

Teaching and Testing EFL in Iran: Global Trends and Local Dilemmas

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Abstract

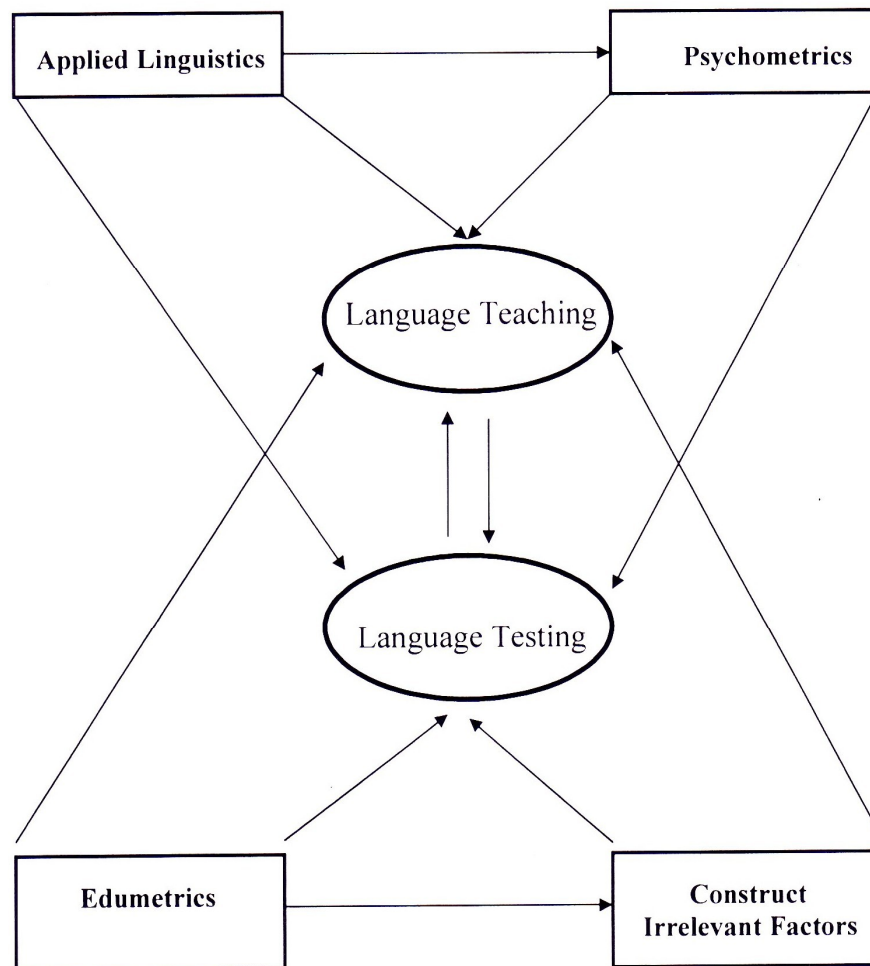
Beginning the second half of the last century, language education has witnessed remarkable advancements and reforms that have profoundly influenced the principles and procedures of both teaching and testing. Different disciplines including applied linguistics, psychometrics, and edumetrics have combined to influence the conceptualization, procedures, and prospects of language teaching and language testing. In fact, it is rightly assumed that language education is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by many fields which at the same time influences other fields. This multidirectional interaction of the disciplines makes language education a complex and a complicated issue. Complex because it is so vast in scope, and complicated because it includes so many unresolved issues.

The purpose of this paper, then, is threefold. First, I will attempt to provide an overview of the global trends in both language teaching and language assessment and compare the theoretical advancements with their practical realizations in the profession. Second, I will venture a comparison between the trend in language teaching and assessment in international communities and those in Iran. Third, I will attempt to demonstrate the dilemmas in language education in the world in general, and in Iran in particular, and make suggestions to bridge the gap between theory and practice on the one hand and global communities with local ones on the other hand.

Key Words: applied linguistics, psychometrics, edumetrics, assessment, communicative competence, functional competence

1. Introduction

Since early second half of the last century, language education has witnessed remarkable advancements and reforms that have profoundly influenced the principles and procedures of both teaching and testing. As a branch of applied linguistics, language teaching has been influenced by the developments in many areas including linguistics, psychology, sociology, first and second language acquisition, to name a few. These fields have had significant impacts on the conceptualization, procedures, and prospects of language teaching. Moreover, the outcome of teaching measured by tests (psychometrics), and used for decision-making at different levels of education (edumetrics), has had considerable effects on testing methodology. This implies that changes in teaching methodology would influence psychometric procedures, which in turn, would modify the nature of edumetric principles. Finally, there are certain factors that influence language teaching and testing without having direct relationship with either instruction or measurement. These factors, seemingly irrelevant to the construct of language ability, are rooted in the characteristics of learners, test takers, and test situations. Therefore, it would be safe to assume that language education is a multidimensional phenomenon and influenced by many fields and at the same time influences other fields. This multidirectional interaction of the fields makes language education a complex and a complicated issue. Complex because it is so vast in scope and complicated because it includes so many unresolved issues. Figure 1 is a schematic representation of this interaction.

