shown that explicit instruction of these strategies can improve EFL learners' comprehension, especially for complex texts (Albrecht & Pearson, 2020).

Metacognition also plays an essential role in reading comprehension. Metacognition refers to the ability to monitor and regulate one's understanding of a text. Metacognitive strategies such as planning how to approach a text, checking understanding while reading, and evaluating comprehension after reading are essential for deep learning (Zhang & Liu, 2023). However, traditional assessments rarely measure or encourage the use of these strategies. This highlights the need for alternative approaches, such as dynamic assessment.

2.2. Argumentative Reading Comprehension

Argumentative texts pose particular challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The reason is that these texts require identifying claims, evidence, counterarguments, and logical fallacies (Kuhn, 2017). Performing such tasks demands not only language proficiency but also critical thinking. Research has shown that many EFL learners rely only on surface-level understanding of the text and have difficulty evaluating arguments properly (Grabe & Zhang, 2022). Traditional assessments, especially multiple-choice tests, are completely inadequate for this type of text because they focus more on memorizing information than on higher-order evaluation (Smith et al., 2021).

Dynamic assessment has been used in various language skills, but reading comprehension has its own unique challenges. Previous research shows that mediation can help learners unpack the layers of complex texts, particularly argumentative ones (Haywood & Lidz, 2007; Fani & Rashtchi, 2015). For example, Rassaei (2023) showed that dynamic assessment through mobile tools improves learners' reading comprehension and self-regulation in reading tasks. More recent studies have emphasized the role of digital technologies in providing immediate scaffolding during reading activities (Wang & Xu, 2024). These studies indicate that integrating technology with dynamic assessment can extend the scope of mediation beyond the limitations of the classroom.

Educational research also confirms that explicit instruction in text structure can improve learners' comprehension of argumentative texts (Albrecht & Pearson, 2020). Similarly, collaborative learning approaches, in which learners discuss and analyze arguments in groups, strengthen critical engagement. Nevertheless, very few studies have examined how assessment practices, particularly dynamic assessment, can be adapted to support these processes.

2.3. Assessment in Language Education

Assessment plays a central role in language education because it provides teachers with information about learners' knowledge and guides instructional decisions. In this domain, a well-known distinction exists between two types of assessment: formative assessment and

summative assessment. Formative assessment refers to activities that take place during the learning process. Its goal is to provide immediate feedback and help improve learning. Examples of this type of assessment include classroom questioning, short quizzes, and peer assessment. These methods allow teachers to identify learners' weaknesses and at the same time help learners regulate their own learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, 2011).

In contrast, summative assessment is conducted at the end of an instructional period to measure learners' progress based on predetermined criteria, such as final or standardized tests (Popham, 2001). Although summative assessment is necessary for educational accountability, it usually provides a static picture of performance and does not show how learners' abilities can develop when they receive support.

The limitations of summative assessment are more evident in the context of English as a Foreign Language education. In these settings, standardized tests often place heavy emphasis on grammar and vocabulary, and as a result they do not accurately reflect learners' actual communicative ability. Research has shown that such tests do not properly measure higher-order abilities such as inference, evaluation, and reasoning (Smith et al., 2021). Moreover, summative assessment often increases anxiety, especially among learners who have less confidence in their language abilities (Stiggins, 2005). For this reason, researchers have emphasized the need for assessment models that promote learning and, instead of merely measuring static achievement, show learners' gradual development.

Language assessment approaches should not be viewed as entirely independent from one another, since each reveals a different aspect of the learning process. Formative assessment focuses on monitoring and improving learning during instruction, whereas summative assessment measures learners' achievement of instructional objectives at the end of a course. Both approaches, however, rely largely on learners' observable performance and provide limited information about their potential for future development. In response to this limitation, dynamic assessment emerged as an approach that integrates assessment with instructional mediation. It examines not only learners' existing performance but also their capacity for growth and development. Dynamic assessment can therefore be regarded as an extension of traditional assessment approaches that places greater emphasis on the learner's developmental process.

2.4. Dynamic Assessment: Theoretical Foundations

Dynamic assessment is rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of mediation in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Dynamic assessment extends this theoretical framework to the domain of assessment and integrates teaching and testing (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014).

Over the past two decades, dynamic assessment has been widely used in second language learning, particularly in contexts where mediation and scaffolding are considered essential for learner development. The basic principle of this approach is that assessment should not merely measure what learners can do independently; rather, it should reveal their potential for development when they receive mediation (Lantolf, 2006). This principle is based on the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development – the distance between what learners can achieve alone and what they can achieve with guidance from others (Wertsch, 2008). Within this framework, learning is inherently social in nature, and progress is achieved through interaction with teachers or peers.

