
Chapter 17

Classroom Assessment of Young Learners

by

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Outline

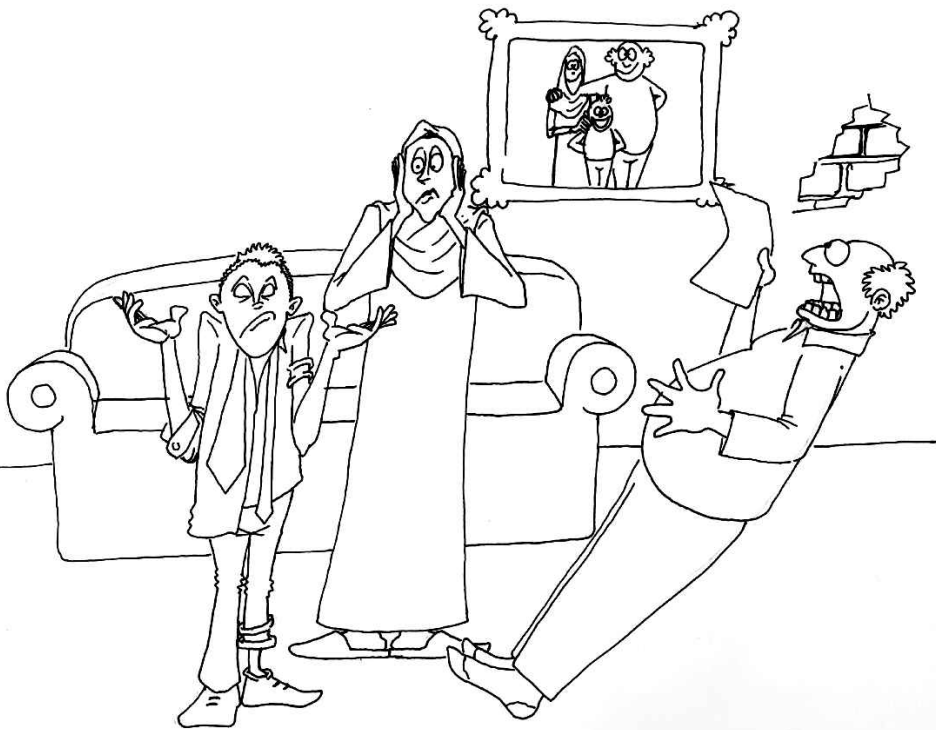
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Introduction

Teaching and learning require us to constantly gather information and make decisions. In order to become good “decision-makers” regarding instruction, teachers need to know how to assess the young learners in their classrooms.

I do not understand it ?!
Every time my father sees the report he acts in a funny way!



Goals

The goals of this chapter are:

1. To help readers understand the importance of classroom assessment in teaching English to young learners.
2. To familiarize readers with basic concepts and terminology of assessment, evaluation, and testing.
3. To equip teachers with practical assessment tools for use in classrooms on a daily basis as part of teaching.

Key Terms

The general public uses the terms *assessment*, *evaluation*, and *test* interchangeably and, in fact, many writers also use the terms loosely. It is quite useful, however, for teachers to distinguish among these terms.

Assessment

Assessment includes any way that we use to look at how far students, teachers, programs, schools are being successful in meeting educational goals. In this chapter, we will focus on a particular kind of assessment: classroom assessment. Classroom assessment is what teachers use in classrooms on a daily basis in order to assess children's learning. Assessments provide the basis for teacher decision-making concerning rate of instruction, topics, presentation methods, sequencing of instruction and opportunities for practice. There are many different kinds of classroom assessment. Some of them involve the traditional paper and pencil test, but teachers have many other ways in which to determine if their pupils are learning at an appropriate rate.

Evaluation

Evaluation is usually thought of as producing the “big picture” of student achievement over time. Evaluation, however, does not necessarily produce results that the teacher can use in a timely way to make instructional decisions. Rather, evaluations are used to make decisions about the level of teaching and learning within a school, a governorate or a country. Educational evaluation can include many kinds of instruments, test scores, interviews, attendance records, and discipline records.

