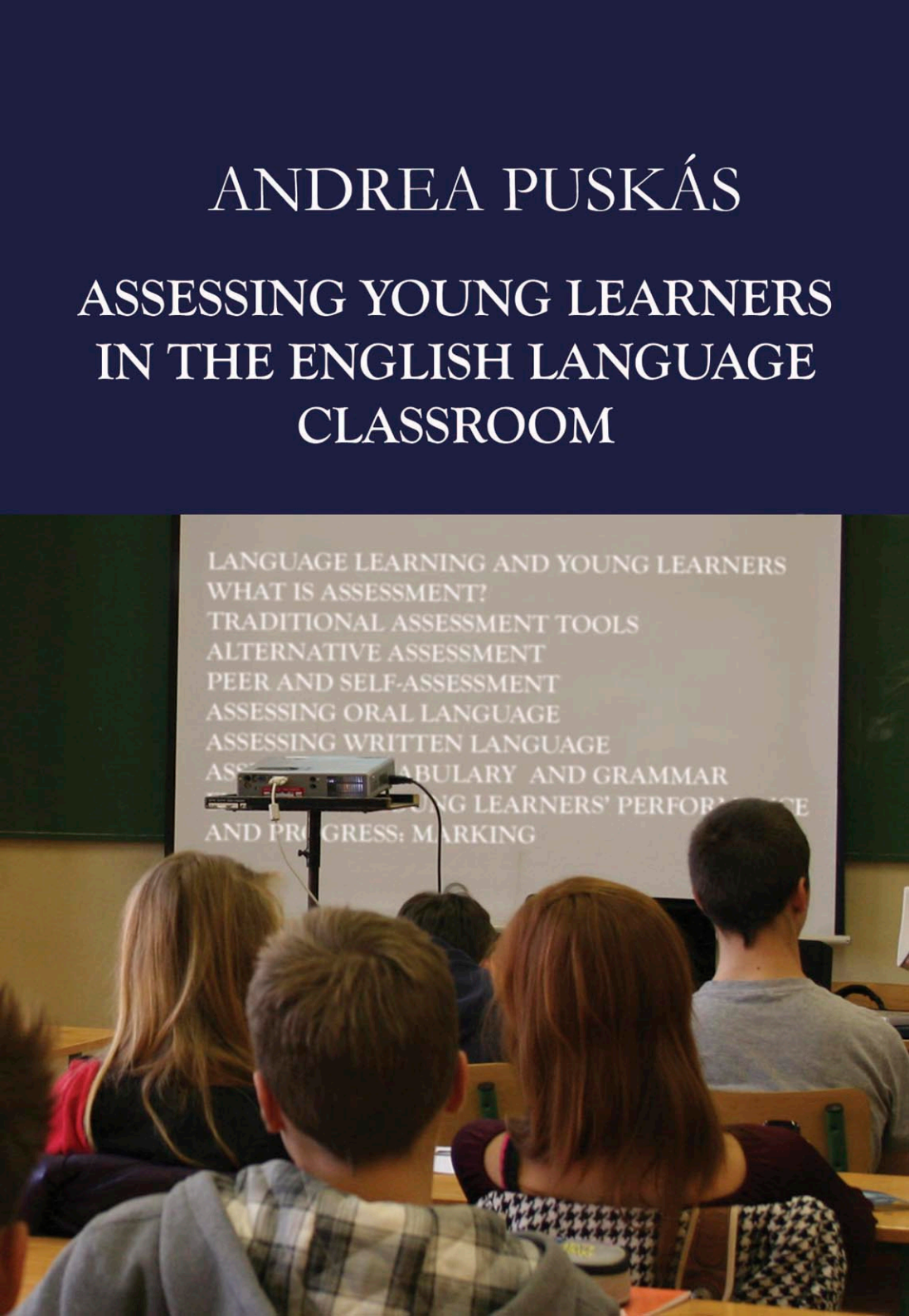# ANDREA PUSKÁS

# ASSESSING YOUNG LEARNERS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM



LANGUAGE LEARNING AND YOUNG LEARNERS
WHAT IS ASSESSMENT?
TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT TOOLS
ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT
PEER AND SELF-ASSESSMENT
ASSESSING ORAL LANGUAGE
ASSESSING WRITTEN LANGUAGE
ASSESSING VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR
ASSESSING YOUNG LEARNERS' PERFORMANCE
AND PROGRESS: MARKING

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# IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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*Assessing Young Learners*
*in the English Language Classroom*

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*Andrea Puskás*

# INTRODUCTION

Teachers of English in the primary school do not receive detailed professional training in language assessment. The vast majority of teachers are still trapped within the framework of the 1 to 5 grading scale, which is applied by state curriculums as the central assessment method. Many times this is the only feedback learners are given for their achievement.

The aim of the monograph is to provide a general overview of learner-centred approaches to assessing young learners and highlight the most important factors that influence assessment as well as to point out the necessity of a reliable and valid assessment system and a great variety of assessment tasks and procedures, which serve the benefit of young language learners.

The book consists of nine chapters, each focusing on a particular issue connected with assessing the young language learner in the EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom.

Assessing the language learning of young learners requires the knowledge of the characteristic features of young learners, their skills, preferences and needs as well as knowledge of the way young learners learn foreign languages. Without a proper understanding of the above fields it is impossible to design appropriate assessment methods and systems. The first chapter of the monograph focuses on these very typical features with special attention to the different understandings of how young learners learn a foreign/second language. It ends with a short summary of some implications for assessment, and highlights the specific notions that need to be considered. A special approach to the

assessment of young language learners is needed taking into account the special characteristics of growth, physical, cognitive, social, emotional and mental development and vulnerability. Young learners are still developing their literacy skills, knowledge and understandings even in their first language, therefore very carefully selected approaches to foreign/second language learning and assessment are necessary.

The second chapter defines assessment in general and makes a clear distinction between the concepts of assessment, evaluation and testing. It discusses the several different purposes and types of assessment, provides a guideline on how to prepare effective assessment and summarizes the very basic principles of learner-centred assessment. Selecting assessment tasks is influenced by several different factors that all teachers of English should be aware of in the young language learner classroom.

The third chapter discusses traditional assessment with special attention to the drawbacks of testing, an assessment tool which is still made equal with assessment – incorrectly. We know that assessment is a much wider area than a test paper and includes several other types and forms of assessing young learners' performance.

The fourth chapter investigates alternative assessment or assessment for learning and highlights the most important and central concepts of this type of assessment. Some of the forms of alternative assessment such as portfolio assessment, projects, contracts of work and observation are discussed in more details.

Changes in the understanding of assessment and in the approaches to learning and teaching have resulted in changes in the relationship between the teacher and the learners and between learners as well. This has led to the promotion of

self- and peer assessment. Chapter five discusses peer and self-assessment and examines how these strategies can be used to improve learner involvement in the learning process and to develop learners' critical thinking and self-reflection.

Several issues in the assessment of the four skills i.e. speaking, listening, reading, and writing are discussed in chapters six and seven, including the selection of texts, tasks, assessment tools and useful tips. Oral language consists of speaking and listening and is the foundation of language learning in the young learner language classroom. Children develop literacy skills through oral language. These two chapters on assessing oral and written language describe a range of assessment task-types and highlight the most important questions of assessing the four skills.

Special attention is paid to the assessment of vocabulary and grammar in chapter eight, though these two areas can be assessed within the assessment of one of the four skills as well.

The final chapter deals with evaluating young learners' performance and achievements and discusses the issue and principles of marking. Examples of observation sheets, checklists and rating scales are provided (both analytic and holistic scales), which can lead to the elaboration of a more effective and fair marking system.

Assessing young learners in a foreign language classroom is one of the most challenging tasks a teacher can face, since it requires sensitively selected learner-centred approaches. We hope that this book can serve as an inspiration and springboard for teachers to make their assessment strategies colourful, fair and motivating.

# 1. LANGUAGE LEARNING AND YOUNG LEARNERS

There has been considerable growth in the number of children learning a second or foreign language and more and more educational programmes seem to recognize the importance of learning and knowing foreign languages in an increasingly globalized world. In addition, there has been a tendency to lower the age at which children start to learn a foreign language.

In order to formulate assessment principles and criteria and design the right assessment process and tools, it is crucial to keep in mind the very basic components of young learner language knowledge and the nature and characteristics of the process of the language acquisition of young learners.

## 1.1. Who are young learners?

Teaching English to young learners – sometimes referred to as TEYL – is an exciting and evolving field within the larger field of teaching English as a foreign or second language. In order to design effective lessons for young learners, develop their skills and motivate them in the most appropriate way, it is crucial to be acquainted with the general characteristics of this target group.

Young learner foreign language programmes can begin already in pre-primary education – kindergartens, nurseries, but they are also generally present in the lower level of

primary school – in some schools already in the first grade, where English lessons can be electives or non-compulsory part of the curriculum. Official – compulsory – English language education in Hungarian schools in Slovakia starts in the third grade. Some programmes, especially the ones in pre-primary education can meet for 20-30 minutes, once or twice a week; others can meet for 45 minutes. The number of lessons, occasions and hours per week may vary.

Teaching English to young learners requires an approach that is appropriate and suitable for the developmental stage of the child, his/her physical, social, emotional, and mental maturity (Kang Shin – Crandall 2014).

Annamaria Pinter (2011) divides young learners into three groups. The first is children who start pre-school at about the age of three, the second is the group of children who start primary school at around the age of 5-7 and finish primary school 11 or 12, although in some countries it happens at around the age of 13 or 14. Pinter calls children from the age of 13 onwards 'early adolescents' (Pinter 2011: 2). In Slovakia, children usually start their primary school education at the age of 6 or 7 and finish at around the age of 15, whereas primary schooling is often divided into lower primary and upper primary years. It means that at the age of 13 children are still in their primary school years and do not change to secondary or high school yet. Of course, the variation in school types and ages shows a complex picture across different countries.

Lynne Cameron defines young learners as "those between five and twelve years of age" (Cameron 2001: xi). Scott and Ytreberg understand young learners as "pupils (…) between five and ten or eleven years old" (Scott – Ytreberg 1990: 1). Of course, there is a big difference between a five-

year old child and an eleven-year old. Nevertheless, children develop differently, their pace and approach can vary. Some of them achieve goals more quickly, others more slowly, however, they can catch up with the former after a certain period of time.

In order to maximize learning and provide support and challenge in learning, it is crucial for the teacher to be well-informed about the learner. It is vital to have information about the physical, emotional, conceptual and educational characteristics of the young learner and consider certain issues and views on how children think and learn.

Young learners have a variety of skills and characteristic features that help them learn a foreign language. Susan Halliwell (1992) points out several qualities of young learners that she considers really useful for language learning. She claims that children:

- are already very good at interpreting meaning without understanding the individual words
- can use limited language in a creative way
- learn indirectly rather than directly
- tend to find and create fun in what they do
- have a wonderful imagination
- have a great delight in talking (Halliwell 1992: 3).

Wendy A. Scott and Lisbeth H. Ytreberg summarize further characteristics of young learners. They assume the following features:

- They understand situations more quickly than they understand the language used.
- Their understanding is based on the physical world – it is always connected with direct experience.

- They have a short attention and concentration span.
- Young children are enthusiastic and positive about learning. Therefore, it is especially important to praise them to keep them motivated and enthusiastic.
- They will rarely admit they do not know something (Scott – Ytreberg 1990: 2-4).

In addition to the importance of physical movement and activity, spontaneity, curiosity and openness to new ideas, most scholars investigating the characteristic features of young learners emphasize that children are imaginative and have a special need for imaginative activities (Shin – Crandall 2014; Read 2007; Pinter 2006). 'Make-believe' activities, role plays and games where they need to pretend that they are someone else encourage them to pay attention and learn more.

Young learners' short attention span has been discussed and pointed out by the majority of scholars investigating the characteristics of this special age group of language learners. One of the greatest challenges of working with young learners is to plan activities that these learners can pay attention to and extending their attention span after a certain period. The teacher needs to use several tools, e.g. colour pictures, posters, costumes etc. in order to capture their attention and vary the activities very rapidly. It is a good idea to plan a series of shorter activities rather than one or two longer ones. Shin and Crandall suggest that with children of ages from 5 to 7, the teacher should try to keep activities between 5 and 10 minutes long, and with children of ages from 8 to 10 activities should last for 10-15 minutes (Shin – Crandall 2014: 29). As children grow older, their attention span grows, they are more able to concentrate for longer periods. It is very important, especially with younger kids to

take regular breaks and not to expect them to work on one single activity for a long time, this is especially true in the case of writing and reading activities, as young learners are still learning to read and write, to hold their pens or pencils properly or not too tightly, which requires plenty of attention and intensive concentration, therefore, both a physical and a mental break is necessary.

Jean Brewster, Gail Ellis and Denis Girard (2002) examine English language learning policies at primary level from different perspectives and claim that as an initial point it is necessary to underline that in the European Union, teaching English to young learners is part of a wider picture of a policy for foreign language learning where it has been suggested that EU citizens have a personal document called a European Language Portfolio (ELP) (Brewster et al. 2002: 4). They add that as far as the policy and the introduction of teaching English to young learners is considered within the above document, several conditions need to be met. Brewster, Ellis and Girard claim that the most important conditions are the following:

1. Teaching English to young learners should be properly planned, based on the discussions and experiences of other countries which have succeeded in it already. Teachers, educators, curriculum designers, material writers and other specialists connected with the given field must have a clear idea of the goals, objectives and outcomes of the teaching process.
2. Adequate resources must be provided by governments and private institutions in order to ensure that there are optimal conditions for teaching English to young learners. This means that there must be material

resources, optimal coursebooks, classroom aids as well as trained teachers and teacher educators.

3. The evaluation of the learning outcomes after a certain period of teaching must be carried out in order to provide information on the validity of the teaching.

The above criteria and conditions set a very general framework to teaching English to young learners; it highlights the importance of a thoughtful policy and physical environment of teaching and emphasizes the need for qualified teachers and professionals. However, it does not go into details when setting the objectives of teaching, the applied methods and techniques. This leads to the fact that different countries have different language programmes and policy documents. Fortunately, more and more countries seem to realize that the aim of language teaching should be more complex than simply teaching language structures or fulfilling an officially pre-set goal.

Brewster, Ellis and Girard identify three major areas within the aims of teaching languages to young learners: psychological preparation, linguistic preparation and cultural preparation (Brewster et al. 2002: 5). They understand that language is not an isolated set of structures, but should be understood in a context, and they also seem to note that the young learner has specific characteristic features that need to be respected. Learning to communicate in a foreign language, therefore, involves raising the child's awareness of the mother tongue and the foreign language, developing a positive attitude to language learning and the foreign language itself as well, and helping young learners discover and develop a positive attitude to the culture the given foreign language embodies.

Angelika Kubanek-German has examined primary English language teaching in Europe and has come to the following conclusion: "regional and national guidelines unanimously point out that the children's experience with a foreign language ought to be enjoyable and not put an extra burden on them" (Kubanek-German 1998: 198). According to her findings, more and more European countries not only seem to note the importance of motivation in foreign language teaching, but even officially justify or 'legalize' the inclusion of playfulness and the concept of enjoyable teaching and learning in state documents and policies. Wasyl Cajkler and Ron Addelman write that "teachers should not take it for granted that children will arrive in the classroom with a strong positive attitude to foreign language learning" (Cajkler – Addelman 2000: 1). It suggests that the teacher is an important factor in the process of raising student motivation and thus encouraging language learning.

The years spent at primary school are extremely important not just from the point of view of establishing a strong basis for students' knowledge and cognitive skills, but also from the perspective of developing the students' intellectual, physical, emotional and social skills. Nevertheless, this is the period when children should be taught how to learn so that they can be more successful in their further studies and should be able to maintain motivation in learning (Puskás 2016). Teaching a foreign language in the first four years of primary school should definitely keep the above assumptions in mind and should be aware of the fact that teaching a certain skill always relies on some other skills, since several different skills and abilities are interdependent at this stage of development. It means that for example if a child finds it difficult to enter an imaginary world or dissociate himself/herself from the here and now,

s/he may also find it difficult to make deductions from concrete facts and to apply his/her knowledge and experience to other situations. Therefore, teaching a foreign language should rely on the interdependence of different skills as well as areas and should focus on the child as a complex phenomenon rather than the target of language acquisition, who needs to absorb fixed grammar rules.

