

A Comparative Study of Cultural, Social and Institutional Dimensions of Language Exams in Iranian, French and American Language Classes

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1. Introduction and Rationale

Classroom-based assessment has recently become a core issue in second/foreign language teaching research and as such, it continues to warrant a significant amount of investigation (e.g., Broadfoot and Black 2004, Tardieu 2005, Rea-Dickins 2007, Huver and Springer 2011). Louis Porcher refers to assessment as the “key” to understanding the process of teaching (2004, p. 86) because it can be used as a tool for learning: learners should use assessment to measure their knowledge and performances and orient their learning strategies. Exams can also be used as a tool for teaching: instructors can use assessment to orient their instruction and measure the effectiveness of their teaching methodologies and instruments; they can also be used as a means of reducing the distance between academic learning and concrete uses of the acquired knowledge and performances, that is, the effective uses of the language in in-class and outside of class interactions and communications (Porcher 1990, pp. 28-29)¹.

Assessment procedures in language classes reflect course objectives for language learning, instructors’ teaching methodology, in-class activities, as well as specific socio-cultural, political and economic demands and needs of learning the language. For this reason, Shepard (2002) conceives of assessment and learning as being “intertwined” and Heaton (1988) writes that it is impossible to “work on either field [assessment or learning] without being constantly concerned with the other” (in Eghtesad 2011, p. 12) Assessment practices used in language classes, therefore, shed light into fundamental issues involved in language teaching that takes place in different academic contexts and situations. Finally, assessment is a crucial subject in any academic setting since its results can have significant consequences on learners’ social and academic future. It is therefore important to carefully examine the question of assessment in a way that it would truly take into account the specific needs and demands of learners, institutions and societies.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to McNamara and Lynch (2001), assessment is a contextual activity “underlined by socially constructed assumptions about the nature of reality” (p. 306), meaning it is:

- A *construct* (Narcy-Combes 2005), artificially designed and prepared by individuals (instructors, coordinators) or institutions (universities, ministries or assessment corporations) within specific cultures, societies and/or contexts, for meeting specific classes', instructors' or institutions' goals and objectives for language teaching/learning, and for language assessment in those cultures, societies and contexts.
- A *product* of what specific students, instructors, institutions or corporations in various settings, contexts, countries or societies believe is important to/is needed to learn, retain, know, remember or perform regarding the specific language in question, and according to the specific sociocultural and politico-economical situations where the language is learned and used.

¹ The citations from French authors have been translated into English by the author of this article.

- Reflective of how specific cultures, countries or contexts perceive *knowing a language*: meaning, does learning equal remembering words and grammar concepts, conversing fluently in a language, performing in a language, interacting in a language, or mastering every aspect of a language, which determines how this "knowing" or this "linguistic knowledge" will be checked, demonstrated, measured and thus assessed within each culture, country or context.

It can therefore be inferred that assessment practices in language learning have:

1. **A social dimension** in that they are social practices based on societies' behavioral patterns, educational culture, points of view, habits and customs, since as a construct, assessment tools and procedures are designed according to cultures and societies' perceptions of learning, demonstrating knowledge and performing. At the same time, assessment has a social role to play: it has to be valid and acceptable not just in scientific terms, but also for the social functions it has to fulfill, such as assigning grades that determine students' academic and professional advancement as well as their social and institutional image.
2. **A cultural dimension** in that just like other institutions, educational activities and teaching/learning traditions within a country form a set of customs, models and constraints that condition, in part, the teachers, the learners, and the institutions (Beacco 2000, p. 6). These cultures include the distinctive specificities of each society, manifested in its participants' representations of teaching and learning, interactions, discourses, habits and preferences, as well as the choice of teaching and learning activities. Assessment therefore, becomes a procedure that develops its own culture or "practices that are compatible with current ideologies, social expectations, attitudes and values" (Broadfoot and Black 2004, p. 24).
3. **A political dimension** in that, academic institutions are required to take into account the political situation of the context in which language is being taught. This situation influences the elaboration of course objectives and targeted language performances, and thus the procedures used to assess these objectives and performances. According to Porcher (2004), assessment in many countries is confined to institutions by the State, as well as the responsibility/duty of the institutions, claimed by the State and the society (p. 86). In many countries, assessment becomes, therefore, a powerful instrument that can be used to control, administer, and organize students, instructors and institutions as well as knowledge and learning.

