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Dimensions of Cultural Responsiveness in the Assessment Practices of Bilingual Teachers

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the dimensions of cultural responsiveness in the assessment practices of bilingual teachers working in diverse educational settings in Tehran. The study employed a qualitative research design to gain in-depth insights into how bilingual teachers conceptualize and implement culturally responsive assessment. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 26 bilingual teachers selected via purposive sampling. All participants had at least three years of teaching experience in bilingual classrooms. Interviews were conducted in Persian, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo software. The data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Three overarching themes emerged from the data: (1) culturally sensitive assessment design, (2) reflective and responsive teaching practice, and (3) institutional and structural considerations. Participants described strategies such as adapting assessment content and rubrics to reflect cultural backgrounds, using multimodal assessment formats, and avoiding culturally biased language. Teachers also engaged in reflective practices, emphasized student voice, and adapted feedback to align with students' cultural contexts. However, they also reported significant systemic constraints, including standardized testing mandates, limited professional development, and lack of institutional support. Despite these challenges, bilingual teachers demonstrated agency and creativity in implementing assessment practices that honored students' cultural and linguistic diversity. The findings highlight the complex, multidimensional nature of culturally responsive assessment and the critical role of bilingual teachers in navigating and transforming conventional assessment practices. Addressing structural barriers and providing targeted professional development are essential steps toward equitable assessment in multilingual educational contexts.

Keywords: Culturally responsive assessment; bilingual education; teacher practices; qualitative research; formative assessment; equity in education; Iranian schools.

Introduction

In today's increasingly diverse classrooms, culturally responsive assessment has emerged as a critical component of equitable education. As global migration and linguistic pluralism continue to shape student demographics, educators are increasingly tasked with evaluating learners from a range of cultural, linguistic, and socio-political backgrounds (Gay, 2018). For bilingual teachers, this task becomes particularly complex, as they navigate the dual responsibility of addressing language

development and ensuring that assessments reflect the cultural contexts of their students. Despite the growing recognition of cultural responsiveness in pedagogy, research continues to reveal significant gaps in how assessments are conceptualized and implemented in multicultural settings (Lucas & Villegas, 2011). This study aims to investigate the dimensions of cultural responsiveness in the assessment practices of bilingual teachers, emphasizing how these educators make meaning of equitable evaluation in real-world classrooms.

Culturally responsive assessment refers to the alignment of evaluation practices with the cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds of learners (Abedi, 2010). Unlike traditional forms of standardized testing, which often reflect monocultural norms, culturally responsive assessments recognize diversity as an asset rather than a challenge. They involve adapting assessment content, formats, rubrics, and feedback methods to better serve students from various cultural groups (Heritage, 2010). As argued by Ladson-Billings (1995), teaching and assessing in culturally responsive ways is not merely about recognizing difference; it involves using culture as a conduit for learning and success. The act of assessing becomes culturally responsive when it is sensitive to students' values, communication styles, prior knowledge, and socio-cultural realities (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). For bilingual teachers—who frequently operate at the intersection of language instruction and mainstream content—this cultural alignment is both a pedagogical necessity and a moral imperative.

Assessment practices have traditionally privileged dominant cultural norms, often marginalizing students who do not share the cultural capital valued by mainstream education systems (Delpit, 2006). In such systems, bilingual students are often viewed through a deficit lens, where linguistic and cultural differences are interpreted as shortcomings rather than resources (Cummins, 2000). Consequently, assessment tools and standards that fail to account for linguistic diversity may not accurately reflect bilingual learners' knowledge or abilities (Solano-Flores & Nelson-Barber, 2001). This can lead to lower achievement scores, misidentification in special education, and diminished self-efficacy among students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Lopez, 2011). To counter these patterns of inequity, scholars have called for a fundamental shift toward more culturally sustaining assessment models (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Bilingual teachers, particularly those in urban and multilingual regions such as Tehran, play a pivotal role in enacting culturally responsive assessments. These educators are often among the first to notice when assessment practices misalign with student needs, and they frequently engage in informal modifications to make evaluations more accessible. Research has shown that bilingual teachers are more likely than monolingual counterparts to use multimodal assessments, contextualized tasks, and flexible rubrics to account for student diversity (Garcia, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017). Moreover, bilingual educators are often uniquely positioned to recognize the cultural nuances that may influence how students interpret test items, communicate responses, or engage with feedback (Nieto, 2010). However, these teachers also face systemic constraints—including rigid curricula, high-stakes testing environments, and limited professional development opportunities—which restrict their ability to fully implement culturally responsive assessments (Sleeter, 2012).