Figure 1: Interaction of Different Fields with Language Teaching and Testing

The purpose of this overview, then, is to introduce, compare, and contrast these trends from positivistic method bound language teaching and testing paradigm to the recent constructivist post method paradigm. The procedures followed will be a) to introduce the positivistic method paradigm in teaching and testing and discuss its advantages and disadvantages, b) to present the paradigm shift from positivistic method based teaching and testing to constructivist post method learning and assessment and delineate its principles, c) to

compare the extent of practical realization of such changes in the world with that in this country and discuss the factors relevant to these changes, and d) to plea caution for an unwarranted, uncalculated, and unbalanced position due to their potentially serious consequences and offer guidelines for a balanced and successful implementation of the principles of the shift.

2. Positivistic Psychometric Method Paradigm

Prior to the penetration of science into the field of language education, both language teaching and language testing were performed through apprenticeship. In this period, called pre-scientific era, the beliefs and tastes of language educators decided the way language had to be taught or tested. However, scientific revolution in applied linguistics, psychometrics, and edumetrics forced the educators to work within a theoretically sound framework. The first manifestation of such an evolution emerged in early 50s. That is, scholars tried to find scientifically sound answers to the following three questions: What is taught; what is measured; and what does the result of measurement mean? Groups of scholars from applied linguistics, psychometrics, and edumetrics attempted to answer these questions. More specifically, linguists attempted to answer the first question and define what is taught, i.e., language. Psychometricians attempted to answer the second question and find out the most effective way of measuring the outcome of teaching language, i.e., the learned language or language ability. Finally, edumetricians attempted to answer the third question and make meaningful interpretations of the outcome of measurement, i.e., test scores. Principles from applied linguistics, psychometrics, and edumetrics, then, have combined to form different theoretical perspectives in teaching and testing EFL in the world.

In this period, with the tendency toward scientification, attempts were made to characterize human related activities within a framework as close to that of physical sciences as possible. This orientation led the field of human sciences to attend to the product of mental activities, because within the positivistic philosophy science had to deal with observable, measurable, and quantifiable phenomena. Following such a frame of mind, the first movement in theorizing language teaching and language testing assumed that:

- *Language is primarily speech consisting of a set of patterns*
- *Language is a system of systems including sounds, words, sentences, and meaning*
- *Language is later manifested in four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing*
- *Language ability is the combination of abilities in the above mentioned components and skills*

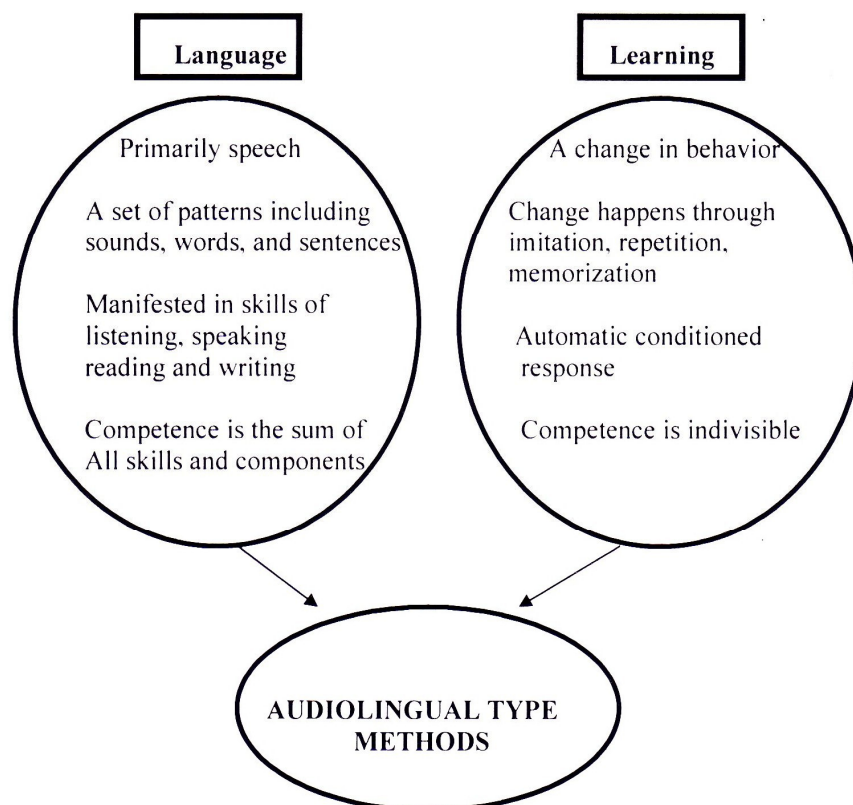
Along with linguistic orientation, psychologists attempted to explain the concept of learning. Behavioristic psychology assumed learning as an observable behavior that changes through learning. According to behavioral psychology

