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Pauline Rea-Dickins

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Current research and professional practice: reports of work in progress into the assessment of young language learners

Pauline Rea-Dickins *University of Bristol*

In all fields, only a limited proportion of activity is formally reported in journals and books. This is especially the case in the rapidly expanding area of primary foreign language teaching where there is, simultaneously, evidence of considerable innovation as well as a lack of clarity on some fundamental issues, as has been pointed out in the various articles in this issue. In spite of the lack of formal reporting in the area of assessment of young language learners, the field is active in several ways.

In trying to answer some of the wider and more theoretical questions focused around the optimum age for starting a second or foreign language, whether there are actually benefits from an 'early start', or whether there are longer term effects from primary language learning experiences on student performance at secondary school, assessment of learner development and achievement plays an important part. This is equally true of second language acquisition and the analysis of the developmental paths to a new language in young children. In her account below, Renate Zangl describes the approaches taken to describe the development of young foreign language learners aged between six and 10, from both spontaneous speech samples and formal oral tests.

There is also the role of policy development for assessment, with decision making at a macro level, and the development of appropriate strategies for professional practice. In connection with the important question as to whether learner achievement should be formally assessed at all (i.e. via graded learner performance) in the primary school, it is interesting that in numerous countries young foreign language learners are assessed (e.g., Dickson and Cumming, 1996) but that a national programme of teacher training in assessment does not necessarily follow on from this. By way of contrast, Norway has articulated a policy of no formal assessment of English within the early years curriculum, with no grades given in Years 1–7 (ages 6–13), and this position has had a profound impact on the national strategy in this country for teacher professional development in class-based assessment of language learning. As we see in the article by

Angela Hasselgren, issues of assessment in relation to teacher development and classroom practice have been systematically addressed.

The work in Norway of Nihlen and colleagues (not reported here) is also important in terms of innovative practice at classroom level, following on from national policy decisions. The recently developed 'portfolio scheme' (e.g., Nihlen and Gardenkrans, 1997) helps teachers and pupils to set goals and provides a basis for informal class assessment. Pupils have a clearly identified role in the assessment process where, through self assessment and dialogue with the teacher, they become involved in thinking about their English studies and about what they want to learn and why. They are encouraged to reflect on what they have learned and achieved and how they have enjoyed their language classes. Through written 'learning contracts' they set individual goals for their language learning (e.g., the words they want to learn) and they evaluate their progress against these goals.

In the area of teacher implementation of classroom assessment, we need to develop a broader knowledge base. For example, there is much to learn about the purposes of assessment by teachers, the nature and quality of procedures used by teachers, the ways in which teachers manage assessment, and the uses made of data from learner assessment. We also need to develop greater insight into the different representations teachers have of assessment and of language learning development, as reflected in their classroom practice and through the analysis of learner–teacher discourse.

The accounts from the funded research of Breen *et al.* (1997) undertaken in 15 schools in different parts of Australia represent an important contribution to our knowledge of implementation of assessment. In an early years' (children aged five to eight) English as an additional language context, they examine the decisions that teachers make – based on their everyday pedagogical practice – about the language development and achievement of their learners. The work of Rea-Dickins and Gardner (this issue) also makes a contribution to our understanding of classroom implementation and, like Breen *et al.* (1997), is focused on teacher assessment for learners with English as an additional language in the same age range.

In the UK, educational researchers have investigated the implementation of teacher assessment in the mainstream (i.e., not language specific) primary curriculum, in part motivated by the role of formal Teacher Assessments as part of national testing in England and Wales (see, for example, Torrance and Pryor, 1998; for a study of classroom assessment in Greek primary schools, see Mavrommatis, 1997). However, in the domain of implementation of assessment in primary EFL

classrooms, there is relatively little inquiry to date; however, see Rea-Dickins and Rixon (1999), Tsagari (1999),¹ Pavlou and Ionnou-Georgiou (1998)¹ and, across a range of foreign languages, the longitudinal work of Low *et al.* (1995). The work in progress by Gattullo (this issue) contributes an analysis of classroom assessment from her work with four teachers over two years in Italian EFL primary classes.

The aim of this work in progress section of this special issue is to present examples of innovation in assessing young language learners. These accounts are all drawn from foreign language learning contexts. In the three articles which follow, the research by Renate Zangl represents the interface between programme evaluation and second language acquisition. She describes the assessment procedures used in two different foreign language learning programmes: the Vienna Bilingual Schooling and the Lollipop Programme and, in the case of the former which takes a longitudinal approach, traces the development of spontaneous speech and the linguistic systems – morphology, syntax, and semantics/lexicon – in language learners from the first to fourth grade of primary school (ages 6–10). She also raises some key principles which should frame approaches to the assessment of young language learners.

Angela Hasselgren echoes some of these principles in her description of the EVA (EVALuation of English in Schools) Project, which has systematically developed and trialed materials for teacher use in the assessment of student language learning in Norwegian primary schools. She identifies characteristics of the younger language learner in Norway which have been influential in the design of the assessment materials, and defines the construct of language ability and the pedagogical principles that underpin the materials developed. Although the analysis of data from national trialing is still in its early stages, Hasselgren puts forward some of the positive contributions that this national initiative to introduce formative assessment into the primary language learning classroom might make by directly addressing concerns of professional practice and teacher development.

The third article, by Francesca Gattullo, focuses on research into classroom implementation, in particular on the formative uses of teacher assessment in two primary schools in the Italian state sector where English is taught as a foreign language. In the form of a pilot study – through classroom observation, field notes, teacher and pupil questionnaires, and teacher interviews – Gattullo focuses on procedures used by teachers in the assessment of language learning, the

¹For details of this work, in part supported by the European Commission (Framework 4, DGX11, Training and Mobility of Researchers), please contact Dr P. Rea-Dickins, The Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, 35 Berkeley Square, Bristol BS8 1JA, UK.

nature of feedback provided for learners and the uses teachers have made of assessment results. In analysing the construct of formative assessment, she borrows the concept of 'assessment episode' (Mavrommatis, 1997) and analyses her data according to four phases:

- phase 1: evidence collection;
- phase 2: decision making against a chosen criteria;
- phase 3: feedback action;
- phase 4: impact on teaching and learning.

On the basis of transcripts of teacher–pupil interaction, Gattullo examines emergent processes underlying formative assessment. In a climate where assessment, and related activities, may take up huge amounts of time and energy, this research into teachers' implementation of assessment represents an empirical contribution and one way of deconstructing assessment processes.

These accounts of work in progress offer complementary perspectives to the articles in this special issue, with a number of shared themes in evidence. In particular, they draw attention to features of the classroom context that are regarded as important for assessment of the younger learner, such as the appropriacy of procedures for the age range of the learners, their motivation and interests, and their levels of language proficiency. They provide insights into the kinds of systems or procedures that have been successfully used in the assessment of young primary foreign language learners. They also represent a range of techniques that include observation-driven assessment, self-assessment, as well as the more traditional pencil-and-paper test. The concerns expressed extend beyond the when, what and how of assessment and seek to clarify some of the key principles at work. They represent a challenge in terms of professional testing practice and raise pointers for future language testing research.

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