In dynamic assessment, mediation is integrated into the assessment process to guide learners in solving tasks that would otherwise be beyond their independent ability. This mediation can take the form of hints, prompts, explanations, or collaborative dialogue. This process not only evaluates learners' responsiveness to support but also extends their competence. Researchers have argued that this very feature makes dynamic assessment more educationally meaningful than static tests, which only record existing performance (Poehner & Lantolf, 2010). Importantly, dynamic assessment challenges the traditional separation between assessment and instruction by combining the two.

The appeal of dynamic assessment lies in its dual function. It is simultaneously diagnostic and developmental. Through scaffolding during the assessment process, dynamic assessment provides a dynamic picture of learners' ability and helps them internalize strategies that can be transferred to future tasks (Poehner, 2008). For this reason, researchers believe that dynamic assessment represents a shift in educational measurement, a shift that moves the focus from final outcomes to learning processes.

2.5. Types of Dynamic Assessment

Research has identified two main approaches to dynamic assessment: the interventionist approach, which relies on structured prompts and standardized procedures (Lidz & Elliott, 2000), and the interactionist approach, which emphasizes dialogic mediation and flexible teacher support (Poehner, 2008). Recent studies have shown that both approaches can promote learning, although they differ in the degree of control and flexibility.

In the interventionist approach, teachers or researchers provide support only when needed, and the level of assistance is recorded to determine the learner's potential. This feature allows for easier standardization and comparison across learners (Poehner & Lantolf, 2010). This approach is particularly effective in contexts where immediate feedback helps learners overcome difficulties quickly (Cheng et al., 2023). However, its relatively rigid structure may restrict open and free interaction.

Although dynamic assessment is often applied at the individual level, researchers have also examined how it functions in group contexts. Poehner (2009) introduced group dynamic assessment (GDA), in which mediation takes place through collaborative activities. More recent studies indicate that GDA can promote both language development and metacognitive awareness through peer interaction (Ableeva & Lantolf, 2011; Rassaei, 2023).

Cumulative dynamic assessment emphasizes repeated mediation across sessions. In this approach, support is distributed gradually over time, and learners consolidate their understanding step by step. Kramsch (2015) believes that this approach captures the longitudinal process of development more effectively than a single session of mediation, which has limited impact. Its strength lies in promoting deeper and more sustainable learning, although it requires more classroom time and is harder to standardize. Research has shown that cumulative dynamic assessment can improve learners' use of strategies and encourage self-regulation (Sanaeifar & Divcolaii, 2019).

Comparative studies in this area are limited. Some research has shown that cumulative dynamic assessment is more effective for learning vocabulary and collocations (Mirzaei et al., 2017; Farahani & Moghadam, 2020), whereas interventionist dynamic assessment may be better suited for tasks that require rapid comprehension or problem-solving (Cheng et al., 2023). These findings raise an important question: is a particular type of dynamic assessment more appropriate for complex reading tasks, such as argumentative reading comprehension?

Interventionist group dynamic assessment is particularly useful for tasks that require quick comprehension and immediate problem-solving, such as selective and productive reading exercises. Recent evidence emphasizes that teacher professional identity, knowledge, and education play a fundamental role in the effectiveness of these assessment processes (Asgari, 2024). Research conducted in the Iranian EFL context confirms that applying interventionist dynamic assessment models can significantly improve learners' performance because they receive structured, real-time mediation that targets specific reading difficulties. Therefore, such an approach is well suited to helping learners develop the analytical skills necessary for understanding complex texts. Importantly, scaffolding (structured support) provided by the teacher or peers, a fundamental feature of dynamic assessment, has been shown to support the development of reading comprehension within learners' Zone of Proximal Development (Pasandi et al., 2023). This scaffolded interaction not only assists with immediate understanding but also encourages learners to internalize strategies that are essential for higher-order reading.

2.6. Empirical Studies on Dynamic Assessment and Reading

In recent years, technology has played an important role in enhancing dynamic assessment. Mobile applications, online platforms, and AI tools have been used to provide mediation in

innovative ways. For example, a study conducted in Iran confirmed that AI-based scaffolding improved both reading comprehension and critical engagement with texts (Mohammadi & Rezaei, 2025). Other studies have also highlighted the role of digital technologies in providing immediate and individualized feedback in reading and writing tasks (Wang & Xu, 2024). These findings indicate that dynamic assessment is moving toward integration with intelligent systems.

