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Student Perceptions of Assessment Practices: Insights from Test-Taking Narratives

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Abstract

Testing has traditionally been a critical component of educational programmes. While there is a considerable amount of research on various dimensions of assessment, only a limited number of studies have explored learners' perceptions of assessment practices, to date. Accordingly, this qualitative study is an attempt to examine a group of undergraduate university students' perceptions of their past assessment practices. To this end, 30 Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) students who had just taken a course on Language Assessment were asked to compose narratives (of at least 2000 words) about their assessment experiences. The collected data were then analyzed thematically, and the results indicated that students mostly held negative feelings toward their previous language assessment practices. Moreover, most of the students did not assign any significance to assessment, considering it redundant. The study found that instilling more positive views toward assessment is required to improve self-regulatory learning and therefore better learning outcomes in students.

Keywords: EFL Learner, Language Assessment, Test-Taker Perception, Test-Taking Experience, Test-Taking Narrative.

I | INTRODUCTION

Assessment is an indispensable part of instructional programs as it directly influences learners' learning processes and outcomes (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Language assessments have been looked down on by both learners and other stakeholders. For example, Nimehchisalem and Mat Hussin (2018) assert that assessment just brings the idea of scores, tests, fear, punishment, and competition into mind in a low-quality educational system. However, as Brown and Abeywickrama (2019) rightly emphasize, "tests need not be degrading, artificial, anxiety-provoking experiences" (p. 2) but can instead be turned into assessment procedures that are authentic and intrinsically motivating. Indeed, one strong justification for the need to include tests and other formal assessment procedures in educational programs is 'fairness', according to Douglas (2010), who argues that tests not only offer students similar assessment conditions but also give teachers a 'second opinion' to help them confirm their own informal evaluations of learner proficiency and progress.



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A test can be applied with different purposes in mind. This measurement tool can be utilized during the course to check student progress and to find out what has or has not been learned and to inform parents or other stakeholders of student progress. Used this way, tests are instances of assessment done *for* learning (formative assessment), whereas tests are also used at the end of the course to understand if the learning objectives have been achieved, in which case they subscribe to the notion of assessment *of* learning (summative assessment) (Sadeghi & Rahmati, 2017). Whatever the purpose, tests and testing play a vital role in the learning process.

Brown, et al. (2014) consider assessment a central part of effective instruction, believing that assessment motivates students to adapt their way of learning and thinking to the newly acquired knowledge and that creating a positive experience of assessment is essential for better learning outcomes. Similarly, Brown, et al. (2014) highlight that learning outcomes will be improved if learners understand testing, which will, in turn, help them to respond to assessments in a self-regulating manner (controlling and managing thoughts and emotions to achieve positive results). Self-regulated learning (SRL), which includes cognitive, motivational, affective, and contextual factors, is a characterization of information processing and has been reported to lead to learning success (Heikkila & Lonka, 2006). Likewise, Brown and Hirschfeld (2008) found that when learners believe that assessment is used to evaluate them, they will strive to improve their performance; however, if they think of assessment as a tool that can be ignored, they will make less effort, which will consequently influence their achievement. That is, when students conceive the importance of assessment and notice its relevance to their achievement, they create adaptive learning behavior; on the contrary, when students do not understand the relevance of assessment to learning and create misunderstandings about assessment and the following consequences, some kind of maladaptive learning behavior is produced in learners (Brown et al., 2014). While Carless (2015, p. 9) believes that improving “student learning should be a primary aim of all assessments”, understanding learners’ perceptions of assessment seems vital since understanding what assessment means to students and how they can improve their perceptions can help teachers create productive learning behavior in students. Similarly, it has been proven that endorsing assessment as authentic (Gulikers et al., 2008), or as a tool for improvement (Flores et al., 2019) leads to the development of professional skills, while on the other hand, considering assessment as irrelevant and ignorable can lead to maladaptive behaviors (Flores et al., 2019).

Given the importance of learners’ perceptions of assessment and their influence on learning success, the current study set out to investigate undergraduate students’ views towards assessment practices.