During the first four years of primary school, children need to develop physical skills – for example they need to develop balance, spatial awareness, perform several everyday activities independently. Secondly, children need to acquire certain social skills, a series of forms of behaviour and characteristics that help them fit into society. These skills and abilities include the ability to cooperate, to share, to be assertive without being aggressive, to be helpful and empathetic (Puskás 2016). The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation published the research results of a 20-year study, which showed a link between children's social skills in kindergarten and their well-being in early adulthood. The findings of the research, which was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, were published in the American Journal of Public Health, 16 July 2015. [1] The researchers conclude:

> "Children who were more likely to "share" or "be helpful" in kindergarten were also more likely to obtain higher education and hold full-time jobs nearly two decades later, the study found. Students who lacked these "social competence" skills were more likely to face more negative outcomes by the age of 25,

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[1] http://www.rwjf.org/en/library/articles-and-news/2015/07/new-research--children-with-strong-social-skills-in-kindergarten.html
Accessed: 6 May 2017

including substance abuse problems, challenges finding employment or run-ins with the law."[2]

The study underlines the fact that early learning and the integration of social and emotional skills in the curriculum is a must, not only in kindergartens, but also in the first grades of primary education. From the point of view of foreign language learning it means that learning and teaching a language should not be isolated from the development of social skills, it is rather one of the elements of a complex phenomenon.

Though teaching a foreign language to young learners requires a lot of theoretical background and a prepared and well-informed teacher, children do not consider language learning as a mere intellectual activity. Sarah Phillips argues that "As a general rule, it can be assumed that the younger the children are, the more holistic learners they will be. Younger learners respond to language according to what it does or what they can do with it, rather than treating it as an intellectual game or abstract system" (Phillips 1993: 7). The main emphasis from children's perspective should be placed on practice; the language learning process should have a practical and meaningful aim.

We can help children learn English more effectively, if what we do with them is meaningful, purposeful and enjoyable. Most activities for the younger learners should include plenty of movement and involve the senses. The teacher needs to involve a lot of visuals, pictures, objects and posters. Playfulness should be the key word when describing the teacher's approach. Playing with the language is a natural

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[2] http://www.rwjf.org/en/library/articles-and-news/2015/07/new-research--children-with-strong-social-skills-in-kindergarten.html Accessed: 6 May 2017

way of learning a foreign language for young learners. Since concentration and attention spans are short, especially at the early stages of language learning, a variety is a must – a variety of activities, a variety of classroom organization, a variety of space, and of course a variety of techniques and methods.

The aims of teaching English to young learners should include the following:
- To encourage open-mindedness and tolerance by learning different ways of thinking and learning.
- To improve creativity.
- To improve cognitive skills and support abstract thinking.

When choosing a task or an activity for young language learners, several aspects should be taken into consideration. Cameron Lynne lists six task demands placed on the student, which she considers as the key to assess whether the particular task or activity is suitable for the student or not, which also helps the teacher evaluate its learning potential. The six types of task demands are cognitive, language, interactional, metalinguistic, involvement and physical (Cameron 2001: 24-25).

**Cognitive demands** – these are demands connected with concepts and understanding the outside world. They also involve understanding connections, links and abstract ideas, recognizing actions, drawing parallels and differentiating between phenomena or objects.

**Language demands** – are demands connected with the foreign language, e.g. if the student knows a concrete word in the target language or if s/he can use the past tense correctly.

**Interactional demands** – These are connected with the type of interaction carried out during the task or activity. For example, when the students are asked to work in pairs, they need to listen to each other and pay attention to their partner. They need to ask and answer questions, interact with other children or with the teacher and they also might need to find a solution together with a classmate.

**Metalinguistic demands** – these are connected with using special language, technical terms to talk about a language. For example, students might get an instruction to use the past form of certain verbs. The younger the child is, the less metalanguage s/he needs or understands, since it is connected with the child's ability to think in abstract terms.

**Involvement demands** – the learner has to be engaged with the task or activity, therefore, it is important to check whether the task can involve the student from the beginning till the very end. It includes the length of the task or activity, the students' interests and concerns, suspense and novelty.

**Physical demands** – It is important to check whether an activity requires students to sit still or it offers some opportunities for movement. Physical demands also include the usage of fine motor skills, i.e. writing and drawing.

The teacher has to check the chosen tasks and activities from the point of view of the above demands and has to examine them in terms of student needs.

Brewster, Ellis and Girard conclude that young learners share the following characteristics and learn a foreign language most effectively in the following way:

- They often respond to an initial stimulus such as a set of pictures, however, they need guidance about how to set about doing an activity or a task.
- Children need to be given a clear goal when starting on an activity.

- They learn better if there is a relaxed classroom atmosphere and they are not afraid of making mistakes.
- Children need time to absorb all the input they receive so they can later produce related work on their own (Brewster et al. 2002: 37).

The above list can be extended by several other principles and assumptions. Teachers usually generate their own ideas about teaching and learners in many different ways. First, they remember their own experiences from childhood, secondly, they gain information during their teacher training, thirdly, they gain experience in the classroom, where they can reflect on their activities, children behaviour or they can have discussions with colleagues. Finally, teachers can gain further knowledge by professional development and further training and development.

The characteristic features of young learners listed and explained in the above sections can be exploited in the foreign language classroom and provide the teacher with wonderful opportunities to build on them. Indirect learning, creativity, imagination and fun are the key words not only in the description of the young learner, but should also be the integral part of the teacher's approach to young language learners and should be the central guidelines of assessing young learners as well.

## 1.2. Learning a foreign/second language

It is necessary to examine how children learn a language in more details and what the best approaches to language learning are in the case of young learners. The methods and techniques chosen for teaching a foreign language should be in harmony with the way young learners learn a foreign/second language, and then assessment tools and procedures should be selected accordingly.

Young language learners can be defined as **foreign language learners**, when they learn a foreign language in a situation where the language is rarely used or heard outside the classroom (e.g. learning English as a foreign language in Slovakia). They can learn a language as a second language, **second language learners** usually belong to a minority group, where the learned language is the language of the majority (e.g. learning English as a second language in England). When referring to second language learners, an important factor is that the majority of the learners' peers belong to the majority who have spoken the language from their birth, and the social and cultural environment is typically the environment of the second language in question. For example, there are still many places in Slovakia inhabited by Hungarian minority citizens, where the vast majority of the inhabitants belong to the Hungarian minority, e.g. more than 80%, in this case learners learn the language rather as a foreign language. Learning English as a second language is also referred to as learning English as an additional language.

Being a young language learner does not guarantee automatic and immediate success in language learning. Although, there are arguments both supporting and

contradicting the critical period hypothesis – the theory claiming that there are certain periods in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning (Mark Patkowski 1980), more scholars and academics (e.g. Dörnyei 2011, Lightbown – Spada 2013) have pointed out that age is only one of the factors that might influence language acquisition. It is essential to think carefully about the goals of a language programme as well as the context of language learning and the components of educational environment. Linguists have compiled long lists of factors influencing second/foreign language learning including intelligence, language learning aptitude, learning styles, personality, attitude, motivation, social factors, learner beliefs, etc. (Lightbrown – Spada 2013). It is sometimes even noted that older foreign language learners benefit from their metalinguistic knowledge, memory strategies and problem solving skills that help them learn the foreign language more quickly than young learners.

Christian Abello-Contesse (2008) lists several examples of researches on the correlation of age and language acquisition and refers to the research carried out by Cenoz (2003) and Muñoz (2006), who have shown that "learners whose exposure to the L2 began at age 11 consistently displayed higher levels of proficiency than those for whom it began at 4 or 8"[3]. Abello-Contesse continues to support his argument by referring to another research and the findings of Harley and Wang (1997) claiming that older learners are usually more able to make faster initial progress when learning a foreign/second language, especially in acquiring the grammatical and lexical components of an L2 "due to

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[3] Abello-Contesse 2008, Retrieved from:
https://academic.oup.com/eltj/article/63/2/170/441108/Age-and-the-critical-period-hypothesis Accessed: 16 August 2017

their higher level of cognitive development and greater analytical abilities"[4]. It can be assumed that there is no 'magic' age for foreign/second language learning, so being a young learner does not necessarily mean immediate and natural success. The elements and characteristics of the learning environment as well as the opportunities for learning are of equal or even greater importance.

Second language learning has been defined and explained from various perspectives. A variety of learners with a variety of characteristics learn their additional language in a variety of contexts. Approaches such as the behaviourist perspective, Krashen's monitor model or the innatist perspective, the cognitive perspective or the sociocultural perspective explain and discuss second/foreign language development and final learning outcomes as well as all the factors and processes that have an impact on these.

In the following, we will examine some theories from cognitive and sociocultural approaches to second language acquisition, some of the most influential theories that have informed second language research and that we consider the most relevant when speaking about young learner language acquisition.

It has been argued that language learning, especially in the case of young learners involve sociocultural and cognitive processes (McKay 2006) which are significantly involved in language acquisition and significantly affect its efficiency and success.

Theorists of cognitive processes in language learning stress the importance of understanding the **cognitive**

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[4] Abello-Contesse 2008, Retreived from: https://academic.oup.com/eltj/article/63/2/170/441108/Age-and-the-critical-period-hypothesis Accessed: 16 August 2017

**processes** that occur during language acquisition as well as the cognitive abilities of the learner in order to respond to the child's performance in the most appropriate way. The mainstream cognitive tradition focuses on mental processes and the mind in order to explain human behaviour and language acquisition. Cognitive psychology has become central to these approaches to language learning, and many times they use the computer as a metaphor for the mind (Lightbown – Spada 2013).

McKay describes Skehan's model of language acquisition and explains that when learners of a foreign language apply their "formulaic system" (Skehan also uses the term "exemplar-based system"), they rely much on lexical elements or chunks, the use of chunks of language and idioms (McKay 2006: 35-38). Chunks can be words or groups of words or unites that may contain structure but are unanalysed. For example, 'Sit down.' or 'Open your books and turn to page 5' can be a chunk, which is understood by the learners even if they cannot understand each part of the structure. The usage of chunks of language and the importance of repetition for young learners have been highlighted by several professionals (Cameron 2001, Halliwell 1992, Kirsch 2008). However, McKay argues that Skehan's theory can help us understand the difference between adult and child second language acquisition, "in particular children's greater reliance on the formulaic system, and their subsequent need for a rich language use environment" (McKay 2006: 38). Young learners rely on the formulaic system as they listen to the language and see how language is used – this way they gain implicit knowledge of how the language works. They learn language chunks that they can use and combine later in stimulating contexts, where they are encouraged to use the language to get through

some messages. Meaningful communicative activities and communicative tasks encourage young learners to use the acquired chunks and create their own as well.

A frequently quoted scholar in applied linguistics, John H. Schumann investigated the role of motivation and emotion in second language learning. In his monograph *The Neurobiological of Affect in Language* (1997) he claims that different people have different value systems, different learners achieve their goals differently. He writes: "The value mechanisms influence the cognition (perception, attention, memory, and action) that is devoted to learning" (Schumann 1997: 2). In the context of language learning, Schumann writes about "sustained deep learning", by which he understands the acquisition of knowledge and skills in which a great deal of variation is evidenced among individuals" (Schumann 1997: 32), and claims that this kind of learning takes place over a long period of time and is highly dependent on affect, emotion, and motivation, it has a strong emotional and motivational component (Schumann 1997: 35). In the light of Schumann's theory, having a positive attitude toward the language and learning itself, enjoyment and motivation are one of the most important, key factors of teaching young learners.

**Sociocultural perspectives** on language learning (e.g. Gee 1996) emphasize that language learning is more than knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, it is rather primarily a social process, therefore, children also need to learn how to use the language, how to use it in different situations (e.g. how to be polite, when to speak, how to name or address different people, how to use body language, etc.). It means that great emphasis is put on social and interpersonal interaction as well as the cultural codes carried by the language to be learned.

The sociocultural theory focuses on the contextual and interactional elements of language use; the origin of language competence lies in the social reality and social environment, therefore, language learning is a public activity, language learners need to participate in the socially mediated practices of their community, they need to be involved in social interactions in a particular context (Lantolf 2000; Johnson 2004, Kirsch 2008). The sociocultural theory of language acquisition is different from the interaction hypothesis, since the later emphasizes the individual cognitive processes in the mind of the learner and claims that interaction facilitates those cognitive processes by giving learners an input they need to activate internal processes (Lightbown – Spada 2013: 118). However, sociocultural theory focuses more on the conversations and claims that learning occurs through social interaction and people gain control of and reorganize their cognitive processes during mediation (Lightbown – Spada 2013: 119).

The sociocultural approach also investigates how participation in several sociocultural contexts influences the learner's language ability. It encourages meaningful and authentic interactions with a wide range of people, especially with more experienced members of the community so that in addition to language, they can also learn about and understand values and beliefs connected to learning a language develop learning strategies and learn how to participate in the target culture. McKay underlines that when learning a new language, children also develop a new identity, as they are venturing beyond their experiences in their first language and culture and their identity and subjectivity are open to new opportunities (McKay 2006: 29-31).

The sociocultural model has moved away from seeing language as a set of linguistic structures. Its main advantage

lies in its ability to recognize that both the cognitive and social factors involved in second/foreign language learning need to be taken into account and its understanding of language competence and performance as 'doing' and 'participating' rather than mere 'understanding'.

Theories of second language acquisition can complement one another and can be completely contradictory; however, none of them can explain second language acquisition on its own. The points that theorists agree on and the arguments that the above-selected approaches highlight can provide a guideline when planning lessons and curricula for young learners. The findings of second language acquisition research, of course, cannot provide straightforward answers on which methods and techniques to choose in the language classroom or on which method is the best to teach a foreign language. They can provide guidelines, but each teacher needs to make informed decisions based on the particular learners, the concrete context and particular time.

When writing about young learners, Penny McKay (2006) describes the optimal conditions for language learning and highlights the most important factors that can contribute to young learners' successful language acquisition. She claims that optimal conditions for language learning are those which include at least two out of the following features:

- focus on meaning
- interesting and engaging input
- interacting, selected opportunities to focus on form
- safe and supportive learning environment (McKay 2006: 41)

Interesting and engaging contexts are absolutely necessary when teaching young learners. Children learn activities best when they can interact with each other, with the teacher, they can cooperate and when they are encouraged and motivated to participate in tasks. Definitely, they are more likely to be engaged in activities when they can feel safe to be themselves, they can feel safe to take risks and make mistakes and when they can be sure that the environment is supportive.

## *1.3. Motivation*

Motivation is a key term in the methodology of teaching foreign languages. It is crucial to establish a motivation-sensitive environment so that motivation-sensitive teaching practice and learners' involvement can be encouraged.

Zoltán Dörnyei has carried out thorough research on the nature of motivation. He suggests some tips that help to create a motivation-sensitive, encouraging environment for students. In his monograph, *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom* (2001), Dörnyei provides a long list of motivational strategies that can be easily applied in teaching a foreign/second language to young learners. Some of the most central strategies are the following:

- Demonstrate and talk about your own enthusiasm for the course material, and how it affects you personally
- Take the students' learning very seriously.
- Develop a personal relationship with your students.
- Create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom.

- Promote the development of group cohesiveness.
- Formulate group norms explicitly and have them discussed and accepted by the learners.
- Have the group norms consistently observed.
- Promote the learners' language-related values by presenting peer role models.
- Raise the learners' intrinsic interest in the L2 learning process.
- Promote 'integrative' values by encouraging a positive and open-minded disposition towards the L2 and its speakers, and towards foreignness in general.
- Increase the learners' goal-orientedness by formulating explicit class goals accepted by them.
- Make learning stimulating by making learners active participants in tasks.
- Increase learner motivation by actively promoting learner autonomy.
- Provide learners with positive feedback. (Dörnyei 2001: 136-143)

## 1.4. Implications for assessment

The assumptions, criteria and principles formulated about the characteristics of young learners and about the way they acquire foreign/second languages – described in the previous sections – hold a lot of implications for foreign/second language assessment.

The following guideline or points can be concluded on the basis of the previously discussed issues. These can later be applied to assessment, more particularly to designing appropriate assessment criteria and tools.

- Pay attention to learners and their individual characteristics, needs, cultural background, learning styles and background knowledge.
- Try to improve learners' motivation and positive attitude both to language learning in general and the concrete language they learn.
- Improve learners' self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Provide enough opportunities for practice.
- Focus on language areas that are appropriate to the learners' age and physical, mental and emotional development.
- Encourage as much contact with the target language and culture as possible so that learners can develop their new identity.
- Learning is a recursive process, therefore meaningful practice should be repeated and certain language areas need to be revised after a certain time.
- Self-assessment should be encouraged and any kind of feedback to the learner should be sensitive and constructive.
- Use activities that are meaningful, useful and enjoyable.
- Create a friendly, non-threatening learning environment where learners feel safe.

