**PRIMARY EFL TEACHERS’ OBSTACLES TO ASSESSING**

**YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

*Nguyen Vu Quynh Nhu & Pham Thi Tuyet Nhung*

*Hue University of Foreign Languages*

**Abstract:** The National Foreign Language 2020 Project has led to the implementation of a new English curriculum for the primary educational level (MOET, 2010), which aims to help primary school pupils achieve level 3 in the Vietnamese 6-level Framework of Reference for Language (equivalent to the CEFR A1 level). This paper reports the findings from an investigation into problems Vietnamese primary English teachers in Hue city encounter in their assessment of young language. Data from questionnaire and in-depth interview have shown that while assessing young language learners, primary English language teachers face various problems ranging from school culture to resources, and hence still need more training, guidance and time to be able to apply assessment methods to facilitate young language learners. The findings provide a basis from which implications for in-service teachers’ professional development are made.

**Key words**: primary, English education, assessment, young learners

**1. Introduction**

Literature on assessment for young language learners (YLLs) has indicated that extra care, preparation and support are required for successful implementation of language assessment tasks and techniques so as to encourage young YLLs to continue to learn. While progress in the language performance of students tends to develop over a long period of learning and instruction time, language assessment, if properly implemented, can provide valuable information about student learning for teachers to improve their teaching in a timely manner, and so helps enhance learning outcomes.

The literature on assessing YLLs (e.g., Hasselgreen, 2005; McKay, 2004, 2006) has emphasized that language assessment needs to be oriented towards age-related abilities. It should be responsive to the levels of physical, emotional and cognitive growth of a specific age group. Language assessment should be personalised, captivating, engaging and game-like to maintain YLLs’ interest. It needs to cater all levels of achievement, allowing flexibility in evaluation and passes for all at different levels. Topics and input provided in language assessment should be associated with familiar, simple subjects or topics used in everyday communication to make YLLs feel “psychologically safe” and comfortable. Input provided should be simple, well-illustrated with images, verbal cues, and examples of expected responses. Language assessment should focus on what YLLs can do, rather on what they cannot do so as to encourage them to learn, feel successful and motivated. Support needs to be made available as to encourage YLLs to complete language assessment tasks, especially in oral skills assessment as well as to keep them on track. Immediate feedback for language assessment task performance is very important to help YLLs maintain attention, concentration and confidence. For language learners, especially YLLs, classroom assessment should promote learning (i.e., assessment for learning) rather than just measure language ability at the end of a programme or a course, a semester or a school year (i.e., assessment of learning) (McKay, 2006; Brown, 2004).

*Popular forms of YLL assessments*

The most popular forms for assessing YLLs documented in the literature on assessing YLLs include portfolio, observation, quiz / informal test, games, role-plays, project and the like.

Observation plays a vital role in assessing YLLs. McKay (2006) divides observations into incidental and planned observation which occurs when teachers want to observe during their teaching process and when they intend to observe in advance, respectively. According to Genesee and Upshur (1996), observation is an integral part of everyday teaching. In class, teachers move around to every student or groups of students and observe what they are doing and give them feedback or gather information for later conferences with them. Doing this helps teachers assess the way learners react to and make use of learning materials and how they work with others in a group. Thanks to observation, teachers are able to measure what student have acquired and not acquired so that they would then find out learners learning habits and improve what is beneficial to them and modify their bad learning habits (Genesee and Upshur, 1996, p. 79). For example, teachers may recognize some problems a certain student encounters by observing his or her performance in class. Moreover, observation is utilized for the sake of assessing learners’ competence and performance against the criteria set by teachers or assessors (McKay, 2006). These criteria are set to check how much learners’ progress. In this respect, teachers might have a checking list to decide how much learners meet the requirements proposed in that list. Obviously, observation is likely to be a useful measurement for classroom assessment.

Games have been proved to work for language learners of different age groups and at different level of proficiency. For YLLs, games are extra-important because they create a stress-free environment for learners to engage and the learning activities and acquire language. Assessing YLLs through games will allow learners to reduce pressure and to demonstrate their language ability in a most lively, natural, engaging way.

Projects can be used to teach as well as to assess different subjects at school, not just English as a foreign language. Project-based assessment can provide a holistic means to collect information about the progress, weaknesses and strengths of learners in an on-going process. It helps learners also develop integrated skills, not just language skills. Projects can vary from being simple work to a bit more complicated tasks, depending on learners’ variables.