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Learners’ conceptions of assessment were studied by Brown and Hirschfeld (2007), and a positive relationship was noticed between mathematics achievement and the sense of accountability of students gained as a result of the assessment. Four self-report inventories of conceptions of assessment and Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (assessing eight domains of mathematical knowledge) were used in their study, and the results showed that conceptions of assessment as fun or something to be ignored had a negative relationship with achievement. The findings of their study were consistent with self-regulatory theory and formative assessment, and the learners who utilized tests formatively could increase their mathematics outcomes. That is, students’ mathematics scores increased if they believed that assessment was a beneficial process and could make them accountable for learning. The study highlighted the importance of students’ views toward tests.

A year later, Brown and Hirschfeld (2008) conducted another study in New Zealand. The study on 3469 secondary school students was done using a self-report inventory survey (SCoA). SCoA included 11 items to reflect four conceptions: assessment makes learners accountable; it leads to school accountability; it is fun, and it is ignored. Scores of standardized curriculum-based assessments of



reading comprehension were utilized as an indication of learning outcomes. Statistical analysis demonstrated significant differences in the assessment perception of learners of different gender, academic years, and ethnicity. The researchers found that students who took responsibility for their own learning because of exams showed increased learning outcomes. In the same year, another exploratory study was conducted by [Peterson and Irving \(2008\)](#). Forty-one students from both genders in New Zealand high schools were chosen from grades 9 and 10 and were randomly divided into five focus groups. During school time, five 90-minute sessions were held with the participants. Three aspects of assessment (definition, purpose, and perceived personal impact) were discussed in the meetings, and all the participants were asked to participate in the discussions and write down their ideas as well. The transcriptions were later analyzed and coded considering the frequency, level of agreement, and intensity (depth of manifested feelings). The findings indicated that assessment for students needed to provide some information (feedback), having several functions. Most of the participants believed that the assessment showed their learning progress through scores, and finally, some students described the assessment as irrelevant, especially when they considered it unfair or not crucial for their future or when it lacked any scores.

Similarly, [Brown et al. \(2009\)](#) conducted a study in New Zealand with a sample of 705 secondary students. The participants answered the Conceptions of Assessment inventory and a list of 12 assessment tasks. The analysis of the data indicated that the more student-oriented the tasks, the less they were considered beneficial by learners. Whereas the authors suggest a need for both interactive-informal assessment and traditional test-like assessments, the participants of the study considered traditional and teacher-controlled assessments as more beneficial to their learning, and when reflecting on interactive-informal practices, it seemed like a kind of irrelevant practice. The study proposes ideas to convince students as well as teachers of the effectiveness of various assessment tasks.

Another study in New Zealand was done by [Fletcher et al. \(2012\)](#). The researchers examined 877 faculty members' and 1224 students' perceptions of assessment in four universities and institutions and found that in the faculty members' ideas, the assessment was a trustworthy process to assist teaching and learning, whereas according to students, an assessment was irrelevant and could even be ignored in the process of learning and teaching. Students' perceptions of graded and frequent assessments were also examined by [Vaessen et al. \(2017\)](#). Two hundred nineteen out of 319 enrolled students participated in their study. A researcher-made questionnaire and also a Dutch PROSDL questionnaire (to measure intrinsic motivation) were filled out by the participants of the study, taking into account their scores and GPAs as well. Four factors that clarify students' perceptions of assessment, namely value (high or low value attributed to frequent assessment), formative function, positive effects, and negative effects were identified. Whereas most students considered frequent examinations as a motivator, some of them also mentioned the adverse effects (lower self-confidence and more stress) of frequent assessments. Finally, the authors recommend clear communication of exam purposes with students to lower the negative influence of assessment.

Moreover, mastery and performance goal orientations were also considered when studying learner conception of assessment. After distributing the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey among 94 students at a public university in northern Malaysia, [Kaur et al. \(2018\)](#) were finally left with 41 students, 22 in the mastery goal orientation category and the rest (N=19) in the performance goal orientation category. Later, these participants were interviewed one by one after their class and were asked to compose reflective writings. Four contrasting themes were found between performance-oriented and mastery-oriented participants: assessment as a process/product, preference for modes, reasons for effort, and feelings and emotions. The findings demonstrated positive experience of mastery goal-oriented students of classroom assessment. These participants considered assessment as a part of their education that led to learning. In other words, an assessment was considered an opportunity to study and revise their learning. On the contrary, students in the performance goal group were only concerned with their final scores. Whereas participants of mastery goal orientation sought feedback to enhance their learning outcome and competency, people in the second group showed the least concern for feedback. The study also highlights negative feelings of the performance-oriented group: in other words, assessment led to feelings such as anxiety, depression, pressure, and burden.



