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# Fundamental Considerations on Assessing Elementary School EFL Learners: with Special Reference to Japanese Classroom Contexts

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## I. Introduction

Assessing young EFL learners is a challenging job because it is a complex area that requires knowledge of age-appropriate classroom methodology in addition to knowledge of teacher and standards-based language assessment, second language acquisition, research methodology and as well as the actual contexts (Pateker, 2021; Nikolov, 2016).

Over the past few decades, foreign language acquisition in primary schools have become increasingly common in many parts of the world (Hughes & Hughes, 2020), including Japan. Along with that, particular requirements of assessing young language learners have emerged, given that teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin.

Cameron (2001) points out several identifiable factors in assessing young learners such as age, content of learning, teaching methods, the goal of language program, and learning theories. They are taken as key factors that may impact assessment practices.

Wolf and Butler (2017) have a similar idea by maintaining that the characteristics of young learners that need to be considered in the development and use of ELP assessment may largely be described in terms of the following aspects: 1) English learning contexts and language ability, 2) cognitive development, and 3) affective factors.

In Japan, the new course of study has been in effect in elementary schools where English has been taught from third graders as a foreign language activity and from fifth graders as a subject. Naturally, the issues surrounding assessment have risen up in the classroom contexts as a result of this development (MEXT, 2017; NIER, 2020).

This paper discusses elementary school students' English proficiency assessment by mainly focusing on their overall language ability and English learning contexts in Japan.

## **II. Theoretical issues and proposals on the assessment of young learner's English proficiency**

Butler (2017) claims that the assessment of English as a second or foreign language for young learners is situated in the midst of many contextual and theoretical changes. Such changes have influenced how we conceptualize EFL assessment for young learners as well as how such assessments are developed and validated.

She maintains that partially due to globalization, the target population of English proficiency assessments has been radically changing and diversifying, and this in turn influences many aspects of assessment contents and use. Assessing young learners inevitably makes us pay closer attention to the role of cognitive and affective development in children's language use and task completion (Butler, 2017).

Cameron (2001) proposes five principles for assessing young learners. First she stresses that assessment should be learner-centered, in that learners should be assessed on not only what they can do alone, but also on what they can do with the help of others. Second is that assessment should support the learning process. In other words, the learning of a language should reflect assessment results. Thirdly, she highlights that assessment does not need to be viewed as testing, which requires us to evaluate learners in other ways such as using portfolios, peer assessment, and self-assessment. Fourthly, she underscores that assessment should reflect what they learned in class, which maintains the content validity of assessment. Lastly, she views children and parents as the main stakeholders.

Patekar (2021) further mentions two more issues by focusing on writing. One is about communicative language testing, which is closely related to performance testing with authenticity, while the other is distinguishing between formative and summative assessment. Assessment for learning is formative, and assessment of learning is summative (Lee & Yuan, 2019). As Patekar (2021) claims, while formative assessment must have a prominent role in early language learning, and young learners should have ample opportunities for assessment for learning before they are tested for a grade, the final summative assessment of learning is required in academic contexts.

## **III. Analysis of Japanese Context: Young learners' EFL assessment conditions in Japan mainly in light of Hughes and Hughes (2020).**

With these pieces of information above in mind, Hughes and Hughes (2020) can be intro-

duced as the main reference for considering Japanese assessment contexts because they tend to encompass/address the teaching and testing situation of elementary education from a wider perspective. They claim the necessity of testing rather than a less formal means of assessment because testing provides opportunities to develop positive attitudes towards assessment and to help them recognize the value of assessment. Pursuing this line of thought, they further propose the following 4 recommendations.

The first recommendation is for a special effort to make testing an integral part of assessment be made, and to have assessment be an integral part of the teaching program. Testing should not be seen as something separate from learning, let alone from teaching (program). We should consider it particularly important that a healthy attitude towards testing be instilled at an early age. In short, testing should be seen as a normal part of learning by young learners, not as threatening or unwanted.

The second recommendation is for children to be provided with constant feedback on their test performance. Immediate feedback is important with the following considerations: firstly, feedback should not only be quick but also, more importantly, positive in nature. Additionally, the criteria by which learners are being assessed should be clear. Furthermore, in order for learners to see progress in their learning, feedback should not be taken as final judgement (Hughes & Hughes, 2020).

The third one suggests that self-assessment be made part of the teaching program. When implemented, it will help children develop the habit of monitoring their own progress and eventually become active learners (Hughes & Hughes, 2020).

The final recommendation is to exert every effort to create the optimal conditions that would allow the children to perform at their best (Hughes & Hughes, 2020).

Notably, all of these recommendations seem idealistic; however, it is understandable that the recommendations are overtly positive, as they intend to dispel negative attitudes towards tests and to language learning in general (cf. Hughes & Hughes, 2020).

With these key points in mind, we will begin to observe the assessment process of elementary students' English proficiency in Japanese contexts.