2.1. *Assessment Instruments*

The multifaceted nature of language and the various components and performances that it includes require realistic methodological reflections on efficient tools to use for assessing students' knowledge and performances in language classrooms. According to Vygotsky (1985), all assessment tools integrated in academic settings are social (rather than individual) and artificial constructs intended for controlling the process of human behavior as well as the structure of his/her mental functions (p. 39)². In educational settings, these constructs are elaborated by teachers, coordinators or educational authorities and/or managers according to the different institutional assessment objectives, conditions and constraints. At the same time, these tools are also influenced by the societies in which they are created and used as authoritative assessment tools, in that the specific characteristics of societies (their people, ideas, values and needs) are reflected in the objectives, the structure, the modalities, the activities and the scoring of assessment procedures.

In general, depending on the decisions of the teacher as well as the requirements of the institutions, various instruments can be used for classroom assessment. However, in spite of the variety of assessment tools and procedures introduced in language classes, especially since the introduction of the communicative method and the importance of informal and formative assessment³, exams remain the traditional image of assessment. As a result, they continue to be one of the most widely used and

² This is because despite the different socially constructed assessment tools and practices used in various institutions, the real assessment of language learning/knowledge happens not inside institutions, but within societies, that is through the way in which learners interact and perform in the language and use it to meet their specific needs, not inside the classroom setting but within the society where the studied language is spoken/used.

³ along with formal and summative assessment practices.

accepted assessment tools for institutional academic assessment (Eghtesad 2011) because of their authoritative and practical dimensions. In fact, for many instructors and students, exams (in their traditional format) continue to be synonymous to assessment (Eghtesad 2011, p. 308) since they are formal and summative.

According to Brown (2004), an exam is “a method of measuring a person’s ability, knowledge or performance in a given domain” (p. 3). It is an instrument, a set of techniques, procedures or items that require performance on the part of the test-taker. For the author, this instrument must be explicit and structured; it must measure learners’ general ability or specific competencies or objectives; it must take into account individual learners’ profiles, previous experiences and background and abilities, and it must provide an accurate measure of the learner’s ability within a particular domain (Brown 2004, pp. 3-4). An exam is therefore an indirect measuring device and procedure from which “one can make inferences about certain characteristics of an individual” (Carroll 1968). In language education, this procedure is used for assessing students’ linguistic knowledge and performances in a given field through the administration of an organized series of questions, which are then graded (Cuq 2003, p. 94). These questions can be oral or written, objective or subjective, discrete point or integrative, knowledge-based or performance-based. For the purposes of this study, we use the term “exam” as a structured assessment practice used at different times during instruction in classroom-based assessment, for measuring students’ progress and observing the development and the construction of their specific or global knowledge and performances within an institutional (university) context. The goal is to not limit the definition of an exam to an administrative tool used for assigning grades and/or proficiency levels, but rather to reveal the important role that this assessment instrument can play in students’ learning. Traditionally, exams consisted of objective questions, to which students had to provide *the* correct answer. Yet, if they are elaborated effectively, language exams can “promote critical thinking and foster and tap higher order skills” (Ofra 2008, p. 295) through interactive and authentic activities and tasks that stimulate individual construction and application of knowledge by learners. Depending on the objectives of assessment, different types of questions can be used in exams (Brown and Hudson 1998, pp. 658-663):

- **Production questions:** open ended questions in which learners must produce an individualized output according to the support provided/question asked. These questions are sometimes criticized for their inevitable subjectivity but they provide a more adequate image of students’ operational linguistic performances (as opposed to objective questions), that is what they can *do* with the language. Examples: analytical reading comprehension or reaction questions with justifications, etc.
- **Constructed response questions:** semi open-ended questions in which learners can provide different answers to a given situation. These questions are easier to grade as far as their subjectivity and complexity is concerned, but they limit students’ individual expression through their predetermined structure, which may be favored in elementary level classes, but if used frequently in advanced levels, it can limit students to purely didactic and institutionalized activities. Examples: fill in the blank with several possibilities, true/false questions with justification, cloze tests, among others.
- **Selection response questions:** closed ended questions in which learners must select the correct answer from the choices provided in the test. In general, these questions are very easy to correct because of their objectivity. However, although these questions can demonstrate students’ linguistic knowledge, the ability to *choose* the right answer does not necessarily reflect students’ linguistic performances, meaning the way in which students’ *use* language within specific contexts; this is especially true if selections questions are used as the *only* type of question given to students in an exam. Examples: multiple choice questions, true/false questions, matching questions, etc.

