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# A Qualitative Investigation of Sociocultural Factors Impacting Assessment Design in Multilingual Education

## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the sociocultural factors that influence assessment design in multilingual educational settings, with a focus on secondary schools in Tehran, Iran. The study employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of educators, curriculum designers, and education policymakers engaged in multilingual classrooms. A total of 22 participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were conducted in Persian, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo software. The data analysis process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, allowing for both inductive and deductive theme development rooted in sociocultural theory. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Cultural Contextualization in Assessment, encompassing subthemes such as local norms, religious values, and indigenous knowledge; (2) Linguistic Diversity and Assessment Equity, addressing issues like language accessibility, multilingual strategies, and test anxiety among non-dominant language speakers; and (3) Institutional and Policy Constraints, highlighting standardization pressures, lack of multilingual policy guidelines, and limited teacher autonomy. Participants described how cultural misalignment, language barriers, and bureaucratic rigidity compromise the validity, fairness, and inclusiveness of assessments. Teachers employed informal strategies to adapt assessments, but these were often unsupported at the institutional level. The study demonstrates that sociocultural factors critically shape assessment practices in multilingual classrooms. Culturally and linguistically responsive assessment design requires systemic reforms, including policy support, professional development, and increased flexibility for educators. These changes are essential for ensuring equitable educational outcomes in linguistically diverse contexts.

**Keywords:** Multilingual education; assessment design; sociocultural factors; language equity; qualitative research; Tehran; culturally responsive assessment.

## Introduction

Assessment is an essential element of the educational process, serving both formative and summative purposes. It enables educators to evaluate learners' progress, diagnose learning gaps, and make informed pedagogical decisions. However, in multilingual education contexts, assessment design is not merely a neutral or technical process but is profoundly shaped by sociocultural dynamics, including language diversity, cultural norms, and institutional policies (Shohamy, 2001). The present study aims to explore the sociocultural factors that impact assessment design within multilingual classrooms, particularly in settings where multiple languages coexist alongside dominant national languages. As global migration, urbanization, and educational inclusion policies continue to diversify student populations, especially in urban centers like Tehran, understanding these influences becomes increasingly crucial.

In multilingual education systems, assessment poses unique challenges due to the complex interplay between language proficiency, cultural expectations, and policy constraints. Learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds often face difficulties in understanding assessment items written in the dominant language, which can result in inaccurate representations of their knowledge and skills (Cummins, 2000). Consequently, assessment practices must be critically examined through a sociocultural lens to ensure equity, inclusiveness, and cultural responsiveness. As Garcia, Kleifgen, and Falchi (2008) argue, traditional assessment models tend to marginalize multilingual learners by privileging monolingual norms and failing to account for students' full linguistic repertoires.

Theoretical frameworks on sociocultural learning, particularly those derived from Vygotskian perspectives, highlight the centrality of social interaction, language, and cultural tools in shaping cognitive development and educational outcomes (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Assessment, as a cultural practice, is embedded in these broader structures of meaning-making. In multilingual classrooms, therefore, assessment is not only a measure of learning but also a site where cultural ideologies and language hierarchies are enacted and contested (Gipps & Murphy, 1994). Understanding the role of sociocultural factors in assessment design helps reveal how power dynamics, language ideologies, and identity politics influence educational experiences and outcomes.

Among the most significant sociocultural factors influencing assessment are cultural norms and values. Cultural perceptions of knowledge, authority, learning, and communication all shape what is considered valid or appropriate in assessment contexts. For instance, in collectivist societies, group performance or collaborative tasks may be more culturally resonant than individual competition-based exams (Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, values related to respect, modesty, or gender roles may influence students' willingness to express themselves openly in oral assessments or classroom discussions. Research by Berry (2015) emphasizes that culturally misaligned assessment practices can lead to misdiagnosis of learning difficulties, behavioral issues, and disengagement from school.

Language plays a particularly central role in shaping assessment outcomes in multilingual contexts. Language is both the medium and content of many assessments, particularly in language arts, science, and social studies. When students are assessed in a language that is not their first or strongest language, their ability to demonstrate understanding is often compromised (Abedi, 2004). This has raised concerns about the validity and reliability of assessments for multilingual learners. Scholars have argued for the use of accommodations such as translation, code-switching, scaffolding, or even developing entirely multilingual assessment tools to more accurately reflect students' knowledge (Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003; Shohamy, 2011). However, such approaches are not yet widely implemented due to practical, political, and ideological barriers.

