

Children Learning English as a Foreign Language

Assessment at Primary Level

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■ Introduction

Assessment has always been a difficult topic among primary school English language teachers, with opinions swinging from a feeling that assessment is unnecessary to considerable interest in assessment.

The primary English language classroom is supposed to be a very upbeat environment with children playing games, singing songs, reciting poems, creating pictures, and acting out short role-plays. Teachers are eager that the environment should be non-threatening, non-judgemental, praise-driven, and full of laughter and fun.

In this environment, assessment introduces the idea of *failure* which is very foreign to the ethos of the primary school classroom. We need to abandon the idea that assessment is used to identify success or failure, and move toward the idea that assessment measures *degrees of success*.

Teachers often connect assessment with children sitting at their desks in silence, struggling with the demands of a formal paper-based examination. Primary teachers prefer to focus on the *attitudinal* value of English language lessons, showing children that foreign languages can be approached without fear and offer possibilities of fun, games, and play.

■ Why do we need to assess?

If children are receiving lessons in English, school authorities and parents want evidence that the children have learned and that the time has not been wasted. The teacher will also want to monitor each child's progress as well as the progress of the whole class. Because of childhood illnesses and infections, there are inevitable periods of absence from lessons. Children will also not understand some lessons and will vary in their progression in some skills. Any testing of children's progress must be accompanied by a program of remedial and catch-up work. If there is no plan for remedial and catch-up work, there is no value in assessing progress.

Children will inevitably move from primary to secondary school, so secondary school teachers will need some indication of the language, skills, and topics which have been introduced and the level of achievement of each child.

■ What should be assessed?

In the past, when the focus of lessons was *language knowledge*, we could test children on their understanding and ability to use the vocabulary and language structures which had been taught. At that time, the major focus was on reading and writing in the foreign language, so we could test the children's reading comprehension, spelling, and sentence construction. Any test of aural/oral skills was usually limited to asking children to read a given text aloud and then answer questions on the meaning.

Today, the focus of lessons is more on language communication rather than language knowledge, and there have been some changes in the methods of assessment. While the old assessment formats might still be used, new assessment tasks focus more on practical application of language knowledge, rather than just the knowledge itself.

For example, listening is often assessed by observing a child's ability to follow a series of spoken instructions rather than their ability to answer comprehension questions after listening to a recorded story. Oral skills are often assessed by asking a child to role play – introducing a friend, or describing a shopping procedure, for example – rather than assessing their ability to read aloud.

■ Assessment since the CEFR and the European Language Portfolio

The Common European Framework of Reference [CEFR] defines the communicative competence of adult foreign language learners in an inventory of “can do” statements. Teachers of young learners have struggled to create similar inventories to be applied to younger learners who will not need to reserve hotel rooms or rent cars.

One of the most successful of these was developed by Italian teachers working with *English Adventure*¹. In the Italian Portfolio Booklet for *English Adventure*, Ignazia Nespole and Franca Marcellan² included the following chart representing the learning steps covered in the series.

I listen and I can ...	I can say ...	I read and I can ...	I write and I can ...
understand the instructions for playing a game or doing an exercise	my name	recognize words	copy words
understand questions about me	my age	recognize short phrases	copy phrases
understand a picture story	hello and goodbye	understand the instructions (or captions) on a picture	write captions for a known story
understand questions about a story I've heard	please and thank you	understand the captions in an illustrated story	complete a form giving personal information
understand what someone says about a person, an animal, a thing, or a place	ask and say where something is	understand a birthday card or invitation	list animals, objects, and food which I like
understand when someone talks about their likes and dislikes	things about what I like and don't like	find information in a text	make greetings cards and invitations
understand when someone talks about what they do (or are doing)	things about what I do at school or at home (or am doing)	understand a message addressed to me	complete phrases
understand a dialogue	things about myself and my family	understand a message addressed to others	complete a short text
understand the words of a song	questions to ask someone about their likes and dislikes	understand a letter I have received	complete the speech bubbles in a story
understand the meaning of a recorded text	questions to ask someone what they do (or are doing)	understand stories in comics	write a postcard

José Luis Morales has produced a series of six booklets containing Unit, Mid-book and End Book Tests for the six levels of *English Adventure*³. These booklets also include practice worksheets for children using the series.

The **European Language Portfolio** consists of three documents or folders. In their *Language Passport*, children record their home language, their school language (if different) and the foreign languages they are learning. In their *Language Diary*, children record the books they have studied, their tests and scores, their foreign language contacts and experiences (meeting native speakers, watching movies and TV programs, learning songs, reading books or magazines, foreign visits, etc.). The third and perhaps most interesting part of the portfolio is the *Language Dossier*. This is a file in which children store self-chosen examples of their “best” work. It may include stories, articles, drawings, photographs, and audio and video recordings.

The important aspect of the European Language Portfolio is that it is created by the learner and remains the property of the learner. The Portfolio is carried by students from primary level into secondary school and into their adult working lives. In this way, the Portfolio can be used as evidence of each child’s foreign language learning experience.

■ Assessment in the Classroom

Assessment in the classroom may be done by both the teacher and the students. Teachers use two forms of assessment.

Formative assessment takes place during the learning process as students are *forming* their concepts and behaviors relating to language. This type of informal assessment attempts to evaluate the degree to which the child is a good language learner. Observations may relate to the child’s willingness to use new vocabulary, the mistakes which the child makes, or to the degree to which he/she learns from the mistake and the correction which follows. *Formative assessment* will also include each child’s willingness or unwillingness to participate in classroom activities.

