

ASSESSMENT OF YOUNG LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

(Does it cater for Amazing Young Minds or are too many Tired Old Minds working on it?)

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This is a summary of the paper I gave at the Amazing Young Minds conference

In the first part of the session, I raised some issues about assessing young learners and see how they fit into people's perceptions and experiences of teaching young learners in different countries. In the second, we took a look at some of the techniques of assessment that have been experimented with around the world to see if they offered some good ideas for development.

Definitions and examples

Assessment is a wider concept than 'testing' and a different thing from Evaluation. For me the following definition works well:

'Any systematic way of finding out about learners' level of knowledge or skills'

Systematic ways can include the following:

- Observation and systematic record-keeping of learners during everyday normal learning activities
- collection and scrutiny of children's course work
- possible special 'set-piece' events such as pencil and paper tests.

Assessment can be for a number of different purposes

- formative purposes (directed towards helping you to adjust your own teaching 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 (selection or rejection for the next stage of learning, deciding who's 'top', a report to the children's next teacher/school).

Different assessment 'cultures'

Different societies seem to vary in their practices and attitudes towards basic issues such as who receives the results of assessment and how they are reported. Some of the variations I have found are summarised in the list below.

WHO GETS AND USES ASSESSMENT RESULTS?

- Nobody except the teacher
- The teacher and the school administration
- The teacher, the school administration and the education authorities
- The parents?
- The children

Different teaching cultures also vary over what is considered to be success in an assessment 'event'. Number 1, in the list below, The 'ipsistic' / 'good for that child compared with his or her previous performance' judgement is one that we may all be familiar with when writing a verbal report on a child, but in some cultures this is 'translated' also into a letter or numerical grade. So for example child 1 who has struggled and produced medium quality work after heroic efforts might in some cultures be awarded an 'A' whereas his or her companion who is perceived as being able to achieve good standards effortlessly might be given a punitive 'B' for work at the same or slightly higher standard. If this offends you it means that you do not share the values of this particular assessment culture. Many assessment cultures are still interested in who is 'top' as in number 3. Sadly for most parents who care deeply where their child figures on this particular ladder of success, we know that not everyone can be 'top'. Number 2, in which everyone can gain praise and receive a good grade provided that they meet certain criteria, seems healthier for the children themselves and more likely to focus teachers' efforts on getting everyone 'there'. The criteria themselves can provide useful guidance as to what is to be taught, whereas in the raw world of no. 3 it is easy to lose sight of what it is important to teach, because one way or another someone is always going to be 'top' whether or not they are being asked to do anything worthwhile.

WHAT IS A 'GOOD' RESULT?

1. Good for that child, compared with past performance, perceived ability ['Ipsistic']
2. Good because the child has met the required criteria
3. Good because the child has 'done better' than others
4. Good because the teacher's description of his/her performance has brought out special strengths as well as areas of need and difficulty

Some other big issues

Transparency

If summative assessment results are being used to influence children's chances (e.g. when they change schools) it is of course vital that they should be based on good evidence. Not only that, they need to be seen to be based on good evidence (parents, authorities) in the principle of transparency. This means that to be safe, the

assessment needs to be traceable/visible. This might suggest 'pencil and paper' testing, but not necessarily. Less intrusive informal methods of assessment have many advantages but they are inherently less transparent, and the danger of biased judgements or perception of bias is one always to be aware of.

So, the burning issue is: how to ensure that less formalised methods of assessment are as transparent as possible?

Compatibility

Compatibility with assessment in other parts of the school curriculum. Assessment procedures used for school English need to be recognisable or at least not too exotic compared with those for other curriculum subjects. However, language proficiency is a complicated construct. It involves an element of knowledge, but is strongly connected with the ability to operate a variety of complex skills. That means that the most appropriate means of assessing language in children may also be somewhat unfamiliar to teachers and children used to the 'handling bits of knowledge' model of assessment that might exist in other curriculum areas.

