

## The Study of The Most and The Least Influential Socially-Mediated Testing Factors in Learning Among University Students

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**Abstract.** This study tries to investigate the most and the least influential socially-mediated testing factors in learning among university students. The necessity to understand these socially-mediated testing to foster language learning in the Islamic Republic of Iran gets bolder, where English as a foreign language learning, in political and social aspects, fulfills a considerable role in different parts of daily life. The researcher used the quantitative method. The participants in this phase included 375 EFL learners studying or completing their Ph.D. The sample included 183 males and 192 females. The age range was from 29 to

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37(M= 33). The instrument applied in this study was a researcher-constructed questionnaire. It consists of two parts. The first part was a demographic question, and the second consisted of questions about factors that affect socially mediated testing. The reliability of this questionnaire was 0.804. The mean values of the four variables showed which factor has the most and which has the least impact on SMT based on the participant's points of view who answered the questionnaires. The most influential factor is the 'Positive points of SMT,' and 'Goals of the teacher in SMT' can reach the second level. 'Learning measurement of SMT' can get the third level, and the last level is for 'Negative points of SMT.' The results of this study can help teachers, students, parents, and all the people who are part of the educational system and make decisions to improve the education system in schools and universities.

**Keywords:** Testing, socially-mediated, anxiety, Vygotsky, motivation

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, there are many new methods that other teachers from other countries use, but Iranian teachers still use the grammar-translation approach in their classes. Hayati and Mashhadi (2010) expressed a similar point of view and believed that most Iranian English teachers follow traditional language teaching methods. The researchers are saying that the academic system in Iran is training students to read and translate scientific information from English. The teachers' teaching style is one of the sources of the EFL learner's problem, which does not assist the students in having and improving their self-regulation. Another problem is that some teachers' practice assessment and test techniques interfere with real communicative interaction and even disrupt the emergence of functional strategies. Traditional teachers ask their students to memorize words from their books without telling them how to use these new terms in their daily lives. Then most students cannot talk to a foreign language tourist who comes to Iran because they just memorized the meaning and dictation of the words and do not know how to use them in conversation in different situations. Therefore, such a situation makes the learner only pass the exam and satisfy the teachers' expectations, and the students cannot communicate well in real life and actual situations. Over the last decades, books were changed, and they tried to prepare a book that is near to acceptable and standard worldwide books. As a result of this

change, the way of assessment and evaluation also changed, and teachers had more emphasis on learners and learning and less on teachers and teaching. As researchers look into how languages are learned in second language acquisition (SLA), they shift their focus away from the actual words remembered and instead look at HOW they are learned. (Oxford, 2001).

Assessment is the systematic information we gather to make decisions about individuals resulting from tests or other measurement procedures. Alemi (2015) claimed that the primary purpose of assessment is to support the teaching/learning process. Most teachers make their tests based on different models. One of those models is curriculum assessment, where you have to learn how to do something and then do it in a test. This is because teachers think students will succeed most if they learn how to do things and then apply those learned skills. Hamayan (1995) believes that the data provided through alternative assessment procedures will be helpful for different groups of stakeholders.

Vygotsky (1978) presented the idea of externally mediated activity, including if you have a goal that you want to achieve, you can use outside tools to help you get them. He believes that understanding how the tools and cues in our brain influence our thoughts will help us better understand ourselves. Wertsch (1985) considers Vygotsky's concept of mediation essential and unique. Vygotsky (1978) asserted that the most significant part of psychological development is the acquisition and development of human culture. Culture can influence different aspects of life through its artifacts - Cultural artifacts or products. People in culture create these things, which are considered the basis of all cultures.

One of the critical perspectives on sociocultural theory (SCT); is that Vygotsky (1978, 1995, 1981) tried to analyze human mental development at four levels, which are: (a) related to mediation, and the different types of mediation instruments that are available, and valid. By society, and is called the sociocultural domain; (b) study the suitability of mediators and their integration into cognitive functioning during an individual's development, and is called the field of genetics; (c) deals with the evolutionary development of human mental organisms over generations, and is named the field of phylogenetics, and (d) focuses on the

instantaneous co-construction of language. In psychiatry, language and language learning in a short period call it the micro genomic domain.