# 2. WHAT IS ASSESSMENT?

Assessing the achievement of young learners is one of the most complex and at the same time most sensitive issues. Even today, there has been huge debate on whether assessing young learners is necessary at all. The critics of strict forms of assessment argue that it often contributes to the loss of motivation and feelings of frustration from the side of the language learners. On the other hand, most researchers agree that it is crucial to determine which skills and what kind of knowledge learners will acquire by the end of a course, and it is equally important to measure whether or to what extent the learners have acquired this knowledge and the determined skill. Assessment, therefore, seems to appear as an unavoidable part of language teaching and learning, since it provides feedback not only for the teacher but also for the learners as well. However, it is extremely important to choose the right assessment techniques for each age group, since neglecting the characteristic features and the needs of the target group can really lead to frustration, demotivation and a series of other problems. For young learners it is even more significant, since it can influence their further approach to the foreign language.

First of all, it is important to clarify certain concepts and terminology and to differentiate between evaluation and assessment. Evaluation is seen as a broader term referring to the judgement not only of the learning and teaching process, but also of the environment, the institution, the teaching materials, the teacher's activities and many other factors that contribute to the whole learning process. Legutke, Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-v.Ditfurth point out that evaluation also includes "children's attitudes, parents' opinions and political ideologies" (Legutke et al. 2014: 122). It means

that evaluation does not only refer to the teacher and the student, but is also concerned with the parents and the institution as well as the whole cultural and social environment. However, unlike evaluation, assessment is much more specific and is much more focused on the classroom. Annamaria Pinter defines assessment in the following way:

> "Assessment refers to the process of data analysis that teachers use to get evidence about their learners' performance and progress in English. In terms of purpose, assessment is carried out because head teachers, school authorities, and parents require evidence of learning but it is also the right of the children to know how they are doing." (Pinter 2006: 131).

The above definition highlights two basic crucial factors of assessment: the teacher's activity of collecting data about children's development and progress and the children's right to and need for being informed about how they are proceeding in language learning. The teacher is a very active participant in determining learners' progress and it cannot be done successfully without proper observation, attention and care. However, the nature of collected data is also significant and the type of data collected by the teacher can also determine the output of assessment. The teacher who collects on type of data about the learners might get completely different results than the teacher who collects a wide range of and several types of data.

Joan Kang Shin and JoAnn Crandall claim that it is not only assessment and evaluation that are often confused with each other. They highlight that many times assessment, evaluation and testing are used synonymously, though they

represent different practices (Shin – Crandall 2014: 246). Therefore, it is important to differentiate not only between evaluation and assessment but also between the previous two and testing. The reason assessment is linked or confused with testing is that the traditional approach to assessment regarded testing the only way of diagnosing leaners' progress. Several scholars determine testing as one type of assessment that formally measures learners' English language performance (Brown – Abeywickrama 2010, Cameron 2001). The centrality of tests in traditional assessment methods is contrasted with the more colourful approach and wider perspective of alternative assessment methods, where testing is only one element of determining learners' accomplishment of learning goals.

Assessment should be an integral part of the language learning process, not just because it gives feedback both to the teacher and the learner about progress and achievements, but also because it helps the teacher monitor the child's learning process and set out further goals for the future. Assessment can motivate children by showing them they have reached a certain level and have achieved a certain goal. For example, it shows them that they have learned the names of colours in English or they are able to tell the time. This suggests that they have achieved a short-term goal and indicates that learning a language – reaching a long-term goal – is manageable.

## *2.1. Purposes and types of assessment*

Teachers carry out classroom assessment throughout the school year for several different purposes. Assessment might be carried out because of diagnostic purposes, e.g. at the beginning of the school year, when teachers intend to diagnose the strength and weaknesses of students or for placement purposes, when teachers need to place students into proper groups or levels. Diagnosis might lead to decision-making about teaching; based on the collected information, teachers can monitor their own effectiveness, the success of selected methods and approaches. In this case, assessment might result in making appropriate modifications about methods, techniques or tasks based on the feedback obtained from assessment. Another purpose of assessment can be to collect data and information about students and their achievement to inform parents and children about their ongoing progress or attitudes. Assessment also helps to identify learners with special needs or to find out who needs special help and support.

The type of assessments that teachers use depend on the purposes teachers use assessment for. The majority of appropriate assessment techniques take into consideration the age and the language level of the children, though most scholars and researchers (Cameron 2001, T. Linse 2005, Szőköl 2015, Szőköl 2016) suggest a much longer list of criteria and recommend using a number of possible variations of assessment techniques. The choice of assessment techniques and the nature of assessment are generally based on putting emphasis on one of the following four factors: the teacher, the student, the learning environment and the learning goals. The basic focus of defining the purpose and types of assessment is connected to

the above factors, the so called agents participating in the process of assessment. On this basis it is possible to talk about **teacher assessment, peer assessment and self-assessment**.

A very general classification of assessment is the distinction between formal and informal assessment (Shin and Crandall 2014). Informal assessment takes place regularly in the classroom, many times without the teacher even noticing. For example, when the teacher praises the learner for doing something correctly and gives comments such as 'Well done' or 'Good job'. Formal assessment is used periodically in order to get information about learners' progress. It is used at the end of a term, a course, etc. sometimes for the sake of obtaining a grade or determining future placements or enrolments. It is often connected with the requirements of the institution in which teaching and learning take place.

Generally, in classroom assessment there are opportunities for **on-the-run assessment** as teaching proceeds and for **planned assessment** when teachers make concrete conscious decisions about which areas, abilities or skills will be targeted. Much classroom assessment is carried out through **continuous assessment** – combining many strategies over a longer period of time to assess learners' performance in order to come to a decision about progress from the use of these strategies (McKay 2006).

Concerning the quality and nature of assessment methods, it is possible to talk about **traditional assessment** or traditional assessment tools or methods and **alternative assessment** (both will be discussed in more details later).

Several scholars focus their analysis of assessment by distinguishing between **summative** and **formative** assessment (Pinter 2006, Legutke et. al. 2014). Others, in

addition to summative and formative assessment highlight the importance of **discrete point** and **integrative** assessment as well (Shin and Crandall 2014).

**Formative assessment** is a type of assessment which aims to inform on-going teaching and learning. It provides immediate feedback (Cameron 2001: 222). For example after a listening activity the teacher assesses the students' understanding and changes her plan to do more practice before moving on with a speaking activity. As Pinter concludes, formative assessment is to inform and improve teaching (Pinter 2006: 132). It is process oriented and it central aim is to diagnose learners' stages of development.

**Summative assessment** assesses learning at the end of a unit, term, year or course. It is product-oriented; its main aim is to detect the achievements reached by the end of a unit. It is often connected with the issue of a certificate. Shin and Crandall point out that summative assessment can be carried out in the form of tests developed by the teacher or provided by the curriculum or they may also be standardized tests developed by educational authorities in order to measure the children's level of English and compare it with a set of standards or expectations. Shin and Crandall add that these assessments are often used to help evaluate the effectiveness and success of a program, curriculum or materials (Shin – Crandall 2014: 249).

The Common European Framework or Reference for Languages discusses the types of assessment and provides the following classification:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 Achievement assessment | Proficiency assessment |
| 2 Norm-referencing (NR) | Criterion-referencing (CR) |
| 3 Mastery learning CR | Continuum CR |
| 4 Continuous assessment | Fixed assessment points |
| 5 Formative assessment | Summative assessment |
| 6 Direct assessment | Indirect assessment |
| 7 Performance assessment | Knowledge assessment |
| 8 Subjective assessment | Objective assessment |
| 9 Checklist rating | Performance rating |
| 10 Impression | Guided judgement |
| 11 Holistic assessment | Analytic assessment |
| 12 Series assessment | Category assessment |
| 13 Assessment by others | Self-assessment |

*(Council of Europe 2001: 192) Retrieved from:*
*https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf*
*Accessed: 25 August 2017*

Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlov suggest the following types of assessment for young learners:

- Structured assessment tasks and activities
- Take-home assessment tasks
- Portfolio assessment
- Projects
- Self-assessment
- Peer-assessment
- Traditional tests
- Learner-developed assessment tasks
- Observation (Ioannou-Georgiou – Pavlov 2003: 8-12).

**Diagnostic assessment** – it aims to establish what a child can and cannot do yet, so that the teacher can determine further learning opportunities (Cameron 2001: 223).

**Achievement assessment** – it aims to determine what the child can do and aims to diagnose his/her achievement in regular intervals.

**Assessment for research**
Many times assessment is carried out for the purposes of research. This is to inform researchers about the nature of the language acquisition of young learners, but sometimes it is carried out before particular innovations are introduced or some changes are carried out in education. Research should focus not only on the learners but also on the teachers, their approaches, choice of methods, techniques and tasks, general attitude to and concrete experience in further education, etc.

The assessment process has several phases. First of all, it starts with the design phase, when the teacher decides on the purposes of assessment and selects the right assessment task or procedure adequate for the learners' needs and characteristics as well as the learning situation. During this phase it should clearly be defined which areas or constructs are going to be assessed (e.g. listening comprehension) and a plan needs to be considered in order to find out whether the assessment task or procedure is useful (we will deal with the criteria of selecting appropriate assessment tasks and procedure later in Chapter X).

The second phase of the assessment process is the preparation phase, where the teacher prepares all materials needed to carry out the selected assessment task or procedure

– e.g. instructions are prepared, checklists are elaborated, etc.

The final phase of the process is the administration or the checking phase, where the teacher checks whether the procedure has worked well or not and, whether it was reliable and assessed children's abilities and suited their needs and whether it was successful in promoting and supporting learning.

Penny McKay explains that the stages and purposes of the assessment process can easily be converted into a set of questions that need to be answered by classroom teachers during the assessment process. She lists the following questions:

- Why do I need to know, and who else needs to know? (The purpose of the assessment process)
- What do I need to know? (The constructs and areas that will be used.)
- How can I find out? (The tasks and strategies that will be used.)
- What will I do with the information? (How information will be used, assembled and stored.)
- How will I know that the assessment has been effective and how can I improve it next time? (The evaluation of the assessment process.)
- (McKay 2006:147)

The above lists underline that undertaking assessment in the language classroom is not an easy task. Teachers need to be acquainted with the broader practices and principles of assessment, need proper planning and have to adjust to the learners, the learning situation and the context of learning.

## 2.2. Effective assessment

The teacher's choice of assessment techniques also reflects his/her approach to language teaching, motivation and his/her overall attitude to learning. It shows what s/he wants the children to achieve and how s/he understands achievement and making mistakes. Handling mistakes and errors is a part of the teacher's approach to language teaching. Allowing students to make mistakes and giving them the change to correct them leads to a more learner-centred type of assessment, where the main emphasis is put on the student, not on the curriculum. An encouraging system of assessment can contribute to a positive and motivating learning atmosphere, where the student can feel safe and is enabled to view learning as a process s/he can benefit from, rather than a situation pointing out the student's weaknesses and threatening his self-esteem. When discussing the importance of assessment in the foreign language classroom, Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlov point out the importance of attitude:

> "Fostering positive attitudes in childhood should be a priority, since this is the best time to form strong positive attitudes towards learning, the target language, and the target culture. Negative attitudes formed at this stage are hard to change in the future." (Ioannou-Georgiou – Pavlov 2003: 8)

Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlov point out a very important element of language learning that needs to be assessed: attitude. It is though-provoking not only because it

expands the field of assessment with emotional elements, but also because it suggests that attitude – both of teachers and learners – can be changed. The teacher's task is not only assessing the language improvement of the child, but also assessing how his/her attitude to language learning develops and changes. The teacher should regularly observe and monitor the children's motivation and individual relationship with the foreign language and should intervene immediately if the child expresses negative feelings or shows signs of discouragement.

The methodologies of teaching young learners seem to have realized the importance of playfulness, motivation, creativity in the teaching process as well as children's special needs connected with short attention span, need for movement and their specific areas of interest. Similarly, the assessment of young learners should take into consideration the very same factors and should be based on the above mentioned principles. We cannot give a multiple-choice grammar test based on the past simple after having sung songs, rhymes, chants and having played games during the weeks preceding the test.

Children need to be familiar with assessment techniques in advance and the form of assessment tasks. It is very important that they do not face tasks that are alien to them or tasks that might create anxiety or other negative feelings.

Assessing learners provides a feedback on students' learning, which can help the teacher make the next teaching event more effective. Lynne Cameron claims that teaching and learning needs should dictate the form and timing of assessment (Cameron 2001: 215). However, in practice, it happens very frequently that unlike the above situation, assessment seems to determine teaching by forcing teachers teach what is going to be assessed. The main reason is that

teachers follow the state curriculum very precisely and strictly and might forget about that the main aim of teaching should not be teaching the coursebook or the curriculum, but the student. Similarly, assessment should not only be based on what the curriculum prescribes, but should also take into consideration the progress that the student has mad. It happens many times that the teacher teaches the present perfect to kids who hardly recognize the present simple or cannot produce correct structures in the past simple. This can only lead to confusion, frustration and the loss of motivation both on the teacher's and the students' side.

Assessment should be complex, checking different areas and skills. Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlov highlight the importance of assessing all four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, though language often involves the use of all four skills in an integrated way (Ioannou-Georgiou – Pavlov 2003: 6). In addition, they suggest that sometimes this task might be difficult, because assessing one skill often requires the use of another. In such case they suggest focusing on the particular skill the teacher wants to assess (Ioannou-Georgiou – Pavlov 2003: 7). For example, if the teacher wants to assess listening skills, the teacher should also pay attention to whether the child can predict the meaning and content of the recording, get the main idea or listen for details, and should not ignore answers with a spelling mistake, since the main focus of assessment was listening, not writing. On the other hand, assessing skills separately should be combined with assessing integrated skills, since they reflect real-life language use in the best way. Assessing integrated skills is connected with situations that simulate real life and encourages children to cope in these situations by using more than one language skill.

## *2.3. Basic principles of assessment*

- The area to be assessed should be defined clearly and it should be isolated from other areas – if we want to assess reading, for example, children should not be asked to write.
- Assessment should have measurable results – and assessment task should produce concrete, measurable evidence about the child's language level or development.
- You should only assess children's skills and knowledge if you have taught those specific skills and knowledge. Assessment should not aim at proving what the kids do not know, but rather diagnose what they already know or can do.
- Assessment should be carried out at specific times during the learning process, e.g. when you have finished a unit or have practiced a specific language item or skill.
- Teachers should focus on the child as a whole person, therefore, it is crucial to take into consideration skills and abilities other than the ones connected with using a specific language item. Becoming a good team player, being polite and sensitive to other's feelings, respecting hard work and appreciating efforts are also parts of the education process, therefore teachers should regularly monitor and assess these skills as well.
- Assessment should be seen from a learning-centred perspective.
- Assessment should not be limited to testing. A wide range of assessment techniques should be used such as portfolio, observation, etc.

- Both children and parents should understand assessment issues. They need to know what is being assessed and how.

## 2.4. Selection of assessment tasks and procedures for young learners

Language assessment tasks can be selected by the classroom language teacher, by other teachers at the school, by the textbook writer(s), test developers in the education department, school authorities or by school subject committees. These language assessment tasks can stand alone or serve a particular purpose, or they may be the part of an assessment procedure (a process that requires a longer period of time, e.g. teacher observation, portfolios, self-assessment or performance assessment).

The person in charge of choosing assessment tasks or procedures for young learners should consider a number of criteria and principles in order to choose the most appropriate task or procedure. It is not an easy and straightforward decision since it requires careful analysis to decide which assessment task or procedure is the most suitable for the learners, the learning context and the goal of teaching and learning.

The very first principle to consider should be that the teacher should select tasks and procedures which suit the characteristics of young learners. The teacher should know about the very basic features of the learners being assessed – their age, interests, social and cultural background, motivation, personal characteristics and take these factors

into consideration when selecting an assessment task or procedure.

