Assessing young learners
A toolkit for teacher development

Assessing young learners

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- This module provides an overview of the issues of assessing English as a foreign language for young learners.

- In this module we will explore why assessing young learners might be challenging and offer some practical suggestions.

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This module is aimed at:

- Teachers of English as a foreign language to young learners

- In-service teachers

Overview

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English is taught to learners at an ever earlier stage of their education.

Parents often attach a great deal of importance to how well their children are progressing in English.

This situation presents teachers with the challenge of having to assess young learners.

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Learning outcomes

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By the end of this module you will have developed:

- an awareness of the characteristics of assessing young learners.

- an awareness of research projects which suggest best practice in assessing young learners.

- an awareness of some suggestions to try in your practice.

Assessing young learners - video

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Watch this video, which introduces the topic of assessing young learners.

As you watch, answer the following questions:

*   Young learners are divided into three age groups – what are they?

*   What are the different ways to assess the three groups?

*   Why is fun important for all ages?

*   [Watch the video](#).

Commentary

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- So, we have seen that young learners can be viewed as being made up of three groups. Each group has its own strengths and challenges.

- Fun is important for learners of all ages and we should think very carefully before using assessments created for adults with young learners.

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How are young learners being assessed?

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- How do you assess the young learners you teach?

- Make a list of all the ways you assess young learners.

Think about both classroom tests and those created by an external authority.

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How are young learners being assessed?

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- Two researchers asked teachers how they assessed their young learners (Rea-Dickins and Rixon, 1999).

- What methods do you think teachers used?

- Check your ideas against those found by the researchers. These are shown on the following slide.

How are young learners being assessed?

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Teachers said they used:

- Grammar and vocabulary tests
- Single sentence exercises
- Gap-filling
- Vocabulary matching
- Restricted dialogues to test speaking

- Listening skills were not mentioned

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Commentary

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- There is a risk that the types of tasks and tests described may not be the best in terms of motivating and stimulating young learners.

- They might be cognitively beyond young learners.

- These tasks could be boring for young learners and may affect their enjoyment of learning English.

Why do we need to assess young learners?

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So, why do we need to assess young learners?

- List the different reasons for assessing young learners.

- Compare your list with the ones described on the following two slides.

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Purposes of classroom assessment (McKay 2006)

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- We can assess learners at the start of the year to identify our students' strengths and weaknesses.

- During the year we can use the results of tests to help us make decisions about what to teach next and what we need to revise.

- As teachers of young learners we collect information about children to share with parents and, of course, with the children themselves.

Purposes of classroom assessment (McKay 2006)

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- Teachers use assessments to provide evidence of student progress.

- These assessments can be required by local authorities and teachers must base their assessments on a local or national curriculum.

- Classroom assessment can also be summative. Children can be given a mark or a grade at the end of the school year.

Assessing the four language skills

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We often think about assessing the four language skills – speaking, listening, reading, writing.

- Listen to Claire talking about the challenges of testing the four skills. Do her points reflect your experiences?

- Play the audio.

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Commentary

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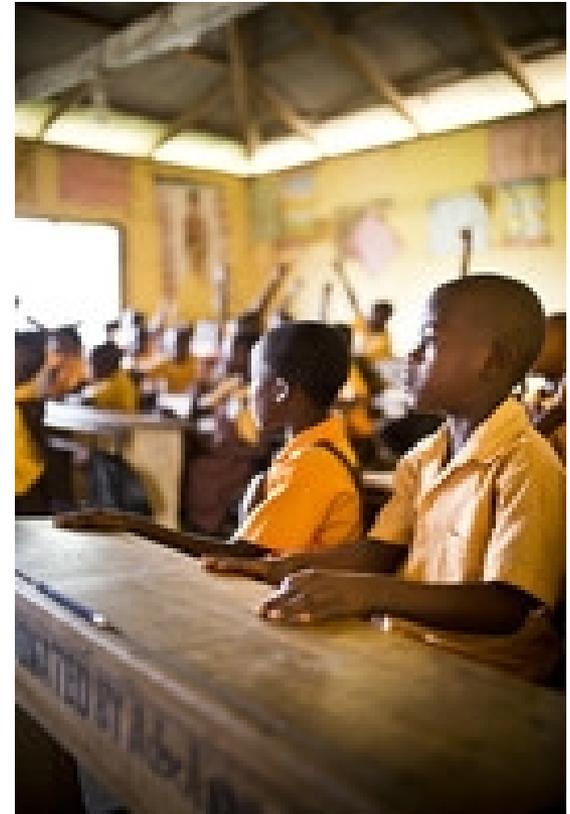
- Claire mentioned that she finds it hard think of interesting and age-appropriate tasks.

- She stated that she tended to use the same activities.

- She stated a desire to have tasks which integrated the four skills.

