Annual Review of Applied Linguistics (2009) **29**, 132–141. Printed in the USA.
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doi:10.1017/S0267190509090114

10. LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT POLICY IN IRAN

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Despite its geopolitical reputation, Iran has been quite underrepresented in studies of its sociopolitically dominated religious educational framework and its language teaching and assessment policy. In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, major restructuring was planned for foreign language teaching and assessment to accord with Islamic values. However, due to political obstacles, including the long-lasting war between Iran and Iraq, most of the plans could not be implemented until years after the revolution. Since high-stakes language tests including university entrance examinations are developed, administered, and scored by the government agencies, independent researchers do not have access to test data. A critical review of the language assessment policy in Iran requires research-based data, which is, in many cases, lacking or sporadic. This article is an attempt to provide some basic documented information about the educational system, foreign language teaching, and assessment in Iran.

The Educational System in Iran

Documents from the old Kingdom of Persia (present-day Iran) indicate that acquiring knowledge was strongly recommended for the purpose of understanding the power of God and abiding by His rules in order to achieve prosperity in both worlds. Evidence for such a priority is probably the first higher education center, called Gundeshapur or Jondishapoor (presently a university with the same name in Ahwaz, a southwestern city in Iran), that was founded in the third century and served as the center for advanced medical, pure, and applied sciences. However, despite this long history, the first modern school in Iran is not more than 150 years old, and the first university, Tehran University, is only 75 years old. Modernization was speeded up by the former regime at all levels, and a systematic educational program with elaborate policy statements was developed from elementary through high school and some higher education centers.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, although a massive reform was planned at all levels of education to apply Islamic values to the education system, the political, economic, and social context of the country, especially the pressure exerted by the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190509090114 Published online by Cambridge University Press

long-lasting war between Iran and Iraq, modified national priorities. Nonetheless, following Islamic values, the appearance of the students and teachers changed, textbooks were Islamized, and religious ceremonies were required at the newly segregated schools.

The first set of changes took place at the high school level in 1990, a decade after the revolution. First, the existing annual academic system was replaced by an annual unit credit system. Second, the length of education at the high school level was reduced to 3 years from the previous 4 years. The additional year, which was designed for those who intended to pursue higher education, was planned to bridge the gap between high school and university level education. Third, many technical, vocational, and applied science branches at high school level were established to train skilled workers to meet the growing demands of the job market. These schools were well received by the students and an increasing number of junior high graduates preferred technical and vocational schools over academic ones due to the emerging demand of the country for trained and skilled workers, the need of the younger generation to earn a living, and the fear and frustration felt at the high levels of competition for higher education (Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education, 2006; UNESCO, 1995). These changes influenced the extent and intensity of teaching and assessment of foreign languages at high school.

In the new system, the teaching of English in public schools has been stabilized at 4 hours a week in junior high school, 6 unit credits at high school, and an additional 4-unit credit course at the 1-year pretertiary level. Despite efforts made by the authorities, the quality of teaching English at public schools is less than desired. The aim of English as a foreign language (EFL) at high school is to enable students to use at least one (foreign) language to communicate with others at a survival level (Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education, 2006, p. 43). To this end, the textbooks were modified on the basis of the principles of communicative approaches to language teaching. Attempts were also made to shift from testing to assessment, since all language tests at the secondary school level were summative achievement in nature and discrete point in form. For example, under the new system, teachers were required to conduct continuous formative assessments during instruction and record their evaluation in student files. At the junior high school, oral and written skills were to be treated as different subjects and assessed separately. However, due to the popularity of discrete point testing of language components (spelling, grammar, and vocabulary) at all grades, teachers were not able to implement the new curriculum because students were concerned with their performance on the tests rather than their performance in actual communication in a foreign language. In fact, the washback effect of assessment procedures hindered the goal of modifying the teaching method (Safarnavadeh, 2004).

While at grades 6 and 7, teachers prepare, administer, and score the exams following rubrics provided by the Center of Educational Measurement (CEM), the final exam at grade 8, the last year of junior high school, is designed by selected teachers, administered in specific locations, and graded blind under the control of provincial CEM offices (Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education, 2006). The

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passing grade for all subjects at the public educational system, including English, is 50%.

The assessment of English at high schools is similar to that at junior high school. However, with the advent of the unit credit system, some modifications were made. One change was administering a diagnostic test at the beginning of each grade to identify weak points and take the necessary measures to help students. Although the Ministry of Education mandates utilization of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments during the school years at grades 9–11, teachers rarely use them.