The use of each of these question types can reveal not only instructors’ and institutions’ conception of assessment and exams, but also their understanding of knowledge and knowledge construction and processing (learning), which could be different from one educational context or country to another depending on the societies’ and contexts’ education and assessment cultures, assessment traditions and habits, and the specific social, cultural, political and economical conditions and constraints that influence instructors and institutions’ academic choices and decisions regarding

assessment and exams. Exam practices and perspectives reflect, therefore, contextual, situational and local curricula (local cultural and educational values) and educational practices.

3. Research Objectives

In the light of the complex individual, social, political, institutional and cultural dimensions of assessment practices, the primary purpose of this paper is to analyze and illustrate what the language exams⁴ 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 question asked in this research is the following: Are the exams administered in university level second and/or foreign language classes in Iran, in France and in the US universal or culturally specific to each country or each language, and if they are specific, what are the underlying social, political, cultural and economic factors that have an effect on them?

Based on this research question, 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 practices designed and adapted according 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 a set of data gathered on the field in these three countries, as explained in the subsequent section.

4. Research Method and Data Selection

The data for this research consisted of 48 individual semi-directive instructor interviews, which were recorded and transcribed⁵ by the researcher in order to analyze⁶ the similarities and differences of language assessment practices and perceptions (regarding language exams in particular) used in the following six contexts⁷:

⁴ This study is part of a larger study in which instructors' entire assessment practices were researched and analyzed. Exams are discussed in particular in this study because in the larger project, they were the main assessment instrument used by 46 of the 48 interviewed instructors (Eghtesad 2011).

⁵ The entire interview, including pauses, repetitions and laughs/sighs was transcribed for qualitative and quantitative analysis of content (answers to questions asked by the researcher, and any other issues/points mentioned by the participant that did not necessarily correspond to the interview questions), as well as participants' attitude regarding specific topics or questions (objective and observable cues such as laughs and sighs or strong expression of feelings like " I hate exams" (interviewee #2 in the English in France context), or "This is ridiculous" (interviewee #6 in French in France context).

⁶ Data transcription and analysis for each participant followed these steps:

- An individual sheet was first made for each instructor, which consisted of the overall summary of the interview, any original, specific points mentioned in the interviewee, and participant's overall attitude, cooperativity and willingness to share ideas, practices and instruments pertaining to exams in his/her class.
- A summary of the instructors' answers to each question, which constituted, later, the twelve themes analyzed for the individual and contextual comparisons.
- An elementary table containing the twelve themes with individual participants' answers
- A secondary table containing the twelve themes and all participants' corresponding answers, presented in form of:

Theme X: Answer 1: (3/8 participants)
 Answer 2: (6/8 participants)
 Answer 3: (8/8 participants)

Note: See table at the end of section 6.3 for the collective table corresponding to all 48 interviews in all six contexts.

⁷ By context, the researcher means the specific characteristics of the teaching of

- *one specific language*
- *in one specific country*

note: all six contexts refer to university level language classes

- Persian as a second language classes in Iran (eight individual instructor interviews)
- English as a foreign language classes in Iran (eight individual instructor interviews)
- French as a second language classes in France (eight individual instructor interviews)
- English as a foreign language classes in France (eight individual instructor interviews)
- English as a second language classes in the United States (eight individual instructor interviews)
- French as a foreign language classes in the United States (eight individual instructor interviews)⁸

The interviews, which consisted of four open ended main questions and thirty sub questions, sought three types of information:

1. The contextual facts about the class in which exams are administered, such as course objectives, activities normally performed in class, or nature of offered course (i.e. whether or not the course is required or elective)
2. The assessment criteria, procedures, instruments, and practices currently used in class, especially those concerning language exams administered in class.
3. The instructors' personal opinion on these criteria, instruments and practices, as well as on "assessment" in general and on exams in particular.

Through a qualitative investigation of these interviews⁹, twelve themes (see table 4 in section 6.3) were extracted, corresponding to the twelve questions that dealt with language exams in the interview using these themes, an *Exam Image*¹⁰ was constructed, first for each participant and then for each of the six contexts concerned with the current study. These images were first described and analyzed for individual participant and then compared and contrasted within each of the six contexts in order to:

1. Make an attempt to present *one* image of exams in for each context¹¹ and for each country.
2. Compare and contrast the similarities and differences of exam practices observed among the two studied contexts in each country,
3. Compare and contrast exam images universally among all six contexts in order to
 - a. Understand some of the underlying factors that influence individuals', institutions' or contexts' practices and perceptions regarding language exams, and
 - b. Decipher possible social, cultural or political elements that may determine the universality or the specificities of the exams administered in these contexts.

In the following section, some aspects of the six studied contexts will be described before presenting the project's finding and results.

