

Classroom-based Language Assessment for Young Language Learners

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In many countries, the age at which children officially begin to learn a foreign language in a classroom has been lowered (e.g., from middle school to elementary school) due to the belief that the earlier they start to learn a language, the more successful they will be in language learning (McKay, 2006; Pinter, 2006). Marinova-Todd *et al.* (2000) argue that this belief is supported by studies that show that age influences learning because “it is associated with social, psychological, educational, and other factors that can affect L2 proficiency” (p.28). In addition, in an ESL situation, many immigrant children not only have to learn the content of the classes which is taught in their non-native language, but also need to acquire that language as their second language.

Classroom assessment plays an integral role in keeping track of these EFL or ESL children’s progress of acquiring language and diagnosing their strengths and weaknesses (McKay, 2006). However, special approach to classroom-based language assessment is needed for children since young language learners are different from adult language learners (McKay, 2006; Pinter, 2006; Rea-Dickins & Rixon, 1999).

McKay (2006) lists three characteristics of young language learners that distinguish them from adult learners to emphasize the need of the special approach in classroom-based assessment for children. First of all, children grow cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically, and these developmental needs must be considered since they can influence their motivation and concentration spans for a given task. Another difference that young learners have compared to older learners is that children develop literacy knowledge and skills as they are learning the L2. They may be developing literacy in their first language simultaneously or their literacy understandings may not be transferring to the L2. This differs from adults since older learners already have mature literacy knowledge and skills when they learn their new language. The last special characteristic of young learners is that they are vulnerable to failure and criticism, and, thus, require careful attention.

Considering the special characteristics of young language learners, “child-friendly” (Rixon, 2007) methods should be used for classroom-based assessment for young language learners. For example, teachers can use different methods such as observations, portfolios, self-assessment, and peer-assessment for formative purposes (Gordon, 2007; McKay, 2006; Pinter, 2006; Rixon, 2007).

McKay (2006) distinguishes observation into incidental and planned observation. Incidental observations could happen in classroom activities or even outside of the classroom. It is beneficial especially for checking the performance of non-linguistic features (e.g., motivation, interest, and engagement), which also is an important factor in language learning. Teachers could also be systematic when observing children’s performance in tasks and activities, and they could use observation checklists for this purpose.

Portfolios are collections of a student’s work over a period of time, and children can be encouraged to participate when selecting the content of the portfolio. Gordon (2007) states that

portfolios are an effective means of classroom assessment because they build students' metacognitive awareness by helping them recognize their own strength and weaknesses. In other words, portfolios can motivate children by having them focus on what they are good at and grow ownership of what they are learning.

Self-assessment and peer-assessment encourage children to be active participants in the assessment process, which could be an integral part of a learner-centered approach (Pinter, 2006). It raises children's awareness of their own performance and increases their responsibility for their work as being part of a classroom community. Having children assess themselves and their peers may be challenging at first, but if students are given careful instructions and if the assessment is specific and restricted to certain tasks, it can be effectively facilitated.

Overall, effective assessment could have a positive impact by providing valuable information to educators, parents, administrators, and students (Bachman & Palmer, 1996), and classroom assessment plays a crucial role for young language learners. At the same time, however, it is equally important for teachers to be mindful of the impact their assessment techniques have on young learners.

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