



## **Focusing on Teachers' Considerations while Assessing Students: A Case of Iranian Junior High and High School Teachers**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated teachers' concerns and considerations in assessing their students informally and formally (formative vs. summative). The researchers used convenience sampling from schools in Khafr Education Department to select participant pool for the investigation. 162 teacher participants from junior high school and high school took part in the study. The methods of investigation were a 20-item Likert Scale questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to collect data in this regard. The study revealed that most of the participant teachers' priorities while assessing their students (both in informative and summative) were: 1- Non-Assessment Orientation 2- Book and University Entrance Examination (UEE) Orientation 3- Psychology of the learners which was somehow neglected by teachers.

**Keywords:** University Entrance Exam (UEE), assessment, learners' psychology

### **INTRODUCTION**

Assessment is a huge ongoing process that encompasses everything from high stake tests to district benchmark or interim tests to everyday classroom tests. In order to grapple with what seems to be an over use of testing, educators should frame their view of testing as assessment and that assessment is comprehensive information. The more information we have about students' performance, the more accurate and the clearer the picture we have about their process of achievement.

Assessment and testing are sometimes used interchangeably but it is a broader process as compared to testing because tests in general are parts of a whole process of assessment (Mousavi, 2009). For process- minded scholars assessment is a professional judgment and decision making process. Good assessments use multiple methods, enhances instructions and motivational factors.

There are two forms of assessments mostly related to the present research. First, formative assessment which informs teachers about the effectiveness of a teaching method and material in order to delete, modify or intensify a method of teaching in the

process of education. Second, summative assessment which deals with the amount of final achievement made by students mostly at the end of an educational program.

Ethics and educational consequences are other aspects of assessments which have been negotiated meticulously and thoroughly by some scholars (Messick, 1992; Cronbach, 1989). Assessment consequences are not likely to be avoided easily and ignored but it is difficult and contentious to deal with (Kane, 2011). All the stake holders of an educational setting are involved in the consequence of an assessment process to amount of their concerns and relations in that system. So, they have to know (or at least be familiar with) about ethics of assessments in general and testing in particular in order to administer a somehow valid assessment process.

In this piece of research, the researchers investigate teachers' concerns and considerations while testing and assessing their students in junior high school and high school.

## METHOD

### Reliability of the Questionnaire

Since the questionnaire was Likert scale and made by the researchers, there was a must to control reliability of the questionnaire before the main data gathering in the study. To this respect, the researchers selected 35 teacher participants (male and female) who were eager to take part in piloting the questionnaire. They were chosen from Khafr education department-Fars province. 26 out of 35 questionnaires were delivered by the participants and the rests were not handed in successfully due to participants' own personal reasons. After collecting and analyzing the data in SPSS, the reliability of the test was estimated through Cronbach's alpha (coefficient alpha). The result of the measurement is as follows on table 1.

**Table 1.** Cronbach's Alpha

Reliability statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N Of Items
.812	20

Homogeneity of the questionnaire items was proved by Cronbach's alpha (.81). After assuring the homogeneity of the questionnaire, the researchers started the main phase of the study.

### Sample Group

In the present study, the researchers utilized convenience sampling to select the willing participants for the study. All of the teacher participants (male and female) were selected from Khafr education department- Fars province- teaching in junior high and high schools. About two hundred 20 – item Likert scale questionnaires were prepared and distributed to them.

For the semi-structured interview 45 volunteer participants among those who took part in the questionnaire session were selected.

## Procedure

In order to have enough data elicited from the participant through Likert scale questionnaire, the researchers selected about 200 teacher participants through convenience sampling in Khafr education department- Fars province. All of the teachers were certified ones teaching in junior and high schools in the abovementioned department. The researchers distributed the questionnaires personally and face to face in order to clarify the study rubrics and process of answering the questionnaires better. They were asked to fill in the questionnaire at their own convenience with an allocated time of one week. In order not to put the participants in trouble, the researchers themselves arranged to gather the questionnaire sheets from participants when they are finished.

## Participants

After 5-10 days, active participants were 162 who successfully handed in their filled-in questionnaires. The rest of the participants who had received the questionnaires failed to hand in their questionnaires due to their own personal reasons. The researchers just used the received data from these 162 active and eager participants.