More recently, [Chen and Brown \(2018\)](#) studied 1393 high school students in 12 public schools in China. Inventories were used to find out learners' conceptions of the purpose of assessment and also their emotions about achievement. The results of the statistical analysis demonstrated that reliable and accurate assessment was enjoyable for students; on the other hand, if the assessment did not focus on students and did not help them in their learning process, feelings of shame and anger accompanied them. The findings also suggest that student scores should not be used as an evaluation of a school or a teacher, and assessment should focus on the student's own learning, skills, and moral character.

Moreover, students' perceptions of assessment were examined in a study by [Nimehchisalem and Mat Hussin \(2018\)](#) with 21 postgraduate students in Malaysia. It was found that although students were aware of the testing purpose, their views toward assessment still needed improvement. Interesting metaphors of *a map (guide)*, *reward (motivation)*, *driver's license (empowerment)*, and *iron fist (control)* were among the most frequent metaphors related to assessment mentioned in the learners' narratives. The analysis also showed learners' awareness of language assessment purposes; however, there seemed to be room for more improvement. In the same year, in Palestine, [Shraim \(2018\)](#) examined university students' perceptions of electronic examinations. Three hundred forty-two undergraduate students from different disciplines filled in the online questionnaire. The 18-item questionnaire aimed at finding the participants' perceptions of pedagogy, validity, reliability, affective factors, practicality, and security of online assessment. Although it was found that online assessment was significantly better than traditional exams regarding grading and efficiency (time, effort, and money), the results demonstrated that the participants preferred traditional tests because of higher security, validity, and fairness. The participants also believed that online examinations were more suitable for formative assessment than summative assessment and noted the unsatisfactory implementations of the mentioned exams by their universities.

Similarly, in the context of a university, and as part of a more extensive study in Portugal, [Flores et al. \(2019\)](#) studied 5549 Portuguese in 5 universities. The Portuguese version of Students Conceptions of Assessment (SCoA) was filled out by university students in 5 different disciplines who were mainly between 20 and 25 years old. The study concluded that Portuguese university students generally viewed assessment as personal responsibility and considered using assessment in improving their own learning. However, the success of the Bologna Process, which was a reform to focus on learner-centered assessment, was not yet evident in the five explored universities.

Believing in the importance of learner conceptions about the standardized test, [Cho et al. \(2020\)](#) examined 230 university students who had taken the TOEFL exam before being accepted to the university. The study concluded that students' adaptive beliefs about assessment had a significant relationship with self-regulatory learning strategies. Indeed, learners used strategies such as planning, monitoring, and regulating more often when they recognized the fruitful, authentic, and positive aspects of the assessment that were in line with their learning objectives. That is, a positive view toward assessment makes assessment a genuine learning opportunity for learners.

More recently, [Adam et al. \(2021\)](#) conducted a cross-sectional study with 324 undergraduate medical students in Malaysia. The Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ) was also filled out by respondents of different genders and ethnicities. The analysis of the data showed that female students adapted more surface learning strategies than their male counterparts. Considering ethnicity, Chinese students seemed more hardworking than Malaysian ones. Regarding the phase of the study, preclinical students strived harder and developed a more surface learning approach than clinical students, possibly because there were more summative tests at this stage of the study; however, since clinical students had clearer goals and expectations, they valued receiving feedback more than preclinical students and considered feedback as a motivation to move forward as they saw feedback relevant to their practice.

Similarly, to understand learner assessment preferences, [Sergent and Lynch \(2021\)](#) studied twelve students who took part in physical education courses, using video narratives and an e-questionnaire. The analysis indicated that video narratives improved students' self-awareness, and in students' ideas, that



kind of assessment gave them a chance to reflect on their own performance. Unlike other types of assessment, students considered video narratives as an authentic learning experience in which they could easily control the learning environment. This new technologically based assessment was found to be more positively viewed by students compared to traditional assessments.