A growing number of studies have examined dynamic assessment in relation to reading and related skills. Fani and Rashtchi (2015) showed that both individual and group dynamic assessment improved Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension, although no significant difference was found between the two formats. Miri et al. (2017) found that both concurrent and cumulative group dynamic assessment enhanced article learning, but concurrent dynamic assessment was slightly more effective. Rezai et al. (2023) also demonstrated that group dynamic assessment improved learners' metacognitive awareness and listening comprehension. These results suggest that the benefits of dynamic assessment extend to higher-order cognitive skills as well.

In the specific domain of argumentative reading, Cheng et al. (2023) showed that interventionist dynamic assessment strengthened learners' ability to analyze and evaluate arguments. These findings indicate that both forms of dynamic assessment are beneficial, although their patterns of effectiveness may differ over time. However, most of these studies had short intervention periods and relatively small samples, a factor that limits the generalizability of their findings.

Evidence from Iran suggests that teacher professional identity, knowledge, and education are key factors influencing the success of dynamic assessment in English language classrooms (Asgari, 2024). In a controlled study, learners who experienced interventionist mediation significantly outperformed their peers in a static assessment group. Similarly, Pasandi et al. (2023) used microgenetic analysis to show how teacher and peer scaffolding unfolds in practice, revealing the detailed ways in which mediation supports reading instruction. Their study confirmed that both forms of scaffolding are effective, although they operate through distinct interactional mechanisms. Furthermore, Farokhipour et al. (2020) designed and validated a local model of dynamic assessment, demonstrating that this approach can be successfully adapted to diagnose and address learning difficulties in high school students' productive skills. Taken together, these studies indicate that structured mediation within dynamic assessment significantly improves L2 reading performance and strategic competence.

Despite considerable evidence for the effectiveness of dynamic assessment, important shortcomings remain in the existing literature. First, most previous studies have focused on

lower-level skills such as vocabulary and listening comprehension, while argumentative reading, which requires the integration of language knowledge with metacognitive abilities, critical analysis, and logical evaluation, has received far less attention. Second, even among studies that examined dynamic assessment in reading, the dominant format has been individual, and group dynamic assessment as a socio-cultural intervention has been relatively underexplored. Among the few studies that employed group dynamic assessment, most merely compared it with static or individual assessment; direct, controlled comparisons between the two main approaches of group dynamic assessment, namely interventionist and cumulative, have rarely been conducted within a single research design. Third, in the specific domain of argumentative reading, no study has simultaneously examined the effects of both interventionist and cumulative group dynamic assessment alongside static assessment.

To put it more clearly, the main research gap can be summarized in three points:

- It remains unclear which of the two group dynamic assessment approaches (interventionist or cumulative) is more effective in improving argumentative reading comprehension.
- It is not known whether the temporal patterns of effectiveness differ between the two approaches, such that interventionist assessment produces stronger short-term gains while cumulative assessment yields deeper and more sustained learning.
- Given the dominance of static, grammar-based assessment in the Iranian educational system, no systematic research has compared these three assessment methods (interventionist group, cumulative group, and static) together in the domain of argumentative reading.

In addition, methodological weaknesses of previous studies – including small sample sizes, short intervention periods (often less than one academic term), and limited contextual diversity – severely reduce the generalizability of existing findings. Consequently, there is a clear and compelling need for research with a coherent design, systematic comparisons, and the inclusion of all three main variables (interventionist group dynamic assessment, cumulative group dynamic assessment, and static assessment) in the field of argumentative reading.

To address this research gap, the present study systematically compares interventionist group dynamic assessment and cumulative group dynamic assessment with static assessment in the domain of argumentative reading comprehension among Iranian EFL learners. Theoretically, this study extends dynamic assessment research to a less-examined text type (argumentative reading) and directly compares the two group-based approaches. Pedagogically, it provides insights into how assessment practices in Iranian English language classrooms can be redesigned to foster critical comprehension and reduce reliance on rote memorization.

Accordingly, the following research questions were posed:

1. What is the effect of assessment type (IGDA, CGDA, SA) on Iranian EFL learners' argumentative reading comprehension, and does change over time differ by assessment type?
2. What are EFL learners' views on the effectiveness of the three assessment methods in improving argumentative reading comprehension?

3. Method

3.1. Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design that followed a sequential explanatory model. The design included two distinct phases. In the first phase, a quantitative quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design was used to measure the effects of different assessment methods on learners' argumentative reading comprehension. Three groups were compared: the interventionist group dynamic assessment group (IGDA), the cumulative group dynamic assessment group (CGDA), and the static assessment group (SA). In the second phase, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a subset of participants to explore their experiences and perceptions of the assessment methods.