Summative assessment takes place at the conclusion of a unit, school period, or course. It is an attempt to sum up what the child has learned from the material presented. Typically, summative assessment is done through formal or semi-formal tests of matching, multiple choice, true/false, and fill-in-the-blank tasks. Summative assessments often generate a numerical score or a grade.

Children are also very aware of their own ability in English and the abilities of their classmates. The primary school learning space often contains displays of work by children in the class. Children can be taught to indicate their **peer evaluation** of another child’s work by adding “star” stickers, drawing happy faces, or sometimes writing comments. Teachers should be aware that these evaluations may be based more on friendship than on an impartial evaluation of the work, but children like to be involved in the evaluation process and their involvement is a valid learning experience.

Self-assessment invites children to reflect on their own work and sense of progress. Rather than being an evaluation of a particular activity or output, self-assessment should encourage and track each child’s growing *self-confidence* in his/her ability to use the language. You might do this, for example, by showing children a 10-item picture/word matching test related to classroom furniture and asking them to predict how many they will be able to match correctly. After completing the test, they will usually find they achieve a higher score than they predicted.

■ The Future of Assessment

In the next few years, children will learn and use English increasingly through interaction with computers. For most of us the computer is merely a tool for calculation, communication and creation of documents by email, social networks, the internet, and using various computer applications.

For children, teenagers and players of computer games, the computer is a gateway to a virtual world in which they can race motor cars, solve mysteries, and undertake challenges which would be totally unsafe in the real world. An early example of these virtual worlds is **Second Life**. After downloading the necessary software, users can create virtual personalities for themselves which are represented in 3D by avatars. These avatars can interact with others in the virtual world in order to *explore, collaborate, build environments, express their ideas or champion a cause*.

This description of virtual worlds which exist in computers may seem very strange to many teachers, but they should not. To a degree, any rule-based sport or even the English language classroom is a virtual world. Children, who probably share a common mother tongue, “pretend” to communicate in English. The teacher is also a participant in the fiction of this virtual world. The teacher either knows or shares the children’s mother tongue and yet chooses to communicate in English.

Computer-based virtual worlds create excellent learning environments for learners of all ages and will be increasingly used for language learning materials. There are opportunities for task-based learning, “immersion” and exploration of the virtual world, and interaction with other characters.

The learner’s behavior in the virtual world can be tracked and monitored to an even greater degree than is possible for the teacher in an over-crowded classroom. Just as children like returning to their favorite stories, repeating their favorite songs, and replaying their favorite games, virtual worlds create spaces in which children can repeatedly undertake the same challenges, becoming more proficient with each attempt.

While paper-based activities will not disappear, assessment will be increasingly done by monitoring and tracking children’s development and progress in computer-based virtual worlds.

■ Cambridge Tests for Young Learners of English (CYLETs)⁴

In the 1990s, Cambridge ESOL introduced a series of three graded tests: *Starters, Movers* and *Flyers*. The tests are written for learners aged 7-11. The tests are very intelligently constructed and designed to remove the ‘fear’ factor from the tests. Each test consists of three short papers:

	Reading and Writing	Listening	Oral
Starters	20 minutes	20 minutes	3-5 minutes
Movers	30 minutes	25 minutes	5-7 minutes
Flyers	40 minutes	25 minutes	7-9 minutes

The Oral section is done with a trained examiner and usually involves a number of practical tasks using a large picture and a number of smaller picture cards. Children are asked to place the smaller picture cards on the large picture in specific ways. They are asked questions about the pictures and may be asked to talk about the pictures.

Children do not *pass* or *fail* CYLETs tests. Every child receives a certificate which may carry one, two or three shields, depending on the grade they have achieved. As the board explains, this is to reward *everyone* who takes the test for the effort they have made. The broad banding of the grading scheme helps to avoid petty competitiveness among children and their parents.

Starters are intended for children who have had about 100 hours of lessons, *Movers* for children who have had 200 hours and *Flyers* after 300 hours. *Flyers* is said to be linguistically equivalent to the Key English Test (KET). Of course, the topics and vocabulary in *Flyers* are appropriate to young learners. The Key English Test is intended for adults.

The aims of the Cambridge Young Learners English Tests are to:

- sample relevant and meaningful language use
- measure accurately and fairly
- present a positive first impression of international tests
- promote effective learning and teaching
- encourage future learning and teaching

These tests provide an opportunity to measure children's ability by independently set international standards. Testing may appear to be very foreign to the environment from the upbeat, praise-driven participation in songs, stories, pictures, and games which characterize the primary level classroom, but CYLETs and the other assessment materials cited in this article demonstrate that assessment can also be fun!

¹*English Adventure*, Christiana Bruni, Anne Worrall, Izabella Hearn © Pearson Education 2006

²*English Adventure Portfolio*, Ignazia Nespolo with Franca Marcellan © Pearson Education 2006

³*English Adventure Teacher's Resource Books 1-6*, José Luis Morales © Pearson Education 2006

⁴<http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/young-learners/yle.html>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Since qualifying as a primary school teacher in 1967, **Nick Dawson** has taught general subjects to children and EFL to adults in Britain, Libya, and Italy. He has a postgraduate TEFL diploma from London University. Since 1979, he has led over 2,000 seminars in more than 60 different countries.

The publications he has helped develop include language tests, grammar practice, dictionary, reading, listening and video skills, teachers' book, CD-ROMs, and IWB activities for primary, secondary and adult learners. He is also the author of *English at Primary Level*, *Teaching on Holiday Courses*, *Learning and Teaching English in Scuola Media*, *Penguin Guide to Graded Reading*, *Listening with Penguin Readers*, and *Teachers Guide to Portfolios and the CEFR*.

Since 2009, he has worked with Pearson as a writer and academic consultant.