

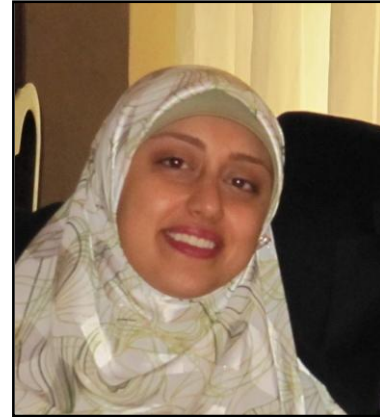


Title of Project:

Cultural Implications of Assessment Procedures in English, French and Persian as Foreign Language Classes in the USA, France and Iran

Researcher:

Soodeh Eghtesad
Université Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle
soodeh313@yahoo.com



Research Supervisor:

Dr Jean-Paul Narcy-Combes

Project Summary:

In light of the complex social, political, institutional, and cultural dimensions of assessment practices in foreign/second language classes, the primary purpose of this project was to illustrate what the language exams used in university level second and foreign language classes in Iran, in France, and in the United States reveal about each country's education, culture, and perception of language, learning, and assessment. More precisely, the main questions asked in this research are the following:

Are the exams administered in university level second and/or foreign language classes in Iran, in France, and in the U.S. universal or culturally specific to each country or each language? If they are specific, what are the underlying social, political, cultural, and economic factors that have an effect on them?

Based on these research questions, as well as the theoretical framework for this project, the following hypothesis was proposed: Language exams administered in Iranian, French, and American language learning contexts are not universal; they are representative of practices designed for and adapted to each country's

- needs and objectives for learning languages;
- education and assessment habits, traditions, and cultures; and
- social, political, and economic factors governing language use, (language) teaching, and (language) assessment in each country.

An attempt was made to validate this hypothesis through a detailed analysis of data gathered through 48 individual semi-structured instructor interviews, which were recorded and transcribed by the researcher in order to analyze the similarities and differences in the language assessment practices and perceptions of practices (regarding language exams in particular) used in the three countries' second and foreign language classes. The analysis of the interviews



produced results about the universality or specificities of the Exam Image¹ in these six contexts. The results were divided into three distinct groups:

- the specificities of the context in which the exam was administered,
- the specificities of the country in which the exam was given, and
- the “almost” universal trends regarding exams in all three countries studied.

The section on the specificities of the context in which the exam is administered included the exams given in English as a foreign language classes in Iran and in France. In both of these contexts, English is learned as an instrumental language for academic and professional enrichment. In the Iranian context, exams included the following criteria:

- the widespread use of discrete-point exams;
- the use of close-ended questions, especially multiple choice questions in exams;
- objectivity and reliability as the rationale for using close-ended questions in exams;
- the unusually high percentage of exams (60-100%) in students’ final class grade; and
- the absence of oral performances in the exam, in form of receptive oral performances or in form of productive oral performances.

The following table summarizes themes reflecting the teaching of English in Iran:

Table 1: Distribution of themes reflecting the teaching of English in Iran

THEMES	IRAN ENGLISH
Mode of exam	Integrated exam (1/8) Discrete point exam (7/8)
Type of exam	Progress test (8/8)
Type of questions used in the exam	Multiple choice questions (7/8) Fill in the blank questions : (4/8)
Rationale for the questions	Reliability and Objectivity (7/8) Time constraints (8/8)
Influences on the exam	Exam reflects course objectives (5/8)
Open-ended questions	Approves and uses (4/8) Approves but does not use (6/8)
Close-ended questions	Approves and uses (6/8)
Function of the exam	Motivate learners (8/8)
Weight of exam in the final grade	60-80% (3/8) 80-100% (3/8)
Drills	No (8/8)
Skill assessed in the exam	Identification of content (8/8)

¹ The term "image" refers to the way in which exams were described by each interviewee, that is, the “image” that each participant interviewed gave to the term “exam.”