Bachman and Palmer (1996) suggest a list of questions that should be asked about assessment tasks and procedures when making a decision to select the right one in order to assess the learners' language use ability. The following questions are included in the list:

- To what extent are results *reliable*? (Would the child get the same results if another teacher or assessor assessed his/her work, or if s/he was assessed in the same way the next day?)
- To what extent is there construct *validity*? (Are the interpretations made by the teacher or the assessor on the basis of an assessment task or procedure meaningful and appropriate? Are the scores and their interpretations on the assessment task really the reflection of learners' knowledge?)
- To what extent is the assessment task *authentic*? (To what extent does the assessment task reflect the type of language young learners use in the classroom or need in situations outside the classroom? Is the language used in the assessment task relevant to the child's world?)
- To what extent is the assessment task *interactive*? (To what extent is the child's language ability involved in completing the task?)
- To what extent is the assessment task *practical*? (Are there enough resources – time, space, energy, materials – for the task to work in the assessment situation? For example, if the teacher wants to assess 30 foreign language learners in a ten-minute individual oral interview, the task will be impractical in this particular teaching situation with the resources s/he has available,

since it would take five hours. This type of assessment task would be suitable in a different teaching situation.)
- To what extent is the assessment task *positive*? (Does the assessment task have a positive impact on the learners, the teacher, the parents or their school community? Does the assessment task have a positive washback – motivation to learn – or a negative washback – discouragement of learners – in the classroom?)

The above criteria are the characteristics of a useful and appropriate assessment task or procedure, all the above principles should be present in the assessment procedure, and each of them should be prioritized to be as high as possible according to the purpose of the assessment task or procedure and the teaching situation.

## 2.5. Influences on classroom assessment

Different countries and educational institutions have several different policies and practices related to assessment as well as to the selection of appropriate assessment tools, tasks and procedures for young learners. Therefore, only a very few teachers are lucky enough to have absolute freedom in the choice of assessment tools, the majority of them are influenced and guided by external factors. The most significant influences on teachers' assessment practices are the requirements of the education system: educational standards, curriculum requirements, and external or in other words 'norm-referenced' tests. The list can also be extended by parental and student expectations and teacher expertise.

The education system is organized around a set of standards that are designed and regularly checked by higher education (state) authorities. These standards serve as reference points for curriculum requirements. Assessment is more or less strictly regulated by central standards. In Slovakia, it is the 1 to 5 marking system, which appears in school certificates and children's school report books. Teachers are obliged to assess learners' performance with a grade regularly, and there must be a half-term and an end-of-term final mark. The choice of assessment tools is unfortunately many times still guided by the dominance of the grading system. However, especially in the first level of primary school, more and more teachers seem to realize the limitations of the compulsory assessment system, which is usually equalled with traditional testing or the written form of assessment tasks, and integrate other assessment tasks and procedures in their assessment process.

System requirements have a strong influence on the teachers' choice of assessment tools as well as their flexibility in the field of assessment. The system does not mean the education system and state authorities only; it also includes the general attitude and expectations of the school and the leaders of the school. The kind and amount of freedom given to teachers may differ in different schools, teachers may be allowed to experiment with alternative methods and assessment tools or they may be asked to stick to traditional forms, document test papers and do statistics on test scores and learners' achievement.

The curriculum content can have an impact on teachers' assessment tools, since teachers may feel that they are obliged to follow the standards, aims defined by the curriculum and move towards the outcomes and results explained by the curriculum. Teachers in these situations

may find themselves teaching the required content or chapters in a textbook sticking strictly to the time limit and deadlines set in the curriculum regardless of the internalization of the content by the children. The nature of assessment and classroom atmosphere generally is definitely different in such cases than in classes where teachers use assessment to support learning and regularly apply a variety of assessment tasks and procedures.

Young learners have the advantage of not having to face external or norm-referenced tests; they do not need to pass tests developed by others or outside experts other than their class teacher. Children need time to improve, enjoy learning and they need a safe, anxiety-free environment. Therefore, it is an advantage that assessment is carried out by the classroom teacher, who can observe learners' performance and development over many tasks during a longer period of time. The class teacher's assessment can be more valid than an external expert's who does not know the learners. In certain cases, classroom assessment of young learners can be carried out by an outsider for the purposes of some research.

A very influential factor in the choice of classroom assessment tools is parental expectations. Parents expect their children to perform well in tests and pass with flying colours. This may result in pressure on classroom assessment and especially in the field of alternative assessment tools, which can be declared as more subjective than a traditional test. In extreme cases, parents who are anxious that assessment is not valid or reliable, can even ask for another teacher to carry out the assessment process. All in all, teachers need to do their best to make sure that assessment is fair and trusted and communicate their professional judgement with parents and students.

Classroom assessment is also influenced by teacher expertise. Some teachers have more experience and training in assessing young learners, others are not. Given the essential role of assessment in teaching and learner motivation, it is crucial to include training in assessment in foreign language teacher training or pre-service education. If such training or courses were not available, the teacher needs to do further research and gain knowledge in the field of classroom assessment as quickly as possible. Of course, experience in various assessment tools largely depends on the amount of space teachers are given by the system (state, school, school principal, etc.) and some teachers can face challenges better than others in adopting new classroom assessment strategies. The most effective way of improving classroom assessment skills is to cooperate with colleagues, work collaboratively, discuss assessment tasks and procedures and share experiences. Groups of teachers can share ideas and persuade school principals and parents about the value of new classroom assessment tools much more easily.

# 3. TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Traditionally, assessment has been carried out in a written form, the form of tests or quizzes with several typical test items such as multiple-choice, true-false questions, open questions, fill-in the blank, matching, writing essays, translating vocabulary lists, etc. The purpose of these standardized tests is to measure whether students have met specific objectives and goals or they have learnt specific language items after a given period of learning.

## *3.1. Testing*

Most schools request teachers to prepare tests for their classes and check what the children have studied in a written form. Tests are the most common basis for assessment; they are easy to design and check, are generally accepted as reliable bases for giving children grades. Many times, these tests are called traditional 'pen-and-paper' tests, which are usually made up of two types of questions. The first is discrete item tasks, which means testing a particular language item, the other is integrative tasks, which means that a number of items or language skills are tested in the same question.

A good test is fair and appropriate for the students, it is easy to mark and it provides clear results.

Brown and Abeywickrama list four basic types of formal tests: diagnostic tests, placement tests, achievement tests and proficiency tests (Brown – Abeywickrama 2010).

Diagnostic tests are tests diagnosing certain areas of learning, possible learning difficulties in order to take further action to eliminate possible problems or obstacles. Placement tests are usually used in the beginning of a language course. They are designed to assess learners' skills and knowledge and to place them in the proper language level learning group or class. The aim is to put learners in a group where materials are neither too easy, nor too difficult for the learner. Achievement tests are designed to measure student progress at certain stages of the curriculum. They can measure whether the content of a unit or certain part of a course has been learnt or not. Proficiency tests usually provide a wider picture of the learner's English language ability. It is not linked with a concrete unit or part of the curriculum; it is rather about obtaining a general picture about what the learner knows or can do in the target language and also providing information about the learner's language development. A proficiency test usually involves testing several skills e.g. listening, reading, etc.

Traditional assessment methods have received huge criticism and are often claimed to be narrow-minded and limited. Annamaria Pinter claims that traditional tests "are often favoured by teachers because they are relatively easy to set and correct and they reduce language knowledge to points, marks, and grades, i.e. quantifiable results. However, in the case of younger children especially, these tests often do not work because such isolated exercises do not show what children know and can do with confidence" (Pinter 2006: 132). The activities carried out in the language classroom do not have a written form only, it is a variety of different speaking, listening, reading activities. Young learners require a lot of movement and playfulness. If the needs of young learners are fulfilled, and plenty of playful

and creative activities are implemented during teaching, it must be reflected in the way of assessment. This means that assessment methods must include creativity and playfulness as well; otherwise it can happen that assessment turns out to be one-sided, testing only one element of the more complex teaching and learning process. As Pinter points out, tests can appear as "isolated exercises", which do not pay attention e.g. the drama techniques ore the language games used during teaching a certain language item.

Another important aspect of testing that has become the target of sharp criticism is grading. Tests can be graded in various ways, e.g. by giving learners grades, numbers from 1 to 5, or percentages or letters (e.g. A, B, C). Lower grades can discourage learners and make them lose motivation by giving them the false message that they could not succeed in handling the tested language skill or language item though a single grade cannot provide a satisfactory feedback. In addition, learning goals include several attitudinal goals (e.g. having a positive motivation towards language learning, widening perspectives toward other cultures) as well as social goals (e.g. improving interactive and cooperative skills, problem solving, empathy, etc.), which are not reflected by the test items of traditional testing. Tests might not give an overall picture of the students' overall abilities.

Tests are claimed to be misleading sometimes, they are not always valid (not always testing what they say they are) e.g. a listening test based on long multiple-choice written questions may actually test reading rather than listening comprehension. Furthermore, the students may guess the answer and might still get it right. Many tests are unreliable, e.g. different teachers might mark it differently, e.g. the assessment of essays can be very subjective even with the strictest marking criteria. Another drawback of tests is that

students with test anxiety might not perform well under test conditions. If tests are the basis for crucial summative assessment in the student's career or an important contributor to their final grade, they can be extremely stressful.

# 4. ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

Several scholars have criticised traditional assessment approaches and tools, especially testing, and have expressed concern about teachers teaching to the test. Dylan William (2002) poses several provocative questions:

- Why are pupils tested as individuals, when the world of work requires people who can work well in a team?
- Why do we test memory, when in the real world engineers and scientists rarely rely on memory? When they do not know something, they look it up.
- Why do we use timed tests, when it is usually more important to get things done right than get things done quickly? (William 2002: 61-62).

William prefers an approach that would support teachers' own judgements of pupil achievement, and suggests that all forms of testing should be avoided.

Alternative or performance-based assessment is also known as assessment for learning. Pierce and O'Malley (1992) 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" (Pierce – O'Malley 1992: 2). Alternative assessment is frequently called assessment for learning, by which scholars emphasize that this type of assessment concentrates on the improvement of learning – i.e. the process – rather than testing learners' achievements – i.e. the result.

Hargreaves, Gipps and Pickering define assessment for learning as "a way of using informal assessment during

ordinary classroom activities to improve learning" (Hargreaves et. al. 2014: 313). They list ten basic principles and key factors associated with assessment for learning:

1. Assessment for learning should be part of the effective planning of teaching and learning.
2. Assessment for learning should focus on how pupils learn.
3. Assessment for learning should be central to classroom practice.
4. Assessment for learning should be considered as a key professional skill for teachers.
5. Assessment for learning should be sensitive and constructive because any assessment has an emotional impact on the learner.
6. Assessment for learning should take account of the importance of learner motivation.
7. Assessment for learning should promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria by which they are assessed.
8. Learners should receive constructive guidance about how to progress.
9. Assessment for learning should develop learners' abilities for self-assessment and self-management.
10. Assessment for learning should recognize the full range of achievements of all learners. (Hargreaves et. al. 2014: 314-316)

Assessment for learning does not start after teaching has been completed, but should be the integral part of the planning of teaching and learning already. Planning should include strategies to make learners understand the goals they need to reach and the strategies they should take in order to improve.

Before teaching and learning starts, the teacher should decide on how learners will receive feedback about their achievements during the course and how they can participate in assessment. One of the most important requirements of successful assessment is that learners should be fully aware of what they should learn and how they can learn it.

Two key factors serve as guidelines for assessment for learning: **motivation** and **the emotional impact of assessment**.

Alternative assessment methods also take into consideration the improvement of the learners' critical thinking. Thinking critically about the learning process, assessing their own performance and the performance of their peers are all phenomena that lead to the improvement of critical thinking. The teacher can do much in order to encourage learners to think logically and use their creativity to the greatest extent. Effective questioning is another factor that contributes to the development of the learners' cognitive or 'thinking' skills. If the teacher wishes to assess learner's knowledge and wants to check understanding by asking questions, s/he needs to make sure that s/he asks the right questions. Instead of yes-no questions, it is more beneficial to ask WH-questions i.e. open-ended questions. It does not only reduce the number of guesses, it also gives learners the change to think more deeply and express their own ideas. Harris and Williams suggest that open-ended questions "provoke speculation and extend the imagination" (Harris – Williams 2012: 375). Hargreaves at al. also support open-ended questions and claim that asking such questions is much more productive than a closed questioning technique, where only one answer is deemed 'correct' by the teacher, leaving the children guessing what the teacher wants to hear, rather than expressing their own ideas (Hargreaves 2014: 317).

Instead of asking questions such as 'Do you remember?', 'Do you know the answer?', 'Is this correct?', 'Is the boy's pullover red?, the teacher should use more complex questions to elicit ideas from learners: e.g. 'What does it remind you of?', 'What do you think will happen next?', 'Which items or things do you think belong together and why?', 'Do you think you could do it differently?', and so on.

Young learners must be given appropriate amount of time in order to produce answers. This time is the so called thinking time. They need to feel safe to think it over before responding. It is also important that the teacher listens to their responses and pays attention without any hurry and does not judge answers negatively e.g. 'No, it is wrong.', but encourages learners and supports their initiatives to express their minds.

The most central principles of alternative assessment or assessment for learning can be summarized in the following way:

- the process of learning is more emphasized than the result;
- assessment is seen as a tool to assist and help the learner rather than a threatening tool;
- the relationship between the teacher and the learner is redefined, they become more like partners, where the teacher uses assessment tasks to reflect on which areas should be covered again to help learning;
- the learner becomes an active participant of the assessment process by being involved in discussions about learning, assessment criteria as well as learning objectives;
- the necessity of self-assessment and peer-assessment is more emphasized than in traditional assessment methods;

- assessment is also used as a motivational tool to inspire learners to understand their learning process, by giving them feedback on which areas to focus on more and hints on how to improve.

Shin and Crandal (2014) list eight types of alternative assessment for young learners:
1. Observations
2. Conference and oral interviews
3. Story or text retellings
4. Writing samples
5. Projects
6. Portfolios
7. Other performances
8. Self- or peer-assessments (Shin – Crandal 2014: 258)

Annamaria Pinter (2006) divides alternative techniques into the following groups:
1. Observation
2. Self-assessment
3. Portfolio
4. Project work
5. The combination of assessment instruments

Jennifer Job claims that the most popular forms of alternative assessment are:
1. Essays
2. Portfolios
3. Presentations/Demonstrations
4. Authentic assessments[5]

[5] Jennifer Job: Alternative Assessment Retrieved from: http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/7041 Accessed: 12 September 2016

Alternative assessments includes (but may not be limited to) performance assessment, authentic assessment and portfolio assessment.

**Performance assessment** includes project-based assessment and problem-base assessment. Students demonstrate their knowledge or skills through a product they have created or a performance they have prepared. This assessment method is seen ideal for special needs classrooms or ones with inclusive settings. Performance assessments includes projects, interviews, presentations, essays, experiments and demonstrations, activities that are more based on critical thinking and the practical application of theoretical knowledge.

**Authentic assessment** is many times defined as assessment that calls for application of concepts in real life.

## 4.1. Primary school portfolios

The roots of **portfolio assessment** date back to the mid-1980s with the work of Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff. They published several papers and books on the "portfolio explosion that has gained steady strength since we [i.e. Elbow and Belanoff] started our experiment in 1983 at Stony Brook"[6]. Since then several scholars and practitioners have suggested designing standards for using portfolios for

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[6] Elbow, P. – Belanoff, P. (1997). Reflections on an Explosion: Portfolios in the '90s and Beyond. In Yancey K. & Weiser I. (Eds.), *Situating Portfolios* (pp. 21-33). University Press of Colorado. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46nxw3.4 Accessed: 1 September 2016

assessing student work and emphasising the process of learning (e.g. Sandra Murphy in 1997).

A portfolio collects the student's work from the beginning until a later stage of development. It is not the collection of the student's best works. Students set goals for their portfolios and decide which works to include. These works can include drawings, written pieces, audio tapes or performances, video recordings, photographs, artwork or children's self-evaluation sheets. All these works included should preferably have linguistic components as well – related language samples, e.g. written comments, descriptions, etc.

Georgia Brooke and Heidi Andrade define process portfolios in the following way:

> "A process portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that documents student growth from novice to master. Successful process portfolios actively engage students in their creation, especially in determining their goals, selecting work to be included, and reflecting on how each piece demonstrates progress toward their goals"[7].