Test development, administration, and scoring of written exams at grades 9 and 10 are performed internally by individual teachers. The final exam of grade 11 is prepared by language testing experts and administered under the supervision of CEM across the nation. Because this final exam is a high-stakes test and required for the high school diploma, it has a higher contribution to the overall grade than those obtained on formative assessments performed by the teachers during the year. It should be noted that no documented research is available on the psychometric properties of the tests administered by CEM since the officials are reluctant to allow independent researchers from outside the ministry to investigate the quality of the tests.

An Overview of the Postrevolution Higher Education

Postrevolution Iran had more challenges at the higher education level than at the secondary school level. Soon after the Islamic Revolution, all educational boards of trustees in charge of designing educational policy were officially dissolved because they had been inactive in the last 2 years of the preceding government (Naeeni, 2004). In February 1980, the Supreme Council of Education was officially established with two important responsibilities: first to set central educational policies for the Islamic Republic of Iran's higher education system, and second, to set criteria for admitting students to universities in accordance with the Constitution and Islamic values (Davari Ardakani, 2004; Hashemnia, 2004).

Because the council was opposed by the active presence of political parties in the universities, in June 1980, the leader of the Islamic Revolution issued an order to close down all universities and establish a new institution called the "Cultural Revolution Secretariat" to reorganize the system and to plan future educational and cultural policies. The new secretariat formed five committees to work on curricula for the five major areas of medical sciences, humanities, basic sciences, technical and engineering sciences, and agricultural sciences (Akrami, 2004). The members of these committees were selected from among experts in the related fields who were believed to have a strong commitment to the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic government. To increase the power of the Cultural Revolution Secretariat, in 1984 the leader of the Islamic Revolution designated it the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution and appointed senior political leaders (the president, the heads of the legislative and judiciary systems, along with some distinguished academic figures) to

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it Khoemini (1982). This council has been responsible for new policies for admitting both old and new students to the universities (Hashemnia, 2004).

The major challenge faced by the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution was to resume admission to the universities, because in addition to former students who wanted to complete their education, a huge number of high school graduates were waiting for the universities to reopen. The council decided that a returning student's qualifications had to be assessed by a Student Selection Committee, the members of which were neither knowledgeable nor experienced in assessment. Therefore, they used ad hoc assessment tools such as informal interviews with the students' neighbors. One criterion was a student's involvement in antigovernment political activity; anyone reported to have been active in this way, especially with any Marxist political groups was automatically barred from the universities. In other cases, local investigations were carried out in their neighborhood to ensure that they had a practical commitment to Islamic laws. Admission was to be based on assessment of knowledge (to ensure knowledge adequacy) as well as the assessment of ideological beliefs and deeds (to ensure ethical adequacy). These nonacademic standards, implemented by nonacademic members of the filtering organization, deprived many students from higher education solely due to their political inclinations rather than their academic records.

Increasing Admission Capacity

Another challenge for the Council was to find a way to increase available spaces for the large number of incoming students who could be accommodated in state universities. The solution was to permit the opening of government-monitored private universities. The first one, the *Islamic Azad* (open) *University* (IAU), was established in 1982 and followed by many other private universities. IAU, the most influential of all, started with 2,045 students in the first year and grew to be the largest university in the world with over 1.5 million students in 220 branches in the country and seven abroad (Mohebati, 2004). The second was *Payame Noor* (The message of light) *University*, which was planned to provide long-distance education for approximately half a million students where university facilities were not available. The last policy decision was made in 1991 to relieve pressure on state universities. The state universities were allowed to admit a number of students for evening classes, for which students would pay as much tuition as they would have paid for private universities. All newly established universities operated under the assessment policies of the Ministry of Higher Education, except for the IAU which developed its own assessment center to work parallel to the ministry-operated assessment organization.

Admission to Universities

The establishment of new higher education facilities intensified the already tense admission process to the universities. The former Ministry of Science and Higher Education had established a center whose major responsibility was to determine the most efficient methods of selecting talented applicants for higher education. Later in September 1971, this center was expanded and renamed the

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National Organization of Educational Testing (NOET). After the Islamic Revolution, like many other organizations, NOET was dissolved and its responsibilities were undertaken by the Student Selection Committee. In July 1989, NOET was reinstated to resume its function of administering the entrance examinations at both undergraduate and graduate levels for selecting the most qualified applicants (Hashemnia, 2004; Yadegarzadeh, Moghimi, Parand, & Bahrami, in press).

