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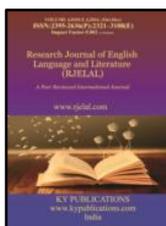
INSTRUCTORS AND LEARNERS' ASSUMPTIONS IN FAIRNESS LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

Testing is one of the most important components of teaching process. Having a reflective and critical perspective is beneficial for instructors, test designers, and administrators in the educational domain with regard to fairness language assessment. The present study is a qualitative research through two phases at investigating the viewpoints of reflective teachers and critical learners on systems of testing, especially in fairness issues in Iran. Twenty instructors as well as twenty learners joined the survey and they were given a structured open-ended questioner containing 12 questions about testing. Finally, the answers were analyzed and the results of descriptive analysis revealed that the present testing procedures in Iran fail to measure the real learners' performance. As a result of the study, some suggestions were made to improve foreign language teaching and testing system. Adjusting and justifying tests to educational contexts and paying attention to ethical issues, real educational and social needs were of essential points that should be considered critically.

Key words: Reflective Instructors, Critical Learners, Testing Procedures, Fairness Language Assessment

Introduction

Language testing is an important means of inspecting and assessing teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes. In fact, decisions made about a person on the basis of a test score can have serious and far-reaching consequences. The results of the tests not only reflect students' level of success but also gives information to stakeholders about the other components of teaching process. Instructors can determine if the students have already acquired the objectives before the instruction; reflect if students have learned what is taught in class after

each unit and they inform how much the objectives of the instruction have been reached at the end of the unit. Therefore, tests are beneficial for students, teachers and even administrators by reflecting the progress of students in the educational domain and helping them to plan the future (Madsen, 1983, p.5). Besides, fairness issue plays an important role in test design and it is often up to the administrators and test designers to cope with external obstacles in promoting this. The important thing is not what a person knows about the language, nor how grammatically correct they are, but if they can use it

to communicate in the target language situation, the real-world situation in which the language will be used (Hymes, 1972). For instance, an action-oriented approach focuses on language ability where language is seen as a tool to perform communicative actions in a social context.

Literature review

Spolsky (1977) supported the approach to language testing that requires full justification of all statements based on tests. He pointed out that language testers must be as concerned with the prevention of bad testing as with developing new tests, and that they must be sensitive to the possible educational, social and political consequences of testing. In fact, as tests have impact on the lives of test takers, any decision should be done professionally. Because information would have influenced their approach to language learning and reduced the negative impact on their lives. The sensitive approach of the administrators, test designers and item writers confirmed the well-known statement that practices and test must be just fair for all. Generally, it is uncovered that language tests have become powerful tools, because they are used to measure the success of individuals in different aspects of life.

In past, tests were considered as purely linguistic acts. Therefore, very little attention was paid to the social dimension of language as the most important medium of communication among humans. Concerning the historical development, Spolsky (1976) distinguishes three historical periods of modern language testing, pre-scientific, psychometric-structuralist, and psycholinguistic sociolinguistic. Later, Shohamy (1996) has identified five stages of development: the discrete point era, the integrative era, the communicative era, the performance testing era and the alternative assessment era. Hamp-Lyons says humanistic and ethical approach are not readily applicable in the testing process. One of the reasons that affect this difficulty is that understanding of what is ethical becomes very difficult in these times of moral and cultural issues. It considers to cultural habits that vary from community to community, from society to society so that the importance of certain aspects under the different perspectives becomes relative.

Generally, the ultimate goal of fairness is potentially feasible. But the concept of 'fairness' is difficult to define, especially when the same test can be perceived very differently by different interest groups. The concept of fairness has been interpreted to mean: "unbiased," "equal opportunity," "equitable treatment," "similar outcomes in terms of scores." Questions have been raised regarding the scope: "Does fairness include validity or does validity include fairness? Or, are they two separate entities?". However, ethical issues serve as fair guidelines for the impact of tests on testees, stakeholders, and society. Schohamy (2001) pointed out that tests motivate students to learn and teachers to become more effective in their instruction' (p. 90), and this is the factor that contributes to their use as 'devices which are effective in enforcing conformity and in ensuring the continuity of various declared agendas of policymakers. This makes it clear that the need for success among students is a high stakes matter. Tests "are impartial, but often represented in political, social, educational, ideological and economic contexts" (Shohamy, 2001, p. 113). He mentioned that the test makers, researchers and linguists who are engaged in all phases of the testing process should be responsive and aware of the consequences of testing on the lives of examinees. There are three aspects mentioned by McNamara (McNamara, 2000, p. 72) which includes the responsibility to those who will undergo the test as well as teachers and school administrators. Regarding Kunnan's principle of fairness (2013), it is claimed that an assessment ought to be fair to all test takers; there is a presumption of treating every test taker with equal respect. First, an assessment ought to provide adequate opportunity to learn the knowledge or abilities that are to be assessed. Second, an assessment ought to be consistent and meaningful in terms of its test-score interpretation. Then it should be free of bias against any test taker groups, in particular by assessing construct-irrelevant matters, and finally, an assessment ought to use appropriate access, administration and standard setting so that decision-making is equitable to test taker groups. On the other hand, based on principle of assessment institution ought to bring about

benefits to society and advance justice through public reasoning. So an assessment institution ought to bring benefits to society by making a positive social impact. Moreover, an assessment institution ought to advance justice through public reasoning of their assessment.