And finally, during the COVID-19 pandemic also, perceptions of medical students toward exams were analyzed. More than 70% of the participants showed concerns about technological issues and privacy, which negatively influenced their performance and highlighted the importance of learner perception (Ziehfrend, et al., 2022). Moreover, different perceptions of formative assessment were reported by students versus teachers in a study by Golzar et al. (2022), and the authors recommend evaluating students' performances in comparison to their previous performances (rather than comparing with other learners' performance).

As discussed above, the perceptions that learners possess towards tests can influence their learning outcomes directly and lead to productive or mal-productive learning behaviors. Although numerous studies have been done in different educational settings (colleges vs. schools), there seems to be a lack of such research in the Iranian context, especially at the tertiary level in which Brown (2021) believes assessment can be psychologically different from that in compulsory schooling. Since in universities, evaluation is primarily summative rather than formative, and students are adults who have more autonomy than their counterparts in schools. To this end, the current qualitative study attempted to gain an in-depth insight into university students' views and perspectives towards assessment by asking them to write test-taking narratives. More specifically, the following research questions were addressed in the current study:

1. What feelings do participants associate with their first assessment experience?
2. What is the most significant assessment in students' lives and how do they perceive it?
3. What qualities do students associate with the most and the least valid assessments?
4. What are the main problems of current language assessment tools in students' views?

III. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was conducted to find out university students' perceptions of the assessments they had taken throughout their academic life. Student perceptions can be better understood through qualitative studies which allow the researcher to be more flexible and widen understanding of the phenomena through an in-depth analysis of the data (Dörnyei, 2007). This section details the setup and organization of the research project, i.e., information about the participants, instruments, and procedures of data collection and analysis.

1. Participants

In the current study, an intact group of BA students (N=30: Male=12; Female=18) majoring in English language teaching (ELT) in a public university in Iran (Urmia) was chosen as the sample of the study. The sampling procedure was both purposive and convenience-based: we surveyed the students who had just taken a course on language assessment so they were familiar with the relevant concepts used in questions. It was based on convenience at the same time as is normal in applied linguistics research. The students came from different cities in Iran, (therefore with assessment experiences in various educational settings) and their ages ranged from 22 to 30. These senior students had been studying ELT for three years at the university and taking a Language Assessment course at the time of the study. Most of the participants were part-time language teachers in language centers/institutes as well and had the experience of taking numerous (language) tests as part of their school and university education.



2. Procedure

The participants were asked to write a test-taking narrative accounting for assessment experiences from elementary to university education, highlighting their negative and positive feelings as well as any turning points that affected their academic or individual lives. Detailed instructions were provided to guide the participants on what to focus on in their stories. Since students were taking a 'Language Assessment' course during the same semester, they were also asked to reflect upon technical terms like the validity and reliability of tests they talked about. The participants were given three weeks' time in order to compose their test-taking experience (with a minimum of 2000 words). Below are some of the questions/points that candidates were asked to draw on as a guide in composing their narratives:

1. *Think about your first test-taking experience in your (academic) life. When was it? What was the test about/for? How did you feel at the time you took the test? Any good/bad memories you remember from that test?*
2. *What experience do you have in taking UEE (University Entrance Examination)? What effect did the test have on your life/employment? Why?*
3. *How do you evaluate language tests you have taken at school, institute, or university? What are the major strengths and weaknesses of the tests you have taken so far?*
4. *Do you think there is a need at all for language tests in educational programs? Why?*

3. Data Analysis

To answer the mentioned research questions, in total 44 narratives were collected, but 14 of the narratives were eliminated from the main analysis because of not meeting the criteria (not being of sufficient length, including irrelevant information), the remaining 30 narratives were analyzed thematically, and the identified themes mainly revolved around those questions posed above. Thematic analysis, which is widely used in qualitative studies, is very effective in summarizing a large set of data. Indeed, thematic analysis is a highly flexible approach that can be used by researchers to analyze, organize and report themes found in the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Below, a more detailed account of the findings is provided.

IV. RESULTS

First Assessment Experience (Research Question 1)

Most of the participants remembered their very first exam at a young age, and all their memories were somehow associated with a feeling of fear.

Unfamiliar feelings, anxious, shocked, sweating, ashamed, and nervous, could hear my heartbeat, like the end of the world for me, it lacked meaning were the phrases and words used by the participants to express their feeling towards their first testing experience. The following extracts from the participants' narratives reflect these feelings:

Extract 1: I had a very kind teacher in the first grade, but on the day of the exam, she was not kind anymore, and she threatened us that she did not even want to hear us breathing or gasping, and it made us completely anxious.