Another key issue is the influence of institutional and policy frameworks on assessment practices. In many countries, including Iran, educational assessments are highly centralized and standardized, leaving little room for contextual adaptation (Heyneman, 2009). National high-stakes exams often determine students' access to higher education and employment, reinforcing the dominance of the official language and dominant cultural values. As a result, teachers may feel constrained in their ability to design assessments that are linguistically and culturally responsive. Research indicates that this pressure to conform to national standards can discourage innovation and marginalize minority learners (Menken, 2010).

Teachers, as mediators between policy and classroom practice, play a pivotal role in interpreting and implementing assessment. Their beliefs, training, and cultural awareness influence whether and how they integrate sociocultural factors into their assessment strategies (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2006). Studies have shown that teachers with a strong understanding of sociocultural perspectives are more likely to design inclusive assessments and provide meaningful feedback to multilingual learners (Cummins & Davison, 2007). However, in many educational systems, teacher training in sociocultural and linguistic diversity remains limited.

The Iranian educational context presents a compelling case for exploring these issues. Tehran, as a linguistically diverse metropolis, is home to students from Persian, Azeri, Kurdish, Lurish, and Arabic backgrounds, among others. While Persian remains the medium of instruction and assessment, many students speak other languages at home, creating a mismatch between their linguistic realities and educational expectations (Gholami, 2017). Furthermore, sociocultural norms in Iran, such as gender roles, religious values, and intergenerational authority structures, shape how students interact with assessment and how educators interpret student performance. Despite the richness of this multilingual and multicultural context, there remains limited empirical research on how sociocultural factors influence assessment design in Iranian schools.

This gap in the literature is particularly evident in relation to qualitative investigations that prioritize the voices and experiences of those directly involved in the assessment process—teachers, administrators, and curriculum designers. While there is a growing body of international research on culturally responsive assessment and multilingual education (García & Wei, 2014; Heritage, 2008), localized studies grounded in context-specific realities are still needed to inform policy and practice in Iran and similar settings. Such research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how assessment practices can be both standardized and sensitive to sociocultural and linguistic diversity.

The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring the sociocultural factors that shape assessment design in multilingual classrooms in Tehran through a qualitative, interview-based methodology. By capturing the perspectives of educators and policymakers working in multilingual educational settings, the study seeks to illuminate how cultural expectations, language practices, and institutional constraints interact in shaping assessment decisions. The ultimate goal is to contribute to the development of more inclusive, fair, and contextually appropriate assessment frameworks that reflect the complex realities of multilingual learners.

In doing so, this research aligns with broader efforts to decolonize assessment practices and challenge dominant paradigms that prioritize linguistic homogeneity and cultural uniformity. As scholars such as Shohamy (2001) and García et al. (2008) have argued, equitable education requires rethinking the assumptions that underlie assessment systems and recognizing the legitimacy of diverse ways of knowing, expressing, and demonstrating learning. Through its focus on Tehran's multilingual classrooms, this study offers insights that can inform both local educational reforms and global conversations about equity in assessment.

## Methods and Materials

### *Study Design and Participants*

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews, which allowed for the collection of rich, nuanced data concerning participants' perceptions and experiences. The target population consisted of educators, curriculum designers, and educational administrators actively engaged in multilingual education environments in Tehran. Purposeful sampling was utilized to ensure the inclusion of participants with relevant professional backgrounds and firsthand experience in assessment design within multilingual classrooms. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, resulting in a total of 22 participants, comprising 14 educators, 5 curriculum experts, and 3 administrative policymakers. Participants varied in terms of teaching experience, language proficiencies, and institutional affiliations, offering a diverse range of insights into sociocultural influences on assessment.