Now we will look at suggested techniques for testing the four skills both as individual skills and together.

Types of writing assessment tasks (McKay, 2006)

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- Writing in speech bubbles

- Writing in response to a picture

- Completing a story

- Re-forming a text

Writing criteria

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When assessing writing you need to think about the criteria you use. The criteria may be given to you by your school or local authority.

- Do you have clear criteria for how to assess your pupils' writing?

- Do you share these with your pupils and their parents?

- Do you give writing tasks that let your pupils demonstrate that they have the abilities you are assessing them on?

- Does your feedback reflect these criteria?

- Do you give corrective feedback that pupils can really benefit from?

Types of reading assessment tasks (McKay 2006)

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- 'Read-and-do' tasks

- Reading and retelling

- 'Read-and-do' tasks requiring a short written answer

- Reading and picture-matching

- Reading and completing charts – information transfer
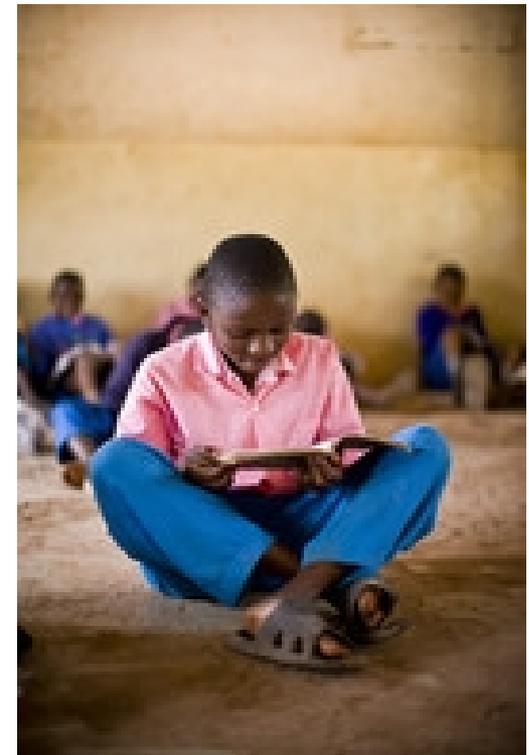
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Reflect

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- Do your pupils have the opportunity to read texts other than those included in the textbook?

- Have you tried assessing the reading of the children you teach? If so, what methods have you used?

- Could the methods suggested here broaden your assessment practice?

Types of oral assessment tasks for young learners (Mackay, 2006)

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Young learner speaking can be assessed using the following techniques:

- News telling – what they have done recently

- Story telling – supported with pictures

- Picture talks

- Categorisation tasks – for example, the children could divide pictures of animals into two groups – those which hibernate and those that do not. These tasks can integrate learning from other school lessons such as science.

- Oral presentations – supported with pictures or objects

Reflection task

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- Develop an oral assessment task for a group of 7 year old children who have been learning English as foreign language for 1 year.

- Think about the following points:

  - Level of language proficiency
  - Level of confidence with the language
  - Topics which have been recently covered in class
  - How long the task should take
  - How will the task be marked?
  - Will the task be completed in groups or individually?
  - How will the results of the assessment be used?
  - What scaffolding (support) will the children need to complete the task?

Types of tasks for assessing listening

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- Listen-and-do – responding through actions, the responses are non-verbal and minimal.

- Action tasks – children could be asked to draw something or build something. The responses are more complicated than those elicited through listen-and-do tasks.

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- Total physical response tasks – the prompts in these tasks are requests or commands. The requests can be simple, such as 'stand up and then sit down'. Or they can be composed of a series of more complicated instructions.

Types of tasks for assessing listening

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Here are some question types for assessing listening:

- True/false tasks

- Aural cloze – words are deleted, which the students complete. The teacher reads the complete text once. Then the teacher reads the text again with items from a particular word category deleted. The teacher should hum to indicate the gaps in the text. The number of gaps should be more limited than in a written cloze due to the limited memory span of children.

- Noting down specific information

- Completing grids and charts

- Matching tasks

- Spot the mistake

Reflection task

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- Devise a listening test for a group of 9 year old EFL learners.

- Think about the following points:
  - Level of language proficiency
  - Level of confidence with the language
  - The source of the listening material
  - How long the task should take
  - How will the task be marked?
  - Will the task be completed in groups or individually?
  - How will the results of the assessment be used?
  - What scaffolding will the children need to complete the task?
  - What type of listening skill is the target of the test?
  - Does the test use written or physical response?

Ways to assess young learners without using a test

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So, how can we assess young learners without giving them a test?
How can we integrate assessment into classroom activity?

- Listen to Maria talking about approaches to classroom assessment. What are the four approaches mentioned?

- [Play](#) the audio.

We will now look in more detail at each approach.