## Instrumentation

### *Likert Scale Questionnaire*

A 20-item Likert scale questionnaire was utilized to gather data. The questionnaire was proved reliable through Cronbach alpha. The participants had to answer a 1-5 option according to their attitude toward the item presented in the questionnaire

### *Semi-Structured Interview*

A semi- structured interview designed in order to heighten reliability and validity of the study. Among these 162 teacher participants, the researchers randomly selected 45 participants for the interview session. To suit the needs of the participants, the time and place for the interview were arranged according to participants' priority and convenience. After explaining the purposes of the study, the participants were told that participation in the interview is totally voluntary. Eight of them left the interview after they knew participation was voluntary. The researcher randomly replaced another eight eager teacher participants. The interviewees were also told that the interviews would remain totally confidential, and only would be used for the purposes of the present study. All the participants had the same amount of time to be interviewed (mostly 15 minutes for each teacher participants). Also, in order for analyzing the data better, the researcher asked the participants to express themselves as slow and relaxed as possible in order to take exact notes from their interviews and not miss anything important. There were 3 generally prepared questions and one unplanned question at interview:

- 1- How do you define assessment in general?
- 2- What factors do take into consideration while you assess your students informally in the class (formative assessment)?

- 3- What factors do you take into consideration while you assess your students formally (summative assessment)?
- 4- The researcher made an unplanned question according and related to participants' answer in questions 1, 2 and 3 to elicit more accurate response.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After collecting the questionnaire sheets, the researchers started to analyze the data through SPSS to compare the means of the variables for conclusions in this study.

### Likert Scale Questionnaire Results

There were three variables hidden in this Likert scale questionnaire administered in the study. Number of options for each of the items was 5 in this Likert scale questionnaire (strongly agree=5 – agree=4 – I am not sure= 3 – disagree=2 – strongly disagree=1). The researchers investigated to know about the concerns and priorities of teachers while assessing their students informally and formally through their class sessions, final exam sessions and in general. The variables that the researchers pursued in this piece of research are listed below:

- a. *Book and UEE orientation*: this variable shows that teachers are mostly book based and UEE oriented and there is little focus on general comprehension. Dominant priority is on points and UEE
- b. *Non-assessment orientation*: this variable reveals that assessment is not teachers' concern and priority while questioning their students formally or informally. It shows that the teachers are not familiar (or at least are not motivated to use) with assessment as a process course of action in their classes.
- c. *Learner psychology*: this variable represents that teachers pay significant attention to the learners' psychology and their general spirits.

Analysis and discussion of each abovementioned variable are presented in full detail below:

- 1- *Book and UEE orientation*: the data was analysed through one sample t-test and the mean of this variable equalled 3.40 (mean= 3.40) (see table 2). This shows that teacher participants in this study mostly agreed to assess or better to say test students according to book and UEE goals or necessities. Most of them believe that books and UEE acceptance are significant to focus on. Also they assessed their students according to their detailed knowledge of book points which is somehow UEE-oriented.

**Table 2.** One sample statistics

One-sample statistics				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error mean
Book and UEE orientation	162	3.40	.40	.03

- 2- *Non-assessment orientation*: the data was analysed using one sample t-test. The mean equalled 3.54 (mean=3.54) (see table 3). The mean represent that most of the

teacher participants in this study were not aware of assessment or they were not motivated about assessing their students in the long run. They were not interested in assessment process.

**Table 3.** One-sample statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error mean
Non-assessment orientation	162	3.54	.43	.03

- 3- Learner psychology: the last but not least was the psychology of the learners to which paid a little attention. The mean is 2.84 (mean=2.84), (see table 4) and this shows that most teacher participants did not paid a lot of attention to learners' psychology at the time of their so called assessment. Regarding this we can conclude that one-shot tests are of more importance than ongoing assessments to the teachers. When a learner has not been able to read and review the lesson(s) they are supposed to know due to any internal/external reasons (social, familial, economical, physical, psychological, etc.), the teachers should feel and understand this condition. By assessments these problems are felt per se and the learners would feel confident about whole process of learning because they know they are not assessed (tested) on time. They are sure they have other times to make up for their average and final grades.

