

Past, Present, and Future of Language Assessment: An Interview with Dr. Hossein Farhady¹

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Abstract

This paper endeavors to illustrate the past, present, and future of language testing and assessment in applied linguistics through an interview with Associate Professor Dr. Hossein Farhady, who has been working on assessment and language testing both inside and outside Iran more than forty years. In this interview paper, Farhady replied to inquiries regarding language assessment and its effect on teaching, the challenges he had faced in assessment in Iran, his attitude towards online assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the future of language assessment in English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) circles. In the end, he provided some pedagogical suggestions for EFL/ESL teachers and researchers about language assessment.

Resumen

Este artículo busca ilustrar el pasado, el presente y el futuro de las pruebas y evaluaciones de idiomas en lingüística aplicada a través de una entrevista con el profesor Dr. Hossein Farhady, quien ha investigado evaluaciones y pruebas de idiomas tanto dentro y fuera de Irán durante más de cuarenta años. En esta entrevista, Farhady respondió a preguntas sobre la evaluación del idioma y su efecto en la enseñanza, los desafíos que enfrentó en la evaluación en Irán, su actitud hacia la evaluación en línea durante la pandemia de COVID-19 y el futuro de la evaluación del idioma en los ambientes de inglés como idioma extranjero (EFL) e inglés como segundo idioma (ESL). Al final, brindó algunas sugerencias pedagógicas para profesores e investigadores de EFL/ESL sobre la evaluación del idioma.

An Overview of Farhady's Contribution to the Applied Linguistics Community

Professor Hossein Farhady is an outstanding English Language Teaching (ELT) scholar in the field of applied linguistics, in general, and aspects of language testing and assessment, in particular with the English as a Foreign Language (EFL)



Photo provided by Dr. Farhady

and English as a Second Language (ESL). He has been teaching various courses on language testing and assessment, research methods, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at MA and Ph.D. programs for the last four decades in Iran, the USA, Canada, Armenia, and Turkey. He has also been a prolific writer, publishing papers and books in prestigious international journals and publishing houses and presented numerous speeches and papers at national and international seminars and conferences. Moreover, he has supervised more than 80 MA theses and Ph.D. dissertations. His widely used book about research methodology for applied linguistics commonly known as "Hatch and Farhady" (1982) has served as the basic textbook at both undergraduate and graduate levels since the early 1980s. He has, additionally, been a curriculum developer and test developer in Iran and other parts of the world. He worked as a senior scholar and project manager for several organizations such as Ordinate and Lidget Green Corporations in California, Avant Assessment, and Second Language Testing, INC., in Rockville, Maryland. He has also received research grants and awards from organizations such as Pearson,

Educational Testing Service (ETS), and International Language Testing Association (ILTA) in scoring and validating language tests. Currently, he is a faculty member at the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department at Yeditepe University in Istanbul, Turkey.

Introduction

This paper has three major purposes: to shed light on the past and present situation of foreign language testing and assessment in the ELT context of Iran and the rest of the world considering the major trends; to characterize the possible future of the field; and last but not least, to explore the possible solutions and suggestions for overcoming the current problems faced in the field. The current condition of the world hopefully recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic has made educators understand that there is still a lot to be done in the field of language assessment, especially with the new problems created by assessment at a distance.

¹ Received: 22 January, 2022. Accepted: 11 March, 2022. Published: 16 December, 2022.

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Historically three major historical trends are identified in the history of language testing and assessment (Spolsky, 1978): the pre-scientific or the beginning of the industrialization and centralization of language testing (the 1950s), the psychometric-structuralist era (1950s to 1960s), and the integrative-sociolinguistic era (beginning in the 1960s). Each of these three trends had characteristics closely related to and influenced by their contemporary theories of language, language teaching, and language learning. However, despite the changes that have occurred in the field, there are still a lot of complications concerning the what and how of language assessment. Therefore, to highlight the major issues and concerns, we organized this interview via *Skype* with an expert in the field to find out to what extent these Covid-induced concerns were serious, in order to understand if research into various areas of language assessment related to social needs could be a useful road to follow.

The Interview

Mohammad Kazemian (M. K.): How does language assessment have a direct effect on teaching?