Extract 2: I was so sweaty and anxious in my first exam, which was mathematics, although I could manage and share the exam answers with my classmate (The participant refers to cheating as a way of managing the exam stress, an unethical practice they learn at a very young age and continue until later in life).



Extract 3: My first exam was painting. I had asked my sister to draw it for me at home, so I could change the drawing with my own at school. My mind was busy and involved in changing the papers. (A similar cheating process seems to be at work here, the motivation for which is the threatening context induced by exams themselves).

Extract 4: I was seven then, the teacher was so aggressive and this made me nervous, and I couldn't write anything and got zero.

Extract 5: I didn't know what was happening, and it was later that my mom told me the process was called an "exam".

Unlike others, one participant associated *positive feelings* with her first exam. The only participant with a positive memory of her first assessment experience attributed her feeling to her teachers' experience and skill.

Extract 6: It was all because of my teacher, who was so skilled in her job. I really felt comfortable. I still remember it after so many years. (The role teachers can play in making stressful test experiences as stress-free assessment practices is evident here).

The Most Significant Assessment in Students' Lives (Research Question 2)

The participants were asked about the most important exams in their lives. Some mentioned English Olympiads, and others highlighted entrance examinations to some high-ranking schools such as the National Organization for Development of Exceptional Talents (NODET: schools which are aimed at providing a unique educational environment for talented students), with most of the participants focusing on the University Entrance Exam (UEE) (i.e., Konkoor, as it is called in Iran).

UEE, which is held once a year in Iran (to be held twice a year from 2023), is the only way to enter top universities; therefore, it is considered the most important exam in the educational system of Iran, as highlighted by the participants of this study as well. Therefore, all the participants shared their ideas and feelings about this challenging exam. The participants associated the following phrases and metaphors with UEE: *Greatest giant, ugly monster, the most-terrifying test, worst exam ever, a path to success or failure, the worst thing that could happen, and life-changing exam.*

An illustration of their experience of UEE was also provided in the narratives. The exam was considered highly stressful for almost all the participants; only 2 out of 30 students had a pleasant feeling during the exam session. Others insisted that the days before the exam were really filled with stress and mental pressure, even for their families. They highlighted that they had to spend an extraordinary amount of time preparing for the exam, spending those tough months and even years in isolation to study, not socializing with friends or family members, and this led to lots of psychological problems such as depression and some physical problems (because of the sedentary lifestyle of sitting long hours to study). Some students regarded it as unfair to ignore 12 years of study at school and assess students in only 4-5 hours and determine their fate based on those terrible hours only. Some others said that UEE could not assess one's actual knowledge: it only assesses what one was able to memorize. Below are a few extracts showing how participants felt about the UEE:

Extract 7: I got hospitalized because of exam stress. I could not really control the stress I felt because of UEE.

Extract 8: I was dying of stress the second time I attended the exam because if I failed again, I had to attend military service (A comment by a male student who was worried he would have to attend military service (for about two years) in case he failed the UEE).

The exam was also criticized for being unfair because not all students across the country have equal access to facilities and educational resources to prepare for the exam. Some participants attended extra-curricular



or private classes, which raised their chances of being admitted to a good university, whereas others could not afford this.

Extract 9: I did not attend such preparatory courses to avoid family blaming me in case I could not get accepted to any university. I was not really in a good economic situation like most of my classmates.

The students did not consider the UEE a standard exam. They opined that some candidates could easily cheat or get a correct response due to chance because the exam was in the form of multiple-choice questions and that the participants' illness, boredom, or fatigue could easily influence the result. That is, the reliability of the exam scores could be easily influenced by such issues. Indeed, many believed that UEE did not really show one's true score because it was unable to assess one's true abilities; even one participant revealed that he had prepared really well for the exam the first time he took UEE, but the result was unsatisfactory, due to the stress he experienced, which calls the reliability of UEE into question. A similar observation was reported by another candidate:

Extract 10: I remember a smart classmate who had prepared for the exam fully but suddenly got sick in the exam session and unbelievably ranked very badly.

