

Seven essential considerations for assessing young learners

Amy Malloy looks at how special children are as learners and weighs up the implications for assessing them.

Josie is sitting in her classroom. Her teacher comes in and announces they are doing a test today and that it is really important that they do well. There is no time to prepare. Next, the teacher hands out a sheet with a list of grammar questions and starts a timer on her desk. They have 10 minutes to answer all the questions. Josie panics. Her heart is beating. She can't read the questions properly. She tries the first question. It's quite easy. She knows that word. The next one is OK too. But then the next one is really difficult. She panics and starts to cry. She's going to do really badly in this test!

Luke is sitting in his classroom. His teacher comes in, smiling, and announces they are going to play a game. Brilliant! Luke loves games. He grins at his friends. The teacher puts them into teams and sticks pictures of people doing different hobbies on the board. One by one, they have to go to the front of the class, write a short sentence in English describing what the person is doing, and run back to their team. The first team to all write something and get back to their desk is the winner and will get a special prize! Luke is so excited!

Both teachers work at the same school. They both hand in a list of scores for their test on the present continuous unit with their class. Can you guess which class did better?

'Most things that involve children are "special" and language assessment is no exception' (Hasselgreen, 2005: 337). Young learners have very different needs to adult learners – they are much less tolerant to formal tests and stress, and perform much better when they are having fun. When assessing young learners, it is important that we take the differences which make children special into account, to avoid assessing something other than their language learning. This article introduces seven essential considerations for assessing young learners, to help you plan motivating assessment techniques for your students and to ensure you get accurate progress reports for your parents.

1. Children react differently to stress

As adults, we are often able to harness the adrenaline brought on by a stressful situation to focus our mind and produce an enhanced performance. The same cannot be said of children. Anxiety begins with a sense of threat which releases chemicals known to trigger the 'fight-or-flight' reaction. In this situation, the body experiences a range of physical and mental symptoms, including raised blood pressure and faster breathing. Under extreme stress, the memory and concentration are affected too. Children are not yet sufficiently self-aware or psychologically

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developed to control or counteract the powerful feelings brought on by stress and anxiety. They have a much lower tolerance and will lose the ability to remember skills and concentrate on a task much sooner than an adult would. Consequently, anxiety in a classroom situation can have a direct negative impact on test scores (Black, 2005).

On the contrary, when feeling calm and relaxed, the brain releases positive hormones which enable the child to pay attention, make connections and to solve problems more easily (Bailey, 2001: 45–47).

What does this mean for assessment?

- Create an atmosphere of calm or fun around your classroom when planning an assessment activity, in which it is not obvious to the child that they are being assessed. For example, if you want to check they have mastered the vocabulary or grammar from the coursebook, try creating a game which practises the content and which will give you the opportunity to review how well individuals have mastered it, rather than a sit-down test.
- If you do need to carry out a more formal test with your class, avoid stressing the importance of doing well in the test. A fun warmer activity beforehand can get the children's positive emotions flowing and make the atmosphere informal. Reward stickers for participating are another encouraging idea.

2. Children have a different concept of time and sequence

The child development research field has identified that children only seem to begin developing the ability to think back and sequence events from the past at around 9 or 10 years old (Orbach & Lamb, 2007). Before this point, they might find it difficult to mix tenses and explain when something happened in the context of something that happened earlier. Piaget's theories argue that this is because understanding time and sequence depends on being able to understand cause and effect: in other words, understanding that one action happens as a consequence of another, or even that one action happens before another in time.

What does this mean for assessment?

- Children below the age of 9 or 10 are likely to find questions with a mix of tenses quite difficult. If they make mistakes in this area, it might not be because they do not understand the past simple tense or past continuous linguistic form. It might be instead that they do not understand what the past tense really means in comparison to the present tense. For example, they might not understand the underlying concept of a phrase, such as 'When Mary was little, she liked dancing. Now



she likes playing tennis', whatever the language. When you are designing test questions for your class, it is important to take their conceptual understanding of time into account.

- You might also find it helpful to do some more sequencing activities and games to support their understanding of different tenses.

3. Children need to impress (you and each other)

Younger children are more likely than adults to seek adult and peer approval for their actions. Many child development researchers attribute this to the fact that often a child's good behaviour results in more smiles and positive encouragement from adults. Incorporating this need into your assessment activities with younger learners can lead to more motivated students and better performances on language tasks.

What does this mean for assessment?

- With younger children, try using a puppet or character toy as the focus

or 'leader' of an assessment activity in the classroom. This works with a game or even to introduce a more formal sit-down test if needed. It will easily catch the children's attention and create the fun, non-stressful atmosphere we discussed earlier. Create a story around the puppet to emphasise its importance as a VIP in the classroom (it could be a guest from England, for example). This can motivate the child to speak English in order to attract the puppet's attention.

- With older children, try using a rewards system such as a wall chart with stickers or stamps for completion of course units or knowing a certain number of words. The incentive of their achievements being put on show for other classes can also prove motivating.