The theoretical foundation for this study draws on sociocultural theories of learning and assessment, particularly the work of Vygotsky (1978), who emphasized the importance of culture and language in cognitive development. According to this perspective, assessment is not a neutral or technical process; it is embedded within social, cultural, and historical contexts. Assessment practices must therefore be viewed as part of the broader cultural tools that mediate learning (Wertsch, 1991). More recently, theorists such as Moll et al. (1992) have highlighted the value of “funds of knowledge,” arguing that students bring culturally embedded assets from home that should be integrated into classroom instruction and assessment. In this light, culturally responsive assessment can be understood as a way of honoring and incorporating these cultural funds into formal educational practices.

Empirical studies have begun to explore how teachers navigate cultural responsiveness in their assessment practices. For instance, research by Hill and Evers (2016) found that when teachers adopted culturally relevant assessment strategies—such as oral storytelling or community-based projects—students from Indigenous and immigrant backgrounds demonstrated deeper engagement and higher performance. Similarly, Looney (2011) emphasized the importance of dialogic feedback, whereby teachers engage students in conversations about their work, using culturally familiar references to scaffold understanding. Yet, much of this research remains concentrated in Western contexts, particularly North America, with limited focus on non-Western, multilingual environments such as Iran. There is a pressing need for studies that explore the lived experiences of bilingual teachers who are actively engaging in culturally responsive assessment in local, context-specific ways.

In Iran, bilingualism is a widespread but politically sensitive phenomenon, especially in regions where minority languages such as Kurdish, Azeri, and Arabic are spoken alongside Persian. The Iranian education system primarily delivers instruction in Persian, which can place students from non-dominant linguistic communities at a disadvantage (Sheyholislami, 2012). In such contexts, bilingual teachers must negotiate the demands of a monolingual curriculum while addressing the multilingual realities of their students. The complexity of their work often goes unnoticed in official policy discourses, and their assessment practices are rarely studied in-depth. Existing research in Iran has focused more on language acquisition and less on culturally responsive assessment, creating a significant gap in the literature (Riazi, 2005).

This study seeks to address that gap by exploring how bilingual teachers in Tehran conceptualize and enact culturally responsive assessment. Specifically, it investigates the strategies they employ, the challenges they face, and the values that underpin their assessment decisions. Through a qualitative research design grounded in semi-structured interviews, this study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which teachers engage with cultural responsiveness in their assessment practices. By doing so, it contributes to a more global and inclusive understanding of equitable assessment, offering practical insights for teacher education, policy reform, and classroom implementation.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do bilingual teachers in Tehran define and interpret culturally responsive assessment?
2. What strategies do they employ to integrate cultural responsiveness into their assessment practices?
3. What institutional, structural, or pedagogical factors influence their ability to conduct culturally responsive assessments?

By foregrounding the voices of bilingual teachers and focusing on their real-world assessment practices, this study aims to illuminate the cultural dimensions that are often overlooked in conventional assessment discourse. The findings are expected to contribute not only to the academic field of assessment and multicultural education but also to the professional development of teachers working in diverse linguistic and cultural settings.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the dimensions of cultural responsiveness in the assessment practices of bilingual teachers. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual understandings. The study focused on bilingual teachers working in diverse educational settings across Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives, particularly individuals actively engaged in bilingual teaching and familiar with culturally responsive assessment practices.

