



Assessment of Young Learners of English *Keeping Track without Turning Them Off* By Shelagh Rixon

A major theme of this colloquium is motivation and I shall therefore be looking at assessment from the point of view of its implications for children's short and long term motivation.

We need to work from the same general sets of definitions and principles as for any discussion of assessment, but I shall be highlighting those areas which directly affect classroom work and classroom relations.

Definitions and examples

It is clearer and more convenient in English to keep the terms Assessment and Evaluation distinct, although in other languages their equivalents are sometimes used interchangeably.

- **Assessment** is any systematic way of finding out about **people's** levels of knowledge or skills, in our case the people are Young Language Learners.
- **Evaluation** concerns systematic ways of finding out about the value and impact of **processes and things** such as teaching programmes, colloquium talks [!], and teaching materials.

Purposes for Assessment

Assessment can take place for different purposes:

Formative purposes - directed towards helping teachers to adjust their teaching in order to support the learners better, or towards advising learners how to adjust their own approaches - and this would take place throughout a course of teaching.

and/or

Summative purposes - to see how well learners have done at the end of a period of teaching. The results of summative assessment are often used to affect learners' chances (e.g. selection or rejection for the next stage of learning, deciding who wins the prize, who gets the scholarship money).

Both formative and summative assessment can have an impact on children's motivation, but in different ways. Formative assessment is more likely to be associated with positive feelings by learners towards the subject studied, while summative assessment need not be associated with too many negative feelings if it is felt to be 'fair' in some of the ways discussed below.

Assessment processes

Assessment can involve a variety of different processes. These may include conventional testing but assessment processes are by no means limited to this.

Assessment processes can include the following:

- observation and systematic record-keeping of learners during everyday normal learning activities
- careful scrutiny of children's course work, including homework
- possible special events such as pencil and paper tests or oral interviews.
- compilation by the children of a portfolio of work that they have chosen to represent their achievements over a period [a term, a year]
- self-assessment by the learners themselves as part of the information collected
- discussion between the teacher and learners about work produced or chosen, for example, for a portfolio and the learners' reasons for choosing the samples of their work.

Different assessment cultures

Different societies have different practices and different attitudes towards basic matters such as who receives the results of different types of assessment and how they are reported.

Who gets and uses assessment results?

- The teacher?
- The teacher and the school administration?
- The teacher, the school administration and the education authorities?
- The parents?
- The children?

How achievements are reported – what is a good result?

- Good for that particular child, compared with past performance or perceived ability. One child's 'good' may therefore be the same in absolute terms as another child's 'excellent'. This style of reporting fits best with summative school reports on general progress and achievements. Not all teaching cultures approve of this 'ipsative' style of reporting achievement. Children are not put into competition, but it may be seen as unfair that a high achieving child is 'marked down' compared with another who may achieve less but be trying harder.
- Good because the child has met the required criteria. Children are not put into competition with one another. In theory, all children in the class could get a 'good' if they meet the criteria.
- Good because the child's achievement is openly expressed as being better than that of other children. Here, children are in competition with one another.
- Good in parts. Here the assessor arrives at a description of a learner's ability which brings out special strengths as well as areas of need and difficulty. Children are not put into competition with one another and the aim here is formative – to help the learner adjust his or her actions.

Some other big issues

Child-friendliness and the differences in how adults see assessment

What suits adults in assessment may very well not suit children at all. My research in Italy shows how differently children tackled standard oral elicitation tasks such as 'Find the Difference' and how differently they saw assessment in general. Extracts from interviews with focus groups of these children will be used to illustrate these points.

Transparency

This means that everybody concerned understands how decisions are reached and has access to the means by which they are reached. A lack of transparency can lead to a lack of trust which in turn can lead to lowered motivation. If children don't know what they must do to 'do better' in a school subject it is hard to see how they can maintain their interest.

Compatibility with practices in the rest of the curriculum

The most appropriate means of assessing language in children may also be somewhat unfamiliar to teachers, children [and parents!] used to the models of assessment that might exist in other curriculum areas. We may have to face the fact that in some contexts what seem to be the 'best' EYL assessment means may not yet be widely acceptable.

Feasibility

Assessment procedures need to be do-able in reasonable amounts of time that do not interfere with teaching too greatly, and in ways that do not take up too much of the teacher's time to devise and analyse, and which also do not take up too much class time which might be better spent on learning.

Conclusion

Finding 'fair' solutions to assessing Young Learners among all these competing principles is by no means easy. Finding solutions that positively affect children's motivation is even more tricky, yet absolutely vital. Some attempted answers to these conundrums will be presented during the session and will involve means such as

- individual portfolio compilation
- individual and group self-assessment
- techniques for eliciting the best performance from children being assessed
- means of making observation of children's efforts more reliable and less of a burden

Suggested reading list

Books and Collections of articles and papers

Allen, D. (ed.) (1995) *Entry Points - papers from a Symposium of the Research, Testing and Young Learners Special Interest Groups* Cambridge 17th – 18th March 1995 Whitstable, IATEFL.

Clapham, C. and Corson, D. (eds.) (1997) *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* Volume 7, Language Testing and Assessment, Dordrecht. The Netherlands, Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Ioannou-Georgiou, S, and Pavlou, P, 2003, *Assessing Young Learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Rea-Dickins, P. (ed.) (2000) *Language Testing* Volume 17 no 2, special issue, Assessing Young Language Learners.

Specially recommended single papers and chapters

Cameron, L. (2001) *Assessment and Language Learning* in Cameron, L. Teaching Languages to Young Learners, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Deci, E. L., and Ryan R. M. (1985) *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behaviour* NY: Plenum Press.

Dossena, M, (1997) *Testing oral production at primary level: what means for what ends?* in A.C. McLean [ed] SIG Selections 1997, Special Interests in ELT, Whitstable, IATEFL: pp 110-114

Hasselgren, A. (2000) *The Assessment of the English Ability of Young Learners in Norwegian Schools: an innovative approach* in Rea-Dickins (ed.) (2000).

Johnstone, R. (2000) *Context-sensitive Assessment of Foreign Language in Primary (Elementary) and early Secondary Education: Scotland and the European Experience* in Rea-Dickins (ed.) (2000).

Rea-Dickins, P and Rixon, S, 1997, *The Assessment of Young Learners of English as a Foreign Language* in Clapham, C and Corson, D (eds.) pp. 151-161.

Rea-Dickins, P. and Gardner, S. (2000) *Snares and Silver Bullets: Disentangling the Construct of Formative Assessment* in Rea-Dickins (ed.) (2000).

Smith, K. (1995) *Assessing and Testing Young Learners: Can we? Should we?* in Allen, D. (ed.) pp. 1-10.

Smith, K. (2002) *Learner Portfolios* English Teaching Professional, Issue 22, January 2002