Hossein Farhady (H. F.): This is a very interesting question because many scholars believe that there is a one-to-one direct correspondence between assessment and teaching. Some scholars, including myself, believe that testing and teaching are two sides of the same coin. We cannot separate them, but the direct effect of language assessment on teaching has been changing over time. For instance, when we were in the time of discrete point multiple-choice or information-seeking question types like the ones in midterms and finals in those days, language assessment might have had a direct effect -sometimes a negative effect- on teaching; that is, what we call washback effect, negative washback, or positive washback; however, a long time ago we did not have language assessment and there was language testing instead.

Language testing had a very negative washback on teaching because tests were the sources of decision making and people were trying to train students who could receive high scores on tests. Therefore, they were usually taught to the test; that is what we call in the literature a "test-driven curriculum". It means that even the curriculum is based on how to prepare students or learners to boost their scores. We had coaching classes and prep classes which were not very popular in Iran, but if you consider other countries, perhaps millions of people are attending prep classes because the competition is very high. Nevertheless, with the changes in the philosophy and epistemology of teaching, assessment moved into the classroom and was no longer an external kind of criterion. Nowadays, most of the focus is on classroom teaching and continuous ongoing assessment of learners' performance and therefore it is not limited to only one midterm or final exam.

Students receive assessment tasks that are learning tasks as well. This is what I called -in one of my presentations- integrated teaching. It means teaching, learning, and assessment are integrated. In this sense, we cannot say assessment has a direct effect on teaching because they are interwoven. On the other hand, teaching, learning, and assessment form an integrated conceptualization of education; that is what is known in the field as learning-oriented assessment. Even though scholars discuss it a lot, I have not seen many teachers do it in their classes. Thus, in the olden days, language testing had a strong effect on teaching, and sometimes an unpleasant effect, but now it has changed. Nowadays, assessment and teaching have become so interwoven and integrated that we cannot tell which one influences which. They have continuous interaction right from the beginning of instruction until the end. One more thing I would like to add is that we need to exclude normative tests like proficiency tests, admission tests, and university entrance examination tests. These tests are different from the classroom assessment; classroom teaching seems not to follow the rules of normative tests, because *normative tests are comparison-based, but learning-oriented assessment is criterion-referenced.*

Fatemeh Khonamri (F. K.): What challenges have you faced in the field of language assessment?

H.F.: That is amazing if you call it a challenge. From the very beginning when I started my service in Iran, I faced challenge after challenge. One type of challenge was the outdatedness of the system in Iran. Currently, you do have some experts talking about testing, but forty or fifty years ago we did not have even one! The only source of reference was Harris' (1961) book; which even now is being used as an anti-textbook; we are giving it to students for a different purpose: to show them that a lot of ideas

and theories of the past are not acceptable today. We tell them that whatever Lado (1961) and Harris (1961) say does not hold now. That was a Bible in Iran and all MA questions and all undergraduate classes were based on Harris and everything was about Harris which essentially belonged to thirty years back then. That was one challenge to talk to authorities, colleagues, and graduate students to convince them that we needed to change the situation. Thus, the first challenge was changing their mindset about testing.

The second challenge was the students. They were used to lecture-type classes, and probably they still are, where they were very passive. Most students would pick up a pen and a piece of paper to take notes from the lecture without paying much attention to what the concept was and what the discussion was about. Students were like tape recorders recording everything and, in many cases, when they went home, they would not make sense of the disconnected notes they had taken. Yes, this was the second challenge that I had; what I did was ask students to put down their pens and papers and stop taking notes! I told them: "Listen to me! I can give you the information you need. I can give you better notes and better sources." It took a good amount of time and effort to convince them that their notes were incomplete and confusing and that they had better listen more attentively to the discussion and arguments in class. Now students who are taking a course with me know that they would be facing a different style that involves hard work and numerous assignments. They need to contribute to the success of the class, and the process of teaching and learning. I was successful in meeting these two challenges, though. I am delighted to see that nearly all my former students are good professors now. They are distinct in terms of assessment and research because they worked very hard for these courses. Moreover, I am happy to say that their mentalities, attitudes, and conceptualizations have changed to be willing to accommodate new developments.