Several significant elements are emphasized in the above quote. Firstly, portfolio assessment and the compilation of the portfolio involve the learner, who becomes a very active participant not only in the learning process, but also in assessing his or her achievements and performance as well. Secondly, Brooke and Andrade highlight that students need to be informed about learning

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[7] Brooke – Andrade. Retrieved from:
http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/resources/student-centered-assessment-resources Accessed: 2 September 2016

goals and have to identify with these goals. This change in perspective suggests that students are more motivated in language learning and in reaching goals when they become active agents in the process. It also suggests that by choosing pieces of work to be put into their portfolios, students develop their skills of assessment, making judgements and critical thinking. They reflect on their own ideas and work.

Katy Hall and Kieron Sheehy claim that classes can have individual portfolios and also 'class' or even 'school' portfolios. Individual portfolios can be connected to one particular subject – English, and one particular student, but even classes can have portfolios, where the teacher puts samples of students' work (Hall – Sheehy 2014: 327). They also suggest having an individual literacy portfolio, where students can put lists of books read, written responses to stories, drawings or paintings in response to literary works, and so on (Hall – Sheehy 2014: 327).

Pucket and Black (2000) distinguish three types of portfolios, process portfolios, archival portfolios and aggregated portfolios. Process portfolios are work in progress, since they follow the growth of students from day to day, address short-term goals and evaluate current performance. Archival portfolios contain selected items from the process portfolio that are chosen to illustrate a child's ability. These items are selected at regular intervals (three or four times a year). These archival portfolios can be forwarded to the next teacher at the end of the year. An aggregated portfolio is a class portfolio that includes representative work samples from each student's portfolio and summarizes class records.

Penny McKay discusses the arguments of Moya and O'Malley (1994) and their findings about the strengths of portfolio assessment. McKay underlines their argument that

portfolios are able to do much more than simply providing a record of a child's progress. Based on the article of Moya and O'Malley, McKay creates the following list of advantages and potentials portfolios have:

Portfolios have the potential for:
- enhancing teacher professionalism through meaningful and active involvement in student assessment;
- establishing a sense of community among evaluators;
- encouraging thoughtful activity in the classroom;
- promoting serious discussion of criteria and what goes on in the classroom;
- creating instructional links at different grade levels;
- linking assessment more closely to classroom activities;
- allowing students to draw on the skills they learn in process-centred classrooms;
- allowing assessments to become a teaching strategy to improve learning;
- drawing on students' strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses;
- involving both students and parents in assessment;
- making assessment more equitable (McKay 2006: 160).

The use of portfolios can establish greater learner and parental involvement in learning and supports learning through assessment. Of course, the use of portfolios should be combined with the philosophy of alternative assessment, its basic principles and goals. Portfolio assessment pushes the process of learning to the foreground and encourages learners to reflect upon their achievements and accomplishments. This way, learners become aware of what progress means, what kind of steps lead to development and

they will understand how well they are progressing and what they need to do for further progress.

Marking portfolios can be done in several ways. McKay suggests that there are two ways of marking. The first way is that individual pieces of work included in the portfolio can be marked separately and the individual marks can be added up. The second option is that a set of criteria can be established for the portfolio as a whole, so the learner gets only one final mark for the portfolio. The two ways of giving marks can also be combined. McKay concludes that "it is more valuable in terms of feedback to the learners to mark individual pieces of work with a separate criteria sheet or marking scheme, and not to just give one overall mark for the folder" (McKay 2006: 161). If learners get a mark for each work, they will get clear feedback about each element of the portfolio and thus are provided specific feedback for further learning about which areas need to be revised in the future. Once marked, the portfolio can be discussed with learners and parents as well; it can be used for illustrating the range and quality of the child's work over a certain period.

## *4.2. Projects*

Project work is one of the most popular forms of alternative assessment. This form of work integrates more skills, e.g. drawing, reading or speaking, therefore, it is suitable for integrated assessment. Projects can be developed individually, in pairs or in groups. When working in pairs or groups, learners need to cooperate and reach the final result through joint effort.

Project work focuses on the complex development of the learner rather than concentrating on teaching the language or linguistic competences. Phillips at al. point out four different areas of skills that project work includes and develops:

- the **intellectual** skills of describing, drawing conclusions, using the imagination, hypothesizing, reading, and planning;
- the **physical/motor** skills of colouring, painting, cutting, folding, gluing, and writing;
- the social skills of sharing, co-operating, making decisions together, and appreciating how individual contributions can make a successful whole;
- **learner independence** skills such as making responsible choices, deciding how to complete tasks, getting information, trying things out, and evaluating results (Phillips et al. 1999: 6).

They add that project work encourages emotional and personal development and gives children the opportunity to produce work which is personal and individual, which reflects their own ideas and interests and they can share their thoughts, opinions and feelings.

The advantages of project work have been summarized by several scholars (e.g. Phillips et al. 1999; Cameron 2001; McKay 2006, Szőköl 2017). The following list can be provided to support the application of project work with young language learners:

- Project work is a learner-centred approach that concentrates on the child as a whole, rather than on the

coursebook or a body of knowledge or set of skills that need to be acquired.

- Project work encourages learner involvement and improves learner independence by giving learners several levels of responsibility by assigning several tasks.
- Project work improves cooperation skills and teaches learners how to work in a team, how to share tasks and help one another. Therefore, it can be used in mixed-ability classes as well.
- Project work integrates experiential learning into the classroom; learners are given a task and use the language that is needed for the successful completion of the activity or tasks.
- Project work involves and develops a variety of skills including social, intellectual, physical, emotional and communication skills.
- Projects allow flexibility in the curriculum, it breaks routine and can provide excitement and raise learners' curiosity.
- Project work can be shorter or it can last for longer periods of time.
- Projects can be presented to parents, assessors or learners from other classes.

The group members working in the same project need to be selected very carefully. Projects can work well in mixed-ability classes, where weaker students can benefit from other classmates, and stronger students can show and share their knowledge by supporting and explaining to others. It is very important that the roles of each group member is clearly set and defined so that everyone knows what he or she needs to do in order to avoid improper division of tasks – it could

happen that one person does the job and the rest of the learners just relax and do not contribute at all.

It is very difficult to assess projects with traditional grades, because the cooperation of the group, their problem-solving skills and creativity needs to be taken into account as well. In addition, it is difficult to be completely fair to each group member. On one hand, the teacher needs to assess the project of the group; on the other hand, the individual work and the individual contribution of each member of the group should be appreciated and assessed as well. Therefore, assessing project work should not be part of formative assessment. It can be part of summative assessment, for example after finishing a unit in a coursebook, the teacher can apply it in order to find out whether students have learnt the language, the content and the skills presented by the particular unit.

## *4.3. Contracts of work*

Contracts of work are documents with a set of tasks and specified accomplishments that children need to perform over a period of time, agreed between the learner and the student. Contracts are more suitable for upper grades  of the first level of primary school who can read and write more proficiently – though some researchers argue that contracts with pictures and graphics can be given to younger kids as well, who cannot read or write (Puckett and Black 2002).

Contracts of work help children organize their work and help them become more responsible for their own learning. They are provided a concrete list of tasks and responsibilities in a written form – as a kind of reminder of what needs to be

accomplished with a specific deadline. Children learn to work more independently and get feedback both on the completed task or project and whether it was done on time. Contracts can be scheduled for a week or for a longer period of time, e.g. a month if longer projects are in question. Learners should be provided the concrete criteria of task completion as well as the explicit assessment criteria for the particular task in the contract. Contracts like this can be kept in a portfolio or in a specific folder for contracts.

An example of a contract between learner and teacher see in Figure 1.

| |
|---|
| Name:                                        Date: |
| I will complete the following tasks by the end of Week 3/ by 23 October: |
| Tasks: <br> ▪ Choose 6 pictures of animals in newspapers or download and print from the Internet. <br> ▪ Search in the library/on the Internet for information on the animal. <br> ▪ Write a draft – 5 sentences about each animal (using the model given by Mrs. Jones). <br> ▪ Ask Mrs. Jones to give me feedback on the draft. <br> ▪ Stick the pictures of animals on a large sheet of paper/board. <br> ▪ Write the description of the animals in the poster/board. <br> ▪ Prepare for the oral presentation – talking about the animals. <br> ▪ Present the poster to the class. <br> …………………...           ………………… <br> Teacher signature           Learner signature |

*Figure 1 Example of a contract[8]*

Learners can undertake the tasks indicated in the contract individually or in pairs or groups. The types of tasks can range from presentations to projects or performances; the

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[8] The contract presented in Figure 1 is based on contract included by Penny McKay (McKay 2006: 164) with several modifications.

most important criterion is that language needs to be involved in tasks, since language assessment is in the focus.

## 4.4. Observation

Systematic observation is one of the most reliable ways of assessing young learners' performances and achievements. Teachers can do it continuously, and many times children are not even aware of being assessed this way. Observation can be incidental, when the teacher watches the faces of the learners during story-telling to check whether they have understood the story or whether they enjoy the story or just checks engagement. Observation can also be planned, it can involve a number of techniques, and teachers may observe children's performance and take notes of what they see on a regular basis. They can use observation checklists or rating scales. O'Malley and Valdez Pierce emphasize that observations become assessment only if they are recorded systematically over a period of time so that characteristics and changes in student performance are noted (O'Malley and Valdez Pierce 1996: 14).

The teacher can observe several forms of classroom work, i.e. individual work, pair work and group work. During individual work, the teacher can observe how the learner starts doing the task, whether s/he understood the instructions and knows how to proceed. This way, the teacher gets a hint about how instructions worked but also can find out ideas about what help the learner requires and what type of guidance is the most suitable. During the observation of group work, the teacher can judge whether students can cooperate, how group dynamics work and how

students can work collaboratively on a project or certain tasks.

The goals of observation can be linguistic (speaking, writing, reading, listening, etc.) or non-linguistic (monitoring attitude, engagement, motivation, interest, etc.). It is important that observation should be recorded and stored. The National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC) emphasizes that effective alternative assessment relies on observations that are recorded in two special ways: checklists and rubrics[9].

[9] National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC). (n.d.). *The Essentials of Language Teaching. Assessing Learning: Alternative Assessment.* Retrieved from:
http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/assessing/alternative.htm Accessed: 12 September 2016

# 5. PEER AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

Changes in the understanding of assessment and in the approaches to learning and teaching have resulted in changes in the relationship between the teacher and the learners and between learners as well. Teachers are no more the only centres of teaching and learning, the authoritative image of the teacher has been pushed to the background and has been replaced by a teacher who is more like a facilitator, an assistant, a guide and the supporter of language learning. This change is mirrored in assessment methods as well by shifting more emphasis on the role of the learner in assessing learning.

Self- and peer assessment are strategies that can be used in student-centred classroom assessment, which involve the learners actively in their own learning process and performance and help them develop critical thinking and self-reflection with clear and careful guidance. McKay argues that self- and peer assessment is a teaching strategy as much as an assessment strategy, since the benefits of these strategies for children can be, amongst others, opportunities to increase their language awareness and ability to talk about language (by discussing what makes a good performance), increased responsibility for their own work and strengthened sense of being part of a classroom community (McKay 2006: 166).

Hargreaves et. al. underline the importance of learners' self-assessment, because by this activity, learners become more reflective and self -managing and their critical thinking improves. They explain: "Reflective and self-managing (or self-directed) learners seek out and cultivate new skills, new knowledge and new understandings. They are able to engage in self-reflection and to identify how to progress in their

learning." (Hargreaves 2014: 315). By developing their skills to assess their own activities gives learners more responsibility and a bigger share in their own learning process. Self-assessment should be practiced on a regular basis so that learners can improve their skills in reflecting and critical thinking. It should not be taken for granted that students can assess themselves in an appropriate way, it is an activity that they need to learn as well. Therefore, regular practice and guidance is necessary.

By this student-centred alternative assessment method, learners become more conscious of the language learning process and get acquainted with the principles of 'learning to learn'. Younger learners may find it difficult to provide a detailed feedback about their own performance, though it is not impossible. Shin and Crandall argue that children under 8 years of age are not likely to reflect on their performance, if they do, they are overly optimistic about their achievements (Shin – Crandal 2014: 261). However, several studies have proved that after the age of eight, children's ability to self-reflect and self-assess improves[10]. In order to achieve this, learners must be given appropriate assistance and guideline.

Regarding self-assessment, the teacher should not ask them to assess overall performance and give general feedback. Instead, they should be asked to assess a concrete task, or how they have managed to complete a concrete activity. It is crucial that teachers should not leave their learners alone with disappointing judgments (e.g. *I am not able to talk about my school.* or *I could not complete the sentences with the right form of 'to be'.*). Self-assessment should always include a positive element, what the learner

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[10] Butler and Lee 2010, Paris and Newman 1990, referred to In: Shin – Crandal 2014: 261.

was able to do, and possible opportunities or solutions for the future – how the learner should proceed in the future in order to be successful, what s/he should do to be able to complete the activity, for example. Therefore, very straightforward and clear assessment criteria should be given to the learner before self-assessment in order to avoid confusion and support safety and learner confidence. It should be stressed continuously that the aim of self-assessment is to improve language learning and identify which areas should be worked on rather than emphasising the learner's weaknesses.

Peer-assessment must be handled with similar care and special attention. Learners working in the same group or pairs should be given concrete criteria based on which they can assess each other's performance. However, before applying peer-assessment, the teacher must make sure that there is a friendly and fair atmosphere in the class and the main focus of children is to support each other and guide each other's learning.

# 6. ASSESSING ORAL LANGUAGE

Oral language includes listening and speaking, the skills, which are even more specifically integrated in the primary English classroom.

Assessing oral language is a complex process, since it involves both speaking and listening skills. Learners' language use ability is assessed in speaking and listening tasks, e.g. interviews, role-plays, pair work activities, etc., tasks that combine speaking and listening. Of course, there are situations where speaking and listening are assessed separately, e.g. in extended speaking or extended listening activities.

Bachman and Palmer (1996) identify four types of language knowledge that we need to consider when teaching and assessing the oral language. Based on this model, it is possible to improve learners' oral performance, of course, by taking into consideration curriculum requirements, the situation that learners encounter in the target language. These four areas are the following:

1. **Grammatical knowledge** – Children need to use proper vocabulary, syntax and phonology, they need to use language accurately and pronounce words properly to use speak clearly. They should have appropriate pronunciation and intonation. In addition, they need to understand other people's pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary and syntax as well.
2. **Textual knowledge** – Children need to speak in organized and cohesive ways, e.g. they need to use relative clauses, understand conjunctions that join sentences and paragraphs together (but, then, and,

though). They also need to learn how to refer back to other parts of a sentence. In listening, children need to understand the context and what is being said. They need to use textual knowledge to listen both to conversations and to extended texts.

3. **Functional knowledge** – Children need to learn that language is used for many different purposes and functions. They need to improve their abilities to use language for different purposes and also to understand the purposes of others behind language use.

4. **Sociolinguistic knowledge** – Children need to learn that they need to use language appropriate to the language use situation that they are in. For example, they can say '*See ya'* to friends, but they should say '*Goodbye'* to the teacher. They need to learn the meaning of idioms, need to understand humour and the requirements of several social interactions.

Penny McKay extends Bachmann and Palmer's model of language knowledge with contributed knowledge and skills by claiming that there is a list of abilities and skills included in the curriculum and learners' language use should be assessed accordingly.

Examples of contributing knowledge and skills for oral language:

- **Ability to discriminate sounds, stress and intonation:** e.g. the ability to recognize the stress in words, differences in intonation, for example to differentiate between questions and statements.
- **Knowledge of a growing range of vocabulary:** ability to use and understand a growing range of words in their

oral language. Knowledge of vocabulary growing in depth and accuracy.

- **Knowledge of a growing range of grammatical structures:** Ability to use and understand a growing range of structures and improving accuracy in the use of grammatical structures.
- **Ability to predict meaning from a range of cues:** Ability to use the semantic, syntactic and graphophonic cues available in others' speech. Ability to use the context to facilitate understanding.
- **Ability to listen for explicit and implicit meaning:** Ability to listen for main ideas. An ability to listen for specific information. Ability to understand the connection between ideas by recognizing linking words and phrases e.g. *because, but, also, at last*.
- **Ability to take responsibility for their own learning:** Ability to look for opportunities to speak to others, and listen to others talk in the target language. Willingness and ability to ask for help.
- **Ability to use communication strategies:** An ability to use strategies to join in and maintain conversations.
- **Confidence and motivation:** Children show curiosity about situations where the target language is used. They enjoy using the language. They interact and listen with confidence. (McKay 2006: 185)

Some of the above examples of contributing knowledge and abilities are also embedded in Bachman and Palmer's theoretical model, but they may be listed separately in curricula and are intended as a set of skills that teachers need to take into consideration both in teaching and assessing oral skills in the young language learner classroom.