**Table 4.** One-sample statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error mean
Learner psychology	162	2.84	.45	.03

Utilizing Friedman test (see table 3.) Non-assessment orientation ranked first in priority level for the teachers participants while questioning their students. The second priority was book and UEE orientation. Finally, learner psychology ranked third in priority level for the teachers.

**Table 5.** Friedman test

Codes	Mean rank
Learner psychology	1.33
Book and UEE orientation	2.22
Non-assessment orientation	2.45

## Semi-structured Interview Results

In this section of the study, in order to heighten the reliability and validity of the study results and conclusion, a semi-structured interview with 3 preplanned questions and one unplanned question ( related to their answers in previous 3 questions) was designed and conducted (see section 2.5.2). The researchers interviewed 45 volunteer teacher participants. All the teacher participants were interviewed separately in order to make a comfortable atmosphere to answer the questions. The interview took 5 days to be finished successfully because participants arranged their time and sometimes places which were mostly at their school.

### ***Encoding the Interview Data***

All of the key points of the interview were written down by the researchers. There was a huge pile of data extracted from the sessions. After analysing and going through the data for several times, 3 classifications were made from all the claims. The researchers noticed their relations and encoded them into the study. The key terms were classified into 4 groups as follows:

- a. Assessment definition and viewpoint: for question 1 (see section 2.5.2) there were 3 key terms which the researcher could encode them into: variety of method, disorganised and fuzzy program, unsuitability
- b. Formative assessment: for question 2 (see 2.5.2) there were 3 key terms which the researcher could encode them into: student level, key points in the book, book based answer.
- c. Summative assessment: for question 3 (see 2.5.2) there were 7 key terms mentioned by the interviewees and they were encoded into: deep learning, class average level, key points in the book, available standard questions, easy to difficult, UEE familiarity, book-based answer

### ***Discussions of Interview Codes***

In the first classification about assessment definition and viewpoints, as you could see on the frequency table 6 about 71% of the interviewees claimed that ongoing assessment is a disorganised and unclear program in the education department (at least their own education department) which has somehow failed to bear fruit in recent years. Unsuitability is another claim of the teacher participants in this section. About 64% of them stated that assessment program was not suitable for their context of teaching. They did not have any motivation to use assessment either for not knowing the process or unpracticality of the process in their context of teaching. Only a few of them mentioned that assessment referred to using a variety of ongoing methods to conclude a total final grade for the students. As you see on table 6 just 22% of them were aware of assessment procedures. This is, to some extent, in line with table 3 which represented a high orientation toward non-assessment form of evaluation.

**Table 6**

Codes	Interviewee	Frequency
1-disorganized and fuzzy program	32 teachers	71% out of 100%
2-unsuitability	29 teachers	64% out of 100%
3-variety of methods	10 teachers	22% out of 100%

The second classification about formative assessment as presented on frequency table 7 about 62% of the interviewees stated that key points of the textbooks are very important to them and they mostly ask their informal questions from these points in the textbooks. Another interesting point is that more than half of them considered just the answer exactly according to the book as standard and true answers. This shows that teachers themselves are book-oriented and it seems that they themselves motivate their students to study their textbooks points more than extensive search about the topic in classes. As

it is presented on the table below (table 7) student level is not paid a lot of attention. About 33% of the teacher participants declared that student level is of importance. This is somehow related to the psychology of the learners which is in accord with table 4. This aspect of questioning students has been pushed to the margin of their education career in general.

**Table 7**

Code	Interviewee	Frequency
1-key points in the book	28 teachers	62% out of 100%
2-book based answer	24 teachers	53% out of 100%
3-student level	15 teachers	33% out of 100%

The last classification about summative assessment seems to be of vital significance due to its detailed contents and key terms. This question took more time than other questions because the teacher participants had more to say in this part. Most of them claimed that textbooks are their source of final questions and they do not go further from their textbooks. Also, as you could see on table 8 codes 1&2 indicate that most of the teachers look through their textbooks while they are having a formal test (summative assessment). It is the book that decides for the teachers in their exams not their knowledge of assessment.

If you check code 3 on table 8, you will notice that a large number of the teachers use so called standard questions available in the market from different national publishers and famous educational ( if not commercial) institutes. These questions themselves need to be studied in case of reliability and validity which is not the concern of this study but the important part of this claim is that the teachers just trust blindly whatever comes around in printed form and also these books are all based on the textbooks point. This goes back to the codes 1&2 on table 8 again which generally deal with book-orientation aspect of evaluation.