## *Data Collection*

Data were gathered exclusively through individual semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the study's conceptual framework and relevant literature, focusing on key themes such as cultural responsiveness, language equity, local norms, and community expectations in assessment. Each interview lasted between 45 to 70 minutes and was conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and participant comfort. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## *Data analysis*

The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The analytic process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, beginning with data familiarization, followed by the generation of initial codes, the search for themes, reviewing and defining themes, and finally, producing the report. Coding was both inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, and deductive, guided by sociocultural theories relevant to multilingual assessment design. Constant comparison was used throughout the process to refine categories and ensure internal consistency across themes. Reflexivity was maintained through memo-writing and regular peer debriefing sessions, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

## **Findings and Results**

### 1. Cultural Contextualization in Assessment

#### Recognition of Local Norms:

Participants emphasized the importance of aligning assessment content with students' cultural backgrounds, noting that assessments perceived as disconnected from local realities often lead to disengagement. Several teachers mentioned that students "perform better when the scenarios reflect their lived experiences." Local customs and values shaped expectations for what was appropriate or familiar, as one participant explained, "When a math problem uses names or situations from Western countries, students just stare blankly. But if we use something like a bazaar or local foods, they get it instantly."

#### Religious and Ethical Influences:

Religion was identified as a critical cultural influence on assessment. Many participants highlighted that assessment content must respect Islamic values to be accepted in school communities. For instance, a curriculum designer noted, "We once had to revise an entire reading comprehension passage because it described a Western holiday celebration that was seen as inappropriate." Ethical alignment was not only expected by parents but also considered a matter of institutional responsibility.

#### Gender and Social Expectations:

Gender emerged as a nuanced sociocultural factor in shaping both the design and interpretation of assessments. Teachers pointed out that "boys and girls are still expected to behave differently in the classroom," which indirectly affects how they engage with assessment tasks. Some participants mentioned tailoring oral examination styles to accommodate different communication norms between genders, especially in conservative school settings.

#### Culturally-Specific Knowledge Assumptions:

The inclusion of culturally bound knowledge, such as local idioms or historical events, was seen as both a strength and a barrier depending on student background. One participant remarked, "Students from ethnic minority groups often struggle with questions referencing Persian poets or local proverbs they don't use at home." This was particularly problematic when assessments assumed familiarity with dominant cultural narratives.

#### Parental and Community Involvement:

Several participants reported that assessments were frequently influenced by community expectations regarding fairness, difficulty, and outcomes. For instance, one teacher said, “We get calls from parents complaining when their children don’t score high in English exams—they expect the tests to reflect home values, not foreign systems.” This pressure from parents and communities often led teachers to adjust their assessment strategies to avoid conflict.

#### Indigenous Language Representation:

The lack of inclusion of minority languages in formal assessment was a repeated concern. Participants expressed that students who spoke Kurdish, Azerbaijani, or Arabic at home felt “invisible” in the classroom. A policy expert stated, “There’s no encouragement to validate a student’s native language, even if it’s part of their identity. Assessment is strictly Persian.” This marginalization was said to diminish student engagement and affect performance.

#### Rituals and Seasonal Traditions:

The timing of assessments around religious or cultural events played a subtle yet important role. Educators mentioned adjusting assessment calendars to avoid clashing with holidays like Ramadan or Nowruz. One teacher explained, “You can’t expect full concentration during the last week of fasting. It’s unfair and it shows in their results.” Incorporating local festivities into project-based assessments was also seen as a way to increase cultural relevance.

### 2. Linguistic Diversity and Assessment Equity

#### Language Accessibility:

A recurring theme across interviews was the challenge of linguistic clarity in assessment design. Teachers pointed out that complex vocabulary, unclear instructions, or overly academic phrasing created unnecessary barriers. As one participant noted, “Even strong students get stuck because they don’t understand what’s being asked, not because they don’t know the answer.”

#### Multilingual Assessment Strategies:

Some participants had developed creative multilingual strategies to support student understanding. These included bilingual instructions, translation support, and the use of code-switching where appropriate. One teacher shared, “We let students answer in their first language during group discussions. It helps them think clearly even if the final answer has to be in Persian.” However, they also acknowledged the lack of institutional support for such practices.

#### Language Bias in Test Items:

Participants cited examples of how linguistic bias impacted student performance, particularly when idiomatic expressions or culturally unfamiliar language structures were used. “Some test items just don’t translate well across languages,” said a curriculum developer. “They’re written for Persian-dominant students and end up disadvantaging others, even if they understand the concept behind the question.”

#### Accommodating Proficiency Levels:

Educators consistently reported the need to tailor assessments to account for varying levels of language proficiency. Techniques such as differentiated assessments, oral testing options, and simplified writing tasks were employed informally by some. “I sometimes allow students to draw or explain concepts verbally,” one teacher said. “They know the content—they just can’t always write it in Persian perfectly.”