## 6.1. Listening

When young learners start to learn a foreign/second language, they receive plenty of input through listening. In order to get to the stage of speaking – oral language production, they need opportunities to listen to rich language input. This input is primarily provided by the teacher, who is the main source of the target language, but s/he can use CDs or videos as well.

Listening can be one of the most difficult skills, it certain factors or circumstances are not avoided. For example, children should not listen to very long texts; the vocabulary in the recording or listening activity should be limited and adjusted to the language level of learners. It is always easier to listen to the teacher than a CD or even another teacher, because if learners listen to their own teacher, s/he can help and support listening comprehension by using gestures, facial expressions, repeating the words or phrases. The level of difficulty at listening tasks also depends on the task learners are supposed to do before, while and after listening. If listening is combined with reading or writing, it is more difficult for young learners than if it is only combined with physical movement. Pinter argues that it is important to give young learners 'listen and do' activities, where children listen and then do a specific movement, rather than being asked to manipulate with some linguistic feature they do not know yet or being asked to translate, analyse parts of sentences or phrases or substituting patterns (Pinter 2006: 45-46). It means that movement is again a key factor in both teaching and assessing listening. Assessment should also take into consideration the nature of the early stage of teaching listening in the foreign/second language classroom, i.e. the

stage, when learners only absorb the language and prefer being silent or often use their mother tongue when responding to teacher's talk.

Though the very first stage of learning a language involves plenty of listening input and learners cannot contribute a lot, during the later stages of learning they become more skilful and become more able to participate in interactions. Listening activities will be about more than decoding what the teacher said and getting a hint about what is going on. Shin and Crandall claim that listening consists of a number of subskills. They provide the following list:

- Discriminating between individual sounds and words
- Comprehending differences in grammar (singular – plural, present – past)
- Identifying the main idea(s) in a story or oral text
- Identifying specific information (Shin – Crandall 2014: 268)

Learners will gradually acquire the above subskills; they will be able to recognize more and more details about oral language.

Shin and Crandall further provide a wide range of ways to check young learners' listening abilities **nonverbally**, a series of listening activities:

- Circling the different sound or the same sounds
- Pointing to a picture or object
- Pointing to a word
- Responding to simple commands (just like in Total Physical Response) or a song like *Head and Shoulders Knees and Toes*) or following oral directions
- Selecting the appropriate picture

- Drawing or colouring a picture
- Matching two pictures or a word with a picture
- Indicating Yes/No with thumbs up/down
- Numbering or putting pictures in sequence (Shin – Crandall 2014: 268)

Primary school learners in higher grades can demonstrate their listening abilities in speaking and writing as well, by:
- Filling in sentences with the missing word in a listening cloze
- Selecting the right response to a sentence or a question in a multiple-choice activity
- Retelling major episodes in a story
- Identifying differences between the recording and the written text
- Providing short answers to questions
- Filling in a chart
- Predicting what comes next

McKay claims that listening is more difficult to assess than speaking because it is 'invisible' and has to be assessed indirectly (McKay 2006: 207). She writes about 'listening-only' tasks, where the main aim is specifically to assess listening comprehension. Teachers and assessors need to find evidence of understanding in children's responses, reactions and subsequent activities. The majority of listening-only tasks involve doing, physical activity or answering questions or retelling (McKay 2006: 208). It is very important that there must be evidence that the learner has understood the listening input – a kind of 'product' or activity, for example, the learner should carry out a particular movement, draw a

picture, organize cards, arrange words into the correct order or fill in a chart.

More scholars (e.g. Pinter 2006; McKay 2006; Grugeon et. al. 2000) emphasize the importance of using visual support in assessment tasks for listening comprehension such as pictures, flashcards, objects, puppets, simple charts, especially with younger and less proficient learners.

## *6.2. Speaking*

Teaching speaking to young learners is probably one of the most difficult tasks a language teacher can face. Learning to speak a foreign/second language fluently and accurately is a great challenge for language learners, too.

Annamaria Pinter emphasizes that when teaching speaking to young learners, it is a good idea to focus on simple but purposeful and meaningful pattern drilling and personalized dialogue building in order to prepare them to be able to talk about themselves and the world around them and to begin to interact with their friends in class and other speakers of the language (Pinter 2006: 56). She also emphasizes the importance of using different speaking activities with younger learners than with older ones, because at a younger age, children do not have to be able to produce complete sentences or questions. First, they are exposed to English through listening, they receive plenty of input, and only later, they start to want and are able to participate in interactions with the teacher and each other. First, children copy simple phrases, join in rhymes and songs, answer questions and become able to introduce themselves and memorize short dialogues (Pinter 2006).

It is widely believed that the bridge between listening and speaking, the bridge that allows children to move from listening to speaking i.e. to begin to use simple phrases and participate in interactions are so-called "chunks" (Pinter 2006, Grugeon et. al. 2000). Pinter defines 'chunks' as "phrases from previously heard input" (Pinter 2006: 56), which are used by children without conscious analysis and which are often learnt from the teacher's input or from other texts such as songs, rhymes, chants, stories and dialogues. For example, if the teacher says 'Have a nice day' at the end of the lesson, some children might pick this up as an unanalysed chunk. Similar chunks are 'See you tomorrow', 'what a surprise' or 'what do you think'. Chunks help learners to produce language faster; they remember the phrases without thinking about the individual words included in it. Pinter claims that children use more chunks than adults, because they do not tend to analyse language into constituent parts. Chunks are picked up without much effort by the children but teachers can also choose to teach set phrases as chunks by repeating them many times (Pinter 2006: 56-57).

Brown and Abeywickrama suggest five different categories of speaking performance assessment tasks: imitative, intensive, responsive, interactive and extensive tasks.

1. **Imitative.** The learner imitates a word or phrase or possibly a sentence. It involves the ability to simply 'parrot back' these items, which is carried out on phonetic level.
2. **Intensive.** The second type of tasks is frequently employed in assessment contexts. It is the production of short stretches of oral language. It may be sentence and

dialogue completion, directed response tasks, limited picture-cued tasks including simple sequences.

3. **Responsive.** Responsive assessment tasks include interaction and test comprehension but at the limited level of very short conversations, standard greetings, small talk, simple requests and comments.

4. **Interactive.** It is different from intensive speaking tasks in a way that it involves longer and more complex interaction which sometimes includes multiple exchanges and/or multiple participants. Interaction can take two forms. One is transactional language, which has the purpose of exchanging specific information. The other is interpersonal exchanges, which have the purpose of maintaining social relationships.

5. **Extensive (monologue).** Extensive oral production tasks include speeches, oral presentations and story-telling. (Brown 2003: 141-142)


## *6.3. Criteria for selecting oral language assessment tasks*

Several factors and circumstances need to be taken into consideration when selecting tasks for assessing the oral language of young language learners. The following list of criteria summarizes the most important conditions and requirements that need to be fulfilled when selecting an assessment task or procedure for assessing oral language:

- Assessment tasks need to be motivating and encouraging for young language learners.

- There must be an element that requires the need to communicate, it means that children need to be involved and engaged in the task. The inclusion of the element of surprise or unexpectedness helps to keep children's attention and interest. There can be an element of mystery, a problem to be solved or some investigation.
- Oral assessment tasks need to provide learners with support, e.g. visual support (pictures, objects, flashcards, etc.) so that the context of the task is more emphasized and less cognitively demanding. This kind of support also helps children feel less worried about producing the target language and draws them more into the task.
- There should be an introductory activity or a warm-up connected with the assessment task to tune children into the topic and the language being used.
- The oral assessment task should use vocabulary suitable for young leaners, both their linguistic level and cognitive characteristics. Language use become incredibly difficult if really hard vocabulary is supposed to be used or the kind of vocabulary that they have not dealt with before.
- The topic of the oral assessment task needs to be selected with great care, it needs to be suitable for the children's cognitive capacity (e.g. describing abstract processes, imagining future events might be difficult for young learners). When more complex topics are being discussed, the teacher can assist understanding by the usage of diagrams, pictures or objects.
- When assessing oral language, the use of a written text should be avoided, especially with young learners, whose literacy skills are not as developed as in the case of learners in upper grades of primary school. Asking young learners to read a text and then respond to some

questions is unfair when oral language is assessed also because this type of tasks requires reading skills as well, so it does not only assess oral language. The selected task needs to be fair for children.

Concrete speaking assessment tasks may include:
- Engaging in information gap activities
- Retelling story episodes on the basis of pictures
- Describing a picture
- Participating in role plays
- Answering open questions
- Presenting a project to the class
- Describing objects to a partner so that the partner can put items into the correct order
- Identifying minor differences between two pictures

*Ways of assessing oral language:*
- Observation
- Oral records in portfolios
- Assessment during teacher-learner interaction
- Self-assessment
- Peer-assessment
- Oral presentations
- Picture talk
- Story-telling
- Mini-dialogues, role plays
- Discussions – in pairs or in groups

McKay (2006) suggests the following types of oral language assessment for young learners:

*Tasks involving speaking only:*
- News telling
- Storytelling
- Picture talks
- Categorization tasks
- Oral presentations
- Other speaking-only genres

*Tasks involving both speaking and listening:*
- Question-and-answer tasks
- Oral interviews
- Mini-dialogues and role plays
- Oral information gap tasks
- Partner and group discussions

# 7. ASSESSING WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Assessing written language – reading and writing skills – should be based on the understanding of how learners learn to read and write both in the first language and in the foreign language. It is crucial to select assessment tools for reading and writing in a sensitive way and make sure that oral language always precedes written language, especially in the case of younger learners. First and second/foreign language literacy should be distinguished, since the two processes are much different involving different processes and even goals. The assessment of reading and writing skills should be designed in a very careful and thoughtful way also because learners need to be really motivated to read texts, read and write in English. They also need assistance when reading and writing English texts.

Reading is similar to listening, both are receptive skills, where learners absorb information written or said by others; and writing and speaking are also similar, both are productive skills, where different ideas are produced or expressed. Reading and writing, however, are complementary activities, since reading always involves the text and its writer, and similarly, writing always involves the text and the reader. Children need to develop reading and writing skills in meaningful contexts with very carefully planned feedback and must be provided controlled and guided practice so that when it comes to assessment, they can feel safe and supported.

Though young learner language programmes are supposed to emphasise oral skills and highlight speaking and listening, learning to read and write in the foreign language cannot be avoided. Writing and reading in a foreign or

second language are introduced gradually with children and need special attention and careful planning. The assessment of these skills should also be carried out accordingly.

Assessing reading and writing is sometimes preferred to the assessment of speaking and listening, because more learners can be assessed at the same time in a relatively shorter period of time or because it is more valued by parents and administrators since more concrete evidence of learning can be provided in a written form. Reading and writing in a foreign/second language and the assessment of these skills depends much on the age of the learners and whether their first language literacy is developed. If they are just learning to read and write in their first language, the assessment of reading and writing in the foreign/second language should come only later. Sometimes, reading and writing are combined – also in the process of assessment, other times they are treated separately

Cameron (2001) defines literacy skills as "being able to read and write different sorts of texts for different purposes", which she calls the broader definition of literacy skills, whereas she explains the narrower, more traditional understanding of literacy skills and "reading and writing words and texts" (Cameron 2001: 125). There are several types of written texts, ranging from signs in the street, in books or on computers. The rapid development of information technology has already had a great impact on the development of literacy skills and the types of written texts and will definitely cause great changes in the next few years. However, writing and reading will always be a crucial part of children's educational and personal development.

McKay argues that in the process of developing their literacy understanding and skills in a foreign/second language, young learners in the early primary school years tend to concentrate on 'code breaking', i.e. working out the

sound-symbol relationships, alphabet knowledge, etc., at first (McKay 2006: 218). This means, that for example in the case of English language, they need to get used to the fact that the pronunciation and the spelling of particular words can differ significantly. This can take a great deal of young learners' attention, so their foreign language literacy development may take a longer time. McKay adds that children are likely to be restricted in their literacy skills development in the foreign language by their oral language skills (McKay 2006: 218). Plenty of oral language input assists the development or reading and listening skills.

McKay (2006) lists three key factors that influence the development of literacy skills in a foreign or second language: first language literacy, cultural and background knowledge and an oral language foundation in the target language.

Cameron (2001) lists four factors that affect learning to read in English as a foreign language and that can influence learning tasks:
- the nature of the written forms of the first language
- the learner's previous experience in L1 literacy
- the learner's knowledge of the foreign language
- the learner's age

When describing the influence of first language on foreign language learning, Cameron points out a significant phenomenon:

> "When we meet a new language, our brain/mind automatically tries to apply the first language experience by looking for familiar cues. Part of learning a foreign language is developing new understandings about the particular cues to meaning that the new language offers, and that differ from those of our first language." (Cameron 2001: 136)

In case of young learners, literacy skills in the first language are only partially developed, or not developed at all. In their first year at school, learners are just starting to learn the alphabet, recognize letters and put together syllables. They are still developing their fine motor skills and learn how to shape and join letters, how to produce written words and later sentences. Since their capacities are limited, this process may take a long time and at the beginning, they can only write a limited number of words, only a small amount of written language. Cameron claims that it is possible that learners will mix knowledge, skills and strategies between their languages. She adds that because of young learners' constraints on memory, when reading a sentence, they may not be able to recall the beginning by the time they have reached the end (Cameron 2011: 138). The age of the learner is therefore a significant factor, it makes a difference if the learner is six years old – at the very beginning of literacy skill development or nine or ten years old – someone who can already read and write in the first language and the processes of reading and writing are much more automatized and firm.

Shin and Crandall (2014) describe five initial literacy stages that all learners, whether first of second/foreign language readers, go through. These are the following:
1. Awareness and exploration
2. Experimenting with reading and writing
3. Early reading and writing
4. Transitional reading and writing
5. Conventional reading and writing (Shin – Crandall 2014: 160)

When designing assessment tools, the above stages should be taken into account, for example lengthy and demanding texts should not be used in stage two.

## 7.1. Reading

Shin and Crandall also describe four types of reading activities – the four making up a sequence: reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading and finally, independent reading (Shin – Crandall 2014: 170-175). Reading aloud is most often applied with beginning readers. It should not be confused with the very tiring and discouraging task of persuading learners to read aloud passages from textbooks. Reading aloud with beginning readers involves the teacher reading aloud stories, chants and other texts with providing learners with opportunities to chime in where words or lines are repeated. The words or sentences can be projected on the board or can be available in coursebooks. Learners are given the opportunity to read aloud some parts of the text – very often the parts that are frequently repeated and the ones they have heard before several times. Shin and Crandall add that one specific type of reading aloud is 'echo reading', which means that children repeat key lines after the teacher – e.g. "And the wolf was hungry".

Shared reading is the second step after reading aloud, where the teacher and the learners read together, where the teacher uses a pointer (a long stick or a lase pointer) with a big book (projected on an interactive whiteboard or Power Point) and points at the words being read. This helps children establish a connection between the pronounced word and its written form. In this form of reading, it is advisable to use stories and books that include pictures and the amount of written language is limited. Reading the story should be accompanied by asking questions, while-reading and post-reading activities.

In guided reading the teacher works with smaller groups of learners who are at the same reading level and provides

them help while they read. The children read the story or the selected book and the teacher helps them with the pronunciation of certain words or other difficulties. Guided reading should be combined with reading activities, reading comprehension activities or vocabulary building.

Independent reading is the final stage or even goal of developing reading skills, since the major aim of any reading programme for young learners is to encourage children to read several different types of texts independently. Independent reading can be carried out at home, when learners are given some books to be read for homework, but they can also select their own books. Reactions to books can be discussed in class, and learners can also be asked to write a reading diary – including several questions to be answered or activities and tasks to be done. Learners can be asked to create a poster about the book they were supposed to read, they can create a questionnaire in groups for the rest of the class. It is important to give learners or help them select books that are at their reading level and are interesting for them.

*Selecting reading materials for assessment for young learners:*
- The interest level of the text will have significant impact on learners' performance. Selected texts should be enjoyable and interesting for young learners, they should want to read them.
- The assessment task should assess reading and should not involve high levels of writing or speaking elements.
- Texts should not be too long.
- The topic of the text should be suitable for the age of the learners.

- Texts should be selected according to the cognitive maturity and language proficiency of the learners as well as their reading ability level.
- Authentic materials from the learner's environment should be selected (e.g. greeting cards, adverts, internet games, texts from children's magazines, etc.).
- Children's literature can play a role in teaching and assessing reading, therefore, literary works suitable for the language level and age of the learners should be selected.