- *Learning is a change in behavior*
- *Change in behavior happens through imitation, repetition, and memorization*

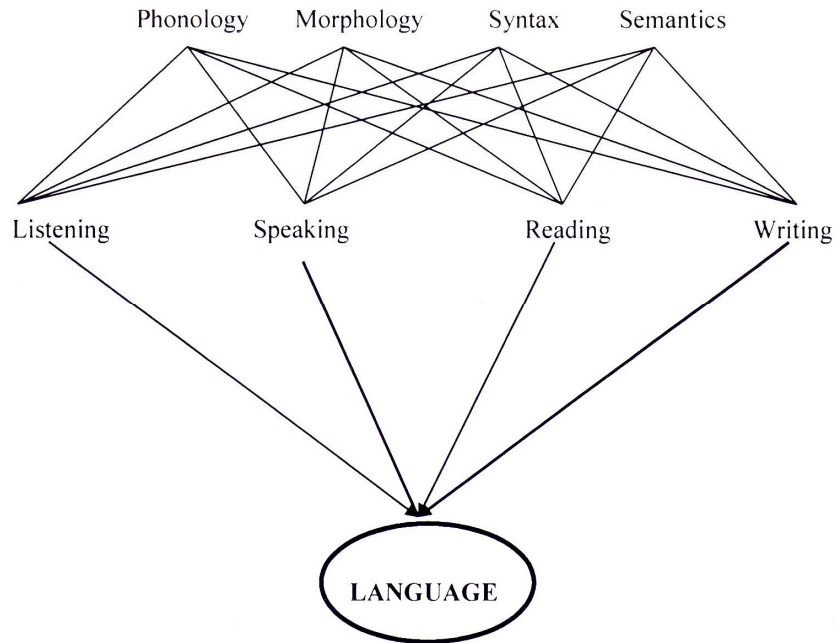
The principles of linguistics and psychology matched to form the foundations of the popular method of language teaching called the Audiolingual method (Figure 2). Following these principles, language teaching activities included the presentation of a particular pattern as a model, and asking the learners to imitate the teacher, repeat, and memorize the patterns. The implication of this method for language teaching was that learners should learn every pattern along with its ingredients, i.e., sounds, words, meaning, etc. through repetition and memorization so that they would be able to use the patterns automatically without much of conscious effort. It also implied that, one's overall knowledge of language would be the sum of the pieces of knowledge regarding these discrete elements.

The need for quantification meant assigning numbers to human attributes assuming that a given quantity would represent the existence of the corresponding latent abilities. This perspective required the development and utilization of valid and reliable measures. In order to meet the requirements of validity and reliability, educators were forced to focus on parameters that would enhance psychometric characteristics of measurement devices rather than on educational values of the learning process.

Figure 2: Conceptualization of Language and Learning by Audiolinguals



To this end, language testers tried to utilize objective methods to score the test items in which the unit of measurement was a pattern, or a sentence, usually referred to as a structural pattern. Therefore, multiple-choice format became the most appreciated form of the items. In addition, to observe the desirable characteristics of a good test coming from psychometrics, the tests had a large number of items to enhance test reliability and validity. This trend in language testing was later called psychometric-structuralist approach (Spolsky, 1979, 1995). The main feature of this approach is that language ability is the combination of small bits and pieces of components and skills. The characteristics of this orientation, called discrete-point (DP), are illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Lado's Conceptualization of Language Ability (DP Theory)

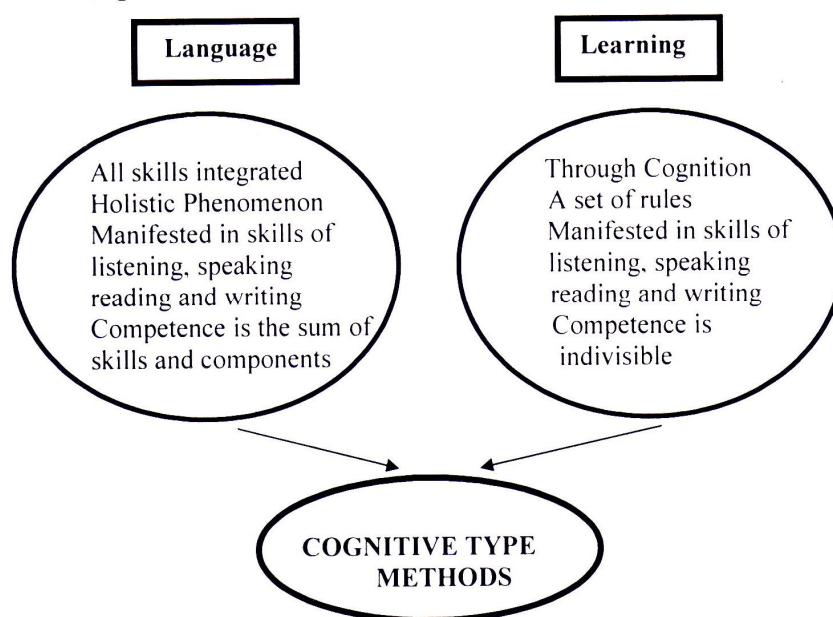
DP testing dominated the field of language testing for almost half a century. In fact, it is still commonly practiced in most parts of the world. Most people are so accustomed to these names and scores that any change in their value systems would be quite inconceivable. The calculation, fixation, and numbering have dominated the stakeholders in educational systems including administrators, authorities, policy makers, teachers, and even students. Most people would ask about the score they have obtained on a test rather than about the extent to which they have learned from the instructional program.