However, the third challenge that was very important and I could not do much about was our testing system in Iran. It started with the Ministry of Higher Education and came down to the Ministry of Education. I have held more than one hundred workshops for the teachers of the Ministry of Education and I gave many lectures whenever I found motivated individuals who were eager to learn to make a change but sadly, I think I did not succeed. I wrote papers and criticized the latest MA Entrance Examination test. I voiced my concerns to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. I mentioned that this system was destined to fail, but unfortunately, I did not succeed. It is still unacceptable because tests are not reliable and valid, so the decisions we make based on these tests are not fair. Individuals' lives depend on one point that could be wasted simply because of an error of the test, etc.

These were the challenges I had in Iran and to answer this question thoroughly, I have to confess that I was forced to have two different lives. One academic life coped with Iran and another one coped outside of Iran like the U.S. and other countries to keep me alive in the field. If you did research that was good for Iran, it would not be good abroad. If you wanted to do research overseas, it would not serve our purpose back home in Iran. It was a very confusing state of affairs! I wanted to be as much in the field as I was before going back to Iran and to keep abreast, I had to do research and publish. People would ask "what is it good for? It is not going to be good for our education system" and they were right! Then, I had to go back and carry out elementary research for it to be acceptable to the community of Iran. That was very tough but I tried and I managed it because I am still writing and publishing. I could not detach myself from my real academic identity, but I also had a - pseudo-academic identity in Iran coping with the problems.

M.K.: What is your idea about online assessment and to what extent has it been successful during the pandemic? As you know one of the problematic features of an online language test is students' cheating, how can we solve this major problem?

H.F.: In the last one and a half year, we all have been in very unpleasant situations. In this part of the world where I am right now Turkey, in Iran, in Arab countries, and southeast Asian countries. In online education, one of the major concerns that almost all teachers have is how to control academic ethics (cheating). They claim that students cheat, students do this, students do that... What some of the teachers have done in response, unfortunately, was to alter the exam questions or change the type of interactions that they had with the students; and sometimes they tried to give the students very

difficult questions. Some of the teachers say, "they are going to cheat, so, let them cheat on something difficult"; but I thought it was not necessary.

Cheating is a phenomenon that comes from the students' fear and lack of understanding. Their fear is fear of failing and their lack of understanding is because they are not taught about the purpose of tests or assessment. Now, I have the same problem, but I asked my students: How many of you have ever thought of anything but getting high scores when taking a test? I surveyed it and they all unanimously said that they just wanted to boost their grades, and wanted to get more no matter what and how. I told them to focus on this statement instead: "say I want to take this test to check and see how much I learned". This is a total change in attitude. I said I am not going to give you any grades. Therefore, do not worry about grades. This is no grade assignment. Just do this test or this quiz to see how much of the materials covered in the class you have learned. Now, when they understand the main purpose of the assessment, they do not cheat because first of all that quiz is not going to define their life.

When you have multiple occasions of multiple tasks through the course, two or three of the students may ask for help, some others may browse the Internet and I love this to happen because that is one way to learn. When you say, "Ok, find the answer to this question", they would have to go to the Internet and search for the alternatives and there is no single answer. There are many answers, and they have to read all the answers available and this reading is the hidden agenda of learning. As they read to answer the questions, they learn a lot more than even in class. This is what we call right now 'beyond the classroom learning. In class, they cannot learn for much more than forty-five minutes even if you keep talking for ninety minutes. We have been doing this all the time and we see the results are not good because we do not engage students in learning; we do not involve students in the learning process. Sometimes, they do not know even why they are doing it. They just obey and conform. "I have to read these books and I have to memorize them and give them back" this is what they probably tell themselves. As a result, I think cheating is a serious problem because students do not understand why they cheat, why they should cheat, and why they should not be cheating. Additionally, our teachers are not well-educated in terms of direct instruction through the course. I have fourteen weeks of a semester and my students may receive twenty-five assessments. Each has half a point and half a point is nothing, but that half a point makes them learn five points. All in all, I believe cheating is a problem, but it can be resolved if there is trust developed between the teachers and the students.