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Other ways to assess: Observation

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Teachers can observe young learners in the classroom.

- Observation is non-intrusive and very flexible.

- Teachers can assess children in a variety of situations e.g. working alone, groups or pairs.

- Observation checklists can be created or found in coursebooks. (Pinter, 2006)

Other ways to assess:
Self-assessment

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- Children can be encouraged to assess themselves as part of a learner-centred approach.

- Read about how this teacher uses coursebook tests for self-assessment:

[TeachingEnglish article: 'Ongoing assessment - fun not fear!'](#)

Other ways to assess:
Portfolio

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- A portfolio is a collection of a student's work. It can include a variety of work.

- A portfolio can be a physical folder or it can be digital.

- A digital portfolio allows children to include a wide range of materials.

- It is important for the children understand the selection criteria.

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Other ways to assess: Portfolio

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- Learners can find creating a portfolio motivating.

- It can also help them to appreciate what they are good at.

- Portfolios can promote student ownership of the learning process.

- The disadvantage for teachers can be the amount of marking which portfolios can generate.

Other ways to assess:
Project work

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- Project work can combine all four language skills. It can be motivating for weaker students because of the opportunity to learn from classmates.

- At the same time it can motivate stronger learners as they have a chance to display knowledge and skills.

## Other ways to assess:
Project work

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- Project work can be suitable for mixed-ability classes. It can provide an opportunity for children to display non-linguistic strengths.

- However, it can be difficult to assign grades to project work because of the need to acknowledge both individual work and group effort.

Large-scale tests

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- Do the children you teach take large-scale tests?

- What are the advantages of such tests?

- What are the disadvantages?

- Compare your list with those included in the following slides.
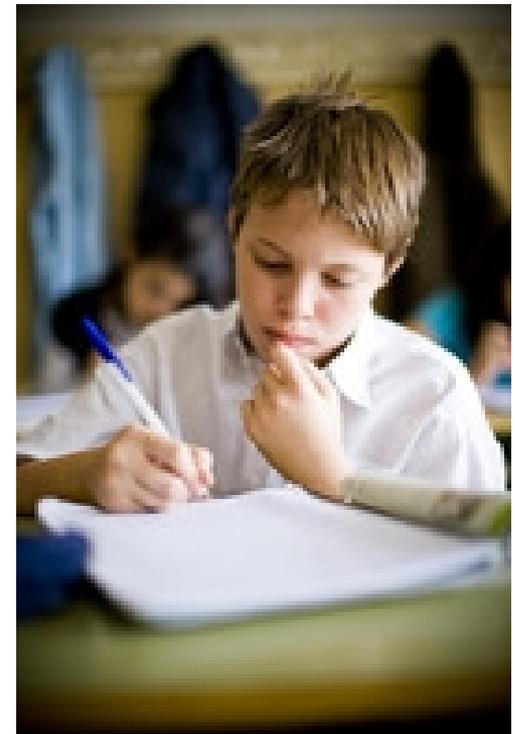
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Problems with large-scale tests

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- They do not provide feedback for test takers to improve their learning.

- Shohamy (2001) argues that tests enable centralised bodies to control the content of education.

- They do not reflect the full range of a child's behaviour.

- Young learners progress at different rates and they should not be compared with each other.

- Negative impact on teaching and learning.

- Teaching according to the content of the test.

- Children miss real experiences with the language.

- Children may not understand the purpose of the test or be able to concentrate for enough time.

CEFR and young learners

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- The Council of Europe Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was originally designed for adults, and its descriptors clearly reflect the language and the world of grown-ups.

- Studies (for example, Hasselgreen and Moe 2006) have lent support to the claim that levels beyond B1 are beyond the cognitive reach of children.

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CEFR and young learners

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With a maximum of three of its six levels spanning several years of primary school learning, the movement from one level to another is a very slow process, and does not show the progress of a child, which can be demotivating.

An example of good practice

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As we have seen in this module, assessing young learners can be full of challenges.

- Here is an example of [a project](#) which we feel gets it right.

- We recommend you look at the website and read the handbook. It provides sound principles on which to organise assessment and how the CEFR can be integrated into the assessment of young learners.

Conclusions

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In this module we have looked at the challenges of assessing young learners.

We have also explored practical approaches to assessment.

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Finally, we have looked at an example of best practice.

We hope you now feel better prepared to assess young learners.

References

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- Shohamy, E. (2001). Democratic assessment as an alternative. Language Testing, 18(4), 373-391. doi:10.1191/026553201682430094

What next?

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You have now finished these materials on assessing young learners. We hope you have found them useful and enjoyable.

If you are interested in learning more about assessment, please look at our other materials on:

- Assessment for Learning

- CEFR and assessing level

- Language assessment for teachers

- Assessment resources

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