Technically, most of the participants believed the exam lacked reliability and validity. The varying difficulty level of items, limited time, boredom and anxiety due to long exam hours, irrelevant content to school books (since UEE is expected to be an overall achievement test), and test wiseness were among the reasons that were believed to question reliability and validity of the exam. Meanwhile, only one participant felt that UEE was unbiased as questions were the same for all the test-takers, and it was scored objectively by a machine.

Extract 11: When we want to study English at University, why should our knowledge of Arabic or Persian literature be tested in UEE?! (Validity of the exam is under question as the participants are assessed on different constructs from those they would pursue at university).

After the exam, most of the participants felt free and lighter; even one commented it was like getting out of prison. Whereas a participant felt that life was the same before and after the UEE as she had always been an active person, most of the students confessed they entered a new life after UEE.

Extract 12: Oh, life was much better after UEE, I felt like I could breathe again. Finally, all that pressure and stress was over.

The Most and the Least Valid Exams (Research Question 3)

Given that students had learned about technical assessment concepts that they could use to evaluate the tests they had previously taken, they were also asked about the most and the least valid examinations they had had. Although it seemed that many did not remember examples of best assessment practices, students could remember many instances of invalid exams. Most instructors, as participants confessed, did not care about the purpose of the course or the test. Rather, the ease of designing exam questions and ease of scoring were of more prominence. Extracts referring to the least valid exams are provided next:

Extract 13: A written exam for a speaking course was the least valid assessment for me.

Extract 14: It was usually okay for grammar courses, but usually for speaking courses; the exams were irrelevant and invalid. (Whatever the purpose of the course, it always seemed easier to have written exams, as they are easier to design, implement, and score by instructors).



Extract 15: We had TOEFL grammar questions for the letter-writing course, which were not valid at all. (The instructor used multiple-choice grammar questions which have nothing to do with letter writing, an invalid tool easily recognized by test-takers).

Extract 16: Honestly speaking, a 15-page exam at 2 pm the summer was the least valid exam for me. (Talking about an exceptionally long exam, the participant seems to be referring to reliability rather than validity here).

Extract 17: A 10-page exam at 2 pm was the least valid exam for me, and I used my cellphone to answer that long boring exam. (A similar issue is being reported here).

Extract 18: Geometry and mathematics exams were the least valid ones for me, and I could never understand their relevance to real life and didn't feel the need to learn those courses and was slapped by the teacher once.

Unfair assessment by some university professors was highlighted in a few narratives as well.

Extract 19: In an exam, a teacher gave 20 (top score) to whom he just liked.

Extract 20: In the methodology course at university, the professor disliked our class and gave us a very long and challenging quiz, which was the least valid assessment, in my idea.

Problems with Current Language Assessments (Research Question 4)

The participants also discussed the problems which they noticed in language exams. For most participants, the problem seemed to be the irrelevant type of exam questions. No matter what the topic or skill was, the most common type of assessment was most of the time writing, with a focus on grammar. Several extracts support such feelings:

Extract 21: It is all writing, and there is no attention to speaking.

Extract 22: Sometimes, it is irrelevant to the objectives of the course; for example, for a reading course, the assessment requires you to translate some sentences. It is weird.

Another major problem that made exams irrelevant to the learning process was the lack of feedback. The only feedback which students received was in the form of scores. No other feedback to help students identify the problematic areas or to suggest techniques or strategies that could help them improve was available.

Extract 23: That awful score I get after the exam always kills my motivation to move on. They don't even tell you why you got such a bad score.

Extract 24: Teachers do not usually let us see our exam papers after getting the score. How can I improve when I do not even know which response was wrong?

Numerous problems were reported to be relevant to multiple-choice items. It seems that this type of item is only used because of the ease of scoring, and instructors do not possess a sound understanding of methods of designing these types of items, as the following extracts show:

Extract 25: Incorrect options of multiple choice questions provide students with the wrong input. In our testing course, I studied that distractors in multiple-choice questions should be designed logically; if not, the learners are confronted with incorrect input. Also, there are sometimes two correct answers rather than one. Many times, I have lost scores because of this.

Extract 26: I guess multiple-choice questions should not really start with a blank, but in reality, they do.

Extract 27: There are always lots of mistakes in multiple-choice questions. Instead, I think instructors can use open-ended questions, where there is less chance of cheating.