4. Children need to know why they are doing something

During the time they are in primary school (typically 5 to 12 years), children are constantly trying to understand the world around them, where they fit in it, and

what boundaries and expectations exist around them. As they grow older and they come into contact with more people and more worlds outside their immediate family, the need to test these boundaries and to ask ‘why?’ increases. In order to understand how particular boundaries are relevant to them personally, they need to have clear, simple instructions and explanations about why they are carrying out a particular task. They will not necessarily be able to make the link themselves between a task in front of them and the end outcome. Their ability to do this will also vary greatly, even within class groups, depending on their individual cognitive developmental stage.

What does this mean for assessment?

- Make sure any assessment activity or game is introduced with clear, simple instructions. You may like to present these in the children’s native language, using pictures rather than words, or using the puppet or a volunteer to demonstrate.
- Allow plenty of time for questions and further explanation.
- It is important that assessment tasks are authentic and that children can see the relevance for them. For example, rather than just asking children to fill in gaps in a sentence, why not make it into a game with a goal: a series of words or letters from the gaps could make up a secret code word when put

together. The first team to figure out the code word gets a sticker.

- Similarly, rather than just a series of anagrams on a page as a vocabulary test, you could introduce the activity as being a way to help someone else achieve a goal. However, make sure any fun introduction is always followed by a clear instruction for action. For example, ‘Oh dear! Lizzie dropped all her words! She’s in trouble. Can you help her put them back together again? Write the words in the correct order.’

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5. Children are still acquiring their first language

Children continue to acquire their first language up into their early teens. It may be less obvious during the older years, but there will likely still be words and concepts they have not fully mastered yet. This period is known as the ‘critical period’: a period of a child’s development when their brain is particularly open to language. If they are also learning a second language during this time, it can have some benefits. It is thought that the ‘critical period’ allows a child to acquire a second language in a similar way to their first, and that this ability decreases as they get older. However, it can also have some disadvantages. The child may make errors based on links with his/her first language, or get confused between the two. They may even learn a new world concept for the first time in their second language rather than their first (e.g. they are shown an apple and told it is ‘apple’, before they know the word in their first language). Evidence from the field of child development suggests a clear shift at around 10 years old in the way a child associates words with ideas (Miller & Johnson-Laird, 1976). It demonstrates a change in the way he/she attaches meaning from the world around to linguistic input. At around 10 years old, they tend to start to make more abstract associations between words. The way they view and understand the world becomes more complex, and this affects their understanding and use of language, regardless of whether it is their native or a foreign language.

What does this mean for assessment?

- When preparing test questions or assessment activities, be sensitive to what the child may not yet have mastered in their first language and what concepts they are already familiar with. Questions or activities targeting language outside this area will be unlikely to produce a reliable picture of what the child is capable of in their second language.
- When marking test questions or assessment activities, be careful not to penalise the child for an error that could be due to their linguistic development. Could a particular error from a child be influenced by their



first language? Could it be because they are not familiar with the concept at all yet, even in their first language? Or could it be because they simply do not understand the world in that way. For example, emotions are quite complex concepts for younger children. So teaching and assessing the word 'happy', 'sad', 'angry' before they understand these conceptually would not be relevant and would give you an unreliable assessment result.

6. Children may understand more than they can produce

During the first few years of their life, children deal only with spoken language. As a result, their listening skills are often the most mature and they are nearly expert listeners (as a physical skill) by the time they are 5 or 6 (Cameron, 2001). To be able to produce spoken language relies on the development of physical motor skills – actually being able to pronounce the sounds with their voice and mouth. Similarly, they will start learning to read, and to understand written language, well before they have mastered how to use a pencil or to form words. Just because a child cannot say or write a word or sentence in English, does not necessarily mean they do not know what it means.

What does this mean for assessment?

- It is important to include a mix of receptive and productive language tasks, as this may highlight that while a child understands a piece of language or a concept, they might not yet have mastered the motor skills required to pronounce or write it.
- For younger children (pre-reading/ learning to read) base assessment around spoken language, particularly response to spoken instructions and matching tasks. This will give you a more reliable picture of what they have mastered linguistically, because you are only assessing their language mastery – not their cognitive or motor skills development. It will also avoid causing undue anxiety for the child.
- If you are assessing their writing skills specifically, provide the same support that they would get when writing in their first language.

7. Children get distracted easily

As we have seen above, children are still developing their capacity to take in and process the world around them. The younger the child, the less able they are to control their reactions to stimuli from the world around them. This means they get distracted and bored much more easily and quickly than adults do.

What does this mean for assessment?

- Make assessment tasks short and vary them often. It may help to include a mix of interactive activities with classmates and you, and quiet pencil activities.
- Try keeping more formal assessment activities to a maximum of 30 minutes. Much longer, and you will begin to assess a child's ability to sit still and concentrate, rather than their knowledge of the language.

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Taking into account the considerations above will ensure the results and observations from your assessment activities with young learners are assessing their language learning only, and are not influenced by factors irrelevant to what you are trying to measure. A key part of this is ensuring that the child is relaxed, engaged and happy (and ideally, completely unaware!) during the process.

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