Tests

Tests are assessments in which students must individually demonstrate their knowledge and abilities. Tests can sometimes check on the learning of a

discrete point of instruction, such as vocabulary or a grammar point, but can also assess broader areas of reading or writing. Test results are usually expressed quantitatively – with numbers. Tests play a role in classroom assessment but they are only one type of assessment that can be used. Other forms of assessment are used more routinely in the language class, as part of instruction, in order to help teachers make decisions about instruction.

Why Do We Need to Use Classroom Assessment?

Classroom assessment provides information to help make decisions about students, curricula and methodology. It is very important that teachers be aware of the reasons for assessment. Specifically, we assess to make decisions in order to meet student needs and teacher purposes. Several examples of each follow: (Nitko, 2000):

Student Needs. Assessment helps in:

- determining student strengths and weaknesses
- determining learning styles of our pupils
- learning about student interests in various topics
- placing students into learning groups based upon achievement and personality factors
- monitoring and following the progress of individual pupils
- diagnosing the group's learning progress as a whole
- providing feed-back about students' achievements

Teacher Purposes. Assessment helps the teacher in:

- planning instructional activities
- discovering what pupils have learned and what they still need to learn
- deciding what to teach next
- determining how to adapt instruction for student needs and learning styles
- determining which content to include and which content to exclude from instruction
- evaluating the effectiveness of our teaching methods
- assigning grades and giving other feedback to students
- giving feedback to parents
- giving feedback to other teachers in the school and the principal
- communicating with other professionals in order to provide more effective instruction

Misconceptions about Classroom Assessment

Educators sometimes have misconceptions about classroom assessment. Below we discuss several of these.

Public exams/tests tell us what children know.

In fact, public exams, though useful for some purposes in assessing both learning and teaching, do not give the whole picture about learners. Tests such as end-of-year exams used in Egyptian schools tell us only a little about what children know. They will not necessarily reflect all that the children have learned in your classroom. These tests also may not tell you all that children know about using the foreign language in an authentic situation involving real, purposeful listening, speaking, reading and writing for purposeful activities.

Language is acquired in a sequential order and in discrete pieces so we need to test in the same way.

From research that closely observed children's language development, we know that children often acquire language in chunks rather than in discrete items and they can use these chunks for real-life purposes. An example is the child who learns to say "*How do you do?*" but has no indication of how many words are contained in that question.

Teacher observations are neither reliable nor valid.

On the contrary, well-trained, experienced teachers who are familiar with learner standards are often good judges of how children are learning. Teachers who observe their pupils carefully, record the results they see and hear, and base their instruction upon these observations which can help provide pupils, parents, supervisors and the school with an accurate assessment of an individual's or a group's learning progress.

Assessment is separate from instruction.

This is perhaps the most wide-spread misconception. In fact, classroom assessment is *most* effective when it is integrated into the instructional experiences of the classroom. We will explore ways to do that later in this chapter.

Basic Principles of Classroom Assessment

- **Multiple Formats.** Effective classroom assessment uses multiple formats to assess pupils in a variety of different ways and in a variety of contexts.
- **Clear Purpose.** Effective classroom assessment must have a clear purpose and reflect what children have actually learned about using the new language.
- **Part of Instruction.** Effective classroom assessment is included in actual classroom instruction. In this way, assessment supports and enhances learning. Assessment of this type takes place prior to, during and following instruction. Effective assessment looks at what we teach and the way we teach it.
- **Provides Useful Feedback on Learning.** Effective classroom assessment provides feedback to improve learning for the teacher, parents, other teachers and for the learners as well.
- **Recorded Efficiently.** Effective classroom assessment provides information which can be recorded in an efficient manner and be used to make decisions about instruction.

What Kinds of Instructional Decisions are Informed by Classroom Assessment?

Assessment can help us make decisions before, during, and after instruction (Nitko, 2000).

Before Teaching

You need to ask yourself the following questions before teaching:

- What input do my pupils need to learn during the next day, week, month, marking period, etc?
- What abilities (interests, skill levels, age, etc.) of my students do I need

to take into account as I plan my teaching activities?