5. Results

The analysis of the interviews indicated interesting results about the universality or specificities of the Exam Image in these six contexts. These results have been divided into three distinct groups:

⁸ These participants were randomly chosen from various institutions (universities) in different cities in each country in order to perform the research on a rather representative population from various cities and institutions. Although the researcher does realize that eight participants are not representative of each context, due to the limitations of this project and the diversity of contexts studied (six contexts), by the end of the data collection, only eight interviews were used per context for analysis, which, although not enough for making general assumptions or hypotheses on a context or a country, can be used to design and develop more detailed and targeted research tools and criteria for conducting more widespread quantitative research in the future.

⁹ Qualitative with some quantifications.

¹⁰ The term "image" refers to the way in which exams were described by each interviewee: the distribution of the 12 themes for each participant, meaning their practices and perceptions regarding language exams.

¹¹ This attempt was not completely successful since noteworthy differences were observed in individuals' exam practices and perceptions (images); the researcher based these images on the most common practices.

1. The specificities of the context in which the exam was administered¹²
2. The specificities of the country in which the exam was given¹³
3. The “almost” universal trends regarding exams in all three countries studied.

5.1. *The specificities of the context in which the exam is administered:*

Based on the analysis of the conducted interviews, in two of the six contexts, a special image of language exams presented by the eight interviewed participants in each context was established, which differs from the image described by the participants of the four other contexts. These two contexts consist of the context of English in Iran and that of English in France, in both of which, English is learned as an instrumental language for academic and professional enrichment

5.1.1. *Exams in English as a foreign language classes in Iran*

The specificities of exams in Iran’s English classes consist of the following observations:

- 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
- The absence of oral performances in the exam, neither in form of receptive oral performances nor in form of productive oral performances. The following table summarizes the distribution of the twelve themes in the English in Iran context:

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 these 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 final grade	60-80% (3/8) 80-100% (3/8)
Drills	No (8/8)
Skill assessed in exam	Identification of content (8/8) Identification of language (5/8) Application of knowledge (5/8) Memorization des of knowledge (4/8)
Targeted performances in exam	Reading comprehension (8/8) Grammar (3/8)

¹² These "specificities" refer to the elements that belong to one specific context (the teaching of *English* in Iran, for example, which only belongs to the teaching of *English* in Iran and not necessarily to the teaching of other foreign languages or Persian as a second language in Iran). By context, the researcher means the specific characteristics of the teaching of: *one specific language in one specific country*

¹³ This group refers to particular characteristics that were observed in both contexts within one country, regardless of the language being taught (English, French or Persian as second or foreign language)

Based on the specificities of the context of teaching English in Iran mentioned above (section 5), as well as the eight interviewed instructors' discourses, these features can be attributed to:

- **The specific characteristics of the teaching and assessment of English in Iranian universities¹⁴:** One of the issues raised by the English language participants interviewed in the Iranian context is time constraints and high number of enrolled students per class, both of which prevent the use of differentiated or individualized assessment. In addition, each instructor teaches several courses per semester, which makes the total number of his/her students rather significant. These instructors are thus obligated to/prefer to use collective assessment practices whose administration and correction are less time consuming. The integration of evaluative instruments such as oral presentations, individual written essays, research projects or group work is therefore difficult or sometimes impossible given these institutional constraints. These constraints, as well as lack of instructors' knowledge and/or training in alternative and more individualized assessment practices and instruments¹⁵ (in some situations) explain the use of the exam as the only or one of the main assessment tools.
- **The Iranian education and assessment culture:** Given the fact that written exam often constitutes most of or the entire final grade of students, and that students' passing of the course and subsequently their graduation depend on their success in the (final) exam(s), a particular phenomenon was observed in this context: that of contesting grades, corrections and instructors' feedback to the instructor or even to the program director, when students fail an exam. According to the interviewed instructors, this phenomenon only happens when exams are composed of subjective open-ended questions, where the accuracy and/or the adequacy of answers can be discussed. To avoid this discussion, despite their pedagogical preference to use open-ended, performance-based questions, many instructors resort to the use of objective, closed-ended questions (6/8), which only have one correct answer and are thus indisputable.
- **The uses of English by the Iranian students during their undergraduate studies:** the Iranian students' minimal contact with foreigners in Iran or abroad due to the current political situation of the country (where obtaining a visa for Anglophone countries is rather difficult for Iranians despite the objectives of travel—professional, academic or touristic) limit the learning of English to a purely academic use of the language, which mainly consists, of reading comprehension for being able to consult resources in their original (English) language. Together with time constraints mentioned above, this academic need for learning English results in the administration of exams that concentrate on reading comprehension with mainly closed-ended questions.