A total of 26 bilingual teachers (13 females and 13 males) from primary and secondary school levels participated in the study. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least three years of teaching experience in bilingual classrooms and be involved in assessment design or implementation. Participation continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new themes or insights emerged from the data, indicating that the data collection was sufficient to answer the research questions.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both guided and open-ended exploration of the participants' perspectives on culturally responsive assessment. The interview protocol included questions related to teachers' understanding of cultural responsiveness, the role of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds in assessment, and the challenges and strategies used in practice. Interviews were conducted in Persian and audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviews took place in educational institutions and, when necessary, via secure online platforms due to participants' availability.

Data analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. This process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo software was employed to facilitate systematic coding, theme development, and data organization. Codes were derived inductively from the data, ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' narratives rather than predetermined categories. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, peer debriefing and member checking were utilized. Additionally, audit trails and reflective memos were maintained throughout the research process.

Findings and Results

1. Culturally Sensitive Assessment Design

Recognition of Cultural Backgrounds emerged as a foundational practice among participants. Teachers consistently highlighted the importance of acknowledging students' cultural identities in assessment. For instance, assessments often incorporated heritage-based examples or questions relevant to students' linguistic backgrounds. One participant noted, "If I don't know where my student comes from culturally, I can't really assess them fairly." Another added, "Sometimes I change the names in the questions to ones they know — it helps them connect better."

Adaptation of Rubrics was another key strategy used to reflect diverse student profiles. Participants described modifying scoring rubrics to include flexible criteria and reduce cultural bias. Some included student input in rubric design. "We need rubrics that are open enough to value different ways of expressing understanding," one teacher explained. Another stated, "I ask students what success looks like to them and then we build on that."

Inclusion of Localized Content was identified as essential for cultural resonance. Teachers shared how they integrated region-specific examples, local idioms, and familiar scenarios into assessment tasks. A participant said, "When I use examples from their neighborhoods or things they talk about at home, their answers improve dramatically."

Use of Multiple Modalities was a common practice aimed at supporting diverse expression. Participants frequently employed oral presentations, visual tools, and project-based evaluations. One bilingual teacher shared, "Some students just cannot write what they know in Persian or English, but they can draw it or say it beautifully."

Avoidance of Cultural Bias was a conscious effort reported by many. Teachers emphasized reviewing assessment items for neutrality and fairness. “I always double-check that I’m not using words or situations that assume one culture is ‘normal,’” one participant explained. Others mentioned revising test questions that seemed “too Western” or “not meaningful” to their students.

Language Accessibility was a practical concern. Teachers simplified language and avoided jargon to ensure understanding. “I always think, if I were learning in my second language, would I understand this?” a participant asked. Several mentioned allowing students to use their first language where appropriate.

Assessment Format Flexibility was another adaptive approach. Teachers reported using oral exams, portfolio assessments, and performance-based tasks in lieu of or alongside written exams. “Not everything has to be a written test. Some of my students do best when they can show what they know,” shared a participant.

2. Reflective and Responsive Teaching Practice

Teacher Self-Awareness was emphasized as critical in practicing cultural responsiveness. Participants reported engaging in self-reflection regarding their biases and evolving cultural competence. One teacher remarked, “I had to unlearn some of the assumptions I made — especially about what a ‘good student’ looks like.”

Student Voice in Assessment was frequently cited. Teachers described offering students choices in how they demonstrate knowledge and involving them in defining success criteria. As one teacher put it, “When students help shape the task, they care more. They feel respected.”

Dynamic Feedback Practices involved giving culturally relevant, strength-based feedback. Teachers tailored feedback to students’ communication styles and backgrounds. “I don’t just write ‘good job,’ I say, ‘Your idea reminds me of something I read from your culture — it’s powerful,’” one participant shared.

Contextual Decision-Making referred to modifying assessment plans in response to classroom dynamics or student needs. Many teachers described flexibility in timing, task difficulty, and format. “Sometimes I realize halfway through the unit that this group needs a different approach — and that’s okay,” explained a participant.