Conceivably the zone of proximal or potential development (ZPD) remains the best-known concept of Vygotskian theory. The Zone of Proximal Development represents the distance between what a person can do with and without help. ZPD is defined as the difference between the actual level of development as determined by independent problem-solving and the higher potential level of development as determined by problem-solving under direction or coordination. With more capable colleagues. (Vygotsky, 1978).

Most of the teachers did not use new methods and recent assessments in their classes because they were afraid to change the ways of teaching methods that they had used for a while. On the other side, the students fear the assessment exactly when they hear it is a creative evaluation. They feel nervous. Psychologists always try to find ways to help students to overcome their fear of evaluation. On the other hand, scientists try to help teachers not to obey the old teaching methods, and they seek to assist them to be updated until they have fun classes. Without knowing Vygotsky's hypothesis, some teachers used this kind of exam in their classes, which was amusing and beneficial for teachers and learners. Then the researcher tried to find if it is a good technique for taking an exam or not in a big population.

As one of the attempts to examine the social context, this study aims to investigate the most and the least influential socially-mediated testing factors on learning among university students. The necessity to interpret these socially-mediated testing to foster language learning gets bolder when one attempts to investigate them in settings like the Islamic Republic of Iran, where English as a foreign language acquisition plays a vital role in different parts of ordinary life among Iranian people. Thus, this study is designed to investigate the following research question:

1. What are the most and the least influential socially-mediated testing factors on learning?

## 2. Review of Literature

In sociocultural theory, human behavior is realized through tools, and sign systems, of which language is the most important. Vygotsky (1987) asserts that tools and languages are unfixed and take modern forms in human history and cultural development; From then on, there is no longer any distinction among the languages used. He further argues that external social discourse is internalized through mediation; society is connected to the mind.

The sociocultural theory of mind tries to explain what happens in the brain if someone acquires something new. De Valenzuela (2006) rightly asserted that the way an individual's brain works (cognitive development) is notably influenced by the society that they live in, and the way that the brain develops for each person is unique, not following a set series of steps. In this view, learning helps you develop cognitive skills or thinking skills.

Curry, Mynard, Noguchi, and Watkins (2017) state that autonomous language students are learners who “know how to learn the self-directed language (SDLL), such as: “the cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social processes that govern learning” (p. 17). One of the most substantial roles in learner autonomy is social mediation. Many researchers have found that the ability to interact socially mediated keeps learners motivated and engaged more in their learning (Mynard and Kato, 2016; Yamashita, 2015). Language is socially mediated and context-dependent. It means that the way that you use language is dependent on your environment and the people around you to whom you talk. If you are in a society that gives you the freedom to ask questions, you will be more likely to ask questions (and they will be more likely to explain them).

Vygotsky is faced with two diverse reductionism, the physical way an organ matures as it grows and the developmental one when a child learns about the culture of their society. There is tremendous pressure to achieve this position. In the second area, Vygotsky argues that his ZPD argued that instead of seeing education lag behind in sociological development, it should look forward and “move forward.” This is to

distinguish between actual growth and potential growth. The level of reality you are in is determined by the tasks you can do yourself and the tasks you need to guide.

Verenikina (2003) asserts that learning in ZPD means mastering how to do something you couldn't accomplish in advance with the help of skilled instructors or peers. As people engage in collaborative conversations with more competent partners, they take language, integrate it into their private speech, and practice it to schedule activities. The way they are independent is the same. They acquire ways of working together and use them in their independent activities.

Scaffolding is when someone helps you get to a place you could not have gotten to on your own, but once you are there, you are just as good at doing it as someone who wasn't helped (Daniels, 2007). In this respect, it shares a similar philosophy to the ZPD. Daniels (2007) argues the scaffolding approach is for studying how structure and organization between people differ rather than focusing on the internal bugs and errors causing those differences. Primarily, it is about simplifying the role of the learner rather than the task. Bruner (1985) describes the term scaffold as directly related to the Vygotskian concept of ZPD. Bruner (1985) considers this concept to embody a new development philosophy within a particular sociocultural class. He acknowledged the genius of Vygotsky's work and pointed to consciousness and communication as features of the theory of proximal development that deserve praise (Yaroshevsky, 1989).