- What materials are appropriate for me to use with this group of students?
- In what learning activities will my students and I need to be engaged as I teach the lesson, unit or course?
- What learning targets do I want my students to achieve as a result of my teaching?
- How should I organize and arrange the students in the class for the upcoming lessons and activities ?

During Teaching

You need to ask yourself the following questions during your lesson.

- Is my lesson going well? Are students learning?
- What should I do to make this lesson (or activity) work better?
- What feedback should I give each student about how well he or she is learning?
- Are my students ready to move to the next activity in the learning sequence?

After Teaching

After you finish teaching, ask yourself the following questions.

- How well are my students achieving the short and long-term instructional targets?
- What strengths and weaknesses will I report to each student and to his parents?
- How effectively did my pupils learn this material?
- How effective are the curriculum and materials I used?

Classroom assessment can help you answer all of the above questions.

How might Classroom Assessment be Used in Egypt?

The chart below outlines major types of classroom assessment as well as the ways classroom assessment is used.

Classroom Assessment: Types and Uses

There is a variety of classroom assessment techniques:

- Teacher Observations
- Oral questioning
- Story retelling
- Interviews
- Questionnaires
- Writing samples
- Journals
- Paper and pencil tests
- Portfolios
- Demonstrations
- Projects

Assessment represents a continuous process. Classroom assessment can be used prior to, during or after the instructional process.

Assessment tends to be dynamic – reflecting multiple points in the learning process.

Assessment provides many different pictures of the learner in a variety of times, contexts and of instructional settings. Feedback is maximized.

Classroom assessment usually focuses on the instructional process as well as the outcome.

Examples of Classroom Assessment

Teacher Observations. We may observe our pupils during instruction for a number of different purposes. Sometimes we want to know who is paying attention, who is raising a hand to answer, who is working well with the instructional materials or who is interacting appropriately with other students in the class during a cooperative learning task. At other times, we may want more specific information about the level of a child's listening or speaking ability in English.

In order for these teacher observations to become assessments, we need to record our observations over a period of time. Observations can be documented in several different ways: checklists, rubrics (scoring criteria) or anecdotal records. The main difference between checklists and rubrics is that checklists tell us about the presence or absence of a language feature, rubrics provide documentation as to the level of learning that has occurred. Checklists can be used with individuals and with groups. Rubrics are usually used to assess individual progress.

The example below is a simple checklist used to assess the number of times members of a group used English while working cooperatively:

Pupil name:	Occurrences of English usage:
Nabil Raga	√ √√√√
Ghada	√√√
Mohamed	√√√√√√√√

Below is an example of a rubric for use in assessing an individual pupil in oral English. A rubric is a description of levels of proficiency that help you determine a learner's level. The rubric below assigns a number to each student relating to the level of the child's proficiency with oral English. Level 6 is the highest proficiency while Level 1 is the lowest.

Rating	Description
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates competently in classroom settings • Speaks fluently • Masters a variety of grammatical structures • Uses extensive vocabulary • Understands classroom discourse without difficulty
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaks in classroom settings with sustained and connected discourse; any errors do not interfere with meaning • Speaks with near-native fluency; any hesitations do not interfere with communication • Uses a variety of structures with occasional grammatical errors • Uses varied vocabulary • Understands simple sentences in classroom discourse; requires repetition
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiates and sustains oral language with descriptors and details; begins to communicate in classroom settings • Speaks with occasional hesitation • Uses some complex sentences; applies rules of grammar but lacks control of irregular forms (e.g., runned, mans, not never, more higher) • Uses adequate vocabulary; some word usage irregularities • Understands classroom discourse with repetition, rephrasing and clarification

Rating	Description
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins to initiate oral language; retells a story or experience; asks and responds to simple questions • Speaks hesitantly because of rephrasing and searching for words • Uses predominately present tense verbs; demonstrates errors of omission (leaves words out, word endings off) • Uses limited vocabulary • Understands simple sentences in sustained discourse; requires repetition
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins to communicate simple and personal information • Speaks in single word utterances and short phrases • Uses functional vocabulary • Understands words and phrases; requires repetition
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins to name concrete objects • Repeats words and phrases • Understands little or no English