Extract 28: Instead of having multiple-choice questions, because of ease of scoring, I rather have gradual preparation of portfolios and journals. That seems a more logical assessment to me.



V. DISCUSSION

As [Brown and Hirschfeld \(2008\)](#) note, the way students perceive testing influences their final learning outcome; therefore, it is indeed significant to understand learners' perceptions toward assessment. In the present paper, a cohort of undergraduate students' perceptions of assessment were examined through their narratives of assessment experiences. Fear, stress, anxiety, and other negative feelings were associated with the participants' first test-taking experience and also the most significant exam in their lives (the UEE). Learners' negative perspectives on assessment were also manifested by [Tong and Adamson's \(2015\)](#) study: not being aware of assessment purposes created a negative perspective in school students of Hong Kong, like those in our study. The findings of this study are also similar to that of [Vaessen et al. \(2017\)](#) in the Netherlands. Whereas the assessment was kind of a motivator for several participants, it was mostly surrounded by negative feelings that overrode the positive aspects of the assessment. [Fletcher et al. \(2012\)](#) study also had similar findings since students considered assessment an irrelevant activity in the learning process. Unlike findings by [Nimehchisalem and Mat Hussein \(2018\)](#), who found assessment to be a kind of map or reward, the participants of the current project not only did not view assessment as a reward but also regarded it as debilitating and suppressing their motivation because of being stressful and the mere focus on exam results (scores). Evident in test-takers' writings was the major role played by a well-educated and knowledgeable teacher who seemed to be able to turn the exam session into a valuable and memorable experience in students' lives.

The findings of the current study showed that the University Entrance Exam (UEE) was the most important exam in participants' life, affecting their future. However, all the negative feelings of the world could be associated with it. Too much stress and pressure were what the participants felt regarding this assessment tool. It seems that the corresponding exam is not designed to cater to different features of standard tests, and considering exam results, it biases a group over others. Rather than motivating students to learn more, this exam has become an economic challenge for most students, creating a large UEE preparation mafia business, and unfortunately, has made a number of high-school teachers teach to the test only. Even worse, the exam is getting more and more difficult and less and less standard every year. Thousands of test-takers who took the most recent version of UEE in July 2022, for example, complained to the test-making body that the exam was highly difficult and that numerous questions were related to topics not covered in their school books, a criticism that was recognized by the Sanjesh Organization (which is in charge of UEE). In our informal conversations with a few distinguished teachers, they reported that even they as teachers could not get 80 percent of the items correctly if they were given twice the time that was allowed to test-takers!

The paper also identified key problems in the language exams students had previously taken. Overall, most of the exams (especially those based on speaking) had problems with regard to validity. When asked about the most and the least valid exams, most of the students remembered their least valid exams, with only a few students remembering their best exams. This can be a negative sign that most of the exams lacked the qualities that could make them positively distinct. Inappropriate exam questions were also among the concerns reported by medical students in Munich ([Ziehfreund et al., 2022](#)). Another main problem with tests was the lack of feedback. Since there was no feedback to guide test-takers, the tests were considered to have little value in the learning path. In addition, focusing on exam results (scores only) created a kind of anxiety that completely switched the purpose of assessment from a high-



yielding activity into one which led to behaviors such as cheating and cramming for exams. This also led students to concentrate solely on performance rather than training mastery-oriented individuals.

In line with the above observations, and in order to render tests and other assessment practices as rewarding learning activities, it is recommended that learners be familiarized with the positive aspects of assessment as learning tools to facilitate top-down self-regulation. When students are well aware of their learning goals and are motivated, they can manage their own learning and plan it well (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005) and learners' concerns about assessment could lead to additional failure and stress (Ziehfrend et al., 2022). The narratives indicated that university students were not really well-motivated and aware of the role of assessment in their education, interpreting it in an entirely negative way. As for bottom-up self-regulation, it is feedback from the task and the achieved rewards that moves the learner forward and leads to modifications of work style. The only feedback provided for students was the scores, which in most cases not only did not assist students in their learning process but also was demotivating.

