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Pauline Rea-Dickins

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# Editorial

## Assessment in early years language learning contexts

**Pauline Rea-Dickins** *University of Bristol*

The teaching of one or more *foreign* languages is no longer restricted to the secondary school domain. In some countries a foreign language was introduced nationally into the primary curriculum as early as the 1960s (e.g., Sweden); elsewhere (e.g., Austria) this began on a very small scale. In another case, the teaching of a foreign language has had a somewhat chequered career, as with French in primary schools in England and Wales in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Burstall, 1974). However, as has been demonstrated unequivocally by Kubanek-German (1998), the teaching of foreign languages is now very much a part of national education policy in the European Union, as indeed elsewhere. In addition to these primary foreign language learning contexts, we have the widespread use of (predominantly) English as an *additional/second* language for children in mainstream education in countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States of America.

At this point it is useful to clarify some of the terminology used in this special issue and the differences in use across the different assessment contexts reported here. A range of terms is used in England and Wales, Australia, Canada and North America to refer to learners who are using English as the medium of instruction in school contexts but who are not English first language (L1) speakers. The term English as a Second Language (ESL) – used in Canada, North America and Australia – carries the same meaning as English as an Additional Language (EAL), which is the term now used in official documentation in England and Wales. In Australia and North America, reference is also made to learners with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). The convention adopted in this special issue is for authors to use the terminology as is the practice in their contexts of work. North American readers will also be more familiar with the

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Address for correspondence: Pauline Rea-Dickins, The Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, Clifton, Bristol, BS8 1JA, UK; email: P.Rea-Dickins@bristol.ac.uk

term 'elementary' school. This carries the same meaning as 'primary' school, which reflects British use. Further, there is synonymy between the North American use of 'foreign languages in the elementary school' (FLES) and what Richard Johnstone (this issue) refers to as 'modern languages in the primary school' (MLPS).

Classroom assessment is used here in the generic sense, covering the full range of elicitation techniques that are used by teachers in their classrooms to gain information about the progress and attainment of their language learners in order to be responsive both to learner needs and curricular demands. The assessment procedures described in the studies in this issue range from ongoing language sampling of spontaneous learner language, through to more structured oral assessments and formal tests, and also involve the use of detailed profiles in schools.

In spite of considerable activity in the teaching of foreign or additional languages in the primary school, it is only since the 1990s that a research and development agenda for assessment has been more in evidence; see, for example: Low *et al.* (1993); McKay *et al.* (1994); Edelenbos and Johnstone (1996); Breen *et al.* (1997); Leung and Teasdale (1997); TESOL (1998); Blondin *et al.* (1998). This special issue of *Language Testing* is focused on assessment in the early years of education and brings together some of the wide-ranging issues from both foreign and additional language learning perspectives.

For the purposes of this issue, young language learners are defined as children from the ages of around 5 to about 12. They range from those who have recently entered the school system (e.g., who are in a reception class or kindergarten) to those who are approaching a transition stage (termed 'articulation' in North America) in their education, either to a change of school, or a transfer to a more senior level in the same institution.

The articles in this issue have been selected to reflect the range of different purposes for assessment within an early years language learning curriculum. One of these purposes is the role of assessment at the end of the primary phase of schooling, i.e., the assessment of achievement. Two empirical studies are reported here. In his article, Johnstone extends the role of assessment in determining value for money or whether the investment in an early start in a foreign language has been worthwhile, suggesting that assessment is important for other reasons such as feedback to parents and the public, as a means to informing national policy development and for school self-evaluation. Through the description of the independent evaluation of the MLPS (modern languages in the primary school) project in Scotland, Johnstone identifies some of the difficulties faced by those who

wish to develop assessments for implementation across different schools. His analysis focuses on the variability evident in different school learning contexts; for example:

- whether the language is taught as a discrete subject or integrated within other curricular subjects;
- the role of prior cultural knowledge;
- the level of familiarity of primary school teachers with testing; and
- what is understood by proficiency in the primary foreign language context.

Peter Edelenbos and Marja P. Vinjé also examine assessment at the end of the primary phase with specific reference to levels of English. Within the framework of the Dutch national assessment scheme (PPON – Dutch National Assessment Program in Education), they describe the development and administration of tests to assess levels of learner attainment in listening, reading and word knowledge in English. Both Edelenbos and Vinjé, and Johnstone, extend their research in innovative ways. Edelenbos and Vinjé examine a range of ‘other’ variables which might have influenced performance in listening at the end of primary school. These include pupil influences – e.g., socio-economic status and gender – and instructional influences – e.g., level of contact hours and pedagogic orientation of the learning programme itself. They also offer a comparative analysis of differences in learner performance in the same skill areas from the PPON 1991 and 1996 assessments. Rather than side-stepping the skill of speaking in preference for the more practicable pencil-and-paper written measures, Johnstone represents one of the first studies in which serious attention has been given to the assessment of levels of spoken language in primary foreign language learning.

The next three articles draw on experiences of assessment with learners for whom English is an additional (second), rather than a foreign language. Common to all three contributions is an analysis of less-well-documented modes of assessment for purposes of school-based instruction. Alex Teasdale and Constant Leung discuss some of the implications for validity of introducing alternative forms of assessment. They question – through a review of the literature as well as their own research into the assessment of speaking and listening skills in the early years of the National Curriculum in England and Wales – the relevance of psychometric theory in determining the validity of teacher assessment for monitoring children’s language learning.