5.1.2. Exams in English as a foreign language classes in France

Concerning the administration of exams in the English language assessment context in France, the following features have been mentioned by the interviewed participants:

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.
3. The high percentage of exams in students' final grade (up to 80%).

Table two summarizes the image of exams as described by the eight instructors in France:

¹⁴ As described by the eight interviewed participants

¹⁵ These data were gathered through questions about instructors' background, language teaching education and training.

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 these 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 final grade	60-80% (6/8)
Drills	No (7/8)
Skill assessed in exam	Application of knowledge (7/8) Identification of content (6/8)
Targeted performances in exam	Reading comprehension (6/8) Listening comprehension (6/8) Writing (5/8)

These features may be attributed to:

- The French education and assessment culture:** as mentioned by the eight interviewed instructors, in the French education culture, being able to express oneself, especially in written form, is very important. French students learn to express themselves, to reason, to argue, to analyze and to summarize from the beginning of their schooling. According to Tomasson (2001), "the French spirit is characterized by its organization. It therefore has its own exercises, such as the [written] essay to train the student to have an organized mind, whose form, meaning and spirit of repartee are as important as its substance" (18). This explains the integration of open-ended questions that solicit subjective writing skills in different forms in most of the interviewed instructors' language exams. Moreover, in the French academic system, particularly at the university, despite the efforts of instructors to encourage oral expression, we see that students struggle to express themselves orally since they fear giving the wrong answer and thus being punished because of their lack of "proper" linguistic competencies¹⁶. As a result, teachers resort to the use of exams that mainly assess students' written performances (written comprehension and expression as well as oral comprehension, which do not require students to speak). The use of open-ended questions in this context reflects, therefore, the French education culture, the French students' habits and preferences, and possibly the French definition of *knowing* a language, to which, instructors are obligated/choose to adhere to in their assessment practices in order for students to succeed in their language assessment.
- The university context of teaching and assessing English in France:** Most interviewed instructors mentioned various contextual problems such as time constraints, high enrollment rate in classes and students' institutional (rather than personal) motivations for taking (passing, not learning) English, which is meeting their programs' requirements for graduation. These constraints require instructors to resort to collective assessment, mostly in form of written exams, which explains the high weight of this instrument in students' final grade; it is therefore primordial for students to pass their exams in order to pass their English language classes.

¹⁶ This fear is expressed by all eight instructors.

However, although in this context, French students do not have the same political constraints faced by the Iranian students, the rather instrumental uses of English prevent these learners from seriously investing themselves in their learning of the language. They prefer to work on their written comprehension skills, which they believe help them with their consultation of English texts and resources. According to the interviewed instructors, most of these university students believe they do not need to learn a more functional and practical English, even though functional knowledge of this language will be required if they plan to work at international milieus. It can therefore be concluded that most of the students studying English in their universities look at it as a language needed for immediate academic use, rather than future professional uses.

Subsequently, in these two contexts in Iran and in France, the format of the exam is not specific to the target language; nor does it reflect the latest approaches to assessment, but it is rather conditioned by the characteristics of the assessment setting and/or context, such as institutional constraints, assessment cultures, as well as the specific uses of the language by students in each context. In both situations, learning English is mandatory for students, which results in a more instrumental and extrinsic motivation rather than a personal, integrative and intrinsic motivation for learning the language. Thus, in the image of the exam presented in these two contexts, academic, situational, and institutional constraints of assessment, and the objectives of learning the language play a considerable role in the elaboration and the administration of exams in university level language classes.

5.2. *The specificities of the country in which the exam is given*

Based on the analysis of the interviews, the interviewed instructors' representations of the function of an exam revealed an interesting difference from one country to another:

- In Iran, most participants in both contexts of assessment in Persian and English classes shared the view that the main function of an exam is to motivate learners to study; an authoritarian function that forces students to take their courses as well as their assessment seriously. Exam is therefore a tool to make learners (better) invest themselves in their academic performance; it is used as an instrument *for* learning, the term "*for*" being used as a stimulus for learning, rather than an instrument *for* learning.
- In France, exams are instruments used for grading students' as well as institutions' performances; they have therefore 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 France¹⁷ are instruments used for assessment *of* learning, with an institutional, administrative and social role, rather than being an instrument *for* learning with an educational importance.
- In the U.S., the function of an exam consists of checking students' learning and improvement, since in this country¹⁸ 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 indicator of the extent to which learning and teaching have been successful; they can therefore be classified as an instrument *of* learning for educational reasons, rather than societal reasons.