(Adapted from O'Malley, J. and L. Valdez Pierce. (1996). p. 66)

Anecdotal Records. Are notes made by the teacher either during or shortly after the observation process. Many teachers like to keep a notebook with a section for each pupil. In keeping anecdotal records we need to follow three steps: (Thorndike and Hagan 1977):

1. Describe a specific event such as an oral report recitation or an oral reading task.
2. Report on what the child says or does rather than evaluate proficiency.
3. Relate the new observation to other facts known about the student.

An example of a report from anecdotal notes on an oral reading assignment follows.

Sara	May 26	HELLO! Book 2
<p>Sara read a story aloud from the dialogue on page 13 in Hello! 2 Student Book. She spoke in a clear voice and read with fluency and correct intonation. She hesitated twice on the pronunciation of "clothes" and "post office" but self corrected without any help from the teacher. Sara answered comprehension questions correctly afterwards. She seems to enjoy reading in front of the class now. This shows growth in confidence from earlier in the year.</p>		

Checking for Understanding. One of the most common types of classroom assessment is oral questioning by the teacher. We need to be aware when our students don't understand information that we are presenting. To "get inside our pupils' heads" to determine this, we use questions to check for the children's understanding of the material.

Checking for understanding is done in many ways in classrooms. Some forms are more effective than others. Essentially, there are four levels of checking for understanding: (Saphier and Gower, 1997):

Levels of Checking for Understanding

- No checking: presses on
- Reads body language
- Asks checking questions
- "Dipsticks" (checks the whole group at once – see below)

No Checking: Presses on. The teacher who *presses on* may not be aware that there is any student confusion and so continues teaching the lesson even though the children do not understand what is being taught. The teacher may be giving directions for a procedure, introducing a new concept or speaking English without any context clues. In many cases, teachers feel compelled to finish the book, the unit or the class within a certain period of time. They continue to teach in spite of the fact that the children in their classes are not learning the new material.

Reading Body Language. Some teachers believe they can tell when students don't understand because they can read the body language of their students. These teachers watch for signs such as posture, and facial expressions which signal attention or confusion. They watch to see if the pupils are asking each other for help. *Reading body language is not always a good indicator of pupil understanding.* Some children are quite content to sit in the back of the class and look alert although their minds may be miles away. Listening to a foreign language, in particular, requires a great deal of concentration and children can display attentive postures while not understanding the teacher's language.

Ask Checking Questions. At the third level, teachers check the understanding of their pupils by *asking checking questions*: either recall or comprehension questions. Recall questions ask the children to recall a fact that has been presented, for example, a vocabulary item. Comprehension questions require the children to understand the concept or materials being presented, for example, after reading a story in *Hello*, the children are asked questions by the teacher to check their understanding of the events. Note

that “*Do you understand?*” is not a good checking question. Teachers often ask for volunteers to answer, which means that only a few learners – usually the best learners – are assessed. Teachers can be misled about what *all* the students know.

Dipsticking. The next level of checking, and the most effective level, is called dipsticking. The term is a classroom metaphor for what we do when we check the oil level in a car. The term was used by Madeline Hunter (1982) to refer to checking for understanding which is characterized by:

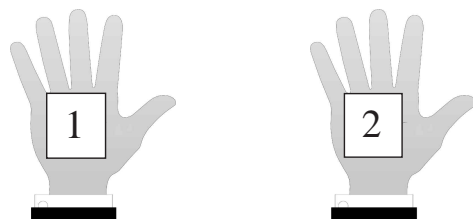
- Checking students frequently during the lesson
- Checking broadly, as many students as possible, simultaneously
- Checking on the same concept or topic
- Checking during instruction

Teachers with large class sizes may feel that it’s impossible to dipstick with large numbers of pupils. Some examples of dipsticking are given below.