*Assessment tasks for beginning readers:*
- Pointing to or circling initial or final letters in words.
- Pointing to or circling words.
- Sorting or matching words that rhyme.
- Matching pictures and words.
- Sorting or categorizing words by type or similarity of sound.
- Making word cards, laminating them and hanging them up round the classroom. Then asking learners to read them.
- Asking learners to combine letters (letter cards or magnetic letters) and make words, then to read them aloud.
- Following the texts of songs or recordings in the coursebook while listening to them, then the teacher stops the recording and the learner needs to show or read where it stopped.
- Read-and-do tasks requiring some actions responses.
- (Shin – Crandall 2014; Pinter 2006; McKay 2006; Phillips 1993, Read 2007)

*Assessment tasks for more advanced readers:*
- Arranging words in proper sequence in sentences and sentences in proper sequence in a text (sentence strips).
- Matching texts that belong together (e.g. e-mails with questions, schedules with descriptions, etc.)
- Correcting mistakes in a text (while the teacher reads the correct version).
- Sorting true and false sentences.
- Answering comprehension questions about short texts (these questions can be either open questions or multiple-choice questions).
- Jigsaw reading in groups – the story is cut up into several parts and children need to find the correct order).
- Filling in a chart or table based on the information included in the text.
- Comparing two texts.
  (Shin – Crandall 2014; Pinter 2006; McKay 2006; Phillips 1993; Read 2007)

## 7.2. Writing

Writing is sometimes considered as the 'missing skill' in the young language learner classroom, because of several reasons. One of them is that some teachers tend to think that writing equals writing essays and this would not work with young learners who are still learning how to write and join letters. However, there is a wide range of texts that can be written and a series of purposes people write.

Annamaria Pinter (2006): "Writing is a complex skill progressing from the level of copying familiar words and phrases to developing an awareness of text structures,

genres, the processes of drafting and editing, and writing for an audience. Reading and writing are usually taught in parallel because children who begin to read enjoy writing too" (Pinter 2006: 74).

McKay (2006) explains that "Writing, like reading, is both a process and a product. Writing as a process involves the pre-writing, writing, revising and editing processes that writers go through to produce a piece of writing. The 'products' of writing are numerous, and in many forms, determined by different purposes and audiences and contexts for writing (…)" (McKay 2006: 245). It is not only McKay who notes that both teaching and assessing writing can be approached in two ways, more scholars (Shin – Crandal 2014; Pinter 2006) distinguish between and describe the product-based approach to writing, which focuses on the final product, and the process-based approach, which focuses rather on the process of writing. Assessing writing is determined by which approach is prioritised by the teacher or the assessor.

The product-based approach, as the name implies, focuses on the final product, i.e. the final written text produced by the learner, which is grammatically correct, which includes proper spelling, punctuation, capitalization and vocabulary. It includes controlled, guided and free writing, each employing different level of freedom given to the learner when producing the written text.

In the process-based approach to writing, the main goal is for children to express their ideas in a written form and to explore their linguistic and other resources (Shin – Crandall 2007: 192). The process of writing according to this approach is more important than the end product. The most common approach to process-based writing is writing

workshops, but it also involves shared or interactive writing and dialogue journals (Shin – Crandall 2007).

*The stages of writing according to the process-based approach can be:*
- Brainstorming and discussing
- Drafting
- Peer reviewing and conferencing
- Revising
- Reviewing and conferencing
- Editing
- Publishing
    (Shin – Crandall 2007: 192-193)

Read (2007) emphasizes that when responding to children's written work (giving feedback and correcting written work) it is important to respond to children's meaning, and not just to spelling and grammatical mistakes. There should be a positive comment on the content, such as "What a lovely poem!". When learners feel that the teacher appreciates their efforts and is interested in what they are writing or want to say in a written form, they will be confident and enthusiastic to develop into more skilled writers in the future (Read 2007: 50).

*Tasks for assessing writing for younger learners:*
- Copying words or sentences.
- Copying and classifying words.
- Completing word puzzles.
- Filling in gaps with the words or sentences provided.
- Contributing words to a word list.
- Labelling or describing pictures.
- Writing mind maps.

- Completing speech bubbles for cartoon characters or characters in a story.

   (Shin − Crandall 2014; Pinter 2006; McKay 2006; Phillips 1993; Read 2007)

*Tasks for assessing writing for older learners:*
- Describing a picture with some vocabulary provided.
- Completing sentences with picture clued or sentence starters.
- Responding to a series of questions in writing.
- Completing cloze activities.
- Writing a text (an invitation, an e-mail or a short letter).
- Filling in blanks.
- Summarizing a story.

   (Shin − Crandall 2014; Pinter 2006; McKay 2006; Phillips 1993; Read 2007)

# 8. ASSESSING VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR

Vocabulary and grammar can be assessed within the contexts of any of the four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing). It can be assessed whether learners can use English vocabulary and grammar in a meaningful and correct way both in oral and written language. However, vocabulary and grammar can also be assessed separately and directly.

It is difficult to separate vocabulary and grammar completely, since when teaching a new word, learners need to be acquainted with its grammatical category as well and when teaching grammatical structures, the combination of words and grammatical patterns is involved. Pinter (2006) claims that vocabulary and grammar overlap more with younger learners, who are not able to analyse language and strip down language into linguistic components and patterns. With older learners it is more possible to point at grammatical structures, talk about grammar more explicitly and separate both teaching and assessing vocabulary and grammar.

In the classroom, both vocabulary and grammar can be assessed constantly and informally. During teaching, teachers can use flashcards and pictures both for teaching and checking learners' understanding of certain words. They can ask learners to brainstorm vocabulary, repeat sentence structures or involve chunks. Vocabulary and grammar are usually assessed in the context of language usage, especially with younger learners. The overall quality of language performance is assessed, whether the learner can use vocabulary and language structures in meaningful contexts.

Observation checklists, criteria sheets and rating scales can be devised and used when assessing the vocabulary and grammar that is required for children's successful language performance. The assessment of grammar, mainly in the earlier stages of language learning should be carried out with special caution with the purpose of motivating and encouraging learners.

## 8.1. Vocabulary

Vocabulary has been considered as the major resource for language use. Building up a useful vocabulary is central for foreign/second language learning. While opinions differ as to how much grammar of the foreign language a young language learner should be taught, the necessity of learning, using and reusing words in the foreign/second language has never been questioned.

When teaching foreign language vocabulary in the primary classroom, especially in the first grade of primary, the teacher needs to keep in mind that young learners are still building on their first language vocabulary and are still in the process of acquiring and organizing concepts. The first language background needs to be taken into account in order to know what will work and what may be too difficult for learners. It is also common sense that teaching names of animals will go fine with young learners, however, teaching more complex adjectives e.g. *relevant*, *significant* or *exhausted* to seven or eight year-olds is rather a pointless effort.

It is many times difficult for the teacher to decide on how many words should be taught and which specific words

should be selected for primary school language learners. This very burning question may depend on several different factors such as learning conditions, time available and of course the concrete age of the learners. However, a variety of general rules can be formulated that are useful to take into account.

Penny Ur (2012) summarizes the following implications for the teaching of new vocabulary in the following way:

- The easier a word is to say and spell, the more quickly it will be remembered.
- It is useful to link words together rather than teaching a larger set of isolated items. E.g. better results can be obtained if you present words in pairs rather than large sets, e.g. *fat + pig*, and not *pig, cow, crow, mouse, sheep*, etc.
- Children remember words better if they have some emotional connection with them. So when presenting new words, the teacher should try to establish links to students' own lives, feelings and experiences.

The above listed assumptions give us a clear guideline in the selection of vocabulary to primary school learners. The younger the student is, the more basic and simple words should be taught. It is also important that the words they learn are meaningful for them; this means that they can connect it to their own personal lives and experiences. Teaching words connected with working on the fields, agriculture, growing plants or harvesting crops would be too distant for the vast majority of children. Vocabulary learning should be personalized and connections between words should be reinforced. Children should also be encouraged to develop independent and individualized learning skills and

strategies so that they can extend their vocabulary in logical and systematic ways.

Vocabulary needs to be assessed in the very same way using the same approach and activities that are used when teaching vocabulary. When assessing learners' knowledge, it should also be considered what it actually means to know a word. Cameron points out that we should take into consideration "the many types of knowledge involved in 'knowing a word'" (Cameron 2001: 75). She explains: "Word knowledge is always then a matter of degree, rather than all or nothing. The pupil seems to have some receptive knowledge of the word, but not yet to have sufficient productive knowledge to be able to produce it automatically on demand" (Cameron 2001: 76). The above quote suggests that it is important to distinguish between learners' receptive knowledge of words, which means that they can have the ability to recognize the word in appropriate contexts, and their productive knowledge, which means that they are able to produce the particular word and use it in meaningful contexts. This leads us to the more complex notion of the several levels of word knowledge, since being able to use a word in an appropriate way involves the knowledge of a variety of components. As an example, the right grammatical form of the word should be known, its proper pronunciation, right spelling – learners need to know how to pronounce the word and use it in oral language but also need to know how it is spelt when using it in written language. Learners need to know the collocations of the specific word, but also the context in which it is used – for example if it is used in more formal contexts or informal language. This makes the assessment of vocabulary even more complex and stresses the importance of selecting very sensitive assessment tasks, which are design on the basis of complex principles rather

than a yes or no axis (whether the learner knows the word or not should not be an either-or decision).

Based on the research of Ellis and Sinclair (1990), Schmitt and Meara (1997), Richards (1976) and Nation (1990), Cameron (2001) subdivides word knowledge into ten further elements all of which are involved when knowing a word. These elements should be examined very carefully when preparing vocabulary assessment, because each of them can contribute to the successful achievement of young learners. The different aspects or elements of word knowledge listed are the following:

- Receptive knowledge – when learners understand the word in oral or written language.
- Memory – learners are able to recall the word when needed.
- Conceptual knowledge – learners can use the word with its correct meaning.
- Phonological knowledge – knowledge of the spoken form; learners can identify the word when they hear it and they can pronounce it in a correct way.
- Grammatical knowledge – learners can use the word in a grammatically accurate way and know grammatical connections with other words.
- Collocational knowledge – learners know which other words can be used with the word, e.g. *beautiful* used with women, *handsome* used with men.
- Orthographic knowledge – learners can spell the word correctly.
- Pragmatic knowledge – knowledge of style and register; learners can use the word in the right situation, e.g. *Would you like a drink?* Is more appropriate in formal situations than *What can I get you?*.

- Connotational knowledge – learners know the positive and negative associations of the word, e.g. *slim* has positive connotations meaning attractive, while *skinny* has negative associations also meaning unhealthy.
- Metalinguistic knowledge – learners know explicitly about the word, e.g. they know its grammatical properties, e.g. *cat* is a noun.

Though the development of metalinguistic knowledge in terms of vocabulary teaching and learning in the young language learner classroom is pushed to the background, the several different types of word knowledge should be determining factors when assessing learners' knowledge of vocabulary.

Cameron (2001) also describes the five essential steps in vocabulary learning which are needed for successful performance. She refers to the research of Hatch and Brown (1995) and lists the following steps:

1. having sources for encountering new words;
2. getting a clear image, either visual or auditory or both, for the forms of the new words;
3. learning the meaning of the words;
4. making strong memory connection between the forms and meanings of the words;
5. using the words.

The meaningful usage of words is only the last stage of a complex process, the first four steps are the key to positive and successful assessment output. When learners meet a new word for the first time and they pay attention to its form and meaning, the word gets into their short-term memory, and this is only the first step of getting the word into long-term

memory. Memorizing activities are needed that create strong memory connections and make word usage automatic.

Penny Ur (2012) explains that better results can be obtained at teaching vocabulary if words are taught in pairs rather than in large sets, e.g. fat + pig. Teachers should use word combinations that sound naturally and are more likely to occur in a phrase or sentence (Ur 2012: 68). She adds that words with emotional associations (e.g. mum, dad) are remembered better and the easier a word is to say and spell, the more quickly it will be remembered, e.g. the teaching of *sky* will demand less attention and effort than the teaching of *earth*. Such practicalities and several further assumptions need to be noted also in assessment.

## *8.2. Implications for assessment*

It is necessary to examine the implications of the vocabulary development of children's foreign language learning and the principles of vocabulary teaching have on assessment.

- Since learners – especially younger children – need very concrete vocabulary that they can connect with their surroundings and concrete objects, these types of words should be included in vocabulary assessment as well. Abstract words and words that are very remote to young learners should be avoided.
- Words need to be used and reused in new contexts and teaching vocabulary needs to involve the recycling of words so that learners are provided opportunities to memorise them much more easily. Assessment needs to

include a variety of activities and several different contexts for the same words.

- Knowing a word means more than being able to produce it in meaningful contexts. Learners' receptive, cognitive, grammatical, conceptual, connotational, phonological, orthographic and pragmatic knowledge of a word as well as their memory capacities should be taken into consideration during assessment.
- Assessment – especially high-stake assessment – needs to be preceded by plenty of input, deliberate and guided practice of vocabulary, recycling and revising vocabulary and plenty of assistance needs to be provided to help the automatization of words.
- Reviewing and revising vocabulary should be emphasised rather than testing vocabulary. Testing aims to find out what learners know and do not know, but reviewing concentrates more on learning.

*Activities for assessing vocabulary:*
- Matching pictures with words
- Matching opposites
- Matching synonyms
- Matching a word with its definition or short description
- Matching parts of words to other parts, e.g. beginnings and endings
- Labelling pictures
- Unscrambling words
- Providing missing letters in words
- Completing word puzzles, diagrams and grids
- Sorting words by content
- Total Physical Response (TPR) activities
- Multiple-choice activities
- Sentence completion

- Completing gapped sentences or short texts with words from a list
- Finding the odd-one-out

## *8.3. Grammar*

The assessment of grammar in the young language learner classroom usually starts with oral language and then it can continue with more conscious and explicit tasks in a written form as well.

Grammar in the language classroom is often associated with accuracy. Penny Ur (2012) defines grammar in two different ways. She argues that firstly, grammar is not just the question of correctness, grammatical forms almost always carry meaning: the meaning of a particular message in a communicative situation is created by the combination of vocabulary and grammar. Grammatical structures are used to express time, place or possibility; therefore, grammar has much to do with meaning. Secondly, Ur explains, the term grammatical can be applied to units smaller or larger than sentences, e.g. 'a tall woman' is correct, but 'a woman tall' is incorrect. It means that grammar does not need to imply whole sentences (Ur 2012: 76-77).

The necessity of teaching grammar to young learners has been discussed several times, sometimes even by questioning whether grammar needs to be taught at all. Cameron lists five starting points for thinking about grammar and young learners and by doing so she somehow supports the idea of dealing with grammar to young language learners. She argues:

- grammar is necessary to express precise meanings in discourse;
- grammar ties closely into vocabulary in learning and using a foreign language;
- grammar learning can evolve from the learning of chunks of language;
- talking about something meaningful with the child can be a useful way to introduce new grammar;
- grammar can be taught without technical labels (e.g. intensifying adverb, adjective) (Cameron 2001: 98).

Annamaria Pinter (2011) claims that "The development of metalinguistic awareness is slow in young children. The ability to think about language as a system is emerging gradually" (Pinter 2011: 43). The development of metalinguistic awareness as well as metacognitive awareness develops gradually in the primary school and it is connected with the physical and cognitive development of the child. Therefore, it is crucial to keep in mind that six or seven year-old children not only have difficulties with understanding grammatical categories and abstract terms connected with language they are also discourage by and simply not interested in such matters. They concentrate more on the context, the concrete and the familiar rather than abstract and distant phenomena. Teaching metalinguistic terms and highlighting linguistic interrelations, grammar rules explicitly would be not only ineffective, but also demotivating and discouraging for them. Pinter explains that "understanding non-literal meaning and irony is a fairly late development, emerging after the age of 10" (Pinter 2011: 44).

When constructing messages, children concentrate on the immediate environment, directly perceivable and observable aspects of everyday life. Therefore,

communication in a familiar setting is a must, since it creates a stress-free environment for the child. As they get older, children become less spontaneous and more deliberate in their language use, at around the age of 10 they become more conscious about using language and understand relationships and theoretical assumptions. Pinter explains that "complex grammatical structures are used more often" (Pinter 2011: 47) only in post-primary school years.