Continuing the theme of alternative modes of assessment, the next article by Penny McKay examines the increasing uses of profiling and the development of English Language Scales for the assessment

of learners working in mainstream curricular contexts. Based on her own involvement in the development of the ESL Bandscales in Australia, she examines the principles behind the construction of profiles, also drawing on examples from Britain and North America, and explores their validity for learners at different stages in the school curriculum.

Pauline Rea-Dickins and Sheena Gardner report on their empirical research into the implementation of assessment in an Early Years Intervention Project in inner-city primary schools in Coventry, England. Like Teasdale and Leung, they focus on teacher assessment and examine, through classroom data, the construct of formative assessment from the perspectives of mainstream class teachers and language support teams in schools. Potential threats to the validity of the assessment procedures reported on are also discussed.

The final section of this special issue has three accounts of work in progress. The first, by Renate Zangl, is a contribution at the interface of assessment with second language acquisition (SLA). She describes the types of assessments used with primary-age learners of English as a foreign language and, in the case of the Vienna Bilingual Schooling project, analyses learners' language – interaction and system-related developments – at specific points in time over a four-year period. She is also interested in the relationship between the acquisitional stages identified and the children's use of English in class (see also Peltzer-Karpp and Zangl, 1997; on interfaces between SLA and language testing research, see Bachman and Cohen, 1998). This is followed by Angela Hasselgren who describes the development of materials to support classroom based assessment in Norway, a country where there is a deliberate policy *not* to formally assess (i.e., grade) learners in the early years of foreign language learning. This teacher development strategy aims to upgrade the assessment skills of teachers and to encourage the involvement of primary learners in the assessment of their own progress in language learning. The third report, by Francesca Gattullo, is based on a small-scale pilot study which is investigating the implementation of teacher assessment in Italian primary schools where English is taught as a foreign language. She, too, contributes to the conversation around issues of formative classroom assessment, initiated in this issue by Rea-Dickins and Gardner.

These articles raise a very wide range of issues of relevance to language testing policy, practice and research in the assessment of young language learners. There are clearly common themes running throughout the contributions presented here, which are also of concern more generally in North America, as elsewhere (see, for example, Huerta-Macias, 1995; Brown and Hudson, 1998; TESOL, 1998). Of

key importance in the assessment of early language learning are issues of:

- 1) processes and procedures used by teachers to inform teaching and learning;
- 2) assessment of achievement at the end of the primary phase of education; and
- 3) teachers' professional development.

In relation to the kinds of procedures that are used to assess the young language learner, there is recognition that factors such as age, motivation, interests, cultural experiences, background knowledge and stages of conceptual development – as examples – will influence not only the kinds of materials and pedagogy to be used with young children but also, and importantly, the assessment procedures themselves. The expanded repertoire of techniques for monitoring learner language development and achievement also raises a number of new concerns in connection with validity and, in particular, how the validity of classroom-based assessment (in contrast with formal pencil-and-paper measures) is achieved.

Variability and diversity is a crucial issue, in particular with reference to the assessment of achievement at the end of the primary phase. Several of the articles in this special issue refer to influences which derive from differences in instructional context where, on the one hand, the additional or foreign language is used as the medium of communication in other school subjects (a feature common in many primary schools where English is taught as an additional language) and, on the other, where language learning is taught and learned as a discrete subject as is the case in most EFL contexts. There is diversity at a range of other levels which may impact upon assessment. As clearly identified in Johnstone (this issue), this diversity may relate to children's prior cultural knowledge, their immediate experiences of testing within the curriculum, teachers' familiarity with testing, and to an understanding of what exactly constitutes proficiency and what levels of this proficiency may be realistically expected at the end of primary education (see Edelenbos and Vinjé, this issue). In turn, this has implications for the transition (or 'articulation') to the next stage of education for pupils with experience of foreign languages at primary school. This is not only in the sense that schools and teachers at the next stage have to accommodate students with different linguistic abilities, i.e., to cater for 'mixed' classes at secondary level. The situation is likely to become even more acute in contexts where primary foreign language teaching has been approached as part of an integrated curriculum – increasingly the case in a European context (see Zangl, also Johnstone, this issue),

albeit in a small minority of schools – but then gets partitioned off as a discrete subject at secondary school. The development of appropriate tools to assess cross-curricular language capacity which pupils have acquired at primary school is important in the smooth transition (articulation) to secondary schooling.

In addition to its specific focus on the assessment of young language learners, and associated processes, it is noteworthy that a key focus permeating all contributions is in relation to the importance of the professional development of teachers. The issues raised are wide ranging. Edelenbos and Vinjé, for example, express this in terms of actual levels of teachers' English language proficiency – in relation to the achievement levels of their learners – and their competence in teaching a foreign language (in their case English) in Dutch primary schools. The articles by both Rea-Dickins and Gardner and by Teasdale and Leung address concerns as to how classroom assessment is implemented by teachers as a 'monitor' of ongoing language learning development. Another example, and one that is particularly interesting, is the contribution by Hasselgren in her description of how – through a national policy decision – a strategy has evolved through which teachers may become engaged and skilled in the processes of implementing class-based assessment as part of their routine foreign language teaching.

The aim of this special issue is to broaden out the scope of language assessment beyond the validation of language proficiency examinations for secondary or adult learners of a foreign language. It seeks to identify, from different perspectives, some of the priority concerns in the implementation of assessment of children in the early years of language education – whether this is assessment of capacity in a foreign language or in an additional language. I hope that the discussions and the analyses offered by the contributors stimulate further work across the range of challenges they raise and that, in some way, this special issue in the first year of the new millennium might assist in the shaping of a still somewhat embryonic research and development agenda for the assessment of the younger language learner.

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