Portfolio refers to a collection or folder that is used for carrying and keeping documents, items and the like. McKay (2006) defines portfolios as “collections of a student’s work prepared over a period of time” (p.159). Benefits of using portfolios in language assessment and learning include: enhancing teacher professionalism through meaningful and active involvement in student assessment, encouraging thoughtful activity in the classroom, linking assessment more closely to classroom activities, allowing students to draw on the skills they learn in process-centered classrooms, allowing assessments to become a teaching strategy to improve learning, and making assessment more equitable (p. 160).

In line with McKay’s perspective, Genesee and Upshur (1996) indicate that portfolios have positive impact on learners. This can be explained by the effects of portfolios on actively engaging learners in assessment and learning. The authors, in the same way, propose more benefits of using portfolios as learners are involved in assessment. They are more responsible for assessment themselves. Additionally, portfolios help learners interact with their teachers, parents and other students. Another benefit is that learners can manage their learning and are more responsible for their learning and even find it exciting to learn the language. One more benefit is that portfolios develop learners’ critical thinking about learning. Portfolios can also improve collaboration and sharing in the classrooms. By using portfolios, teachers, parents and learners have more opportunities to look at what children have done and achieved. And then teachers can assess their progress and drawbacks in order to maintain their strengths and help them gradually remove their weaknesses. However, the use of portfolios has some disadvantages in large-scale and high-stakes assessment, thus teachers need to make portfolios useful to assessment and choose appropriate tasks to be put in portfolios for the sake of effective assessment. As can be observed and well documented, the use of portfolio has become more popular in CEFR-driven context.

It is no doubt that tests are used in most language classroom to assess learners’ ability, performance and progress. McKay (2006) defines test as “an individual task, or set of tasks, in which the conditions (e.g., support, interaction with others and time) are controlled” (p. 167). A test, in simple terms, is a method of measuring a person's ability knowledge, or performance in a given domain (Brown, 2004). Testing is a useful medium to assess learners’ language use and ability. Particularly, informal, short tests are often deployed to discover how far students have achieved a specific content of instruction, to diagnose students’ strengths and weaknesses, to identify what they know and what they do not know and to assist placement of students by identifying the stage or part of a teaching program most appropriate to their ability (Hughes, 1989, p.7).

Quiz relates to the highlights of the day’s assignment and class activities (Cohen, 1994, p. 31). Quiz is considered more informal than a test. However, it can assess learners’ language competence and performance naturally and accurately. Quiz is usually short. In addition, it supplies teachers and language learners with valuable feedback. Also, it can be used to assess the material and learners progress using learning materials.

YLLs need to be assessed constantly so that teachers are likely to get to know about learners’ problems and misunderstandings. Thanks to the use of quizzes and also different forms of assessments, assessing YLLs is easier since it’s short and then teacher can provide learners with timely feedback. Quizzes might be a short test regarding reading, listening or oral one in which teachers measure their understanding and progress. As a result, quizzes are suitable for young language learner in terms of its convenience for immediate assessment and its short duration.

*Primary English assessment in Vietnam*

Since the 1990s the status of English in the primary school programme in Vietnam has changed remarkably and the English language assessment policy by the MOET has also evolved over time. MOET Decision No. 50/2003 provides general, primary guidance for English assessment for primary school pupils as follows: “Testing and assessment should strictly follow the objectives, content and the required standard regarding English language knowledge and skills and must involve all listening, speaking, reading and writing skills; Assessment must be based on test scores and participation evaluation; frequent assessment [formative] and scheduled assessment [summative] must be combined” (MOET, 2003, p. 9). Since then, little else on assessing YLLs can be found from MOET’s documents.

Decision 1400 of the Vietnamese government, dated 30 September 2008, regarding the approval of the national project titled “Teaching and learning foreign languages in the national educational system for 2008-2020 period” (the 2020 Project). Among the many objectives related to foreign language teaching and learning set by the 2020 Project, foreign languages are planned to be a compulsory subject in the new 10-year foreign language learning programme, starting from grade 3, then 4 and 5 of primary education and continuing up to grade 12 of high school education. The implementation of a new foreign language curriculum, mainly focussed on English, on a nationwide scale is planned to be completed in three consecutive phases. First, from 2010-2011, the objective was to have 20% of primary students learn a foreign language with the numbers being expanded to 70% by 2015-2016 and 100% by the 2018-2019. Decision 1400 also sets level A1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as the standard learning outcome required of all students graduating from primary schools (MOET, 2008).