The idea of dynamic assessment was developed based on ZPD (Feuerstein et al., 1980). ZPD allows for an alternative to an existing performance problem that could deteriorate for various reasons and fail to measure learning ability. Dynamic assessment targets the change process and jointly builds knowledge and skills by working with more competent instructors or peers (Roth, 1992; Kirschenbaum, 1998). In their book on dynamic testing, Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002) explained that ZPD reflects development by saying that it is not something one can become; it is not the developed ones, but the developing ones. As a result, they subsequently describe assessing these maturing cognitive functions. It is ordinarily performed by establishing a collaborative effort between the

child and others. It can provide a basis for estimating the gap amidst what learners do independently. They perform with the help of others.

Imamura (2018) investigated how a social-mediated interaction with an academic advisor helps learners to self-direct during self-directed learning in the SAC of a university in Japan. As they do, an experienced teacher helps them figure out how to learn things (to learn). This study investigated how students felt about their interviews and how they felt regarding their learning (academic progress). It also looked at the social aspects of education, like “how do students feel about talking with someone about their thoughts and feelings” and “how do students experience their interactions with someone helping them learn?”.

Larkin (2009) found that infants as young as six months old can think about other people’s thoughts. They use this knowledge to learn things faster and explain their reasoning. This happens because of collaborative tasks and conversations with parents or other people. This study examined the peer structure of metacognition in children aged 5-7 years engaged in collaborative writing tasks. Six years 1 and 2 were involved in the project (n=172). Twenty-five hours of video observation data, teacher and researcher reflections, and structured field notes were qualitatively analyzed using ATLAS software. The texts produced during these sessions were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, specifically looking for evidence of textual and metacognitive processes. The results provide evidence of the ability to engage in metacognitive discourse and use metacognition purposively in co-constructing written texts. The relationship between children and their interlocutors influences the impact of predefined literacy. Teachers who ask direct questions to reflect on the writing process do not always favor metacognitive dialogues that develop metacognition and illustrate how young children negotiate task requirements, in general, writing tasks.

In this study, the researchers tried to investigate the most and least factors of socially mediated testing on the learners because most of the other researchers have studied the ZPD theory of Vygotsky, or learning and teaching by socially mediated technique, and their effects on the learner and teachers. No studies about socially mediated testing categorize these factors from the most to the least. As a result, the researchers

tried to organize these factors based on the data that could be gathered.

### 3. Design of the Study

This study follows a quantitative method to investigate the most and the least influential socially-mediated testing factors on learning among university students.

#### 3.1 Participants and setting

Since the sample has to be large, available sampling was used. The participants in this phase included 375 EFL learners studying or finishing their PhD in teaching English at Azad university of Qeshm, Shiraz, and Chabahar maritime university in Sistan and Baluchistan. The sample included some male and some female learners. Regarding their proficiency test, 234 were studying at the high intermediate level, and 141 learners were at advanced levels. The age range was from 29 to 37( $M= 33$ ).

**Table 1:** The Frequency of The Participants' Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	183	48.8	48.8	48.8
	Female	192	51.2	51.2	100
	Total	375	100	100	

**Table 2:** The Frequency of The Participants' Level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	High intermediate	234	62.4	62.4	62.4
	Advanced	141	37.6	37.6	100
	Total	375	100	100	

#### 3.2 Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a researcher-made questionnaire. This questionnaire comprised two parts. The first part included demographic information of the respondents, such as their age, gender,



education, and so on. The second part of the questionnaire had 25 questions. The respondents were required to indicate their attitudes on a pre-coded five-point Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree, with the neutral point being neither disagree nor agree. To ensure the participants had no problems understanding the questions, the items were written in their mother tongue, Persian. It included four different themes: positive points of socially mediated testing (9 items), negative points of socially mediated testing (7 items), learning measurement (7 items), and goals of the teacher (2 items). The reliability of this questionnaire was 0.804, and it was a standard questionnaire.