The sequential explanatory design was selected because quantitative data alone could not capture the complex ways learners interacted with the assessment approaches. The quantitative strand allowed the researchers to identify significant differences among groups and to establish whether dynamic assessment methods had measurable effects. The qualitative strand provided insights into learners' perspectives on feedback, collaboration, and learning strategies. Integrating the two strands allowed the study to address both research questions: the first required statistical evidence of differences, and the second required participants' explanations of how assessment experiences influenced their comprehension. This integration strengthened the validity of the findings by connecting performance outcomes with learners' lived experiences.

3.2. Participants

This study was conducted with the participation of 90 Iranian EFL learners who were enrolled in private language institutes in Bushehr. The choice of private institutes as the research context is important because many Iranian learners attend these centers to prepare for international exams (such as IELTS and TOEFL) or to improve their academic skills. Therefore, investigating argumentative reading comprehension in such contexts has high pedagogical relevance. Participants were first assessed using a placement test to ensure that all of them were at the low-intermediate level. Then, using stratified random sampling based on gender (two strata: male and female), participants within each stratum were randomly assigned to three equal groups ($n = 30$ each): interventionist group dynamic assessment (IGDA), cumulative group dynamic assessment (CGDA), and static assessment (SA).

The participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years ($M = 20.7$, $SD = 1.8$). There were 48 females (53.3%) and 42 males (46.7%). Most participants came from middle-income families, while 22 students (24.4%) reported a lower socioeconomic background. All participants had studied English for at least four years in the public school system prior to entering the institute. None had lived or studied in an English-speaking country.

3.3. Instrumentation

3.3.1. Argumentative Reading Comprehension Test

To assess learners' argumentative reading comprehension, a researcher-made test consisting of 20 multiple-choice questions was developed. The base text of the test was taken from the topic "Mandatory Recycling", which was selected for its argumentative nature (including claims, evidence, and counterarguments) as well as its relevance to the everyday experiences of Iranian EFL learners. The reason for using an independent text rather than passages from the institute's textbooks was that the textbook materials had already been taught in class; using them in the pretest and posttest could have allowed unequal prior knowledge or memory effects to influence the results. The time allowed for completing this test was 30 minutes.

The text was evaluated using readability indices (such as the Flesch Reading Ease Index and the Fog Index) and found to be at a level equivalent to B1-level texts. Moreover, the vocabulary and grammatical structures of the text were matched against a corpus of B1-level texts. To ensure appropriate difficulty and to prevent learner fatigue or frustration, the text was piloted with 20 learners at the same proficiency level (who did not participate in the main study).

Table 1 Readability Indices of the Text

Readability Index	Obtained Value	Interpretation Range	Text Level
Flesch Reading Ease	64.5	60–70	B1
Gunning Fog Index	8.2	8–10	B1
Average Sentence Length	14.3 words	12–20 words	B1
Average Syllables per Word	1.45	1.3–1.7	B1

The obtained values for the readability indices fall within the standard range for B1-level texts. The Flesch Reading Ease score (64.5) indicates a relatively fluent text, the Fog Index (8.2) suggests that about eight years of formal education are needed for comprehension, the average sentence length (14.3 words) points to appropriate syntactic structure, and the average syllables per word (1.45) shows that most vocabulary items are short and common. Overall, the text "Mandatory Recycling" is judged to be appropriately difficult for low-intermediate (B1) learners.

The results of the pilot reliability analysis showed that the test had satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$). Therefore, this test was considered a reliable instrument for the pretest and posttest of the main study. To assess content validity, the initial version of the

protocol was reviewed by three experts in English language teaching (all holding an MA degree in TEFL, specializing in dynamic assessment and reading skills, with over eight years of teaching experience at private language institutes), and revisions were made to improve clarity and appropriateness for the target learners.

3.3.2. Placement Test

To ensure the homogeneity of participants at the low-intermediate level, the B1 Preliminary (PET) practice test (2024 edition) was used. This test is published by Cambridge Assessment English and consists of four sections: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In this study, only the reading section (32 questions) was administered, and its completion time was 45 minutes.

3.3.3. Semi-structured Interview

To examine learners' perceptions and experiences of the assessment methods, semi-structured individual interviews were used. The reason for choosing individual interviews over group interviews was to prevent responses from being influenced by others' opinions and to increase the depth and accuracy of the data. The interview protocol was developed based on a review of previous research (Poehner, 2008; Rassaei, 2023) and focused on three areas: (a) learners' experiences with the assessment process, (b) the perceived impact of the methods on comprehension of argumentative texts, and (c) their attitudes toward feedback and mediation. To assess content validity, the initial version of the protocol was reviewed by three experts in English language teaching, and revisions were made to improve clarity and appropriateness for the target learners. The protocol was then piloted with 5 participants from the same group of 20 learners who had taken part in the text pilot (and who did not participate in the main study).