Dipsticking Signals. *We may ask our pupils to show Thumbs Up or Thumbs Down to indicate understanding, e.g., If you think the clothes shop is on Nasser Road, show me Thumbs Up at the signal. If you think it’s not on Nasser Road, show me Thumbs Down at the signal. Show me now!*

We can also use signals to check the content of the lesson. Some examples include:

- Children show a notecard with *N* if the word is a noun or *V* if the word is a verb
- Show notecards with *yes* and *no* or *true* and *false* during a listening activity
- Sort vocabulary items into two groups numbered *one* and *two*, for example, *farm animals* and *zoo animals*. The children signal each item by showing one finger or two fingers. Alternatively, children can hold up paper with 1 or 2 written on them.



Other Dipsticking Checks. Non-signal checks for understanding are also effective if they are done frequently during instruction and reach all, or almost all, of the children.

Questions. Sometimes, teachers pause in the middle of instruction for a

one-question quiz. They ask a question and then circulate as the children write the answer to see how well the class understands the lesson. Sometimes teachers ask *a large number of questions* on the topic, making sure to call on those students who don't often raise their hands. *Unison responses* tell us how many children can respond to our recall questions. E.g.,

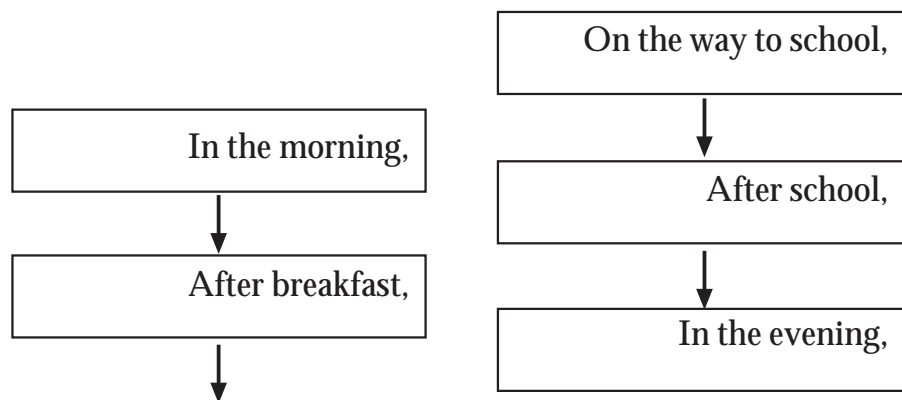
Teacher: Class, all together, tell me what the mice wanted to put on the cat?

Class: A bell.

Drawing. Checking vocabulary by asking the children to *draw quick sketches* of the target word is another technique. All of these techniques can be used routinely during instruction to provide teachers with the information they need to adjust instruction effectively for their pupils. e.g. Teacher: *Huda is riding in a bus. Draw a bus.*

Story Retelling. Story retelling requires pupils to retell stories they have listened to or read. If our objective is to determine a child's listening and speaking competence, we will ask the child to listen to the story. Asking children to read stories turns this activity into a reading assessment – quite a different objective. We should be sure to read stories to children that are appropriate to their age and to their language ability. We might use contextual clues to help the children comprehend the story. We could also give children a graphic organizer to help the child take notes on important story elements. The graphic organizer is helpful in that it also tells the children exactly what is required for them to remember for the retelling and acts as a support for the child during the task. An example of a graphic organizer for a story follows:

Amal Ibrahim's Day



Elements for assessment could be the child's fluency, level of vocabulary and grammar. Children should have the opportunity to practice their story retellings with a learning partner. During this practice time, the teacher has the opportunity to listen to the pairwork and assess individual students. For this purpose, use a rubric for oral language assessment or a checklist of oral language skills. Sharing these assessment instruments with the class prior to the assessment task will help the students be aware of exactly what they must know or be able to do to perform well on the assessment. Some teachers might wonder how they would find time to do an activity like story retelling in a large class. We suggest that teachers set aside five minutes at the end of the period to work with a small group of about 5 students to check their language with a technique like story retelling.