### **3.3 Data collection & analysis procedures**

This phase consisted of gathering the opinions of the new sample (No. 375) by distributing the validated questionnaire among them. Therefore, enough questionnaires were printed and distributed among students at different levels of proficiency in various branches of the university during the academic semesters of the fall and winter of 2020-2021. Before answering the questions, the researcher gave the participants instructions on how to answer them. She also told them that their answers would be kept private and that the study results would just be used for educational purposes. Filling out the questionnaires took between twenty and twenty-five minutes. Then the questionnaires were gathered, and the responses were coded into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 26 program to be analyzed and interpreted later. After analyzing the data, the researcher interviewed the participants and asked them about their view of SMT.

The researcher used the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to find the most and the least effective factors of socially-mediated testing and the learning factors.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of all the measured variables.

**Table 3:** Descriptive Statistics for The Variables of The Study

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Positive points of SMT	375	2	5	4.208	0.908
Negative points of SMT	375	2	5	3.339	0.981
learning measurement of SMT	375	2	5	3.959	0.780
Goals of the teacher in SMT	375	2	5	4.029	0.761

The mean values of the four variables indicate which factor has the most and which one has the least impact on SMT from the 375 participants' point of view who answered the questionnaire. According to Table 4, the most effective factor is the 'Positive points of SMT' with a mean value of 4.231. Most students have a positive point of view about this kind of exam. They said they could increase their motivation to study for the exam, help their classmates, and create a friendly atmosphere in class.

*12. I think this exam helps us communicate, talk to each other and explain everything we can learn and understand the topic better than before.*

*25. I hate exams .mm.but this kind of exam is funny, and we feel comfortable. We do not need to hide our minds and everything we learn from the topic. We show it to all of our friends without any stress of justice or other things. We help each other comprehend the issue and prepare for the final exam.*

Table 3 shows the 'Goals of the teacher in SMT' that can reach the second level. The mean is 4.049. In this kind of exam, the teachers can achieve their teaching goals, such as recognizing the weaknesses in teaching and trying to solve them or making a good plan for the following sessions or terms according to the students' marks.

*13. Wow. I use it in my class because it can show my students' true scores then I can plan for future sessions in that term. I can understand whether my approach was good or not.*

*19. This exam is an excellent instrument to help the teachers determine whether the students can learn the topic and help the teacher find the weak points and try to improve them.*

'Learning measurement of SMT' can reach third place. The mean is

4.012. It shows that this exam can measure how much the students could learn and help the teacher decide about that course. Most of the students agreed about using this kind of exam. They said we were not stressed and were relaxed, so they could focus on answering the questions.

*17. I like this exam because of many reasons. One of them is about showing the correct score. In this exam, without any stress, I started studying, and, the exam, again, without any pressure, I could answer the questions. This kind of exam can show a real mark on my learning.*

*26. I will use it in my classes .ha..ha.ha you know I want to be a teacher. This exam helps me to guess how many of my students can pass this course and go to the next step and class.*

*16. Wow I love it. It can help me find my weak points and try to improve them for the next session or the final exam. Because in this exam, there weren't any mistakes; everything that happened was about my poor knowledge.*

The last place is for 'Negative points of SMT.' The mean is 3.343. There are a few students who disagreed with this kind of exam. Some of them believed that this kind of exam decreased their motivation because there was cheating in class, and all the classmates tried to help each other to give the correct answer. They said: "This kind of exam can't show the weak points in our learning because we have cheated in class, and if we don't get the answer, our classmates help us to say the correct answer."