3.4. Procedures

The study was conducted in three phases: pretesting, intervention, and posttesting. First, to ensure that all participants had a similar level of English proficiency, the PET was administered. The PET exam assesses four key skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Each skill is scored out of 25 points, with a total possible score of 100 points. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the B1 level (low-intermediate) is typically achieved with a total score between 70 and 84. However, for this study, participants were required to score within the range of 60 to 74 to ensure they were at the low-intermediate level, as this range aligns with the lower end of the B1 level and reflects the target proficiency of the participants. Then, the argumentative reading comprehension pretest was given to establish baseline performance. After this phase, participants were randomly divided into three equal groups (n = 30 each): interventionist group dynamic assessment (IGDA), cumulative

group dynamic assessment (CGDA), and static assessment (SA), which served as the control group.

The intervention lasted six weeks, consisting of twelve sessions (two sessions per week). Each session lasted 90 minutes, and the entire time was devoted to research-related activities, including reading argumentative texts, providing feedback, and conducting group assessments. In the IGDA group, learners completed reading tasks individually. When a learner encountered difficulty, the teacher used hierarchical prompting: first an implicit hint was given, then a more explicit prompt, and finally, if needed, the teacher directly explained the answer. This feedback was immediate and individualized, and the level of assistance was recorded. In the CGDA group, learners worked collaboratively in small groups of 3 to 4 members. The teacher acted as a facilitator. When a group asked for help, the teacher did not provide a direct answer but referred the question to the whole group, guided the discussion with probing questions, and helped summarize key points. This feedback was repeated across sessions so that learners could gradually consolidate their understanding. In the SA group, learners completed the same reading tasks individually and without any assistance or feedback from the teacher. The teacher merely distributed and collected the test sheets. This group served as the control group and did not provide qualitative data during the intervention.

After the intervention, all participants completed the argumentative reading comprehension posttest, which was parallel to the pretest. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subsample of learners from the IGDA and CGDA groups (12 participants in total) to explore their perceptions and experiences of the assessment methods.

Prior to the study, written informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were assured that their information would remain confidential, that their scores would not affect their course grades, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure anonymity, participants' names were replaced with numerical codes. The study was approved by the research ethics committee of the institute.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the pretest and posttest were analyzed using a mixed analysis of variance with two factors: assessment type (three levels: interventionist, cumulative, and static) as the between-subjects factor and time (two levels: pretest and posttest) as the within-subjects factor. Argumentative reading comprehension scores served as the dependent variable. The main effects of time and assessment type, as well as their interaction, were examined. Due to the study's focus on separately comparing each dynamic approach with the control group, the main analyses were conducted pairwise. Subsequently, a Tukey HSD post hoc test was used to

directly compare the two intervention groups with each other. Prior to the main analysis, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were checked.

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Two researchers independently coded the transcribed interviews. The extracted themes included learners' perceptions of the assessment methods, the role of feedback, and challenges related to text comprehension. Finally, the qualitative findings were integrated with the quantitative results to provide a clearer explanation of how different assessment methods influenced reading comprehension.

4. Results

First, the placement test (PET) was administered to the participants. Learners who scored between 60 and 74 (out of 100) were selected as being at the low-intermediate level and continued in the study.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of PET Scores

Skill	Mean Score (out of 25)	Standard Deviation	Total Score (out of 100)
Reading	16.3	1.2	65.2
Writing	15.6	1.3	62.4
Listening	15.2	1.2	60.8
Speaking	15.9	1.3	63.5

The PET results showed that all participants had similar language proficiency across the four skills. Mean scores for each skill ranged from 15.2 to 16.3 out of 25. The overall mean score was 62.5 out of 100, which falls within the range of 60 to 74. This range corresponds to the low-intermediate level and confirms that all participants were at the intended level. Homogeneity of language proficiency was essential for the validity of the findings, as it prevented individual differences in language ability from affecting the results.

Before the main study, the argumentative reading comprehension pretest and posttest were administered to 20 learners from the same population (who did not take part in the main study). The purpose of this pilot study was to examine the reliability and validity of the assessment instruments.

Table 3 Reliability Analysis of Pretest and Posttest

Test Type	Cronbach's Alpha
Argumentative Pretest	0.85
Argumentative Posttest	0.87

The Cronbach's alpha values for both the pretests and posttests were above 0.80, indicating high reliability. This confirmed that the tests were consistent and suitable for measuring the intended constructs.

To answer the first research question, the effect of each dynamic assessment approach (interventionist and cumulative) was first examined separately in comparison with the control group (static assessment). Then, the amount of progress from pretest to posttest was analyzed in these comparisons. The results are presented in the following tables, with an explanation of how each table addresses the research question.