In another aspect, 'washback' effect, originally formulated by Wall and Alderson (1993), dealing with the impact of testing on teaching and especially their relationship, which turns out to be much more complicated than thought earlier; and finally, the impact of the test beyond the educational institution that administers design in society. In this regard, Shohamy (2001, p. 114) provides five views related to the social responsibility of the testers: first, an ethical perspective which related to contract between the profession of testers, the individual and the public; secondly, awareness of others, which means that the tester should make known publicly the test impact and consequences; thirdly, the consequences, the tester himself must be aware of the consequences that his decisions cause; fourth, sanctions on misuse of tests; and fifth, shared responsibility, which deals with more active involvement of the examinees in the testing process, not simply as the end user, but as active participants in policy making on the use of tests. Additionally, there are factors outside the classroom that affect language learning and achievement. It is well known that socio-economic backgrounds have impact on language learning and achievement.

Methodology

Purpose of Study

Observing the specific context of Iran and regarding several research, the main purpose of the study was to investigate the critical perspectives of teachers and learners with regard to fairness language assessment in Iran. This study has been conducted based on the descriptive research design. It basically falls into the category of survey research and shared a number of characteristics of qualitative analyses.

Settings and Participants

Randomly, 40 language learners and instructors among 20 universities and language

institutes of Shiraz, Esfahan, Tehran were selected for filling the constructed inventory .

Instruments and Procedures

In fact, regarding the aim of the present study, a questionnaire based on Spolsky and McNamara's assumptions was designed. The questions were based on the following issues: "if there is any consideration to social, political and educational consequences and dimensions in the present exams and language tests in context of Iran. If measurements are based on individual's success in specific aspects, if tests are purely focused on linguistic facets or not and also pay attention to usability, if there is any emphasis on varieties of cultural habits from society to society or even within each society, if the representation of language tests are based on ideological or political aspect of the present context, if it has been seen any responsibility of theorist, researchers, administrators and instructors in all angles of designing and preparation of the test, if it has been seen equal treatments in testing processes in every aspects, if before the test performance, there was adequate opportunity for learners to learn the knowledge and ability related to that test, if assessments are meaningful and consistent in terms of test score interpretation, if there is any focus on socio-economic backgrounds and factors outside the classrooms which affect language learning and achievements, if in everywhere in context of Iran, the classroom settings are equal in teacher or learners autonomy or not , and generally its influences in test consequences and finally if teachers and learners' motivation, perception and attitudes are considered equally everywhere or not".

Results

It clarifies that there are some problems in language assessment in this context. Language teaching and assessment are not tailored towards attaining the objective of the policy on language education. Lacking of specialists for diagnosing and identifying learners with special needs of students are prominent in some cases.

Educational development is teacher dependent, so that the learner often depends on what is taught in the classroom to learn the English

language with little or no input from outside the classroom. Certificating and qualifying language tests are generally beyond what has been taught test-takers, and therefore unfair. Further, since information and communication technologies (ICT) are still a novelty to many, they are not being exploited for solving educational problems. In some cases, teachers lack the motivation to acquire computer literacy or surf the internet for teaching materials and innovative ideas. The falling standards of English language use at all levels of education indicate that most learners are not autonomous so they are unable to overcome problems that they encounter learning the language.

Therefore, because of outdated and inefficient method of teaching language, which does not lead to effective language use, and also because language assessment has some shortcomings, incongruence often exists between learners' proficiency and what their results suggest. Some participants believed that passing in exams may not be clear passes and failures may not indicate an inability to communicate in the language. The result may not depict a learner's true competence in English. Moreover, most language tests concentrate on linguistic items and fail to assess effectiveness in the use of the language.

Conclusion

It is time to appraise language assessment in Iran by raising and answering questions, such as: What role should language assessment play in language and national development? Could there be a need to redesign language policies and language assessment in Iran? What are the developments and trends in language assessment in other contexts similar to Iran and how can language assessment in Iran be aligned with best practices? How could language teaching be made more responsive and relevant to learners and their environment?". Besides, with regard to fairness issues, being sensitive and aware of ethics and fairness in language testing should be considered seriously. Regular appraisal of language assessment mechanisms is crucial in ensuring that language fulfils its functions in society. In fact, language assessment can be a motivator or a demotivator for language learning, depending on the learner and the

learning situation. In this regard, cultural and linguistic variables act as mediating factors affecting semantic and cognitive developmental language processes. For instance, it is important that language should be designed to compensate for poor sociolinguistic and literacy backgrounds (Lee and Fradd 1998) so as to bridge dichotomies developing between learner of different socio-economic backgrounds in a nation. It should be considered that without national examinations, it would be very difficult to assess individuals with different needs and expectations.

Appendix

Regarding the aim of the present study, a questionnaire based on Spolsky and McNamara's assumptions was designed. Randomly, 40 language learners and instructors among 20 universities and language institutes of Shiraz, Esfahan, Tehran were selected for filling the inventory which were based on the following issues:

1. Explain if there is any consideration to social, political and educational consequences and dimensions in the present exams and language tests in context of Iran.
2. If measurements are based on individual's success in specific aspects.
3. If tests are purely focused on linguistic facets or not and also there is paying attention to usability.
4. If there is any emphasis on varieties of cultural habits from society to society or even within each society.
5. If the representation of language tests are based on ideological or political aspect of the present context.
6. If it has been seen any responsibility of theorist, researchers, administrators and instructors in all angles of designing and preparation of the tests.
7. If it has been seen equal treatments in testing processes in every aspects.
8. If before the test performance, there was adequate opportunity for learners to learn the knowledge and ability related to that test.
9. If assessments are meaningful and consistent in terms of test score interpretation.
10. If there is any focus on socio-economic backgrounds and factors outside the classrooms

which affect language learning and achievements.

11. If in everywhere in context of Iran, the classroom settings are equal in teacher or learners' autonomy or not, and generally its influences in test consequences.
12. If teachers and learners' motivation, perception and attitudes are considered equally everywhere or not".

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