*23. I don't have any stress. If I have time, I will study my topic, and if I don't have time, I will repeat the answers of others in the class, whether true or not. I can't understand whether I can learn or not from this exam.*

*14. In this kind of exam, most of the students repeat the answers of the clever student in class, then the teacher may think that all the students can learn the topic very well.*

*1. A more critical issue with cheating is that it can directly get in the way of learning. For instance, students who copy answers to the exam instead of doing them themselves will not learn what they should.*

According to the data obtained from the descriptive statistics of the variables, the most and the least influential factors were determined by exploring the mean for each variable. The following table presents the standards for all eight variables.

**Table 4:** The Ranking of The Four Factors from The Most to The Least Important

Variables	Mean	Significance level	Mean differences
Positive points	4.208	0.000	1.341
Negative points	3.339	0.000	1.263
Learning measurement	3.959	0.000	0.987
Goals of teacher	4.029	0.000	1.251

The table reveals that positive points (M=4.208) are the most influential among the other factors. This kind of exam was accepted by the participants involved in this study. As mentioned before, this factor has nine subcategories. They are ‘Communication,’ ‘Friendly relationship,’ ‘Good competition,’ ‘Classmate teaching,’ ‘ Learning review,’ ‘Funny exam,’ ‘Increase self-esteem,’ ‘Motivate students to study more,’ and ‘ Helping classmates with a friendly mood.’ These subcategories also show that, because of the friendly atmosphere that this exam created in the class, they could be relaxed, have enough time to think about the questions and help their classmates if they did not understand the topic. They can communicate with each other in the target language, improve it, and increase their self-esteem. In the interview, most students said that their teacher taught them to compare their old knowledge with current knowledge and never had any comparison between themselves and other classmates. They also claimed that when they started explaining the topic that their classmates had a little problem understanding, they were proud of themselves and tried to study harder than before because they claimed that at that moment, they thought they are as a teacher to other students. They listened to them carefully. When they explained the topic, it helped them to remember everything they had learned and studied before, and if they did not study well and understand the issue, they could not explain it to other classmates. Then

before the exam, they tried to learn deeply and understand the topic well. Most students in this study claimed that they enjoyed this new exam. They said most of the exams use pen and paper, and most of the time, they should memorize some information and write them on exam day on paper. They said this new exam helped them study the topics deeply, not just remember some information. On the other hand, they believed that they could increase their self-esteem. Because they tried to study harder than before, act as a teacher, and improve their way of speaking and listening in the target language to understand their classmates better.

Second comes 'Goals of teacher' (M=4.029). It consists of two parts: "Planning for future teaching" and "Finding strong and weak points in teaching." Based on the findings in this study, the teacher can use the scores of this exam and design a good lesson plan for the future because the scores are true, and according to these scores also, the teacher can find their faults in teaching and tries to improve, and find a solution to solve these weak points in education.

Third comes 'Learning measurement' (M=3.959). As mentioned before, this study has seven subcategories. "True measurement," "True guess of successful," "True measurement to go upper level," "Compare differences between students," "Measuring weak and strong points in the learning of students," "Giving the motivation to overcome their weak points," and finally "Showing the real scores of the students" are these seven subcategories of this factor. Most of the students who participated in this study claimed that they felt relaxed in this exam because, before the exam, they studied hard and were ready for the exam. During the exam, they had enough time to talk with their friends and change their opinions by discussing the question. If they understood the topic poorly before answering the wrong way, they could correct it and understand it better than answering the question. When they exchanged their ideas about the answer, they could understand the topic better than before and also had a review of the issue. They said they were so motivated about this exam because it was new, and they had a lot of energy during it and tried to find the proper and correct answers. Students often find traditional testing threatening (Dochy and McDowell, 1997).