Though it was a great improvement over the traditional intuitive teaching and testing of the old times, it suffered from certain theoretical and practical shortcomings. Theoretically, the principles of structural linguistics were severely attacked by the then new generation of linguists led by Chomsky. The new school called Transformational Generative (TG) linguistics questioned the validity of the assumptions made by structural linguists. According to this school of linguistics, language was not a set of patterns but a set of rules. The knowledge of these rules, called linguistic competence, would manifest in reality as linguistic performance. Within linguistic

competence or performance, it would be almost impossible to separate the bits and pieces of language. In a communicative setting, all these components and skills integrate and make language a holistic phenomenon.

Following the changes in linguistics, similar changes happened in psychology as well. Contrary to behaviorist psychologists, who believed that learning is a change in behavior, cognitive psychologists believed that learning is a mental process. They claimed that learning would be meaningful and sustained if it happened through cognition. The statements made by linguists and psychologists, illustrated in Figure 4, shook the foundations of the audiolingual method and brought about the popular cognitive code learning method.

Figure 4: Definition of language and learning by Cognitivists

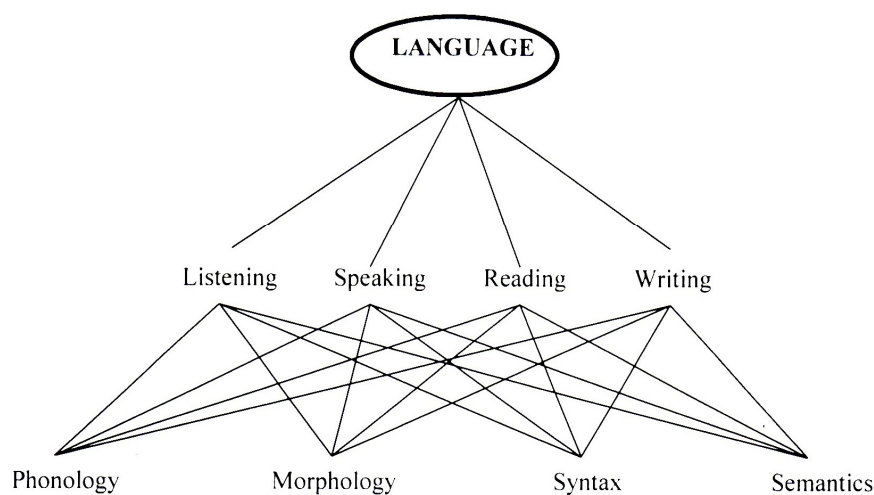


To accommodate the requirements of the new approach to language teaching Carroll (1961), followed by Oller (1970) and his associates took the position that language ability should be measured as a holistic phenomenon in a meaningful context. Furthermore, they assumed that psychometric principles are inseparable components of language testing. Therefore, the test development moved toward contextualization along with keeping the objectivity of scoring to

preserve the reliability of the tests. The new trend, referred to as integrative approach (IN), was popularized by cloze and dictation type tests. Directed and supported by Oller, cloze and dictation became the most talked about tests for almost three decades. The idea was that IN tests are more valid than DP tests because they utilize language in a context which is similar to language use in real life situations. That is why Spolsky (1979) called this era integrative-sociolinguistic, implying that language should be measured holistically and skills should be integrated and used in social contexts. Characteristics of this trend as an opposing movement to DP approach are illustrated in Figure 5.

The long debate among the proponents of DP and IN approaches to language teaching and testing lasted for a long time. However, after years of arguments scholars agreed that the difference between DP and IN tests was not a matter of type but a matter of degree. Most people argued that a combination of DP and IN tests would provide a better picture of one's language ability than any one of them alone. However, Farhady (1980, 1983) presented evidence that the combination would lead to unreasonable results and thus called for an alternative approach to language testing.

Figure 5: Oller's Conceptualization of Language Ability (IN Theory)



At the same time, Canale and Swain (1980), and later Canale (1983) presented the most influential theoretical framework for

language teaching and testing called a communicative competence model. According to them, language ability, or what they called communicative competence (CC), consisted of three components including linguistic competence (LiC), social competence (SoC), and strategic competence (STC).