Code 4 on table 8 reveals that far more than half of the high school participant teachers practice UEE questions and test their students according to that standard but junior high school teachers do not practice a lot according to UEE standards. This shows that UEE has had a great effect on testing and evaluation system of students even teaching procedures and methodology which is known and studied as backwash effect (washback effect) for a long time by different scholars (Hughes, 1989; Alderson and Wall 1993; Alderson, 2004; Shohamy, 2001a, 2005b, 2006c; Mcnamara and Roever, 2006). Although, this is not the concern of this study but it is completely noticeable and unavoidable in the finding of the study.

Code 5 on table 8 unravels the point that about 68% of the participant teachers test their students to know they have learnt deeply or not. They claim that if the students can answer the detailed points in the book and about the topic (book-orientation), they will be considered deep (real) learners who have taken the point of the lesson. Again this refers to book- based ideology of the teachers that can be felt in their viewpoint in this study.

Code 6 on table 8 indicates that more than half of the teachers (64%) consider the average level of the class in order to test their students in the formal testing setting (summative assessment). They meant that questions should not be too easy and too difficult in exams especially in the final exams. Although, they took the level of the class into consideration but still according to codes 1-4 their priorities are book points and UEE.

Code 7 on table 8 placed the last. Again more than half of them stated that when preparing formal tests/ exams, they try to arrange the questions from easy to difficult mostly to motivate them in the beginning of the formal exams / tests.

**Table 8**

Code	Interviewee	Frequency
1-book-based answer	38 teachers	84 % out of 100%
2-key points in the book	38teachers	84% out of 100%
3-available standard questions	36 teachers	80 % out of 100%
4-uee familiarity	High school	33 teachers
	Junior high	2 teachers
5-deep learning	31 teachers	68% out of 100%
6-class average level	29 teachers	64% out of 100%
7- easy to difficult	28 teachers	62% out of 100%

All in all, it is greatly noticeable on table 8 that most of the participant teachers in the study tend to go through books and key points whether for UEE (high school teachers) or for formal tests and exams. Since the third questions of the interview sought summative/formal testing (or assessment), most of the teacher participants could narrate a long story about that.

Another interesting point unravelled by this study is that about more than half of the teacher participants who attended in this study were teaching a subject other than their field of study at university (see table 9). That is, most of them were not expert in the subject they were teaching at school.

**Table 9**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Related	75	46.0	46.3	46.3
	Unrelated	87	53.4	53.7	100.0
	Total	162	99.4	100.0	
Missing	System	1	.6		
Total		163	100.0		

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study revealed some interesting point about how teachers test/assess their students in formal and informal evaluation setting. Some of the common points in the Likert scale questionnaire and the interview that go hand in hand are first: non-assessment orientation of the participant teachers who did not know or use the assessment process in their overall evaluation of the students. Second common point is book points and UEE orientation which were felt dominantly in both Likert scale result



(see table 2) and the interview. It shows that most of our teacher participants think not more that the book and its points so, extensive education-in general- is somehow neglected in our educational setting. The third is psychology and the spirits of the learners. Both in Likert scale result and table 7 code 3 it can be noticed that psychology and the spirits of the learners are not considered that important and most of the teachers intentions turn to book points and UEE in case of high school teachers and for junior high teachers, books and key points in the book are of importance.

To conclude, the researchers suggests that teachers, in all levels of teaching (mainly in this study junior high and high school), should insert ongoing assessment in their teaching and evaluation program in order to motivate students more than before because on-shot test cannot decide as fair as possible. It is suggested that they should not pay a lot of attention to points of the book so that they are left behind in making students familiar with extensive knowledge and reading. Finally, psychology of the learners is of great importance and it is better for the teachers to pay more attention in order to optimize their constant attempt in teaching career.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In final words, no one can claim that his/her research can be generalized to all possible events and participants. So the researchers now feel that it is the beginning of conducting other aspects of this research. Some aspects that can be investigated through other research projects are suggested below:

- a. Does experience in teaching affect teachers' assessment power and literacy?
- b. Are there any significant differences in assessment between male teachers and female teachers?
- c. Is level of education important in the way teachers assess their students?

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