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 precious time to devise or to analyse. There are documented cases of countries in which following the 'normal' procedure of testing once a week (see 'compatibility' above) has halted teaching to the extent that progress through textbooks has taken more than twice as long as intended.

Child-friendliness

This is a crucial area. Procedures that are well known for older learners are not all suitable for younger ones. There is much work left to be done in the field of finding imaginative and possibly even playful ways of allowing children to show what they can do. The serial mystery story of the 'Missing Elephant' used in Norway and described in the article by Hasselgren is a very good example of the type of thing that can be achieved. I have recently also heard of ingenious role plays involving children being given the chance to produce known chunks of language in new contexts in response to a teacher playing one of the roles, for example Winnie the Witch is showing the child guest round her castle to elicit comments from the child on the rooms.

Adults' versus children's perceptions of assessment

We all need to feel competent and to be self-determined – to feel that we can make choices. It is important also to see success and failure from a child's point of view. It is not just a question of a 'good' result increasing motivation but of the way in which the children are enabled to see that the results are actually linkable to actions on their part rather than just 'luck' or the teacher's whim.

The work by Deci and Ryan on attributions of success or failure is important in this area

- success
 - attributed to good luck, and the fact that the task is ‘too easy’, (bad for self-esteem)
 - attributed to hard work and a systematic approach (good for self-esteem)
- failure
 - attributed to lack of preparation, task being too difficult, being badly taught (self-valuing reasons)
 - attributed to bad luck, being ‘slow’/dyslexic, being bad at... (self-devaluing reasons)

Deci and Ryan claim that it is very difficult to motivate children if they have no control over the outcome, and they will go to many lengths to avoid the activity.

Technical details of assessment procedures

Many EYL teachers especially ‘new’ ones are very unclear about the technical side of assessment. During the session we looked at several simply remedied ‘bad’ testing items. For example, the very popular matching task [pictures to words, first halves of sentences to their completions] can be answered by elimination once the child is sure of one or two answers. It also ‘forces’ results which are either mostly right or disastrously wrong since a mistake, once made will be compounded as future choices are limited by it.

Assessment and Evaluation

Administrators who want to evaluate a Young Learner’s programme are often looking for ‘objective’ proofs of the benefits of the enterprise. There is a tendency to see assessment results as the ‘best’ kind of evidence, and to pay less attention to other instruments such as observation or interview data with children and teachers. Tests linked with Evaluation programmes can come with the danger of the ‘glass ceiling’ effect. Some that I have seen are so unchallenging that most pupils are scoring high. This may seem good news in a climate of anxiety to demonstrate success, but if such tests do not allow the full range of achievement to show itself precious information is being lost.

The effects of international exams for Young Learners

Parents are also keen for evidence of achievement but also possibly avid for trophies of success. It is important for responsible exam providers to steer the difficult path between this and creating exams which are demotivating because they discriminate too strictly. A very important issue is that exams have exam syllabuses and these can have very strong effects not only on the teaching of Young Learners but possibly on the contents of future published materials. We need to ask how the exam boards arrived at their syllabuses in the first place. A major source in at least one case was existing YL textbooks. There seems to be the danger of a ‘closed and possibly vicious circle’ here.

Examples were shown during the talk and many of them were drawn from publications listed in the following reading list.

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Suggested reading list of sources

Collections of articles and papers

1. 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.
2. Clapham, C. and Corson, D. (eds.) (1997) *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* Volume 7, Language Testing and Assessment, Dordrecht. The Netherlands, Kluwer Academic Publishers.
3. Rea-Dickins, P. (ed.) (2000) *Language Testing* Volume 17 no 2, special issue, Assessing Young Language Learners.
4. Rixon, S. (ed.) (1999) *Young Learners of English: some research perspectives* Harlow, Longman.

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.

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 Rixon, S. (1999) *The Assessment of Young Learners: reasons and means* in Rixon (ed.).

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.