Emotional and Relational Responsiveness played a significant role in assessment experiences. Trust-building and relational closeness were seen as prerequisites for honest student engagement. One participant explained, “My students open up more when they feel safe. That affects how they perform on assessments.”

3. Institutional and Structural Considerations

Policy Constraints were frequently described as limiting culturally responsive practices. Teachers expressed frustration with rigid standardized tests and uniform grading policies. “I want to adapt the assessments, but the system says I can’t — it’s discouraging,” stated one teacher.

Professional Development Gaps were cited by many participants. Teachers noted a lack of practical training on culturally responsive assessment. “We get theory, but no real tools. I had to figure it out myself,” one teacher admitted.

Peer and Administrative Support influenced implementation. Teachers emphasized the need for collaborative environments and supportive leadership. One participant shared, “When my principal encouraged cultural projects, it gave me the freedom to assess differently.”

Resource Limitations presented a significant barrier. Teachers cited lack of access to multilingual materials, culturally diverse content, and preparation time. “We don’t have the books or tools to design inclusive assessments,” one teacher explained.

Equity-Oriented School Culture emerged as a critical enabler. Schools that promoted inclusion through events, policies, and shared values supported teachers in applying culturally responsive assessment. As one participant put it, “When the whole school believes in inclusion, assessment becomes a part of that vision.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a multidimensional understanding of culturally responsive assessment among bilingual teachers in Tehran. Three overarching themes were identified: (1) culturally sensitive assessment design, (2) reflective and responsive teaching practice, and (3) institutional and structural considerations. Each theme includes nuanced subdimensions that collectively illustrate how bilingual teachers interpret, adapt, and implement assessment practices that respect and respond to the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students.

The first major theme—**culturally sensitive assessment design**—highlighted teachers’ deliberate efforts to modify assessment content, format, and language to align with students’ cultural backgrounds. The inclusion of localized content, adaptation of rubrics, and use of multimodal assessment formats demonstrate a practical application of the culturally responsive assessment framework articulated by Gay (2018), which emphasizes instructional alignment with students’ lived experiences. Participants described adjusting scenarios, using familiar names and examples, and reducing cultural bias through language modification—practices that support findings by Solano-Flores and Nelson-Barber (2001), who argued that cultural incongruence in test design leads to misrepresentation of student ability.

Additionally, the use of multiple modalities in assessment—including oral presentations, visuals, and projects—echoes what Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) describe as “performance-based assessments” that provide more authentic and inclusive measures of learning for diverse learners. These methods are particularly important in bilingual contexts, where written language proficiency may not fully reflect conceptual understanding. The study findings align with Garcia, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017), who noted that multilingual students often excel when given alternative formats that allow for translanguaging and multimodal expression.

Another key finding concerned teachers’ **reflective and responsive teaching practices**, which extended the concept of assessment beyond a technical task to a relational and ethical act. Teachers described practices of self-reflection, student-centered decision-making, and feedback that is personalized and culturally affirming. This is consistent with the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), who emphasized that culturally relevant pedagogy includes teachers’ awareness of their own cultural positioning and their commitment to social justice. Participants in this study described how reflecting on their biases and inviting student voice into the assessment process allowed for more equitable evaluation.

The use of dynamic feedback, as reported by participants, supports the theoretical perspectives of Vygotsky (1978) and Looney (2011), both of whom stress the formative nature of feedback in promoting learning. Bilingual teachers in this study emphasized the emotional tone and cultural framing of feedback, an approach that reinforces students’ identities and motivates deeper engagement. These findings also support Hill and Evers’ (2016) emphasis on the relational dimension of assessment, particularly in classrooms where power dynamics and cultural differences can shape student-teacher interactions.