In addition, high levels of pressure and stress due to non-standard, unreliable, and invalid assessment tools worked as an obstacle on the learners' path of learning, where students sought to escape the prison of exams rather than viewing them as a step in their progress. Indeed, our observations attest to the fact that in the Iranian educational system, the focus is on measurement-oriented exams and tests rather than on assessments that can better serve learning and teaching, the ultimate aim of education.

Given the above-mentioned observations about assessment in Iran, and remembering Nimehchisalem and Mat Hussin (2018), who found that low-quality educational systems create negative views toward testing and it is mainly considered an end-of-the-term phenomenon, it can be concluded that the educational system of Iran encounters paramount issues as far as its assessment practice is concerned. That is, low-quality educational systems primarily focus on summative exams only (end of the term phenomenon), with learners forming negative attitudes towards assessment. Such learners are usually not aware of assessment purposes and the role of assessment in their learning procedure, as sufficient feedback is not usually offered to them. Based on what is reported here, the educational system of Iran does need significant changes and improvements to shift from a measurement-oriented focus on exams to that of empowering learning. In line with recent research recommendations (such as Jopp & Cohen, 2020; Cho et al., 2020) that increasing student satisfaction with assessment can lead to enhancing learning outcomes, cultivating positive attitudes toward assessment seems to be of foremost importance to boost learner achievements.

The importance of formative assessments during the term and their positive influences on student learning (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2007; Einig, 2013; McCallum & Milner, 2020; Perera et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2008) should also be highlighted. As students and teachers may form different perceptions of formative assessment (Golzar et al., 2022), considering students' opinion of the type of assessment or attempting to improve learner perception seems essential. As another suggestion, different varieties of assessment can be implemented in higher education. In the context of alternative assessment, for instance, Sadeghi and Abolfazli Khonbi (2015) found that university students manifested more positive attitudes toward self and peer assessments compared to traditional assessment procedures, which led to improvement in their performance and better learning outcomes. Their study also proved the positive influence of continuous assessment, which stands against one-shot exams at the end of the term. A variety of tasks, such as gradual completion of portfolios and journals and frequent assessments during the semester are recommended to be used instead of a single summative test at the end of the term as well. For example, in the study by McCallum and Milner (2020), the participants perceived short, frequent, and feedback-rich formative assessments as assisting them to monitor their learning, motivating further study, and increasing their understanding. Innovative technology-enhanced assessment procedures such as the one used by Sargent and Lynch (2021) are also creative ideas that can improve learners' perspectives towards assessment and consequently boost their learning outcomes. It is also recommended that teachers and stakeholders cater to students' individual differences, such as mastery/performance goal orientation, as these students may need different types of assessment to satisfy them (Kaur et al., 2018).



VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The present study sought to understand undergraduate students' test-taking practices by analyzing their narratives on assessment experiences. It was found that a majority of the students held negative perceptions towards the assessment, and since the assessment was mostly in the form of summative assessment, without proper feedback afterward, it led to maladaptive learning behaviors in students, such as cheating or studying for scores only. That is, as [Brown et al. \(2014\)](#) argued, when students are not well-aware of the role of assessment in their learning process and do not understand its relevance to their educational success or when they form negative perspectives and feelings towards test-taking, they create a kind of maladaptive learning behavior which runs counter to their learning goals.

Therefore, as a step to improve the current situation, teachers and policymakers need to improve students' attitudes toward a self-regulating assessment perspective since, as [Brown et al. \(2014\)](#) put forth, perspectives and convictions toward assessment can lead to adaptive and maladaptive achievements. It is hoped that this research project lightens the path for future researchers in investigating the ways that can be effective in improving students' understanding of assessment and also boosting exam qualities in general. A full discussion of students' perceptions of assessment experiences lies beyond the scope of this research paper, and indeed, each question investigated here would ideally need tackling as a separate paper. As such, the current study was only a glimpse into the assessment system of Iran's education as experienced by university students taking a course on language assessment, and for that reason, other studies need to focus on problems of exams course-wise and focus on specific tests (both classroom-based and national) to better identify prevalent issues. Moreover, considering the limited number of participants and the convenience sampling procedure used in this study, findings need to be interpreted with caution and replicated in other contexts to boost the credibility of findings. Research projects also need to attend to the different types of feedback that are available to students and inform them of the value and purposes of feedback to make assessment experiences more enjoyable and memorable and to make assessment tools facilitators of learning, which is the ultimate enterprise of education.

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