	Identification of language (5/8) Application of knowledge (5/8) Memorization des of knowledge (4/8)
Targeted performances in the exam	Reading comprehension (8/8) Grammar (3/8)

Based on the context of the teaching/learning of English in Iran, these features were attributed to:

1. the specific constraints of the teaching and assessment of English in Iranian universities with high number of student enrollment and not enough in-class time for individual participation and assessment,
2. the Iranian education and assessment culture where exams are the main assessment tool used and accepted, and
3. the uses of English by the Iranian students during their undergraduate studies: reading articles in their original text.

In the French context, however, they demonstrated the following characteristics:

1. the widespread use of open-ended or semi open-ended questions in the exam;
2. the emphasis on written performances, both written expression and written comprehension; and
3. the high percentage of exams in students' final grade (up to 80%).

The following table summarizes themes reflecting the teaching of English in France:

Table 2: Distribution of themes reflecting the teaching of English in France

THEMES	FRANCE ENGLISH
Mode of exam	Integrated exam (5/8)
Type of exam	Progress test (7/8)
Type of questions used in the exam	Written comment (4/8) Essays (4/8) Open ended reading comprehension questions (4/8)
Rationale for the questions	Efficiency (6/8) Time constraints (6/8)
Influences on the exam	Exam meets institutions' requirements (4/8) Feasibility (8/8) Validity (5/8)
Open-ended questions	Approves and uses (6/8)



Close-ended questions	Approves and uses (3/8)
Function of the exam	Assign grades (5/8)
Weight of exam in the final grade	60-80% (6/8)
Drills	No (7/8)
Skill assessed in the exam	Application of knowledge (7/8) Identification of content (6/8)
Targeted performances in the exam	Reading comprehension (6/8) Listening comprehension (6/8) Writing (5/8)

These features were attributed to:

1. the Iranian or French education and assessment culture, and
2. the instrumental/practical uses of English by the Iranian and French students during their studies.

The section on the specificities of the country in which the exam is given consisted of interesting differences in instructors' representations of the function of exams. In Iran, most participants share the view that the main function of an exam is to motivate learners to study. This is an authoritarian function that forces students to take their courses as well as their assessment seriously. The exam is, therefore, a tool to make learners (better) invest themselves in their academic performance, and it is used as an instrument *for* learning, the term "*for*" being used as a stimulus for learning, rather than an instrument *of* learning. In France, exams are instruments used for grading students,' as well as institutions,' performances. The exams, therefore, have a judgmental role, meaning they are used as a tool for judging students (or students' performances). As a result, it seems as if exams in France are instruments used for assessment *of* learning, with an institutional, administrative and social role, rather than being an instrument *for* learning with an educational and learning role. In the U.S., the function of an exam consists of checking students' learning and improvement because in the U.S., students are at the center of instruction. It is, therefore, important for instructors to measure the efficacy of their teaching as well as the amount of students' learning, at least through the results obtained in exams administered during or at the end of class. Exams in these two American contexts are, thus, neither motivational nor judgmental, but rather indicators of the extent to which learning and teaching have been successful. They can, therefore, be classified as instruments *of* learning for educational reasons, rather than societal reasons. It was noted, therefore, that there was a cultural and contextual function of the exam in each country because, based on the interviews, these differences in the functions of the exams in each country originate in the following elements:

- instructors' perspectives about exams (in all contexts),
- instructors' approaches to assessment via the administration of exams (in all contexts),
- the specific characteristics of students (in the Iranian context),
- the specific characteristics of institutions (in the French context), and



- the specific missions presumed by universities (in the U.S. context).

Finally the “almost” universal trends regarding exams in the three countries, which included most of the themes studied in this project, consisted of a very significant number of similarities (rather than differences) in the image of exams administered in language classes that were taught by participants in the study. Despite all of the contextual differences observed in these six contexts. These similarities, found in most of our contexts are the following:

- the widespread presence of written exams as the main assessment tool used;
- the uniform presence of both discrete-point and integrative exams, except in English classes in Iran where only discrete-point exams are used;
- the use of short answer questions (with fixed or different possible answers), multiple choice questions, guided production questions, open-ended reading comprehension questions, except in English classes in Iran and in France;
- the use of short answer questions in the exams (except in English classes in Iran where reliability and objectivity in scoring are more important than effectiveness of exams);
- the use of mainly comprehension and application types of activities in the exam; and
- the performances on the exam targeted for reading comprehension, writing, listening comprehension, and grammar (except in English classes in Iran which mainly focus on reading comprehension).