In fact, at the undergraduate level, it is a bit more difficult to control students not to cheat! Students are not well-educated, but as you give them reasons for why they should not cheat, if they understand, I am sure it will diminish. In my own experience, cheating is almost non-existent. Even if you have police for everyone at home, some people will go around it, but not many, and I would not sacrifice the whole class for two people. Cheating is a phenomenon everywhere in the world; it is not specific to our community, but the way to deal with it is important. If you do a police and thief game, you are not going to succeed. Because they are always smarter than you are. The next generation is smarter than this generation and it is going to go on and on. However, if it is academically and trustfully solved between teachers and students, it will be minimized.

F.K.: Our next question is related to the future of language assessment. We would like to see where you see the future of language assessment and what shifts or changes have you seen in the field throughout the years.

H.F.: Language testing and assessment seem to have been one of the fastest, most dynamic, evolving, and changing fields, because language testing or assessment is rooted in education, and education moves and improves very fast. Indeed, when education changes, then the definitions of teaching and learning change as well.

Once upon a time, learning meant memorizing language chunks, then it changed into understanding meaning, and then again it changed to the ability to use the language and these changes go on in the field of education, teaching, and learning; as a result, such changes all happen in testing too. Fifty years ago, when the translation method was popular, tests were translations based too. My English

test in my last year at high school consisted of four or five sentences to translate from English to Farsi and vice versa. Then, the multiple-choice test emerged, and we pushed the field into using them. In Iran, it especially became popular because it was practical and easy to administer and score. The world got into multiple-choice discrete point tests coming from positivist philosophy, audio-lingual teaching, and behavioristic learning and it was dominant for probably half a century, and it still is in many places around the world. Major exams are all in multiple-choice from discrete point systems. Then, the cognitive approach appeared and rejected the idea that language was a combination of elements of discrete points. Proponents of this approach believed that language is a holistic phenomenon and that it served a communicative function. Next, they started some kinds of holistic tests like cloze and dictation. After that, we had communicative tests like functional tests and we have currently task-based tests, etc. I have observed these movements in the last four decades.

In the last twenty years probably beginning in 2000, the world has been pushing assessment into the classroom and the latest one right now is varieties of learning-oriented assessments. There have been a lot of changes. This is the applied linguistics side of change because testing has another root in psychometrics and measurement. There have been a lot of changes in this realm, too; from simple addition, subtraction, item analysis, item facility, and item difficulty, we moved into modern theories of dealing with data like generalizability theory; and then we moved into item response theory, and right now we are in the realm of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) which mixes factor analysis and regression analysis. That is, we are getting more and more sophisticated in statistical analyses as well. Thus, changes in the definition of what language and learning are, along with changes in psychometrics principles, inform us about how to measure ability. Some other factors such as environment, condition, proctors' behavior, etc. are not directly related to language ability but they influence one's performance.

As I mentioned earlier, I have observed many changes in the last fifty years both in the conceptualization of what language ability is to measure, how to make sense out of the data. However, it keeps growing since almost every single day we come up with something new, something more sophisticated which may be more effective. We are now in a much better position than we were in the past fifty years. We understand much more now than we did in those days, but it is still just the tip of the iceberg! We have a long way to go to learn and improve to understand the nature of learning and assessment.

M.K.: What suggestions would you give teachers/researchers about language assessment?

H.F.: I have given teachers/researchers and assessment scholars directions and guidelines for the last forty-five years in Iran and other parts of the world. However, right now I believe in what I once mentioned in one of my talks, that after all these years, I have come to a very solid conclusion that teachers are the brains and the hearts of education. Unfortunately, we have had the least investment in our teachers; many countries around the world have done the same thing. Teachers are underpaid and overworked and they have lost their social recognition. Some of the teachers I know are working in two or three different places to make the ends meet and my commitment right now is to give them as much as I can.

Another issue is related to teachers' professional development. Teacher education in the form of ongoing in-service training should be meaningful for them! I have been in these training courses many times and more than fifty-sixty percent of teachers coming to these courses honestly state that they do not participate in these training to learn but they insist that they want to get credit for promotions at their workplace. This is a very unfortunate case with an instrumental mentality on the side of teachers. I am not blaming the teachers. I have been a teacher for years and have been undervalued and underpaid all of my life. That is one side of the story, but the other side is that your students are innocent and should not be caught in the crossfire. They don't know how much you get and they do not know how you are coping with your life. You are a role model for them. Therefore, my recommendation right now, before anything, is to get to the teachers and make them proficient in the language. That is, to improve the content knowledge that would help them to learn and update themselves on pedagogical content knowledge.