The theme of **institutional and structural considerations** sheds light on the systemic constraints that inhibit culturally responsive assessment. Teachers consistently reported policy limitations, lack of appropriate resources, and insufficient professional development opportunities. These findings align with Sleeter’s (2012) assertion that culturally responsive practices are often undermined by institutional inertia and standardized accountability measures. Participants in this study described feeling torn between their knowledge of what is best for their students and the demands of high-stakes testing systems—a tension well-documented in the work of Abedi (2010) and Lucas and Villegas (2011).

Moreover, teachers expressed a desire for greater collaboration with peers and administrative support, echoing the calls by Nieto (2010) and Castagno and Brayboy (2008) for school-wide cultures of equity that transcend individual classrooms. While some participants reported working in schools that promoted inclusive values and supported culturally responsive innovation,

others described isolation and a lack of institutional vision. This variation underscores the importance of systemic alignment in fostering assessment equity, as emphasized by Heritage (2010) in her work on formative assessment infrastructure.

An important contextual insight from this study is the role of bilingual teachers in multilingual societies where dominant language ideologies persist. In Iran, the official use of Persian in schools often marginalizes minority language speakers, creating added complexity for assessment (Sheyholislami, 2012). Teachers in this study navigated this reality by using first-language supports, adjusting language complexity, and advocating for assessment practices that recognize students' full linguistic repertoires. These strategies are consistent with Cummins' (2000) interdependence hypothesis, which posits that bilingual students' academic success is enhanced when both languages are supported.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the global literature by offering localized insights from a non-Western educational context. Much of the research on culturally responsive assessment has emerged from North American or Australian contexts (Paris & Alim, 2017; Hill & Evers, 2016), leaving a gap in understanding how these principles are interpreted and enacted in other sociopolitical environments. By focusing on Tehran, this study illuminates how teachers creatively adapt global frameworks to fit their unique institutional and cultural conditions. For example, the dual emphasis on cultural adaptation and system navigation reflects a hybrid pedagogy that balances responsiveness with pragmatism.

Taken together, the findings of this study illustrate that culturally responsive assessment is not a fixed set of strategies, but a dynamic and context-sensitive process. Teachers must constantly negotiate between ideal pedagogical principles and the real constraints of their work environments. The dimensions revealed in this study—ranging from rubric adaptation to relational feedback—demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of equity in assessment, one that moves beyond mere accommodation toward transformation.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample was limited to 26 bilingual teachers from Tehran, which may affect the transferability of findings to other regions in Iran or globally. While Tehran represents a linguistically diverse metropolis, rural or monolingual regions may present different assessment challenges and opportunities. Second, the study relied solely on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Participants may have described practices they aspire to implement rather than what consistently occurs in their classrooms. Finally, this study did not include classroom observations or student perspectives, which could provide a more holistic view of culturally responsive assessment in action.

Future studies should consider expanding the participant pool to include teachers from a variety of geographic and cultural contexts across Iran and other multilingual societies. Comparative studies between urban and rural settings, or among different language groups, could uncover additional nuances in assessment practices. Moreover, mixed-method designs that incorporate classroom observations, student interviews, and artifact analysis (e.g., student work samples or assessment tools) would offer richer triangulation and validation of findings. Longitudinal research tracking how culturally responsive assessment practices evolve over time—particularly in response to policy changes or professional development—would also be valuable. Finally, future studies should explore how cultural responsiveness in assessment influences measurable student outcomes, such as engagement, achievement, or self-efficacy.

To support the implementation of culturally responsive assessment, several practical steps are recommended. First, teacher education programs should include modules specifically focused on equitable and culturally sustaining assessment practices. These should include both theoretical grounding and practical tools such as rubric adaptation strategies, inclusive test design, and dialogic feedback techniques. Second, school leaders should create institutional cultures that value diversity in assessment by providing time, resources, and professional learning communities for collaborative reflection and innovation. Finally, assessment policies at district and national levels should incorporate flexibility that allows educators to adapt assessments based

on student context while maintaining standards of validity and reliability. Such systemic support will empower teachers to bridge the gap between policy expectations and the needs of diverse learners.

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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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