¹⁷ As expressed by these sixteen instructors

¹⁸ Based on the sixteen interviewed participants' responses

Table three describes the most commonly mentioned functions of exam in each of the six studied contexts:

Table 3

Distribution of the theme "function of the exam" throughout all six contexts

EXAM	IRAN PERSIAN	IRAN ENGLISH	FRANCE FRENCH	FRANCE ENGLISH	USA ENGLISH	USA FRENCH
Function of exam	Motivate learners (7/8)	Motivate learners (8/8)	Assign grades (5/8)	Assign grades (5/8)	Verify learning (3/8)	Verify learning (5/8)

The cultural and contextual function of the exam in each country is therefore observed in each country, which originates in the following five elements:

- Instructors' perspectives about exams (all contexts)
- Instructors' approaches to assessment via the administration of exams (all contexts)
- The specific characteristics of students (Iranian context)
- The specific characteristics of institutions (French context)
- The specific missions presumed by universities (U.S. context)

These specificities are rooted in the culture of each country as well as in the views and objectives of the people in each context about assessment and exam.

5.3. *The "almost" universal trends regarding exams in the three countries*

Despite contextual differences observed in these six contexts, it was interesting to observe a more significant number of similarities than differences in the image of exams administered in language classes that are taught by the study's participants. These similarities, found in most of the six contexts are:

1. The widespread presence of written exam as the main assessment tool used.
2. The type of the exam:
 - Uniform presence of both discrete-point and integrative exams, except in English classes in Iran where only discrete-point exams are used.
3. The type of questions used in the exam:
 - 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.
4. The rationale for the use of these questions in the exam:
 - Effectiveness, except in English classes in Iran where reliability and objectivity are more important than effectiveness of exams
5. The type of activities to perform in the exam:
 - Mainly comprehension and application activities
6. The performances targeted in the exam:
 - Reading comprehension, writing, listening comprehension, grammar, except in English classes in Iran which mainly focus on reading comprehension

Table four summarizes the similarities and the differences in exams administered by the 48 interviewed instructors in the six contexts studied:

Table 4

Distribution of the 12 analyzed themes in all six contexts: Cells in regular font represent participants' exam practices whereas cells in bold represent instructors' perceptions of exam (see below).

THEMES	IRAN PERSIAN	IRAN ENGLISH	FRANCE FRENCH	FRANCE ENGLISH	USA ENGLISH	USA FRENCH
Mode of exam	Discrete point (5/8) Integrated exam (3/8)	Integrated exam (1/8) Discrete point exam (7/8)	Integrated exam (4/8) Discrete point exam (4/8)	Integrated exam (5/8)	Discrete point exam (5/8) Integrated exam (3/8)	Integrated exam (5/8)
Type of exam	Progress test (8/8)	Progress test (8/8)	Progress test (7/8)	Progress test (7/8)	Progress test (8/8)	Progress test (8/8)
Type of questions used in the exam	Short answer questions (6/8) Open ended reading comprehension questions (5/8) Guided production (5/8) Fill in the blank questions (5/8) Short answer questions fixes (5/8) True/false questions (5/8) Multiple choice questions (4/8)	Multiple choice questions (7/8) Fill in the blank questions : (4/8)	Fill in the blank questions (8/8) Open ended questions (6/8) Short answer questions fixes (5/8) Multiple choice questions (5/8) Open ended reading comprehension questions (6/8)	Written comment (4/8) Essays (4/8) Open ended reading comprehension questions (4/8)	Short answer questions No fixes (7/8) Guided production (7/8) Matching questions (6/8) Short answer questions fixes (5/8) Multiple Choice questions (5/8) Open ended reading comprehension questions (5/8)	Guided production (6/8) Short answer questions with fixed answers (6/8) Fill in the blank questions (6/8) Short answer questions with different possibilities (5/8)
Rationale for these questions	Efficiency (8/8)	Reliability and Objectivity (7/8) Time constraints (8/8)	Level of learners (5/8) Efficiency (5/8)	Efficiency (6/8) Time constraints (5/8)	Efficiency (5/8)	Efficiency (7/8)
Influences on the exam	Exam meets institutions' requirements (3/8)	Exam reflects course objectives (5/8)	Exam reflects course objectives (6/8)	Exam meets institutions' requirements (4/8)	Exam reflects course objectives (6/8)	Exam targets different performances (5/8)