These universal tendencies in assessment practices may originate in the following observations:

- the exam being administered in an academic and institutional context;
- the integration of similar scientific theories and approaches to assessment and to exam by the instructors interviewed;
- the elementary level of students; and
- the nature of the collected data, which are based on the perceptions and the representations of instructors rather than on their actual observable actions.

These similarities do not present a general description of these three countries’ education and evaluation cultures (because our data is not representative of the entire contexts or countries’ practices and perceptions). Rather, they represent some of the particularities of the *academic* and *institutionalized practices* of language assessment in spite of the language being assessed or the country where the language is evaluated. Exam practices (e.g., type of exam, type of questions, targeted activities and performances) in these six contexts seem to be more generic (rather than culturally specific) because instructors in these countries are required/constrained to follow certain guidelines to comply with institutional rules, contextual specificities, and (elementary) level of students. In other words, more than a specific learning or assessment culture, it is the *institutional* nature of assessment that determines exam *practices* that individual instructors adopt in their classes. Assessment, as a scientific activity, (Peretti, 2005, has, therefore, become an institutionalized tool and set of procedures because of the consequences for students and institutions.



At the same time, we observe interesting differences from one country to another in the instructors' *perceptions* of exams, in their function and importance, which seem to be shaped by the following contextual variables:

- participants' perceptions of the social, academic and institutional role of the exam (differences in the function of the exam);
- students' objectives for learning the language (the presence of only reading comprehension activities in exams in English classes in Iran);
- the use of certain questions in the exam, such as close-ended questions in the Iranian context of learning English (to ensure the reliability and objectivity of the exam);
- contextual constraints (time constraints); and
- political constraints (rare in interactions with foreigners in the Iranian context)

From the analysis of the differences and the similarities in the exams administered in these six contexts, we can make the preliminary conclusion that exams in these settings, as described by the interviewed participants, are both similar and different. Whereas, the similarities observed reflect the exam's format, question types, and activities used in exams. That is similarities are in the *practices* of the exam. The differences suggest that there are culturally and contextually different and specific *perceptions* regarding assessment and learning, in general, and exams, in particular, in each of these three countries. The results obtained in the data analysis partially explain our initial hypothesis: we have witnessed noteworthy similarities that seem to suggest that while assessment (exam) is culturally specific in some dimensions, it is composed of (i.e., it follows) universal practices and guidelines that belong to the institution of assessment rather than to the specificities of various cultures, situations and contexts. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that in the case of exams administered in language classes in these 48 participants' representations of their exams, learning cultures influenced instructors' approaches, perspectives, and attitudes much more than their actual concrete practices in the field. Practices arise from the institutional notion of assessment, which is a construct designed with specific structures, rules, traditions, and tools that must be respected and obeyed in the different educational settings and contexts concerned in this project.

However, due to the limited number of interviews per context, these conclusions do not indicate results that can be applied generally to these three countries. Our analysis provides us with sufficient *tools* (the extracted themes and other issues raised by instructors during the interviews) for conducting further, quantitative research about these countries' perceptions and practices regarding language exams, which may reveal more justifiable results about the way language learning and assessment are viewed, understood, and practiced in each of our six contexts. These research findings only provide us with an interesting "understanding" of assessment perceptions and practices. We can further use these results to not only understand the underlying factors that affect assessment practices and perspectives, but also to elaborate on culturally appropriate, acceptable, and reasonable assessment procedures to be used in language classes in these three countries. Thus, our results mark only the beginning steps of a much larger project that we hope to continue to work on in order to provide (English) language program and curriculum designers and language teaching instructors with more practical assessment tools that are appropriate both on theoretical, cultural, institutional, and social dimensions.



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