Table 4 presents the results of the mixed ANOVA examining between-subjects effects (IGDA vs. SA) on argumentative reading comprehension scores in the pretest and posttest. This table addresses the first part of the first research question: whether there is an overall difference regardless of the time factor between the IGDA group and the control group (SA).

Table 4 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects IGDA vs. SA

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	7631.022	1	7631.022	3375.707	.000	.975
Group	0.55	1	0.55	0.10	.75	.002
Error	320.10	58	5.52			

The results in Table 4 showed that the main effect of group was not significant ($F = 0.10$, $p = 0.75$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.002$). In other words, when time was not considered, there was no statistically significant difference between the IGDA and SA groups in argumentative reading comprehension scores. This finding indicates that simply being in the experimental or control group, without considering changes resulting from the intervention, cannot serve as a basis for judging effectiveness.

Table 5 presents the results of the mixed ANOVA examining between-subjects effects (CGDA vs. SA) on argumentative reading comprehension scores. This table also addresses the first part of the first research question, this time comparing the cumulative group with the control group.

Table 5 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (CGDA vs. SA)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	15220.00	1	15220.00	2709.00	.000	.98
Group	0.30	1	0.30	0.05	.83	.001
Error	325.80	58	5.62			

The results in Table 5 showed that the main effect of group was not significant ($F = 0.05$, $p = 0.83$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.001$). Similar to the previous comparison, without considering time, there was no statistically significant difference between the CGDA and SA groups. This finding again highlights the need to examine the interaction effect between time and group.

Table 6 addresses the second part of the first research question: whether the amount of progress from pretest to posttest differs between the IGDA and SA groups.

Table 6 Tests of Within -Subjects Effects (IGDA vs. SA)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Time	550.20	1	550.20	150.00	.000	.72
Time × Group	261.90	1	261.90	71.00	.000	.55
Error (Time)	212.75	58	3.67			

The results in Table 6 showed that the main effect of time was significant ($F = 150.00$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.72$); that is, argumentative reading comprehension scores increased significantly from pretest to posttest in both groups. Moreover, the time $\times$ group interaction was also significant ($F = 71.00$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.55$). This finding directly answers the second part of the first research question and shows that the amount of progress over time was significantly greater in the IGDA group than in the SA group. Therefore, interventionist group dynamic assessment had a greater impact on improving argumentative reading comprehension than static assessment.

Table 7 presents the results of the mixed ANOVA examining within-subjects effects (time and time $\times$ group) for the comparison between CGDA and SA. This table also addresses the second part of the first research question for the cumulative group.

Table 7 Tests of Within-Subjects effects (CGDA vs. SA)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Time	590.00	1	590.00	165.00	.000	.74
Time × Group	331.00	1	331.00	92.40	.000	.61
Error (Time)	207.50	58	3.58			

The results in Table 7 showed that the main effect of time was significant ($F = 165.00$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.74$). In addition, the time $\times$ group interaction was significant ($F = 92.40$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.61$). This finding indicates that the CGDA group showed a greater increase in argumentative reading comprehension scores than the SA group. Thus, cumulative group dynamic assessment also had a significantly greater effect on reading comprehension improvement compared to static assessment.

In summary, the findings showed that both dynamic assessment approaches (interventionist and cumulative) led to greater progress in argumentative reading comprehension compared to static assessment. Although there were no significant differences among the groups before the intervention, over time learners in the dynamic assessment groups showed larger increases in their scores. This result suggests that applying dynamic assessment – regardless of whether it is interventionist or cumulative – has a positive and significant impact on improving argumentative reading ability compared to traditional static assessment.

To answer the second research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subsample of 12 participants (4 from each group). The interviews explored participants' perceptions of the assessment methods, the role of feedback, and the challenges they experienced. The sample size was limited, so complete thematic saturation could not be claimed. However, recurring patterns across groups indicated that the themes reflected shared experiences while still capturing individual differences. Interview transcripts were coded using an alphanumeric system (e.g., IGDA1, CGDA3, SA2) to preserve anonymity and to trace quotations back to participants. Analysis revealed five core themes that explain how dynamic assessment methods shaped learners' experiences compared to static assessment.

4.1. Perceived Value of Assessment Methods

Participants generally favored dynamic approaches over static testing. IGDA learners reported that teacher guidance during tasks helped them develop independent strategies. For instance, IGDA2 remarked, *"I learned how to think through problems rather than just wait for answers."* CGDA learners valued collaborative engagement, with CGDA3 noting, *"Group discussions showed me different ways to see the same text."* In contrast, SA participants often felt frustrated. SA1 commented, *"The tests only showed what I didn't know without helping me improve."* At the same time, not all learners preferred mediation; one IGDA participant stated that *"too many hints slowed me down,"* showing that perceptions of support were not entirely uniform.