The University Entrance Examination (UEE) consists of two parts. The first part, which is designed to measure applicants' general educational capability, focuses on subjects such as Islamic studies and culture, Persian language and literature, Arabic language, and one elective foreign language (English, French, German, Italian, or Russian). Scoring is based on a weighted system because it is believed that these subjects play a disproportionate role in applicants' overall educational capability. This part of the UEE is the same for all applicants independent of their high school majors and the disciplines they wish to pursue in the university. Each student receives a total score to be used as one of the criteria for admission. There is no empirical evidence regarding the decisions made on the weights given to each subject matter area in the test. The second part of the test includes subject matter areas related to the four high school majors of the applicants in mathematics and engineering, life sciences, humanities, and arts. The content of these tests is based on the content of the textbooks studied at the high schools. This part, too, is scored on a weighted system to provide another total score to be assigned to each applicant (Rahimi & Aghababa, 2006).

The applicants are ranked on the basis of their total scores on both parts and admitted to the universities in the majors they had requested. If an applicant's score is not high enough to be admitted to their requested discipline, the applicant can be admitted to other disciplines. Although many applicants are not accepted in their majors of interest, they may still continue because in addition to the social desirability of getting into universities, male students are exempt from compulsory military service.

The adequacy of this admission system is not the point of discussion here. However, Farhady (1998) raised questions about the test development procedures and content validity of the English language section of the entrance examination. Regarding test development, it takes place in the NOET headquarters under strict security. Experienced teachers write parallel tests for each subject matter area including the foreign language every year (Rahimi & Aghababa, 2006). There are usually 25 multiple-choice items in the language section, which tap candidates' knowledge of grammar and lexicon as well as general reading comprehension with a 20-minute time limit. This procedure is repeated every year, and a few days after the exam, the test is published for public access with keys to the items. This makes pretesting the future items impractical and the task of item developers more demanding. The only strategy NOET applies to improve the quality of the test is to analyze test items after they are administered and decisions are made. The item writers are then informed of the quality of each item, which is supposed to help them improve future tests. It should be mentioned that no written report is available on the

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psychometric characteristics of this test. However, Khoii (1998) conducted a qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the English subtests of entrance examinations of universities using the Rasch model. The study investigated the test construction process, the content validity, and the reliability of the English subsection of three entrance examinations administered by the NOET and the testing center of IAU. The results of the study indicated that no standards existed on which admission tests were constructed in Iran and the reliability and validity of the tests were not satisfactory.

The second problem with the test was related to its scope. Farhady (1998) argued that the language section of the entrance examination included too few items to provide a reasonable assessment of the language ability of the applicants. A good number of universities in the country admit undergraduate students in foreign languages such as English, French, German, other language, language translation, and language teaching. The objection was that many applicants are admitted to these majors on the basis of their total scores on the UEE without necessarily having a high proficiency in that language. Since the language of instruction in foreign language departments is the target language, these applicants face serious problems in coping with the requirements. To solve the problem, all applicants interested in foreign languages were required to take an additional seventy additional test items (Rahimi & Aghababa, 2006).

The third problem with the UEE was that although it was based on the content of the high school textbooks to assure the content validity, drastic differences existed in the quality of education due to disproportionate allocation of educational facilities across the country. Further, due to the long lasting effects of the war, many students had spent a good deal of the time defending the country they would have otherwise spent studying. In addition, there was a large group of applicants who had been damaged physically or mentally during the war or had been prisoners of war for a few years. Supporters of such a diverse group of applicants strongly argued that if these applicants had spend the time they spent in war on studying, they would have had a better chance of being admitted to the higher education institutes.

With the arguments for such applicants and with high priorities given to Islamic values, many top-ranked authorities agreed that they should be treated differently to recognize their service to the country (NOET, 2007). One kind of help was to provide educational facilities such as free preparatory classes and tutors so that they could compete with other applicants. The Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution approved a set of new admission criteria for such students. Applicants who were certified as war veterans would be admitted to the university if their total scores approached 80% level of the last person who was admitted into a particular university major (Rahimi & Aghababa, 2006). Another type of accommodation made to alleviate the problem of unequal educational opportunities across the nation was to develop a kind of mathematical formula to adjust the total scores of the applicants whose home regions were considered to have received less educational facilities (called deprived states or regions). This plan is documented as “regional allocation” in the literature of NOET (2007). Although with so many test scores, weighted scores,

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and recalculations, admission to universities was already a complicated process. Admission would not be complete unless the applicants met the criteria set and independently applied by the Student Selection Committee to assure that the admitted applicants have strong dedication to Islamic values and ethics.

Increasing the Number of Faculty Members

With the increased number of students admitted, there was also a need for policies that would help increase the number of instructors. A short-term policy was to send some eligible graduates to foreign countries with quality graduate programs. In the absence of relations with the United States, other countries such as England, Australia, and Canada, which had kept their diplomatic relations with Iran, became the target for scholarships for Iranian students going into doctoral programs.