	Exam reflects course objectives (3/8)			Feasibility (8/8) Validity (5/8)	Validity (6/8) Exam meets institutions' requirements (5/8)	
Open-ended questions	Approves and uses (5/8)	Approves and uses (4/8) Approves but does not use (6/8)	Uses depending on level of students (5/8)	Approves and uses (6/8)	Approves and uses (5/8)	Approves and uses (5/8)
Close-ended questions	Approves and uses (5/8)	Approves and uses (6/8)	Approves and uses (5/8)	Approves and uses (3/8)	Approves and uses (5/8)	Approves and uses (4/8)
Function of the exam	Motivate learners (7/8)	Motivate learners (8/8)	Assign grades (5/8)	Assign grades (5/8)	Verify learning (3/8)	Verify learning (5/8)
Weight of exam in final grade	20-40% (5/8)	60-80% (3/8) 80-100% (3/8)	40-60% (7/8)	60-80% (6/8)	40-60% (4/8) 20-40% (2/8)	40-60% (4/7)
Drills	No (5/8)	No (8/8)	Yes (5/8)	No (7/8)	No (6/8)	No (5/8)
Skill assessed in exam	Application of knowledge (8/8) Identification of content (8/8) Memorization (4/8) Personalization (5/7)	Identification of content (8/8) Identification of language (5/8) Application of knowledge (5/8) Memorization of knowledge (4/8)	Application of knowledge (7/8) Identification of language (6/8)	Application of knowledge (7/8) Identification of content (6/8)	Application of knowledge (7/8) Identification of content (7/8) Identification of language (5/8) Personalization of knowledge (5/8)	Application of knowledge (6/8) Identification of content (5/8) Identification of language (5/8) Memorization (4/8)
Targeted performances in exam	Reading comprehension (8/8) Writing (7/8) Grammar (6/8)	Reading comprehension (8/8) Grammar (3/8)	Reading comprehension (7/8) Listening comprehension (7/8) Writing (6/8) Grammar (5/8)	Reading comprehension (6/8) Listening comprehension (6/8) Writing (5/8)	Reading comprehension (8/8) Writing (6/8) Listening comprehension (4/8) Grammar (4/8)	Reading comprehension (8/8) Listening comprehension (7/8) Writing (7/8) Grammar (4/8)

These universal tendencies may originate in the following observations:

- **The exam being administered in an academic and institutional context;** this academic and institutional context of assessment usually has its own rules, methods and guidelines to be respected and implemented by instructors and students regardless of the context in which/the reason for which assessment is being performed.
- **The integration of similar scientific theories and approaches to assessment and to exam by the instructors interviewed;** in other words, many of the participants either have had access to or have been trained according to similar scientific educational and/or pedagogical resources since the current methodologies and perspectives on language teaching and acquisition are becoming more and more universal in that they are available to instructors and researchers in different parts of the world through international conferences, the internet or the easy circulation of journals, articles and teaching resources. It is therefore not surprising that many of the interviewed instructors are aware of or incorporate similar theories and concepts in their practices (their actions) and/or in their discourse about their practices during the interview (their representations).
- **The elementary level of students,** which prevents the incorporation of certain (higher level) exercises or activities in the exam while privileging the use of others. In fact, we noticed that the tasks mentioned in the elementary levels of Bloom's taxonomy (1956) are often included in the exams administered by many of the interviewed instructors, whereas advanced activities seem to be reserved for more superior courses.
- **The nature of the collected data,** which are based on the perceptions and the representations of instructors rather than on their actual observable actions (since these data only¹⁹ consisted of interviews in which instructors *talked about* their practices and their perceptions). This implies participants' *possible* conscious or unconscious reliance on official/institutional language teaching documents and/or discourses, such as language teaching guidelines or benchmarks in the answers provided to the questions, rather than realistic references to the actual practices (actions) of instructors. The traces of these guidelines' discourse in instructors' answers does not, however, guarantee their implementation in their assessment practices, mainly in their exams, which seem to be more influenced by the social perceptions and institutional constraints present in different contexts and countries rather than by scientific guidelines and concepts offered in the current language learning literature.

These similarities do not present a general description of these three countries' education and evaluation cultures (since these data are 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 (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* (table 4 above: regular font cells) that individual instructors adopt in their classes. Assessment, as a scientific activity, (Peretti 2005, 391) has therefore become more of an institutionalized tool and procedure because of its important consequences on students and institutions.

At the same time, interesting differences from one country to another were noted in the instructors' *perceptions* of exams (table 4 above: cells in bold), that is, 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)

¹⁹ In the initial planning of this study, not only instructors' interviews were meant to be analyzed, but the researcher also planned to examine actual practices via a copy of an exam that each instructor believes to be representative of his/her discourse on exams. Yet, these data were not completely provided to the researcher in many cases (explained below in the last section), which changed the analysis criteria, but also gave the study an interesting insight into a different dimension of assessment/exams, that is, the (personal, cultural or institutional) differences in sharing/not sharing exams in these six countries (explained below).