I have argued elsewhere (Farhady, 1983) that although this model was a breakthrough in demonstrating the nature of language ability construct, it seemed to be linear in structure and additive in nature. That is, according to Canale & Swain, (LiC), (SoC) and (STC) would add up to form one's CC. I have also argued (Farhady, 2005) that CC is too vast in domain and too complex in nature to be achieved by individuals, even by native speakers. The argument, supported years later by Widdowson (1999), implies that not all people could be communicatively competent in all given language contexts. Therefore, Farhady suggested the concept of functional competence (FC) as a specifically predefined subcomponent of CC that has all the characteristics of CC but is limited in scope. According to Farhady (1983), CC comprises many FCs within specific areas of language use and learners would accumulate more FCs depending on their educational and professional careers. The more FCs the learners can accumulate, the larger CCs they would develop.

Beginning 90s, Bachman (1990) introduced the most comprehensive model of language ability of all. According to his model, language ability consists of organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence includes grammatical competence and textual competence. Pragmatic competence includes illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Each of these competencies encompasses certain abilities. The model is comprehensive because it considers some important factors such as test method, test facet, etc., which makes the model comprehensive.

The above overview was intended to set the ground for the discussion of the changes happening in the late 90s. The problem with these models was that they were all progressive in theory but similar in practice. That is, though the models were quite different in conceptualization, the testing field was still living in the 60's. The tests were almost all in multiple choice format, isolated from real life context, psychometrically oriented, and number based. An unfortunate issue was treating language ability as the sum of a set of scores obtained on different parts of a test regardless of the value attached to the scores. This era is called psychometric era, because numbers,

statistical values, standards, and quantification were the dominant characteristics of the tests.

Due to the dominance of psychometric era, over the last 50 years, the institutes producing and administering the standardized tests have been enjoying social, political, and organizational power. The significant influence of TOEFL type tests on the decisions made on people's lives led language education institutes to try any strategy available to prepare students for such tests. The unfortunate result has been the so-called test driven curricula where educational materials are directed toward the content of the tests rather than toward instructing what the learners should be learning. This phenomenon, known as negative washback, has diminished the learning value of the language instruction across the world. Therefore, to beat the TOEFL 500 criterion, preparation classes mushroomed around the world with the intention of boosting students' score on the test without taking the learning outcome of the education into account.

The deficiencies of this kind of grade-oriented education became obvious when scores did not seem to be accountable for the abilities claimed to have been measured. For example, a score of 500 on TOEFL used to be interpreted as the ability to pursue academic advancement in the universities where English was the medium of instruction. For years, this was taken for granted that a student with such a grade will conveniently cope with requirements of the academic life. However, this was not simply true. Research findings have demonstrated that tests of this quality do not measure students' language ability in the sense that they claim. There is ample evidence that students with high scores on TOEFL type tests are not, in fact, competent enough to cope with academic requirements. That is, the validity of such tests is seriously under question. In other words, such tests do not have credibility. Although powerful organizations such as Educational Testing Service (ETS) have been utilizing the tests across the world, such tests are no longer credited for their accountability. That is why ETS has launched the new version of TOEFL since early 2005.

Of course, this type of testing culture was cultivated by the corresponding teaching approaches. As long as the language teaching was thought to be in the theories supporting the componential framework for the construct of language ability, such tests served their intended purposes (Shohamy, 1995). One of the major requirements of measurement is the theoretical and operational definitions of the construct to be measured. When language ability was defined as the

combination of separate components and skills, no more expectations could be made from the tests measuring these components and skills. The only concern was to measure the construct as consistently as possible following the principles of psychometrics. Indeed, the field of language testing has been quite successful in accomplishing the task. However, the task that was seemingly accomplished satisfactorily was not at all important or significant regarding language ability.

One important point to be mentioned here is that although Educational Testing Service (ETS) officials have realized the problems with TOEFL, authorities around the world are still enthusiastically practicing TOEFL type tests in different contexts such as the university entrance examination at different levels. Another important point to be mentioned here is that the criticism is not directed toward the multiple-choice form of the tests. Rather, the underlying principles upon which these tests are constructed, implemented, and interpreted are the topic of debate.

With the trends in language teaching and the focus on learning languages for communication, neither the traditional teaching methods nor their testing counterparts were efficient enough to achieve the objectives of instruction. Therefore, the field shifted to a new paradigm called the assessment paradigm.

Within the last few decades, the field of TEFL has witnessed a paradigm shift in language teaching as well as language testing. In teaching, the shift has been from atomistic component skill orientation towards communicative, holistic, and realistic approach. Similarly, in testing, too, the shift has been from discrete point component based perspective to task based, performance oriented approach. Consequently, on the teaching part, educators are looking for accountability, credibility, and responsibility towards learning, learners, parents, community, and eventually the nation. On the testing part, the traditional psychometric score oriented procedures are no longer as valid as edumetric principles of self and peer assessment, and formative criterion referenced assessment (Alderson, 2002; Bachman, 2000).