In our field, pedagogical content knowledge comes from applied linguistics that includes: Methodology, Linguistics, Testing, Second Language Acquisition, socio-psycholinguistics, and other related fields. They should have a minimum required command of these areas. They also should be given security to be able to feel safe to use their experiences in class (i.e., their experiential knowledge). If things are going to work out best, they cannot be realized in a top-down way. With top to bottom orders, which is the case in many places, the field will not move in the right direction because the person or group at the top is not well informed about the significance of the issue. They have not seen and experienced it. Therefore, my suggestion for countries and educational systems is to pay attention to teachers, to provide them with as much as possible. If we successfully manage to train a good teacher, this good teacher can change a bad textbook to a good one, or motivate students for more learning. On the contrary, a bad teacher would ruin a motivated student and even a good textbook!

My second suggestion is for researchers and the community. I think if you go to our libraries right now, you will find a large number of MA theses and Ph.D. dissertations and I am confident some of them are good pieces of work, but even the findings of the best ones are not used in a real-life context. It means that an MA thesis is written to be kept in the library. Thus, my suggestion to the researcher is very simple. When you are starting a research project, whether it is a paper, an MA thesis, a Ph.D. dissertation, or a grant project, the very first question we need to ask a researcher is the "so what" question.

We have been doing a lot of research (let's not talk about the quality of publications); we are publishing a lot. However, the applications of the findings are missing in Iran. This means that not many people pay attention to the findings, applications, and implications of the research. Not many decisions are research-based. Ministers come and go and expect certain things to be done for which they have no sound justifications. One minister comes and expects a certain change to happen without having any expert knowledge about it. For instance, once English was eliminated from junior high school in Iran for no good reason and when they decided to open it up, they reduced it to three or four hours a week. We have seen many changes in BA, MA, and Ph.D. programs, but not many of them have been based on research findings. What has been done is mostly based on intuition!

I have served on many committees for curriculum planning, materials development, and assessment for years. We did not make decisions based on research findings back then. This does not mean, by any means, that the committee members were not aware of the significance of research or they did not have enough knowledge or skills about doing research. They were distinguished scholars, but any time we suggested research, we had to insist on it and convince people to accept it but oftentimes without any positive response.

My suggestion to researchers is to carry out research that is relevant to the immediate needs of the community. Teachers need to do research even for their classroom but I have not seen many teachers doing classroom research. Researchers must ask the "so what?" question considering the context they are working in. If we create an interactive platform where researchers share their findings with teachers and teachers report the result of applying the findings of the researchers, they could solve some of the problems related to language teaching and assessment. The reason is that if our teachers are informed about the research findings in testing and assessment, for example, if they share their findings that one particular system of testing works better than the other one, then, our teachers would do a much better job. Researchers in turn would get feedback from the teachers about their results in the classroom and this beautiful cycle of research application refining and modification will work wonders. This is my suggestion to all countries, not just the Iranian community. We need to have competent, motivated, safe, and secure teachers and researchers if we want to cope with the developments in the world and face the challenges.

F. K.: Any final comments?

H. F.: One of the concerns I always had in working in Iran was top-down management [authorities and policy makers]. Right now, most of the issues are addressed using a bottom-up approach. If you want to do something about students, why don't we ask the students? If we want to do something about teachers, why don't we ask the teachers? It is true for university instructors as well. I think most of our educators

from Elementary to University, except for a few, are not abreast of the latest developments in the field. They are living in the years of their graduate studies. It is a rumor that many syllabuses are similar in content to those of many years ago. The same is true about materials that have not changed very much either. I believe the central idea is that we should move towards doing planning based on bottom-up research in our education system and consider all stakeholders like students, teachers, the community, and parents.