Very lately, the MOET has issued Circular 30 providing guidance on how to assess primary pupils in Vietnam (MOET, 2014). This Circular states that primary teachers are not allowed to use grades marks provide feedback on learners and this document does not apply for foreign language assessment. The guideline for assessing YLLs is still not available yet to primary English teachers. This has caused a number of problems to their assessment practice, and so has incurred social criticism.

*Primary EFL teachers in Vietnam*

Primary EFL teachers are those who teach English at primary schools. In the current context of Vietnam primary EFL teachers have some unique characteristics. It is hard for them to practice their language skill regularly. They do not have opportunities to communicate with peers in English and even native speakers. This can happen outside the classroom but not many of them can do this. As a result, their language skills are, to some extent, unlikely to be improved. Nguyen & Nguyen (2007) and Nguyen (2011) have shown that primary EFL teachers in Vietnam are not qualified to teach elementary level of English as their teaching skills are not good and they do not received formal training to teach English to YLLs. A considerable number of them were actually trained to teach languages other English (e.g., Russian) and then re-trained intensively to teach English now to primary school students (Ha, 2006; Pham & Tran, 2014). Additionally they lack vocabulary and their pronunciation is not proficient as well. According to the requirement of the MOET, primary EFL teachers must obtain the CEFR B2 level of language proficiency. According to the 2020 Project Report in 2013, the assessment result showed that most of them are not likely to achieve this level (MOET, 2013). Another issue is that they do not have opportunities to get involved in professional development activities except for those being sent to intensive training one-off workshops within the 2020 Project for the last 4 years (Pham, 2013).

According to the new regulation about assessing YLLs in primary school by the MOET (2014), for all other subjects teachers are asked to limit the use of scores and marks for students’ achievement and focus on giving comments on whether they meet the requirement of assessments or not instead. However, further guidance on how the assess English or any other foreign languages at primary school has still been absent. And this issue has created some difficulties for primary EFL teachers. Newspapers have reported a number of issued claimed by primary teachers. For instance, because they have been used to marking learners’ progress and performance for so long, they have little or no experience in assessing young learners without using tests and marks. Therefore, it is hard for them to give appropriate and accurate comment on learners’ language development and proficiency. In the same way, they might find it confusing to decide which level of achievement young learners. This would have a major impact on young learners’ learning, teachers’ teaching and the quality of assessment.

This all creates a necessity to investigate possible problesm which primary EFL teachers in Vietnam face when assessing YLLs. Information from this study will be able to provide valuable inderstanding of their practice as well as rich, practical input for in-service teacher training.

The current research therefore aims to explore possible problems that primary EFL teachers have in their assessment practice.

**2. Research**

*Participants*

This research is carried out with the participation of 57 primary EFL teachers in Hue city, Vietnam. Their ages vary from 26 till 45. All of these teachers are female. These teachers mostly graduated from university and colleges. In addition, they have a quite long teaching experience that is over ten years for 15 of them. They teach from 18 to 23 periods a week and one period lasts 35 minutes. The average class size varies from 35 to 46 students depending on the school policy and on different grades.

*Research instruments*

This study employs 2 main instruments to collect the desired data to explore the issues and problems that primary EFL teachers face while assessing YLLs. These instruments are questionnaire and in-depth interview.

A questionnaire was developed to examine whether EFL primary teachers face any problems while assessing young language learners. This questionnaire investigates teachers’ personal information (inlcuding their age range, years of experience, school, qualifications and professional development, and so on) as well as problems they face while assessing young language learners. There is a leading question after the participants have asked to fill in their personal information. This question asks if the participants have any problems in their assessment practice. If the participants choose “Yes” to confirm they have problems, then they are asked to write down problems they face while assessing young language learners. If the participants choose “No” to reject the assumption that they may have some problems while assessing young language learners, their response to the questionaire would not be processed. The results indicate that among 63 teachers to whom the questionnaire was delivered, 57 show they have problems at different levels while practising assessing young language learners. The open-ended section asks the teachers to write down the measures or needs that they think will help them solve these problems.

Together with the questionnaire, extended interviews were conducted so as to investigate further obstatcles to teachers’ assessment practice. The participants were asked to elaborate on their assessment practice and forms of assessment they use and problems they face. Nine (9)participants were chosen to take part in extended, in-depth interviews. The interview employed the following major questions to explore possible problems primary EFL teachers face when they practise assessment for young language learners.