3. Constructivist Post Method Paradigm

With the reform in education and emphasis on the dynamic nature of human intellect, which can creatively plan for learning processes and help learners realistically assess their own abilities, most of the fundamental principles of method orientation in teaching and psychometric orientation in testing were questioned. Under the

influence of constructivist frame of mind, a paradigm shift was expected. Teaching moved towards helping learners to activate their mental faculties for autonomous learning rather than being taught by teachers. Along the same lines, testing moved towards serving as a means of enhancing learning rather than checking the amount of learning. Therefore, individual learners, their learning strategies, and their personal characteristics gained prominence over the ways the learners are taught.

The paradigm, then, shifted from product oriented quantitative approaches to process oriented qualitative approaches. The idea was to investigate how learners learn and what types of strategies they employ while learning. Cognitive, metacognitive, and communication strategies were paid due attention to explore the mysteries of learning processes. Investigations on the learner characteristics, learner needs, and learning needs became the central point in language education research. Research on these issues has undoubtedly deepened our insights into the process of learning. Therefore, teaching procedures in language education shifted from teacher fronted instruction to learner centered cooperative activities. The ideas of task based, content based, and reflective teaching became popular in the field.

The shift mentioned above required extensive modifications on the perceptions of the teachers, learners, administrators, and other stake holders in language education. Learners' involvement in the process of learning, teachers' involvement in the process of facilitating learning for the learners, administrators' involvement in the interpretation of the outcome of education, parents' involvement in helping their children to become autonomous learners, and communities' involvement in redefining the criteria for achievement and ability are all manifestations of this shift. The characteristics of the shift are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Method Era	Post-method Era
Teacher fronted	Learner centered
Transfer of Information	Processing the Information
No help from others	Cooperative
A rigid framework	Context based
Product oriented	Process oriented
Prefabricated Contexts	Authentic Contexts

Along with teaching procedures, an evolution was shaped in language testing as well. Scores given on a particular test at a particular time were no longer considered an absolutely valid indication of achievement. Psychometric dynasty began to lose its power. An alternative to testing, namely assessment, emerged. While testing was product oriented, assessment was intended to be process oriented. While testing was to check how much the learners know, assessment was intended to help learners to learn. While testing was a one shot case instrument to be administered, assessment was an ongoing process of gathering, evaluating, and interpreting information about learners' achievement. Table 2, (Harati, 2005) shows the differences between testing and assessment.

Table 2: Differences between Assessment and Testing

Assessment	Testing
1- Helps individuals to develop or furtherhis learning	1- Measures attributes which are the property of the individuals and are thought to be fixed
2- Focuses on absolute performance	2- Aims at Relative performance
3- Enhances learning	3- Tests learning
4- Is student-centered	4- Is teacher- centered
5- Accounts for the extent of learning	5- Accounts for reliable variations
6- Is an ongoing process	6- Is given at a particular time
7- Is interactive	7- Is teacher controlled
8- Attempts to gain insights into teaching/learning process while the teacher is the assessor, user, and interpreter of result	8- Attempts to gather information to be used in decision making in the classroom
9- Uses interpretive scoring that needs classroom teacher	9- Uses deterministic scoring that needs classroom teacher
10- Is appropriate for low stakes	10- Is appropriate for high stakes
11- Provides description of abilities	11- Provides pass or fail information
13- Shares the outcome with learners	13- Keeps the outcome as a secret
14- Reports a profile of abilities	14- Reports a single score
15- Is performance based	15- Is competence based
16- Is CRT based	16- Is NRT based
17- Is process oriented	17- Is product oriented

With this reform, whereby emphasis has shifted from norm referenced, standardized tests to teacher made, criterion related measurement, and the traditional type tests such as TOEFL gradually lost their credibility. Instead, process oriented, task based, learner centered, and strategy driven teaching and testing became popular. The constructivist paradigm assumes a greater role for those who are directly involved in the process of instruction. Educators are no longer interested in a single score obtained on a single standard test to make decisions on the lives of people. Rather, they are looking for a more comprehensive qualitative account of the learners' ability through multiple measures in multiple occasions. They seek accountability for what the test scores mean.

Recent discussion of the constructivist approach to teaching and testing has highlighted the potential usefulness of a variety of innovative teaching and testing procedures. On the teaching side, task based, content based, strategy based procedures have become quite popular. On the assessment side, portfolio assessment, self and peer assessment, conferencing, diaries and learning logs, and teacher checklist and observations (McNamara, 1996; Skehan, 1998) have replaced the traditional competence oriented approaches.

The constructivist approach to language instruction has certain characteristics. First, it approximates the actual language use with authentic communicative function and avoids activities with little or no intrinsic communicative value. The activities tend to be based on the actual performance in authentic situations. This shift of emphasis has changed the role of the language teacher from a person to receive information about the learner, usually given by testing specialists, to a person to provide information to authorities such as administrators, policy makers, and other teachers.

