

## ASSESSING YOUNG LEARNERS LANGUAGE SKILLS

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### ANNOTATION

The last two decades have witnessed a marked increase in the teaching of English as a foreign language at the primary level in many countries. This trend has come at a time when the field of EFL/ESL is witnessing a notable shift from structural teaching approaches to communicative, humanistic, and learner-centered approaches.

**Keywords:** method, learner, language skills, EFL, ESL, education.

### INTRODUCTION

Consequently, the assessment of students' progress and achievement in EFL/ESL classes should be carried out in a manner that does not cause anxiety in the students. As new EFL/ESL curricula have moved in the direction of developing communicative skills through the integration of language and content as well as language skill integration, the traditional paper-and-pencil tests no longer cover the variety of activities and tasks that take place in the elementary classroom. The summative form of testing that permeated the traditional curricula would not be fair to students whose studies are based on communicative activities. Fortunately, the field of evaluation has witnessed a major shift from strictly summative testing tools and procedures to a more humanistic approach using informal assessment techniques that stress formative evaluation. This article discusses alternative forms of assessment, in particular, personal-response and performance-based assessment, which, in congruence with the learner-centered principles of new methodological approaches, treat assessment as an integral part of teaching culminating in formative evaluation.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

In all academic settings, assessment is viewed as closely related to instruction. Assessment is needed to help teachers and administrators make decisions about students' linguistic abilities, their placement in appropriate levels, and their achievement. The success of any assessment depends on the effective selection and use of appropriate tools and procedures as well as on the proper interpretation of students' performance. Assessment tools and procedures, in addition to being essential for evaluating students' progress and achievement, also help in evaluating the suitability and effectiveness of the curriculum, the teaching methodology, and the instructional materials.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The testing tools and procedures discussed in this article are characterized by a deliberate move from traditional formal assessment to a less formal, less quantitative framework. Pierce and O'Malley define alternative assessment as "any method of finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is not a standardized or

traditional test". Specifically, alternative ways of assessing students take into account variation in students' needs, interests, and learning styles; and they attempt to integrate assessment and learning activities. Also, they indicate successful performance, highlight positive traits, and provide formative rather than summative evaluation.

Until recently the assessment scene in EFL/ESL classes has been dominated by summative evaluation of learner achievement, focusing on mastery of discrete language points and linguistic accuracy, rather than on communicative competence, with test items typically consisting of matching or gap-filling. Communicative teaching methodology brings with it a considerable emphasis on formative evaluation "with more use of descriptive records of learner development in language and learning which [track] language development along with other curricular abilities".

Therefore, assessment becomes a diagnostic tool that provides feedback to the learner and the teacher about the suitability of the curriculum and instructional materials, the effectiveness of the teaching methods, and the strengths and weaknesses of the students. Furthermore, it helps demonstrate to young learners that they are making progress in their linguistic development, which can boost motivation. This encourages students to do more and the teacher to work on refining the process of learning rather than its product.

Using formative assessment can help decrease the level of anxiety generated by concentration on linguistic accuracy and increase students' comfort zone and feeling of success by stressing communicative fluency. Some teachers and researchers call for allowing students to have a say not only in deciding the format of the test but also in deciding its content and the way it is administered. Thus, Mayerhof suggests allowing students to discuss questions during the test quietly as long as each writes his own answers; of course, she is referring to subjective types of questions. Friel recommends involving students in suggesting topics for the test or in generating some questions.

A final characteristic of alternative assessment techniques for young learners is that they are performance-based, requiring students to perform authentic tasks using oral and/or written communication skills. These techniques can include traditional classroom activities, such as giving oral reports and writing essays, but they may also involve nontraditional tasks, such as cooperative group work and problem solving. Teachers score the task performances holistically. Student performance should be measured against standards previously discussed in class.

#### Classroom assessment techniques

The following assessment techniques can be used for effective and practical measurements of students' abilities, progress, and achievement in a variety of educational settings.

**Nonverbal Responses:** At the early stages of learning, before the emergence of speech, children should be instructed and assessed largely through the use of physical performance responses and pictorial products (Tannenbaum 1996). These tasks require simple directions to carry out. As an assessment technique, this type of response may help lower the level of anxiety normally associated with evaluation, as students see it as a natural extension of learning activities.

**Written Narratives:** Assessment of the written communicative abilities of children could be achieved through purposeful, authentic tasks, such as writing letters to friends, writing letters

to favorite television program characters, and writing and responding to invitations. Young learners enjoy story telling and are usually motivated to listen to stories as well as to tell them. Teachers can take advantage of this interest in stories and have their students write narratives that relate to personal experiences, retell or modify nursery stories and fairy tales, or retell historical events from different perspectives.

**Oral Interview:** Pierce and O'Malley (1992) suggest using visual cues in oral interviews at the early stages of acquisition. Thus a student may be asked to choose pictures to talk about, and the teacher's role is to guide the student by asking questions that require the use of related vocabulary. This technique works well during the early speech and speech emergence stages.

**Role-play:** This informal assessment technique combines oral performance and physical activity. Children of all ages, when assessed through this technique, feel comfortable and motivated, especially when the activity lends itself to cooperative learning and is seen as a fun way of learning.

Kelner (1993) believes that roleplay can be an enjoyable way of informal assessment that could be used effectively within a content-based curriculum. For example, he recommends the use of role play to express mathematical concepts such as fractions, to demonstrate basic concepts in science such as the life cycle, and to represent historical events or literary characters.

## CONCLUSION

This article has emphasized the need for teachers to use a variety of types of alternative assessment, especially non-threatening informal techniques, with young EFL/ESL learners. However, there is no claim that these types of assessment are without shortcomings. Brown and Hudson point out that "performance assessments are relatively difficult to produce and relatively time-consuming to administer.... Reliability may be problematic because of rater inconsistencies, limited number of observations, [and] subjectivity in the scoring process". For example, in self-assessment, accuracy of perceptions varies from one student to another and is usually affected by language proficiency.

Other objections could be raised about informal assessment. However, teachers should not be expected to use techniques of alternative assessment exclusively. Teachers should strive to familiarize their students with all forms of assessment because each form has its merits and uses, as well as its problems and shortcomings.

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