According to Myyry and Joutsenvirta (2015), there are two types of achievement measurements: test culture and assessment culture. Testing culture reflects the traditional approach to teaching, where teaching and testing are considered separate activities, and education means imparting knowledge to students who memorize and reproduce knowledge. Multiple-choice questions (hereafter, MCQ) are usually used. In an assessment culture, on the other hand, teaching and assessment are integrated, and students actively assess their performance. Learning is a source of meaning, and teachers are seen as mentors, providing opportunities for students to apply their knowledge (Birenbaum, 1996). It has been argued that traditional testing methods are incompatible with goals such as reflective thinking, synthesizing new knowledge from learning materials, criticism, and problem-solving (Dochy and Moerkerke, 1997; Khare and Lam, 2008). Doing so helps students develop into reflective practitioners who can critically reflect on their professional practice. (e.g., Schn, 1983). They believed this exam was a perfect tool to measure their knowledge and show their true score. Based on the correct score, the teacher can have decision-making for the next term or the next session, and also, they can find the strong and weak points of teaching and try to overcome them. This kind of exam also can help the teacher be more familiar with their students and know them better, and based on the student's knowledge, design a lesson plan or course for the future. The findings of this part of the research were the same as the previous studies about the evaluation and the assessment.

The last factor is 'Negative points' ( $M=3.339$ ). This factor, as mentioned before, includes "Poor find weak and strong points in learning," "Poor to find weak and strong points in teaching," "Increased cheating," "Decreased motivation to study," "Decreased sense of competition," "Using in small classes," "Students compare their learning with other classmates." Some students who participated in this study believed that this exam did not have enough ability to find their weak points in learning and teaching. Because all the students cheated on each other, help each other to give the correct answer. Then there was no competition between students because they knew that if they did not study, the other students would help them then they lost their motivation to learn

the topic.

On the other hand, when students tried to show themselves as a teacher and explain the answer to other students, some of them lost their self-esteem, or maybe they did not have enough self-esteem to talk in front of the other students and groups. They did not participate very well in this exam. Some students believed this kind of exam should be used in small classes until the teacher monitors all the students and groups.

Damankesh and Babaii (2015) investigated the effect of high school final examinations on students' test-taking and test-preparation strategy use. Analysis of the verbal protocols obtained from the high school learners revealed that these examinations made students employ some strategies that seemed to negatively influence their learning by directing them toward a measurement-driven approach to learning. These factors were anxiety, lack of motivation or self-esteem, and nervousness. Other studies also indicate some negative factors in new kinds of evaluation that could affect the learning and the score of assessment, such as: "Poor to find weak and strong points in teaching," "cheating among the students," "demotivation students," "lack of competition," and "anxiety" (Carleton, McCreary, Norton, and Asmundson, 2006; Collins, Westra, Dozois, Stewart, 2005; Winton, Clark, Edelman, 1995). The results of the previous study were the same as this research.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

As mentioned, positive points ( $M=4.208$ ) are the most influential among the other factors. This factor shows that this kind of exam was accepted by the participants involved in this study. The least factor is 'Negative points' ( $M=3.339$ ). Some students said this exam did not help them find their weak learning points. They thought that cheating in class distracted them, and they were confused. They claimed that there was no competition among students because they knew that if they did not study, the other students would help them then they lost their motivation to learn the topic. This part of the results is consistent with Myyry and Joutsenvirta (2015), who investigated what students described as focusing on understanding rather than memorization when preparing for

online exams. About one-fifth also claimed that answering questions of this type on the exam facilitated deep learning and advanced information processing, and one-third said their knowledge was better in deep understanding than surface learning. I felt that it represents, furthermore, in addition to recognizing that the exams are different, the exam situation of answering questions seems to have stimulated the students' thinking and supported deep learning. (Guligers et al., 2006).

To the researchers' knowledge, not enough research has been carried out in Iran about SMT, and some solutions are presented based on the quantitative phase findings. The results of this study can shed light on the issue of learning in foreign contexts and how it might have differed from that of English as second language contexts. There are a lot of topics in testing and new ways of testing that other countries are using, but in Iran, the teachers do not use them and are not familiar with these new forms of testing. The educational system (Universities and schools) also, could benefit from the results of this study directly, and parents of the students indirectly, since the score of the students can show them how much they could learn in schools or universities and help them decide for the future. For the subsequent studies, researchers can use Longitudinal case studies because these studies can monitor changes in learners' learning behavior; other investigative experiments can be conducted to examine whether the proposed model can predict English language performance among students of different levels.

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