Second, in the new paradigm, the learner along with his/her social, academic, and physical context is taken into account as a whole. Along this holistic view, learning and learner's total array of skills and abilities are paid due attention in assessment. In other words, the new paradigm allows for integration of various dimensions of learning as they relate to the development of language abilities. The dimensions include not only processes such as acquiring and integrating knowledge, extending and refining knowledge and using it meaningfully, but also issues such as varying student motivation and attitude toward learning (Harp, 1991).

Third, the constructivist paradigm considers development of learning within the cognitive, social, and academic context of the

learner. It reveals information about a learner's proficiency in the context of what is relevant to that learner's life and experiences. In a sense, classroom instruction magnifies the concept of students' reflection on their learning process. To reflect upon one's own work is part of learning. Kolbe, Rubin, and McIntyre's (1970) 'learning cycle' describes how an active learner experiences things, reflects on those experiences, conceptualizes what has been learnt, and goes on to act on the basis of the conceptualization, i.e., to experiments.

Students have many experiences of doing assignments or preparing term projects. However, whether they reflect on, conceptualize, or experiment their class work is not clear. When students are asked about the extent to which they learned from doing a particular assignment, they are often puzzled. In contrast, they are willing to articulate the grade they received on the assignment. This implies that they cannot express what they are learning which, in turn, implies that they are not learning in a way that is conscious and under their control.

Experience wise, one can assume that many students do not reflect on, conceptualize, or deliberately experiment their course work. Of course, teachers grade or mark each piece of work in many classes. However, the students are often concerned with how the score they received compares with what they hoped for rather than how much they learned from the assignment. That is why they usually go straight to the next assignment without even reviewing their previous work, let alone reflecting on it.

4. Local Dilemmas

The paradigm shift has opened an array for fundamental changes in the perception of educators regarding the whole teaching, learning, and assessing activities. Implementation of all these changes is not an easy task. It requires cultivation of the principles in educational environment, which is not a task to be accomplished in a short time or without much resistance. In fact, the change has led to a certain number of dilemmas in the educational context in many communities. Some of the major dilemmas include:

- 1. Are theoretical advancements applicable to different educational contexts?**
- 2. Are there sufficient resources to implement the theoretical principles?**
- 3. Are there uniform patterns of practice around the world?**
- 4. Where do we stand between the theory and practice along the continuum?**

Although answers to these questions, i.e., solutions to the dilemmas, are beyond the scope of this paper, a brief account may be helpful.

4.1 Are theoretical advancements applicable?

The answer to this question is a straightforward NO. Of course, theoretical advancements are necessary to provide insights to our understanding of the concepts we are dealing with. However, theoretical arguments are not often directly translatable into practice. One reason for such a mismatch is that theorization occurs in the minds of people. Usually, the mental capacity of theoreticians is way beyond the implementation abilities and facilities of the practitioners. A simple principle such as 'an ongoing process of collecting information on the students learning experiences' is a huge task in implantation stage. It requires a change in the beliefs of learners and teachers, community members, and administrators. Such a process could be tedious, and costly. So, we should not expect a quick jump in the process of changing from one paradigm to another.

Furthermore, it may not be safe to assume that all the principles of a given paradigm enjoy an absolute accuracy. In many cases, the principles of a particular theory have been seriously, and rightly, questioned after some years. Therefore, practitioners should exercise caution not to advocate a particular theoretical perspective without having ample evidence for its appropriacy.

It is also important to note that a theoretical change entails many modifications in different dimensions of instruction. For instance, teacher training, materials development, assessment procedures, and administration are just a few areas that should be modified in order to meet the requirements of a new theoretical perspective. Thus, it seems essential to have a comprehensive survey of the availability of the facilities to implement a particular theory of teaching. Otherwise, the

values of the present practice would be jeopardized without having a suitable replacement.

4.2 Are there sufficient resources?

The answer to this question is also a negative one. The reason lies in the fact that theory usually takes place in the minds of theoreticians which is often established in an idealist context. There is usually a large gap between the assumptions of the theory and the realities in practice. For instance, if the theory requires a change in the instructional materials, it would be easily said than done. Developing a new set of instructional materials requires ample planning and time, especially when it is on a nationwide scale. Therefore, authorities should again exercise caution not to trade the existing facilities for an unclear future change.

More often than not, during the time that the administrators attempt to accommodate the requirements of a particular theory, many modifications occur on the principles of the same theory. Therefore, we should not go through the old and unsuccessful practice of pendulum swing of the past. The field has the bitter experience of jumping from one method to another without sufficient accommodation, which would eventually fail. Facilities do not just refer to instructional materials. From, teachers to learners to educational contexts to cultural values of the community to financial resources available to the authorities, and technological possibilities all would contribute to a successful implementation of a new approach to language teaching.

