Assessing Young Learners

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Introduction

Young language learners (YLLs): are defined here as being primary school pupils up to about 12 years who are learning a second, additional or foreign language. This group includes children attending school where the language of instruction is not their L1, as well as those studying another language as a school subject. The assessment of YLLs is distinct in many ways from that of older learners, who for a long time comprised the 'default' subjects in the literature and research in language assessment. This is due to both the characteristics of YLLs themselves and the assessment they are most often subjected to, being largely informal and formative in purpose.

Historical perspectives

During the 1990s, concern for the effects of national language testing in schools, among younger pupils, was voiced, e.g. Shohamy (1997). In 2000, a special issue of Language Testing (17) was devoted to YLLs. In her editorial, Rea-Dickins comments: 'In spite of the lack of formal reporting in the area of assessment of young language learners, the field is active in several ways.' (Rea-Dickins, 2000: 245) This recognition of YLL assessment as a field of research went hand in hand with the emergence of 'alternative assessment' In his editorial, McNamara cites two defining characteristics of papers which he deemed as belonging to the area alternative assessment: 1-They articulated the theoretical challenge to mainstream interests in testing research 2-They focused on classroom contexts of assessment, involving either adult or school-based learners

In 2006, McKay's seminal book on the assessment of YLLs, she identifies four main purposes for research into YLL assessment:

1- to investigate and share information about current assessment practices

2- to find ways to ensure fair and valid assessment tasks and procedures

3- to find out more about the nature of young learner language proficiency and language growth

4- to investigate and improve the impact of assessment on young language learners, their families, their teacher and their school.

Certain of these areas have attracted more research than others, e.g. the second area; Mackay maintains: "Assessment carried out by the teacher in the classroom is a rapidly growing area of research" ...Research interest in this area has developed as standard documents require teacher based assessment and reporting .Reports of YLL research have emerged as a trickle rather than a flood. Similarly, articles on YLL research rarely focus on assessment, as can be illustrated in Moon and Nikolov's (2000) collection of research articles on the teaching of English to YLLs, where not one article addresses this topic. The traditional university structure in some countries

(such as Scandinavian countries) whereby postgraduate students were unlikely to enter primary education, is yielding to more open systems, offering postgraduate studies with a didactic focus for trained teachers.

Organizations such as EALTA (European Association for Language Testing and Assessment) are explicitly catering for school teachers in their events. In the USA, the No Child Left Behind legislation has led to a considerable research focus on English language tests for young learners, as exemplified in Ferrara (2008). The widespread adoption of the Council of Europe's European Language Portfolio in primary schools has inspired researchers, e.g. Little (2009). And a tendency for formal language learning to start earlier, combined with increased mobility and immigration, has meant that there are many more YLLs to assess.

Critical issues and topics, and how recent research has shed light on these

A number of critical issues impact on the assessment of YLLs.

1- The first and most central is the complex nature of children themselves.

2- The second involves the language skills we can expect YLLs to acquire.

3- The third takes account of the situation of the teachers of YLLs, and their competence in language assessment. Some less obvious issues, but still deserving of mention, include

4- the effect of language assessment policy on the status of languages 5- the role of digital media in assessment 6- the use of assessment in SLA research.

Young learners themselves

Young learners are generally rather different from adults. This is perhaps most apparent in their behaviour (good and bad), reactions, interactions, emotion and concentration spans. It also manifests itself in what they are capable of, linguistically and cognitively, raising the question of how much support children should be given in the assessment process. These characteristics have particular repercussions for any tasks we can expect them to do as part of an assessment process. It has also to be borne in mind that age and maturity play a great part in the extent to which these characteristics apply, and the teacher has to judge this for each child. Some of the characteristics of YLLs identified by Hasselgreen (2000) are: 1-] they have a particular need and capacity for play, fantasy and fun; 2-they have a relatively short attention span; 3- they are at a stage when daring to use their language is vital, and any sense of 'failure' could be particularly detrimental.

Cameron (2001) warns of tasks placing demands – linguistic and otherwise that may prevent a child from performing optimally; she lists six such demands:

1- cognitive (involving the degree of contextualization of the language and the child's readiness to deal with the concepts involved)

2- language (involving the familiarity/complexity of the language used, and the 'skills' involved, such as reading or conversing)

3- interactional (involving the child's ability to take part in the interactions involved)

4- metalinguistic (involving the 'technical' language used about the task)

5- involvement (involving factors such as the time needed, the degree of interest etc., which may influence the level of engagement with the task)

6- physical (involving any actions needed, or sitting still, as well as motor skills required)

A teacher needs to consider these demands when designing and giving tasks to children, and in deciding what level of support to give