To receive a scholarship, three assessment criteria were applied: First, the candidates had to demonstrate high academic qualifications beyond their university grade point averages (GPAs) by sitting for a content test in their major. Like other high-stakes tests, there is no documented research on the quality of these tests. Those who obtained the passing score on this test would be assessed on their adherence to the ethical, religious, and revolutionary principles of the Islamic government. This assessment was performed by the same Student Selection Committee that was in charge of admission to the universities. A similar informal assessment process was carried out by conducting local investigation in the applicants' neighborhood. The last assessment criterion, which was the most challenging of all, was that the candidates had to satisfy the language proficiency requirement of the host universities. It was probably the first time since the revolution when the need for English language ability became a significant factor in the implementation of the policies.

With the postrevolutionary damage to the infrastructure of language teaching organizations, the government directly sponsored test preparation classes for eligible candidates. Further, because of political reasons, TOEFL was not administered in Iran, and because the target countries preferred International English Language Testing System (IELTS™) over the Test of English as a Foreign Language™ (TOEFL®), the Ministry began to administer IELTS in collaboration with the Australian and British Embassies in Tehran.

To expedite the process, some students were sent with low IELTS scores provided that they would take some English as a second language (ESL) courses in the host university to improve their language ability to the point that they could pursue main stream courses. Furthermore, due to the infrequent administration of IELTS, the Ministry developed a local test and used it as a precondition for applicants to sit for IELTS. The local test was called MCHE, an abbreviation of the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. The MCHE was a test similar to paper-and-pencil TOEFL without the listening comprehension section. Applicants who obtained 50% of the score on this test would be granted a scholarship.

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At the same time, graduate schools were expanded and many doctoral programs were established to train university instructors locally. Because of the importance of the English language at the doctoral level, students applying to local programs had to demonstrate a reasonable command of English. Therefore, MCHE was set and still is the criterion for admission for local doctoral programs as well. However, along with the MCHE, another test of language proficiency test called TOLIMO-EA (Test of Language by the Iranian Measurement Organization: English-Advanced) was developed. The original TOLIMO included sections on listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and structure. Later on, the test followed the changes made in TOEFL, and the vocabulary section was removed from the test and a writing section was added. The test consists of 140 multiple-choice items and an essay. The total normalized score ranges between 310 and 677, and the writing score is reported separately. Although claims are made that TOLIMO provides score comparable to those of TOEFL and enjoys high psychometric qualities, no evidence has been published to support such a claim. Nor has a third party been allowed to scrutinize this test (Ministry of Research, Science, and Technology, 1993)

Teaching and Assessing English at Universities

In contrast with the complexities of entering the universities, teaching English or other foreign languages at the university level follows a simple and straightforward policy. Usually there is a 3-unit credit requirement for all university students regardless of their major. Beyond this general requirement, depending on the needs of the students and the approval of the school, students might take up to 4 units of English for special purposes (ESP) courses. The way English is taught at the universities is often translation oriented, because the main objective is to enable students to read and understand materials written in English in their majors. Since the language of instruction in the universities is Persian, there is no strong feeling toward the need for English, especially at the undergraduate level. In fact, these few units are the only exposure that university students have in their undergraduate studies. At the graduate level, too, English is considered a tool to enable students to access the materials written and published in English.

The instructional materials for English courses at the universities are prepared by an organization established in 1981, called the Center for Research and Development of Textbooks for University Students. One section of this organization is assigned to developing English texts for non-English majors. There is one specific textbook for every major in the university and in most cases another one for graduate-level courses. The content of these books is progressively closer to the materials that students will face in studying the original materials in their major fields of study. Except for the texts that are usually taken from original materials with some adaptations and modifications, the presentation of materials is quite traditional. Each book often includes several lessons (ranging from 16 to 20), and each lesson includes

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a couple of passages followed by some true-false, multiple-choice, comprehension, and translation exercises.

Concluding Remarks

The postrevolution political atmosphere in Iran has witnessed fluctuations in language teaching and assessment policy. Despite banning English and attempting to replace it with Arabic, many economic, industrial, educational, and military activities in the country required knowledge of English. Therefore, the concept of learning English as a threat to national and cultural identity has changed. It is quoted from the leader of the Islamic Revolution that foreign languages were not necessary in the past, but at present it is necessary for all students to equip themselves with at least one foreign language to be able to communicate with the international community in defending the national and international rights of the country (from the preface to the textbooks for university students). However, despite continuous efforts, there have not been considerable improvements in either teaching or assessing the English language ability of the students and traditional methods and materials are still in practice.

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