4.2. Nature and Impact of Feedback

The timing and quality of feedback distinguished the groups. IGDA learners described the immediacy of feedback as useful. IGDA4 explained, *"When I struggled with an argument, the teacher's questions made me see where my reasoning went wrong."* CGDA learners experienced feedback as cumulative across sessions, with CGDA1 stating, *"Each discussion built on the last, so my understanding kept growing."* SA learners, however, received little feedback. SA3 remarked, *"We just got scores with no explanation."* A minority of CGDA learners also mentioned challenges, with one noting that *"sometimes group feedback was confusing because opinions were different."*

4.3. Cognitive and Emotional Experiences

Dynamic assessment changed how learners approached difficult texts. IGDA learners developed real-time strategies, with IGDA3 noting, *"I learned to break down complex sentences instead of panicking."* CGDA participants gained confidence from peer support. CGDA2 said, *"Hearing others' interpretations made me realize there are many ways to understand."* In contrast, static testing triggered anxiety. SA2 admitted, *"Tests made me nervous because they felt like judgments."* Still, one SA participant mentioned that *"working*

alone made me push myself more," suggesting that not all aspects of static assessment were viewed negatively.

4.4. Development of Learning Strategies

Dynamic assessment promoted metacognitive awareness. IGDA learners reported internalizing the teacher's questioning techniques. IGDA1 explained, *"Now I ask myself the same questions the teacher used."* CGDA learners adopted strategies from peers, with CGDA4 remarking, *"I picked up how to spot weak arguments by listening to group members."* SA learners reported little strategy growth. SA4 admitted, *"I never thought about how I was reading until this study."* However, one SA learner also noted some self-reliance, saying, *"Doing tasks without help forced me to check my answers carefully."*

4.5. Social Dimensions of Learning

The social context of CGDA emerged as particularly influential. Participants described how collaboration improved comprehension. CGDA2 reflected, *"Explaining my ideas to others helped me clarify my own thinking."* Even initially reluctant learners grew more confident, as CGDA4 explained, *"I was shy at first, but structured discussions made it easier to talk."* This social support was absent from IGDA and SA. Some CGDA participants, however, also found peer interaction distracting at times, as CGDA3 commented, *"The group sometimes went off topic, and it was hard to focus."*

4.6. Summary of Themes

The interviews showed that dynamic assessment was generally perceived as more supportive than static testing, but experiences varied. Immediate mediation in IGDA and cumulative peer-based mediation in CGDA fostered both strategy use and emotional engagement. In contrast, static testing offered little guidance, often leaving learners frustrated. Yet even within groups, some participants raised concerns about pacing, clarity, or distraction. These perspectives indicate that the effectiveness of assessment methods depends not only on formal structure but also on how learners respond to the cognitive and social environments created during assessment.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study were explained through the lens of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which positions learning as a socially mediated process that develops within the Zone of Proximal Development. Assessment in this framework is not a detached activity but an instrument that can promote learning when mediation is embedded. The significant gains of the IGDA and CGDA groups in argumentative reading comprehension confirmed that guided interaction and scaffolded support are more effective than static measurement. These results

connect directly to the discussion in the literature review, where the role of mediation in learning development was emphasized.

The quantitative findings revealed that both dynamic assessment groups outperformed the SA group. The stronger effect of IGDA in the short term can be explained by its emphasis on immediate and individualized mediation. Teacher prompts encouraged learners to analyze arguments, recognize evidence, and evaluate rhetorical structures, which developed their metacognitive strategies. These results are consistent with research highlighting the importance of teacher professional identity and training in the effective implementation of dynamic assessment (Asgari, 2024). Moreover, the teacher-scaffolding process that lies at the heart of this mediation has been shown to guide learners effectively through their Zone of Proximal Development, leading to deeper engagement with the reading material (Pasandi et al., 2023). Furthermore, this outcome is consistent with Albrecht and Pearson (2020), who stressed the importance of strategy instruction for argumentative reading. It also supports earlier work by Ableeva (2008) and Poehner (2009), who documented the benefits of individualized mediation in comprehension tasks. The present study extended this line of research by focusing specifically on argumentative texts, which demand evaluation of claims and counterclaims.

The CGDA group also demonstrated significant improvement. The collaborative format provided opportunities for peer modeling and repeated discussion of texts. Learners explained that group interaction helped them to clarify organizational patterns such as problem–solution and cause–effect. These results are in line with Rezai et al. (2023), and Mirzaei et al. (2017), who found that cumulative mediation fosters metacognitive awareness and peer-assisted learning. The present study contributes new evidence by showing that cumulative mediation can support argumentative reading comprehension, a text type less examined in earlier dynamic assessment research. The finding that IGDA was more effective than CGDA in a six-week program also adds to previous studies. Miri et al. (2017) and Safaei Asl et al. (2021) reported stronger long-term benefits for CGDA, which suggests that intervention length plays a role in shaping outcomes.