Clearly, the non-linguistic demands should be reduced to a minimum if we are primarily interested in assessing the child's language, but the question arises of how much linguistic support we should give. From the perspective of Vygotsky (1962), the child will perform best when supported by a helpful adult, suggesting that assessment may benefit from children performing in interaction with the teacher. However, the situation is far from clear cut. Oliver et al. (2008) gave two groups of children (10–12 years and 5–7 years) information-gap and picture-based oral activities, with pre-task instructions. For some tasks the pupils also received teacher guidance during the task. The authors demonstrate that the older children (ages 10–12) appeared better able to respond and adapt to teacher input while doing a task than the 5–7 year olds, who appeared best left to their own devices, and who actually performed significantly less well with teacher support. In formative assessment, classroom interactions play a major role, both in eliciting what a child knows, or can do, and in giving feedback

It is posited that a child who attributes success to stable factors, such as high ability, rather than unstable factors, such as luck or effort, will have higher expectations and confidence. On the other hand, if failure is attributed to stable factors, such as ability, this can result in a lowering of expectations and self-esteem. So a child who performs badly on a task, but is praised for trying hard may suffer more, in terms of self-esteem, than one who is admonished for not making an effort.

Goals are distinguished as belonging to two orientations:

1- learning goals, where the pupil aims to learn or master something
2- performance goals, where the aim is to get a favorable judgment on his/her Performance.

- Children who are generally oriented towards learning goals will choose challenging tasks, make every effort to succeed and not be put off by the prospect of failing. They will accumulate learning from the task.
- Children who are oriented towards performance goals will avoid or even sabotage challenging tasks. They will attribute failure to low ability, and will give up easily

The language skills we can expect YLLs to acquire:

The language skills we can expect a YLL to acquire vary considerably. Factors such as age/maturity, 'world experience' and L1 literacy are among those that are particularly influential on YLL ability The question of how to describe the language ability of children has been the subject of some major research and development work in the past decade, and two distinct areas are identified:

(1) where the language is a second, or additional language, and the language of mainstream schooling;

(2) where the language is taught as a foreign language and not used as the main language of instruction.

(1)The first area is perhaps the most pressing one; not mastering the language can have implications for every aspect of school life, and educational success generally. A special issue of Educational Assessment (13: 2, 2008) is devoted to the assessment of English language learners in the context of the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislative Act of 2002, in the United States. The NCLB Act requires 'all states to assess the English proficiency of English language learners each year', and, further, 'to measure the annual growth of students' English language development in reading, listening, writing and speaking and in comprehension towards full English proficiency' (Ferrara, 2008: 132)

Ferarra describes the design of the speaking component of one such assessment tool, ELDA (the English Language Development Assessment). ELDA has separate assessment components for each skill, at three grade clusters: 3–5, 6–8 and 9–12. The content of the tests are taken from three academic areas:

English language arts, maths, science and technology as well as one nonacademic topic. Proficiency is defined at five levels, and tasks are designed for each of the grade clusters Mackay lists some of the problems and outlines requirements for designing ESL standards, which include separate descriptors for younger learners, which are appropriate to the purpose of ESL assessment and which 'convey a sense of what we know about second language learning of school ESL learners in mainstream contexts.

(NLLIA) ESL Bandscales, presented in Mackay (2006). Developed in 1994, these Bandscales are developed for three distinct age groups, approximately 5–7, 8–11 and 12–18 years. The scales are made of up of holistic descriptors for reading, writing, speaking and listening, with eight levels, from beginning to near native. They 'include reminders about the characteristics of second language acquisition of young learners and reminders about the role of the first language in second language learning. They reflect the cognitive demand and the maturity of each broad age group, and also the types of tasks that young learners are expected to carry out in the mainstream classroom' (Mackay, 2006: 311).

The second area, involving foreign language assessment, has until relatively recent been more straightforward. School curricula were traditionally able to define aims which assumed a grade-related progression from beginner to higher levels. the Council of Europe (1998) encourages its members to use the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) and its offshoot, the European Language Portfolio (ELP), Each of these instruments was originally designed for adults, and while the CEFR remains in a standard form, the ELP now exists in numerous forms, for adults and YLLs, across Europe An advantage of using the CEFR as a basis for describing the language ability of YLLs, whether in ELPs or as scales of descriptors, is that they can ideally be used regardless of the L2 being assessed..

The situation of the teachers of YLLs, and of their competence in language assessment

in a survey conducted by EALTA in 2004 (Hasselgreen et al., 2004) they were clearly able to identify areas in which they had need of training. The most notable were:

1- using ELP/other portfolios

2- conducting peer/self assessment

3- interpreting results and giving feedback

4- carrying out informal continuous assessment.

Edelenbos and Kubanek-German (2004) investigate the extent to which primary school language teachers demonstrate skills in diagnosing pupils' weaknesses and strengths, and conclude that support and material are needed in order to build this competence. They maintain this

competence includes the teacher's skill in performing certain activities, including such diverse ones as the ability to:

1- guess what a child wants to say from his/her fragmentary and possibly linguistically infelicitous utterances, to complete them or motivate the child to do this;

2- give concrete examples of an individual child's language growth over a period of, for example, 3 months;

3- recognize from a child's face if he/she has understood an instruction or a key point in a story