Conclusion

These examples show how you can use a variety of assessment techniques at the primary level, adapting the techniques to the level of the class. It is sometimes said that assessment "drives" instruction. By this, we mean that the techniques used to assess our pupils determine *what* we choose to teach and *how* we choose to teach. By selecting a variety of effective assessment techniques, we will be sure to get a full picture of the strengths and needs of our pupils in order to provide them with quality instruction.

Key Terminology

Evaluation

Evaluation assesses the performance of large groups of pupils for the purpose of determining how effective a program of study in a country or region has been. Classroom teachers often cannot use evaluation to make instructional decisions.

Assessment

Assessments are conducted by teachers in their own classrooms to make instructional decisions about pupils and to provide feedback to parents, children and the school community. There are many different kinds of classroom assessment but all of them require the teacher to record results in some way.

Test

Tests are usually paper and pencil assessments which produce a quantitative result. Some tests are written by teachers and others are produced by textbook companies or by school districts.

Checklist

A checklist is a quick way to determine if a student has satisfied predetermined criteria. Checklists are often used during classroom observations.

Rubric

Rubrics are descriptions of different levels of performance used to assess student levels. Teachers share rubrics with the children prior to the assessment process so that the pupils know exactly what they are required to know or be able to do to achieve a high level. Rubrics can help to assess performance in a global or holistic way. They can also be designed to assess discrete skills in a more analytical way. Teachers can create rubrics to reflect the objectives of their teaching.

Anecdotal Record

These are brief comments written by teachers that describe student behavior and/or performance at a given observation.

Dipsticking

Dipsticking is a way of checking the understanding of all or most of the pupils in the class, frequently, on the same topic or concept, during instruction.

Story Retelling

Retelling stories after a listening experience can become an assessment technique when the teacher determines criteria for assessing the retelling and records the students' performance.

Portfolio

Portfolios are student- selected samples of work which are self-assessed and evaluated by criteria which are determined collaboratively by the teacher and the class.

Understanding Check

1. What are the differences between evaluation, assessment and testing?
 2. Why is it necessary to use more than one kind of assessment technique?
 3. What are the basic principles of classroom assessment?
 4. What are four techniques that are used in language classrooms at the primary level for classroom assessment?
 5. Apply the principles and tools of this chapter by designing and describing two techniques you will use to assess your students in the next unit you teach.
-

Resources

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Hunter, M. (1982). *Master Teaching*. El Segundo, CA: TIP Publications.

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Saphier, J. and R. Gower. (1997). *The Skillful teacher: Building your Teaching Skills*. Carlisle, MA: Research for Better Teaching, Inc.

Thorndike, R. & Hagan, E. (1977). *Measurement and Evaluation in Psychology and Education*. 4th ed. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Online Resources:

Learner-centered Listening Assessment for the EFL Classroom

Christine Coombe & Jon Kinney

<http://www.thaitesol.org/bulletin/1102/110202.html>

Assessment and the Language Teacher: Trends and Transitions, by Geoff Brindley

<http://langue.hyper.chubu.ac.jp/jalt/pub/tlt/97/sep/brindley.html>

Individual Differences in the Japanese EFL Context

Amy D. Yamashiro

<http://www.tuj.ac.jp/tesol/press/papers0014/introduction.html>

Summary Handout for Chapter 17: Classroom Assessment of Young learners

Evaluation

Assessment

Testing

The reasons for classroom assessment

- Student needs
- Instructional needs
- Communicative needs

Basic principles of effective classroom assessment

- Multiple formats
- Clear purpose based upon objectives
- Embedded within classroom instruction
- Provides feedback
- Can be recorded efficiently

Instructional decisions informed by classroom assessment

- Before teaching
- During teaching
- After teaching

Different types of classroom assessment

- Teacher observation
- Oral questioning & dipsticking
- Story retelling
- Interviews
- Questionnaires
- Writing samples

-
- Journals
 - Demonstrations
 - Projects

Recording classroom assessment

- Checklists
- Rubrics
- Anecdotal records
- Self-assessment