4.3 Are there uniform patterns of practice around the world?

The third question has also a negative answer. Due to the determining effect of the context of instruction, no two environments would share exactly the same features. Every community is managed by culturally and mentally different people. Administrators in one community do not share the same beliefs and ideologies as those of others. Nor do teachers or learners have the same conception of the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, implementing even a single theory in two different contexts would lead to different procedures and outcomes.

This does not mean that communities would act independently from one another and would come up with entirely different outcomes. Along with differences in the societies, there are similarities as well. Therefore, sharing the experiences among the

members of the communities would help them avoid making the same mistakes in different contexts. Furthermore, exchange of ideas among the communities would help them utilize the successful strategies and avoid unsuitable ones.

4.4 Where do we stand between the theory and practice along the continuum?

This is probably the most difficult question of all, because it requires empirical data to compare and contrast the educational system and its output with that of other countries. However, reflecting on the present status of TEFL in Iran, may lead us to believe that we are reasonably successful in educating our teachers and instructors on the theoretical issues in the field. This means that the knowledge base of the teachers regarding methodology, linguistics, testing, and assessment is at an acceptable level. However, we are lagging behind in practice in almost all aspects of language education. Of course, to be behind requires identification of a criterion. The criterion is not assumed to be the one in the developed countries. Nor is it assumed to be the one in developing countries. The criterion I have in mind is the theory itself. In comparison, our language instruction is relatively more successful than that of most of the countries where a huge amount of investment is made on language teaching. Research has demonstrated that at junior high school level, given the right instruments for evaluating learners' language ability, the learners perform well above the ideal mean of a sound educational system (Farhady, 2000). The same research has also demonstrated that our teachers enjoy an acceptable range of language proficiency and language knowledge.

Regarding assessment, the educational system suffers from a serious lack of compatibility between theoretical advancements and their practical realization. While we are talking about constructivist humanistic assessment in class, we are practicing an unacceptable traditional method of test development across the nation.

However, from theory to practice, we face so many problems to be resolved. The most important of all is the quality of teacher training programs in the country. Assuming that a teacher is the most significant factor in the whole educational program, we need to invest as much as we can in providing pragmatic knowledge to our teachers. As Akbari (2005) mentions, within the world of learner significance, almost all facilities are directed toward learners at the cost of ignoring teachers.

Another important factor refers to the quality of the instructional materials. Changing the instructional materials, especially in a centralized educational system, requires a huge amount of investment in terms of both human resources and financial facilities. Moreover, it requires time and planning. In most cases, language policy and language planning are a national, political, cultural and religious endeavor. It is not usually under the control of teachers or materials developers. Therefore, all the afore-mentioned factors should be given careful considerations in the process of developing nationwide instructional materials.

5. Suggested Solutions

It should be clearly and unambiguously stated that fixing one aspect of education would not cure any ill. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the factors influencing language instruction are in close interaction. A reform should be systematic and should apply to as many factors involved in TEFL as possible. For example, training good teachers without providing them with good instructional materials along with technological facilities would not do much of good for language instruction. Nor would having acceptable materials within the access of unqualified teachers help improve the process. Therefore, the variables involved in language education should be taken into account within the context of a particular educational community. In this direction many parties should assume responsibility some of which are mentioned below.

First, the community should assume responsibility towards a change from quantity oriented to quality oriented perception of language education. This requires cultivating the culture of new trends in the learners, teachers, parents, authorities, and administrators. That is, all parties involved in education should be convinced, in both theory and practice, that a reform is needed so that they coordinate their efforts in achieving the objectives of the instruction.

Second, the government should assume responsibility toward providing clear, practicable, and reasonable educational policies, and should subsequently support the implementation of the policy. In this regard, fund, personnel, and other requirements should be made available to the people involved in moving the educational system forward.

Third, the teacher education centers as the main sources of training teachers should assume responsibility toward training teachers with pragmatic ability to implement the new approaches in different

contexts. Giving teachers theoretical knowledge alone would not be very fruitful in practicing the new methods. Teachers' beliefs, understanding, attitude, motivation, and, most important of all, their needs should be given due attention. An unhappy, uneasy, unsatisfied, unmotivated, and financially needy teacher would never succeed in implementing any instructional program, including language programs.

Last but not least, universities as one of the major sources of education in the community should assume responsibility toward providing the students, and apparently, future educators with the context in which they develop deep feeling of dedication and commitment toward flourishing the nation. Just studying and getting degrees without intending to utilize their capacity in the direction of constructing the educational system would harm the whole nation. Educators at the university should help students realize that without such commitments, a university degree does not suffice to save the nation. Of course, this requires a reform in the concept of education in the country.

I would like to finish the paper with a strong plea for a multidimensional cooperation. It is my deep belief that as long as the community, the government, the teachers, the learners, and the administrators do not cooperate and collaborate in the direction of improving the status quo of language education in the country, it would be very difficult to witness satisfactory improvement in this regard. So let's hope for a better future.

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