#### Teacher Language Proficiency:

Teachers’ own limitations in using multiple languages fluently also emerged as a barrier to implementing equitable assessments. Some participants admitted that their lack of proficiency in minority languages constrained their ability to support students. One teacher remarked, “If I could speak some Kurdish or Turkish, I could explain things better. But I can’t, so I stick to Persian, and they suffer.”

### Students' Linguistic Identity and Confidence:

Many participants observed that students' relationship with their home language affected their academic self-esteem. "When students feel their language is inferior, it impacts how they engage with tests," one participant explained. Another added, "There's a clear drop in confidence when students are asked to write long answers in Persian—they feel exposed."

### 3. Institutional and Policy Constraints

#### Assessment Standardization Pressure:

Several participants expressed frustration with national mandates enforcing standardized assessments that ignore local linguistic diversity. "The Ministry wants uniform exams across the country, but that doesn't work when students don't have uniform language backgrounds," said one administrator. The lack of flexibility was seen as a major limitation in adapting assessments to student needs.

#### Lack of Multilingual Policy Guidelines:

Educators reported an absence of official guidelines supporting multilingual assessment. "We don't even have a document telling us whether it's okay to translate a test," said a curriculum coordinator. This policy vacuum created uncertainty and fear of non-compliance with national regulations, often discouraging innovation.

#### Resource Inequities Across Schools:

Disparities in material and human resources were frequently mentioned. Schools in wealthier districts had access to language labs and translated materials, while others had to improvise. "We have no budget for dual-language textbooks," noted a participant from a public school. Another explained that "staff training in multilingual pedagogy is nonexistent outside private schools."

#### Bureaucratic Resistance to Change:

Participants described institutional reluctance to revise assessment frameworks to reflect sociocultural realities. "Change comes slowly, and even when we propose adjustments, they're often rejected at higher levels," said an educational administrator. This resistance was linked to a centralized control structure that discouraged school-level adaptations.

#### Teacher Autonomy and Professional Judgment:

Finally, many educators felt constrained in their ability to use professional judgment when adapting assessments. One teacher shared, "We're told to use the standardized test booklets exactly as they are. If we modify even one part, we're questioned." Fear of administrative backlash limited teachers' capacity to make context-sensitive decisions.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study highlight the complex interplay of cultural, linguistic, and institutional factors that shape assessment design in multilingual educational settings in Tehran. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 22 educators, curriculum specialists, and policymakers, three overarching themes emerged: (1) cultural contextualization in assessment, (2) linguistic diversity and assessment equity, and (3) institutional and policy constraints. Each theme elucidates how sociocultural dimensions are embedded in assessment practices and how they mediate students' access to fair and meaningful evaluation.

The first theme, cultural contextualization in assessment, underscores the significant role that local norms, traditions, religious values, and social expectations play in shaping both the content and format of assessments. Participants emphasized the importance of aligning test items with students' lived realities, such as incorporating culturally relevant scenarios and acknowledging religious holidays in scheduling evaluations. This finding aligns with existing literature that highlights the cultural specificity of learning and assessment, arguing that educational tools cannot be culturally neutral (Berry, 2015; Gipps



& Murphy, 1994). Shohamy (2001) contends that tests often function as cultural instruments of control, reflecting dominant ideologies and marginalizing non-dominant cultural groups. In the context of Tehran's diverse student population, neglecting sociocultural alignment in assessment can exacerbate educational inequality by alienating students whose identities and backgrounds are not reflected in assessment content.

Moreover, the integration of religious and ethical values into assessment design reflects the broader socioreligious fabric of Iranian society. Participants reported that assessment materials must conform to Islamic norms and ethical standards to be considered acceptable by students, parents, and administrators. This finding is consistent with studies conducted in other majority-Muslim contexts where religious frameworks influence curriculum and assessment practices (Heyneman, 2009). Such considerations are particularly relevant in oral assessments and language-based evaluations, where cultural taboos and gender norms may limit student participation or expression. The relevance of these cultural dynamics highlights the need for culturally responsive assessment design that is sensitive to local values without compromising pedagogical quality.