We never count parents! I can remember in Iran we would tell parents: "Please do not help your kids because you are going to give them wrong pronunciations." However, now the idea is that parents should work along with their kids because they are more patient and concerned than anyone else in teaching their children. Therefore, a part of teaching should move beyond classroom learning and classroom teachers. Students should understand that learning is not limited to classes. It should go beyond the class and teachers should be able to put them in the context of learning outside the class. This may sound quite unlikely to happen but I dream that things would happen using bottom-up approaches. That is, we start with students and involve them in the teaching/ learning process. Some people may think high school or undergraduate students do not understand what teaching, learning, and assessment are, but I am confident that they do. They understand many things and in some cases better than we do! I think we should give them character and give credence to their thoughts.

Even in testing right now I am sharing with my students all class materials, criteria for success, rubrics, and instructions for performing and assessing the assignments. The idea is not to have my students write a test for me, but rather let them learn about learning by engaging in class management. I mean that if they are asked to write a test, the very first requirement of writing a test is that they have to go to and read the required materials which is the concern of all of us to have students prepare for each session in advance.

We always complain that our students go to class without reading the material. We push the students to read, but this is not the appropriate way. They accomplish it, we need to follow the bottom-up approach. We need to trust our students and involve them in the process of instruction and direct them towards how to perform the given tasks and keep monitoring them, which is not very common again. Even for teachers, everything finishes when they go out of their class. Teachers need to stay reflecting on their classroom and try to problematize their teaching. This is how real learning takes place for both parties.

Thus, to put it briefly, to change our education for the better, the government, the ministry, the districts, the universities, the high schools, and the elementary schools, all need education because they are not educated in the true sense of the word. Many people are heads of testing departments without having the expertise. What I would like somehow to see happen, something before I leave this world, is that we are moving towards giving everybody their fair share in education beginning with the students and moving up to the government and I hope it will happen soon.

F. K.: and M. K.: We completely agree with you Dr. Farhady and we hope that this dream of yours will come true soon. Thank you very much indeed for your time.

Conclusion

In this interview article, we discussed the past, present, and future of language assessment with Dr. Hossein Farhady who is an associate professor of Applied Linguistics at Yeditepe University in Istanbul, Turkey. Our discussion was based on some questions focusing on several issues. The first was to understand the extent to which language assessment had a direct effect on language teaching. The conclusion drawn was that assessment and teaching were integrated and that today, unlike in the past, it seems that integrative teaching tends to be more effective. The fact of the matter is that these two fields will continue to affect each other.

The second concern was related to the challenges that Farhady had gone through as a university professor. He pointed out that he had faced many types of challenges in his assessment from the onset of his service in Iran. The challenges ranged from obsolete testing references and lack of testing and assessment experts, to students and the types of teaching methods, and the testing system in the country. Even though he was quite successful in changing students' mindsets and revising language testing and assessment references

as well as training good teachers and professors, he could not change the testing system in his home country, Iran.

Next, we addressed the issue of online learning and the problem of cheating. Farhady thought that the reaction shown to online assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic and its repercussions were not quite agreeable. He stated that most teachers in Asian and Arab countries had incorrectly changed their final exam questions to be extremely difficult to prevent students from cheating, but to no avail. He also added that cheating was a phenomenon found almost everywhere and that it was due to a lack of knowledge and understanding. When students are told about the philosophy of learning and are assessed via multiple assessment techniques, cheating will significantly diminish.

Concerning the future of language assessment in the EFL and ESL contexts, he pointed out that testing and assessment have been one of the most dynamic fields of applied linguistics, and we are in a better position than we were fifty years ago. Every day, we witness something new, more advanced, and more efficient. By the same token, language testing and assessment will continue to follow the shifting sands in language learning and language teaching.

And finally, he provided some suggestions to teachers and researchers. Farhady believes that teachers are the brains and hearts of education. To prosper in education, teachers must feel secure and safe both financially and psychologically. They need to receive ample and genuine training, too. Language testing and assessment are heavily based on language teaching and teacher education. When the problems of teacher education are solved, testing and assessment will find their way and their problems will be solved to a great extent.

Acknowledgments

We wish to express our special thanks to Professor Hossein Farhady for accepting our invitation to this friendly and academic conversation.

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