- 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),
- Political constraints (rare interaction with foreigners in the Iranian context)

From the analysis of the differences and the similarities in exams administered in these six contexts, the following preliminary conclusion can be made: 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 the *practices* of the exam, the differences suggest culturally and contextually specific *perceptions* regarding assessment and learning in general and exams in particular in each of these three countries. As a result, despite the initial hypothesis of this study, which predicted that exams administered in these three different countries would display significant cultural and contextual differences, noteworthy similarities were witnessed, which seem to suggest that while assessment (exam) is culturally specific in some dimensions, it is composed of (it follows) universal practices and guidelines that belong to the institution of assessment rather than to the specificities of various cultures, situations and contexts. Where significant differences in the image of exam presented by the 48 interviewed instructors were observed, however, was in the instructors' willingness to share copies of their exams, as explained in the following section.

5.4. The Other Dimension: Instructors' willingness to share assessment materials

In designing this project, the initial plan was to ask each instructor to share a copy of his/her exam to be used as a way of observing the consistency of instructors' representations of assessment and the actual assessment practices used in their class. However, when these documents were requested following the interviews, they were not readily and willingly shared in all three contexts. Table five illustrates the distribution of instructors' willingness (or possibility) of sharing their assessment materials:

Table 5

Instructors' sharing of exams

	IRAN PERSIAN	IRAN ENGLISH	FRANCE FRENCH	FRANCE ENGLISH	USA ENGLISH	USA FRENCH
Exam	3	2	3	4	7	8

In Iran and in France, most of the participants hesitated or refused to give copies of their assessment material under the pretext of exam not yet written, lack of permission from the coordinator or the institution, loss/misplaced copy of the last given exam, or (never kept) promises of sending copies of exams later on via email. These excuses and/or constraints mainly come from

1. The fact that in these two countries (Iran and France), it is not a common practice to share exams/assessment material
2. Instructors' possible lack of confidence in the researcher and or projects' objectives
3. Instructors' possible fear of non conformities between their discourse and their actual practices.

In the American context, however, most instructors willingly shared copies of exams, which proved of:

1. A more open, self-assured culture regarding sharing assessment material
2. A probable more cohesion between instructors' practices and discourses, as well as a more collaborative regard and approach to teaching and learning.

These assumptions, however, cannot be proven through the available data; they are just possibilities that require more detailed and widespread research for validity.

Consequently, it is true that in the comparison of these six contexts, more similarities than differences were noted in exam practices. Yet, this research confirmed interesting cultural and contextual differences in other aspects of a cross-cultural comparison, such as those of exam

perceptions, as well as instructors' willingness and/or institutions' possibility to share assessment tools for possible analytic purposes outside of their classes. These differences originate in:

- Institutional regulations, which seem to be stricter in the Iranian and French contexts, but less severe in the American setting
- Cultural characteristics of different societies: the spirit of constructive collaboration, mutual help, sharing and offering, showing confidence and feeling secure about educational practices observed among many of the interviewed American instructors, as opposed to a more individual, reserved characteristic of most of the Iranian and French participants, with the need to protect themselves from possible criticisms, disapprovals or condemnations.

6. Conclusion

The results obtained in this data analysis partially explain the initial hypothesis, which predicted that exams used in language classes in Iran, in France and in the US are not universal, but culturally specific to each context (and eventually to each country) studied. In the comparison of the exam image in these six contexts, while significant number of similarities were observed in exam *practices* rooted in the institutional context of assessment as well as the elementary level of students, noteworthy differences were also discovered, mainly in instructors' *approaches* and *perspectives* to exams, which indicated the influences of these countries' education culture and social values of assessment and learning. However, as far as the willingness to share assessment materials, unexpected differences were observed in these six contexts, which can be attributed to each country's cultural and political²⁰ approach to educational collaboration and to constructive interaction. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that in the case of exams administered in language classes in these forty eight participants' representations of their exams, learning cultures influence instructors' approaches, perspectives and attitudes much more than their actual concrete practices in the field; practices rise 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. Yet, as mentioned earlier, due to the limited number of interviews per context, these conclusions do not indicate results that can be applied generally to these three countries. The current analysis provides the researcher, however, with sufficient *tools* (the extracted themes and other issues raised by instructors during the interviews) for conducting further, more 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 the six contexts.

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²⁰ Political in the sense of being safe to share concrete examples of practices for non institutionalized uses.

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