This outcome aligns with the broader DA literature that highlights the value of peer scaffolding in promoting learning. Studies have shown that peer scaffolding can rival teacher-led mediation in fostering reading comprehension gains, as classmates offer complementary perspectives and share learning strategies (Pasandi et al., 2023). That collaborative dimension represents a distinctive strength of the cumulative group DA model.

The weaker performance of the SA group confirms limitations of static assessment. Their lower scores and negative perceptions resonate with critiques of conventional testing by Popham (2001) and Smith et al. (2021). Learners' reports that static tests increased anxiety and

provided little guidance illustrate the inability of such assessments to promote learning. These findings connect to the literature review section where the separation of assessment and instruction was discussed as a persistent problem in EFL contexts.

Qualitative results provided insight into the mechanisms behind the quantitative outcomes. IGDA learners reported that teacher mediation helped them to slow down and reflect, which reflects what Wertsch (2008) described as the process of internalization. CGDA learners described how collaboration increased their confidence, which supports Shanahan and Shanahan's (2020) claim that complex texts require both individual and collective strategies. In contrast, SA learners described frustration, which confirms Stiggins' (2005) argument that assessment format influences affective outcomes. The connection between strategy development, reduced anxiety, and comprehension growth in the DA groups shows how mediation addresses both cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning.

These findings reinforce an emerging consensus in assessment research: static, non-mediational tests are insufficient for capturing or fostering the full scope of learners' developmental potential, particularly when contrasted with the diagnostic and instructional benefits offered by DA (Farokhipour et al., 2020; Asgari, 2024; Pasandi et al., 2023).

The findings also reveal cultural factors in the Iranian setting. CGDA participants noted that group work resembled traditional educational practices, which supports Rahimnia (2016). This cultural alignment may have reduced resistance to collaborative tasks and increased engagement. Grabe and Zhang (2022) argued that affective engagement is central to L2 reading development, and the present findings support this argument by showing that culturally familiar interaction patterns enhanced motivation.

The present study therefore confirms earlier theoretical claims about dynamic assessment, extends recent empirical studies with a focus on argumentative reading comprehension, and shows the adaptability of DA to different cultural contexts. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings also demonstrates how DA functions not only as an evaluative tool but as an instructional practice.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of dynamic assessment approaches compared with traditional static testing for improving reading comprehension among Iranian EFL learners. Both interventionist and cumulative group dynamic assessment methods produced stronger outcomes than static assessment. The interventionist format was especially effective for supporting learners' analysis of argumentative texts, while the cumulative group format showed advantages for collaborative understanding of argumentative structures.

The findings supported Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which explains that guided mediation within the Zone of Proximal Development promotes development. Learners in dynamic assessment groups achieved higher scores and reported greater confidence and engagement. These outcomes were consistent with Poehner and Lantolf (2010) and more recent studies such as Zhang and Liu (2023) and Cheng et al. (2023), who confirmed that mediated learning improves comprehension in complex texts. The Iranian educational context may also have shaped the positive reception of collaborative approaches, as suggested by Rahimnia (2016).

The results carried important implications for teaching practice. Assessment can be integrated into instruction to support strategy use and motivation rather than function only as an evaluative tool. Teachers require training to apply dynamic assessment methods effectively, and institutions need to allocate resources and time to support these practices. Such changes would connect assessment more directly to the learning process, a recommendation consistent with Stiggins (2005) and Wiliam (2011).

Despite these contributions, limitations need to be recognized. The participants were low-intermediate Iranian EFL learners, which restricts the generalizability of the results. The intervention lasted six weeks, which may not have been sufficient for capturing the full potential of cumulative group mediation. The reading tasks were limited to argumentative texts, which narrows the scope of application. These limitations are common in classroom-based research, but they also provide direction for future inquiry. Future studies should include learners with different proficiency levels and from varied contexts, extend the duration of interventions, and apply dynamic assessment to multiple genres of reading. Recent work by Poehner and Yu (2022) and Rassaei (2023) suggests that digital mediation tools may expand opportunities for applying dynamic assessment in diverse educational settings.

This study contributed to the growing body of research on alternative assessment in language education. It showed that dynamic assessment can enhance both performance and attitudes toward learning, and it revealed specific benefits of interventionist and cumulative formats for argumentative reading comprehension. These findings extend the discussion presented in the literature review and offer directions for improving both classroom practice and future research in EFL assessment.

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