National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER) (2020) describes the details of English education in elementary schools (foreign languages and foreign language activities) in MEXT's Course of Study (MEXT, 2017). According to the Course of Study for Elementary Schools by MEXT (2017), foreign language studies will be offered to 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders as a subject while offered as activities for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders

#### Grades 5–6: Foreign Languages (English)

##### Foreign Language (English):

5 areas: 1) Listening, 2) Speaking (presentation), 3) Speaking (interaction)

4) Reading, 5) Writing

3 viewpoints: 1) knowledge and skills, 2) thoughts, judgements, and expressions

3) positive attitude towards studying

#### Grades 3–4: Foreign Language Activities (English)

##### Foreign Language Activities (English):

3 areas: 1) Listening, 2) Speaking (presentation), 3) Speaking (interaction)

3 viewpoints: 1) knowledge and skills, 2) thoughts, judgements, and expressions

3) positive attitude towards studying

Naoyama (2021) points out three essentials of assessment among several elements: validity, fairness and reliability. In order to grasp the students' learning appropriately and utilize assessment results to improve teaching methods, those three essentials of assessment must be taken into account. Validity refers to whether the test measures what it is supposed to measure, and while it is difficult to understand the concept concretely due to the theoretical construct of its basis, the basic component is well reflected in the course of study. Teachers can utilize the concept in their teaching plans. The second essential, reliability, focuses on the consistency of test results. Reliability is closely related to Validity. A test is considered to be reliable once its validity is established however, this principle cannot be applied both ways. A reliable test will not always be valid. Fairness addresses whether test conditions such as test methods and tasks are fair to the test takers. It is imperative that they are properly upheld so that test takers should not be discouraged to perform well.

When it comes to young learners' assessment or more specifically, Japanese elementary school students' assessment, Naoyama (2021) further recommends five types of tests in consideration of the MEXT's course of study. The first one is observation, which is conducted through in-class utterances and behavioral activities. Hughes and Hughes (2020) claim that testing should cover the 5 areas and 3 viewpoints of assessment criteria, and should not be regarded as a separate component of learning. Observational data of in-class student activities is crucial for comprehensive assessment. The second type, portfolio analysis, can be managed through classwork materials such as worksheets or posters. This covers two areas (listening and writing) and three viewpoints. Hughes and Hughes (2020) state that children should be provided with constant feedback and that the interaction between teachers and students under portfolio analysis must be functional. The third type of test is reflection analysis, which is assessed through self-evaluation sheets. Hughes

and Hughes' (2020) idea of self-assessment can be used for this purpose. This focuses on two viewpoints (1) thoughts, judgements, and expression, and (2) positive attitude. The fourth type is the traditional paper test, which is known to be a summative and fair assessment practice and should be conducted with care. Although this is not particularly mentioned in Hughes and Hughes (2020), it should be worth considering. The fifth and final recommended test type is a performance test, which refers to speaking and writing. In this type, learners actually perform in the test context. One benefit of this is its authenticity, and it can also cover three viewpoints in one test at a single time. However, drawbacks may include the time and the reliability of rating. Although Hughes & Hughes (2020) specifically mention any performance test, language teachers should create the ideal conditions where learners can perform their best even in such testing situations.

Following these recommendations, two more aspects of assessment for young learners must also be considered. The first is proposed by Wolf and Butler (2017). They claim that assessing young learners' English Language Proficiency (ELP) can happen in many different ways depending on the purposes of assessment. They can serve primarily as assessment of learning (i.e., for summative purposes) or as assessment for learning (i.e., for formative purposes). ELP assessment for young learners should be both; in other words, they are intended to measure learners' current ELP levels to help them improve their English skills, providing score reports or feedback for distinct users.

The second aspect is introduced by Bailey (2017). He proposes that informal or alternative approaches (e.g. quizzes, peer and self-assessments, games, and teacher observations) are frequently created by the classroom teacher and used to ascertain learner performance and progress. In contrast, formal or standardized assessments are pre-formatted and normalized across large samples of students. The advantages of informal assessments include their sensitivity and suitability for use among school-age language learners.

In conclusion, Butler (2017) insists that the traditional measurement is primarily for a summative purpose (an assessment of learning orientation), while assessment professionals have paid increasing attention to the role of assessment as a support for student learning, in other words, the formative purpose (an assessment for learning). She maintains that considering young learners are in the midst of developing various cognitive, social and affective skills and knowledge, the notion of assessment for learning is particularly relevant to them.

## **IV. Conclusions**

We still see many traditional tests and examinations that are clearly recognizable, even to chil-

dren, as ways to measure foreign language proficiency (Timpe-Laughlin & Cho, 2021). However, as we are rapidly moving into an age of technology, more innovative and integrated formats of language assessments such as the use of video games and game-based tools might be highlighted (cf. Timpe-Laughlin & Cho, 2021).

We need a better understanding of young learners' FL proficiency and use—their knowledge intake, learning process and strategies, to better contribute to their overall development. Information on how children from a wide range of contexts use language is indispensable (Butler, 2017).

Patekar (2021) has already pointed out some challenges that teachers face in teaching and assessing in the context of Croatia. His study shows that some assessment tasks and grading practices were inadequate and could not accurately measure children's writing ability. Such results are caused by a lack of resources, issues surrounding behavioral management, and a dilemma between using grades to motivate students versus using the teachers' own standards. However, these are also applicable to Japanese contexts, where we need to advance young learners' education in the context of formal training programs for teachers. Based on the overall data, we need to conduct further research to find a better solution for our respective contexts.

In all, one single important issue is the goal of tests for young learners (cf. Butler, 2017). Since the ultimate objective of any test is to support student learning, we should better understand how teachers use their students' test results to help the students facilitate their own learning.

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