The second theme, linguistic diversity and assessment equity, captures the challenges of assessing students in a dominant language that may not be their first or strongest. Participants described numerous instances in which students' understanding of content was obscured by language barriers rather than actual cognitive limitations. These results echo a long-standing concern in language assessment research—that linguistic proficiency often becomes conflated with subject mastery, leading to biased and invalid assessments for multilingual learners (Abedi, 2004; Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003). Garcia and Wei (2014) argue that multilingual learners are best understood through the lens of "translanguaging," which recognizes the dynamic use of their full linguistic repertoires. However, in the current study, such approaches were rarely institutionalized; instead, they were implemented informally by teachers who permitted limited code-switching or translation during classroom-based assessments.

Teacher narratives also illustrated the importance of developing multilingual assessment strategies that provide scaffolding and flexibility without diluting academic rigor. Techniques such as bilingual instructions, visual aids, and oral assessments were occasionally used to accommodate students' varying proficiency levels. These practices align with recommendations from Cummins (2000), who advocates for additive bilingualism and the use of students' home languages as cognitive resources rather than obstacles. Yet, the lack of formal training and policy support for these approaches reflects broader systemic neglect. Participants indicated that while multilingual strategies are pedagogically sound, they are often unsupported or even discouraged by national assessment frameworks, which continue to enforce Persian-only evaluations.

The emotional and psychological impact of linguistic marginalization was another critical insight. Many educators observed that students with lower proficiency in Persian often displayed reduced confidence, increased anxiety, and social withdrawal during assessment tasks. This observation is corroborated by studies showing that language-based test anxiety disproportionately affects bilingual learners, particularly when they are assessed in high-stakes environments (Menken, 2010). When students are made to feel that their home languages are irrelevant or inferior, it affects not only their performance but also their sense of belonging in the classroom. Thus, assessment equity requires more than linguistic accommodation—it requires affirmation of students' identities and cultural capital (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008).

The third major theme—institutional and policy constraints—revealed the structural challenges that educators face when attempting to implement inclusive assessment practices. Participants expressed widespread frustration with centralized, standardized exams that leave little room for contextual adaptation. National assessments in Iran are highly prescriptive and often prioritize uniformity over inclusivity. This mirrors international critiques of standardization, where rigid assessment policies hinder pedagogical innovation and disadvantage diverse learners (Shohamy, 2011; Heritage, 2008). Teachers reported

that even minor deviations from the official exam format could result in administrative censure, discouraging them from tailoring assessments to suit their students' needs.

Another related concern was the lack of clear policy guidelines for multilingual assessment. Educators were unsure whether translation, code-switching, or differentiated instruction were permissible within official evaluation frameworks. This policy vacuum fosters ambiguity and contributes to risk-averse behavior among teachers, particularly in public schools. Studies by Leung and Lewkowicz (2006) emphasize that successful implementation of culturally responsive assessment requires institutional support, including guidelines, training, and evaluative flexibility. The absence of such structures in the Iranian context leaves teachers in a precarious position, caught between the moral imperative to serve their students equitably and the bureaucratic pressure to conform.

Furthermore, unequal distribution of resources across schools was a recurrent theme. Teachers in well-funded urban schools had occasional access to translation services, training workshops, and differentiated materials, while those in under-resourced schools reported having to rely entirely on personal judgment. This inequity exacerbates the already significant challenges faced by multilingual learners in marginalized communities. The issue of institutional resistance to change was also prominent. Participants described educational authorities as bureaucratically rigid and slow to respond to proposals for inclusive assessment reforms. This resistance is not unique to Iran. As Heyneman (2009) notes, centralized education systems in many countries often resist reform due to entrenched political, religious, and ideological interests.

Lastly, the role of teacher autonomy emerged as a decisive factor. While some educators exercised professional discretion in adapting assessments informally, many felt constrained by fear of non-compliance and institutional backlash. This finding reinforces the call for professional development programs that empower teachers to make pedagogically sound and contextually appropriate assessment decisions. Empowerment, however, must be accompanied by systemic change—modifying policies, rethinking national standards, and embedding sociocultural responsiveness into the very fabric of assessment design.

In sum, the study provides compelling evidence that sociocultural factors are not peripheral but central to assessment design in multilingual education. Culture, language, and policy intersect in ways that profoundly shape students' assessment experiences and outcomes. The findings support and extend previous literature by offering context-specific insights from Tehran and by foregrounding the voices of educators who navigate these challenges daily. It is clear that equitable assessment in multilingual settings requires both micro-level innovation and macro-level reform.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors equally contributed to this study.

### **Declaration of Interest**

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### **Transparency of Data**



In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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