Lynne Cameron (2001) concludes on several starting points for thinking about grammar and young learners:

- Grammar is necessary to express precise meanings in discourse.
- Grammar is closely connected with vocabulary in learning and using the foreign language.
- Learning grammar can evolve from the learning of chunks of language.
- Talking about something meaningful with the child can be a useful way of introducing new grammar.
- Grammar can be taught without technical labels (metalinguistic terms e.g. auxiliary verb, intensifying adverb, etc.) (Cameron 2001: 98).

There have been several approaches to teaching grammar to young learners over the last fifty years ranging from the grammar-translation method to the communicative approach. A number of attractive books on teaching grammar to children have been published (Ur 2009, Nixon – Tomlinson 2003). One of the most frequently discussed issues is the emphasis on accuracy and fluency, whether we should worry about grammatical accuracy when it does not interfere with effective communication or a message.

The most commonly used terms when explaining the forms of grammar teaching are explicit and implicit ways of teaching grammar. The explicit form is when the teacher explains all grammar rules, provides students with the form and meaning of a grammar item, explains the usage in details and makes conventional grammatical rules clear. This approach is based on the assumption that the most important part of the language is its grammar and language learning is nothing else but the accumulation of mastered rules of grammar. It uses metalinguistic labels to talk explicitly about grammar, e.g. the past participle, gerund and infinitive, special terms and specialized language is used to talk about language. One of the most popular grammar-centred language teaching methods and approaches was the grammar-translation method, which was originally used to teach dead languages such as Greek and Latin.

Implicit grammar teaching means that students are allowed plenty of opportunities to hear, read and use the correct forms of a grammar item. They are given plenty of comprehensive input – listening, reading activities and they find out grammar rules independently, on their own. This approach to grammar teaching was the dominant approach in communicative language teaching in the late 1970s and 1980s. A form of communicative language learning is Total Physical Response (TPR) developed by Asher (1972). Based on this approach students listen to commands in the foreign language and respond through movement and action.

Both explicit and implicit ways of teaching grammar have both supporters and opponents. For example, Stephen Krashen (1999) argues that grammar is best acquired implicitly; however, there has been a large amount of evidence against this view, e.g. Norris and Ortega (2001) or Ur (2012). Lynne Cameron (2001) lists several examples of researchers and

researches carried out in Canada, Spain and the USA on learning a foreign language through communicating in the foreign language. She explains that recent research and evaluations show mixed results (Cameron 2001: 107-108). Though children exposed to the foreign language environment and learning a foreign language through the communicative approach develop very good accents and listening skills and pick up the foreign language really quickly, in terms of grammar, they do not develop the same level of accuracy as native speakers without paying attention to the form of the language. They also have problems with basic structures. Cameron explains that grammar may emerge naturally in first language, "it may even be genetically determined"[11], but the grammar of a foreign language is 'foreign', and grammar development requires skilled planning of tasks and lessons, and explicit teaching (Cameron 2001: 108). Penny Ur concludes that most recent researchers come to the conclusion that those students who receive some explicit instruction in grammar perform better than those who do not receive any (Ur 2012: 79). We can assume that though grammar explanation is helpful, the golden road must be found between direct explanation and implicit, communicative input and intuitive acquisition. In case of young learners, teaching grammar becomes an extremely great challenge, since at this early stage of language learning the main emphasis should be placed on motivation and playfulness and children should not be discouraged by the stiff memorization of grammar rules.

Teaching grammar to young learners should rely on presenting grammar through topics and meaningful contexts. Children need to be provided with both controlled practice and creative language use. Grammar items need to be presented in interesting contexts in which children are

[11] Pinker 1994 quoted in Cameron 2001: 108.

involved actively. There should be a combined focus on accuracy and fluency, while children should be provided with opportunities from an early stage to use grammatical structures for real communicative purposes. This will make language learning more meaningful and motivating. It also means that the very explicit way of teaching grammar, e.g. writing structures of the present simple on the board, underlining and translating auxiliary verbs, questions, etc. should all be forgotten in the young learner classroom. Instead, plenty of drills, directed practice and creative games should be used. In addition, children should not be afraid of making mistakes, and they should be encouraged to correct their own mistakes, too.

The most frequent activities for teaching grammar in the primary classroom are project work, chanting and drilling, songs or even colouring activities at lower primary school. Grammar structures and items need to be hidden in games, playful activities, simple reading and listening activities as well as simple communication activities. Visual support is also important, therefore the teacher should use flashcards, colour cards or even posters to present grammar items.

*The most frequent activities both for practicing and assessing grammar:*
- Mechanical drills
- Ordering dialogues
- Multiple-choice questions
- Reordering sentences or words
- Grammar quiz
- Team competition
- Naughts and crosses grid
- Prepare questions for the other team
- Information gap activities

- Memory test
- Picture dictation – 1 student describes, the other draws
- Miming an action
- Growing stories – each student adds one sentence to the story
- Questionnaires – students survey each other
- Grammar auctions – Students get a mix of correct and incorrect sentences, they work in groups, they are given a certain amount of pretend money, the teacher reads the sentence, they "bid" on the correct sentence
- Board games
- Matching sentence halves

# 9. EVALUATING YOUNG LEARNERS' PERFORMANCE AND PROGRESS: MARKING

Teachers need to use a scoring or marking method when they make judgements about the quality of young learners' performance. Considerations about marking and the marking system apply the theoretical basis included in the curriculum, the teaching approach and the teacher's understanding of learning a foreign/second language. The scoring method consists of the criteria by which learners' responses are evaluated and the procedures followed to arrive at a score (Bachman and Palmer 1996: 194).

The scoring method must rely on previously set criteria usually based on theory, not just randomly selected. Criteria should be very specific, the more specific the criterion, the more objective decision can be made about the learner's performance. Learners need to feel that the score or mark given is fair, which can be only ensured when criteria are specific and available for learners from the very beginning of learning.

Criteria can be written as headings (e.g. Accuracy, Fluency), as statements (Can participate in group activities) or as questions (Is the learner able to write a short e-mail using informal language?). Criteria can be broadly defined (e.g. Can write an e-mail) or more specifically given (Can pronounce final consonants clearly) (McKay 2006).

There are different ways how a task or the learner's performance is scored. Dichotomous scoring is used when

each response is marked as either correct or incorrect (e.g. in a picture-matching task, a multiple choice or a true/false task). The final mark is obtained when the correct responses are added together (McKay 2006: 268). Scores can be reported separately for different areas of language ability by using the method of partial credit scoring (Bachman and Palmer 1996: 199-202).

Assessment tools and procedures used to arrive at a mark must be appropriate for young learners, this means that they need to reflect the characteristic features of the young language learner and their learning context. They should also reflect the purposes of assessment. Assessment might be carried out for classroom use; it can be prepared for summative or formative assessment or for external purposes.

There are several ways the teacher can arrive at a final mark and make it as fair as possible. Using scoring rubrics is one of the most frequently applied tools of alternative assessment in order to maximize reliability in marking. Reliability is defined by McKay in the following way: "Reliability refers to the extent to which the child would get the same results if another teacher or assessor were to assess their work, or if they were to assess it in the same way again another day, or if they were assessed through different tasks and with different rubrics" (McKay 2006: 294). By using rubrics, instead of simply giving a 3 or an A to the learner, the teacher goes through a complex process and can provide learners, parents or colleagues with detailed information on the learners' progress and achievements.

## 9.1. Observation sheets, checklists and rating scales

Rubrics are scoring guides that are used in assessing learners' performance on a range of criteria. Scoring rubrics are sometimes also called as 'instruction sheets' or 'criteria sheets' or 'scoring guidelines'. Rubrics can be designed for one specific language use task or for a wide range of tasks. They can be specific or more general depending on the purpose of assessment, the age of the learners and the context of assessment. More general rubrics and rubrics that are generalizable are more practical for teachers, since they save a lot of time and energy for the teacher or assessor who prepares them.

There are different kinds of rubrics and rating scales used with young language learners. Scoring rubrics for young learners generally take the form of **observation checklists**, task-based **criteria sheets** and **holistic and analytic rating scales** (Shin – Crandall 2014; McKay 2006).

Observation checklists are usually designed by teachers for their own observation to check and document whether their students are achieving the objectives they have set for the course or for a unit or for a period of time. An observation checklist consists of several points of observable behaviour. It must include the learner's name, the date and topic of observation. Observation checklists can be designed for very concrete tasks or in a much more general way.

| | Yes/No | Comments | Follow-up tasks |
|---|---|---|---|
| Name: | | | |
| Date: | | | |
| Topic: My favourite animal | | | |
| Can name their favourite animal | | | |
| Can label the parts of the animal | | | |
| Can ask someone else about their favourite animal | | | |
| Can describe their favourite animal | | | |

*Figure 2 Example of an observation checklist*
*(adapted from McKay 2006: 278).*

Learner's name:

1 = Exceeds objective

2 = Meets objective

3 = Meets objective partially

4 = Needs improvement

5 = Does not meet objective

| Objective/Skill | Date | Date | Date | Date |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Responds to Yes/No questions | 10 Oct: 3 | 12 Nov: 2 | 12 Dec: 1 | |
| Responds to WH-questions | | | | |
| Follows oral directions | | | | |
| Participates in chants and songs | | | | |
| Interacts with other learners in English | | | | |

*Figure 3 Example of an observation checklist*
*(adapted from Shin – Crandall 2014: 263).*

Teachers can prepare their own observation checklists depending on what they want to observe and which skill or language use they intend to assess based on the observation checklist. It can also be designed by a group of colleagues teaching the same subject or teaching in the same grade.

Criteria sheets are similar to observation checklists in a way that both of them include guidelines for assessment, however, criteria sheets include a set of criteria organized into categories or dimensions of criteria (McKay 2006) constructed for specific tasks. The guidelines are accompanied by a marking scheme that helps to evaluate the quality of performance in a particular task.

| Learner's name: | | | | |
| Date: | | | | |
| Notes: | | | | |
| | | | | |
| Description of the task: Oral presentation to class | | | | |
| **Assessment criteria** | **Comments** | **low** | **↔** | **high** |
| **Text content and organization** | | | | |
| includes key information | | | | |
| provides appropriate detail | | | | |
| maintains fluency | | | | |
| concludes appropriately | | | | |
| | | | | |
| **Vocabulary and sentence structure** | | | | |
| uses appropriate conjunctions (and, but, so) | | | | |
| uses adjectives | | | | |
| is generally accurate in structure | | | | |
| pronounces words appropriately | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Responsiveness** | | | | |
| can respond to questions | | | | |
| makes appropriate eye contact | | | | |
| **Comments** <br><br> **Final mark:** | | | | |

*Figure 4 Example of a criteria sheet*
*(adapted from McKay 2006: 282).*

Holistic rating scales provide the descriptions of abilities at a number of different levels (McKay 2006: 285). These levels are provided on the same scale, which is divided into several levels indicated in various ways, e.g. from Level 1 to Level 5 or from 'Excellent' to 'Needs improvement'.

| **Points** | |
|---|---|
| 10-9 points | Communicates all the requested information. Uses grammar, vocabulary in an appropriate way. |
| 8-7 points | Communicates the requested information. Mistakes in grammar and vocabulary slightly interfere with getting the message across. |
| 6-5 points | Communicates most of the requested information. Mistakes make the message hard to understand. |
| 4-3 points | Much of the requested information is not included. Mistakes hinder comprehension. |
| 2-1 points | Attempts at expressing ideas in writing are unsuccessful. |

*Figure 5 Example of a holistic rating scale*
*(adapted from Shin – Crandall 2014: 265).*

Analytic rating scales differ from holistic scales in that they split up the specified criteria so that assessors can make separate decisions about each level of performance or separate element of the learner's performance. Analytic criteria are supposed to be used to help teachers and assessors to be less subjective in marking.

| Scores | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| **Accuracy** | Learner was unable to use target form(s). | Learner was able to use target form(s) successfully some of the time. | Learner was able to use target form(s) successfully most of the time. |
| **Communic ation** | Learner demonstrates little or no focus on the topic, and ideas are not clearly connected. | Learner provides some focus on the topic, and some ideas are clearly connected. | Learner maintains consistent focus on the topic, and ideas are clearly connected. |

*Figure 6 Example of an analytic rating scale*
*(adapted from Shin – Crandall 2014: 266).*

## 9.2. The Common European Framework of Reference

The Common European Framework of Reference provides a basis for the elaboration of language curriculum guidelines, syllabi, exams, textbooks and assessment criteria, too. It provides a reference point for each stage of learning a foreign language. The purpose of this framework was to

bring together the several different language programmes in Europe by determining the characteristic features of and specific features typical for a particular language level. When describing the basic user, the Common European Framework provides the following holistic global scale of descriptions:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Basic user | A2 | Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. |
| | A1 | Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. |

*Figure 7: The first two levels of Common Reference Levels: global scale (Council of Europe, 2001: 33) Retrieved from: https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf Accessed: 25 August 2017*

|  |  | A1 | A2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Understanding** | **Listening** | I can recognize familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly. | I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements. |
|  | **Reading** | I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues. | I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters. |
| **Speaking** | **Spoken interaction** | I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics. | I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself. |

| | | | I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job. |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Spoken production** | I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know. | |

*Figure 8: Examples of levels A1 and A2, listening, reading and speaking skills. (Council of Europe, 2001: 33) Retrieved from: https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf Accessed: 25 August 2017*

The reference framework can be used as a guideline do design the criteria, the content and the form of assessment and can serve as a guideline when making comparisons. It also allows for self-assessment, though with young learners it is rather the teachers and the parents who make decisions about language levels.

# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Assessment practices in teaching English as a foreign language in the lower primary school not only influence learners' attitude to the foreign language, their motivation and general attitude to learning itself, they also reveal what teachers and educators consider important about language teaching and learning.

The feedback learners receive about their performance tells them what is valued about their achievements and what matters for the teacher and the system.

Assessment takes place throughout the academic year for different purposes; therefore, different types of assessment are applied. There are a number of classroom assessment strategies available to teachers, though many teachers are in situations where their use of classroom assessment is limited or restricted by system requirements, parental requirements or school expectations. However, classroom assessment is a vital tool in helping learners improve their learning strategies, motivating learners and obtaining feedback on the teaching process as well, therefore, teachers need to do their best to use a colourful palette of assessment tools and strategies.

Teacher cooperation and engagement in 'assessment dialogue' with other teachers or professionals can help to be more open to new strategies and build up a more realistic knowledge of learners abilities and potentials.

Assessment has the power to change children's lives; it can have a very positive or a negative effect. Young learners are even more sensitive about the feedback they receive, since it carries messages of worth and status. Effective assessment provides valuable information to teachers, assessors, researchers, parents and educators.

For young learners what matters is enjoyment, confidence, feeling safe, plenty of movement and using the oral language. Therefore, these areas should be exploited, which should also be reflected in the choice of assessment tools. For learners at the upper level of primary school, the written language becomes more and more supportive and accepted.

The research into young learners' assessment and the principles of alternative assessment help teachers understand the main issues of learner-centred assessment in the foreign language classroom. There are a number of classroom assessment strategies that help to improve learner involvement both in the learning process and the assessment process, they help to raise learners' responsibility for their own learning and improve critical thinking.

Assessing oral and written language need to be approached very sensitively in the young language learner classroom. There are many issues for teachers and assessors to consider when assessing the four skills. Oral language is usually pushed to the foreground, since young learners first discover the foreign/second language through oral tasks and oral language is supposed to be the foundation of literacy skills.

Developing the vocabulary and grammar of a foreign language is a long and complex process, and unfortunately young learners have a lot of time ahead of them. There is no need to hurry up. Children need to be taught words that they can connect with their physical surroundings and are more concrete and immediate. As far as grammar is concerned, young learners do not analyse language structures and do not even need metalinguistic terminology to operate with grammatical patterns. Language structures are learned unconsciously, many times in the forms of chunks, which

remain unanalysed until learners grow older. Both the assessment of vocabulary and grammar must be extremely cautious not do discourage or demotivate learners; it should concentrate on engaging young learners in meaningful contexts and overlooking minor errors and mistakes as far as meaning is conveyed so that young learners stay motivated to use the language meaningfully.

Lynne Cameron claims that "educational research demonstrated long ago that children live up to the expectations of their teachers, whether those are low or high." (Cameron 2001: 240). It is very important that teachers not only have high expectations toward learners, but also take providing fair conditions and thorough planning and preparation seriously so that a safe, learner-centred environment can be created for young learners, where they can grow and develop in the best possible way.

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