1. Among the forms of assessment you often use for assessment, which one(s) do you think is the best? And why? Which one is the easiest, most convient for use? And Why? Which one is the most demanding, difficult to use? And Why?
2. What are the biggest problems you encouter while implementing assessment practice for YLLs?
3. What do you think are the reasons for these problems?

The average length of each interview is from 25 to 35 minutes. The length of the interviews depends on how fast the participants respond to the questions and how much they know about their work regarding assessing YLLs.

**3. Findings**

Data analysis has shown that problems the investigated teachers face fall into 5 main categories: a) Problems related to school culture, b) Problems related to curricuculum and teaching materials, c) Problems related to resources, d) Problems related to assessment policy, and e) Problems related to teacher professionalism.

*Problems associated with school culture*

School culture problems arise from features associated with the operation and implementation of teaching at a specific primary school and these features may vary from one school to another (Pham, 2013). Typical issues cited by the participants include big class size and heavy teaching loads. Teaching classes with 40 students or more and teaching more than 18 hours a week was reported to prevent the teachers from implementing time-costly assessment forms such as portfolio or project-based regardless of their awareness of the usefulness of these methods. As shared by one teacher that while they have to cover too many teaching hours a week the priority goes to covering the textbook (and the curriculum) as planned. Most teachers teach more than one grade, and so follow the curriculum and textbook of at least 2 or 3 grades (e.g., gade 3 and 4, or grade 4 and 5 or more). For each week they work with 5 to 6 classes, that is 200 to about 250 students. The implementation of effective assessment methods then becomes a luxury rather than a practical choice because teachers need to reduce as much time as possible for marking and commenting students’ assessment tasks.

Being burdened with heavy teaching loads and large classess explains why the teachers interviewed tend to use tests to assess young language learners in order to save time and energy. To them tests are time-efficient becau they can also be re-used over time.

*Heavy curricuculum and teaching materials*

Issues concerning the curricum and teaching materias are tyical examples reported by the participants to cause obstacles to assessment practice. The curriculum as well as the primary English textbook (English for grade 3, 4 and 5 by Hoang et al., 2011, 2012, 2013) are said to be too “heavy”, “dense”, and hard to cover properly within just 4 hours a week, which reduces the time for assessement to be implemented properly. In addition, as claimed an an expienced teacher: “there are too many things to be taught in different units from vocabulary, grammar to language skills and phonics, it is impossible to assess all these or to assess students’ learning frequently […], so I just can assess what we think is most important to the curriculum and only provide more feedback to students when time allows.”

*Lack of relevant assessment resources*

The questionnaire data show that although the teachers can have access to various materials both online and in print for assessment practice, they tend to come across materials usable for building tests more often rather than resources useful for the the implementation of other forms of assessement. The teachers do find the materials published by other publishers, especially Cambridge YLL series including *Starters* and *Movers* available from local bookstores*,* helpful for use in formative assessments but again these are often utilized to build 35-minute or 15-minute tests. When it comes to assessing listening, a majority of the participants indicated that they appreciate the techniques provided to them in intensive trainings on how to “tailor” an existing listening task to use for assessment. However, they expressed the lack of suitable sources for listening assessment. Up to 25 teachers indicate in their questionnaire response and 7 out of 9 teachers interviewed emphasized the need to be provided with more specific guidance and support for assessment practice.

*Constraints from national and local assessment policy*

Primary teachers reported to administer eight formative 35-minutes tests a year according to formal guidance from the MOET (MOET, 2011). Summative tests are one end-of-1st-semester large-scale test and one end-of-academic-year large-scale test designed and distributed often by the provincial Department of Education and Training (DOET). The same assessment practice is required for both groups of students, those learning 4 x 35-minute periods a week with the pilot textbook series and those learning 2 or 3 x 35-minute periods a week with books published by other publishers, commonly *Let’s go* and *Family and Friends* by Oxford University Press. Interview data show that speaking is rarely assessed except for the end of semester/academic year test. The summative end-of-semester/year tests also cover all language skills and are administered on the same day, at the same time (except for the speaking test) for all students in the same grade (i.e. for fourth and fifth graders) within the province. Speaking is assessed by the teacher before or after the large-scale test administration. The same assessment practice but with different summative tests is required for both groups of students, those learning 4 x 35-minute periods a week with the pilot textbook series and those learning 2 to 3 x 35-minute periods a week with books published by other publishers, commonly *Let’s go* and *Family and Friends* by Oxford University Press.

The policies above cause some trouble to teachers. The participants reported that they have 35-minute tests too frequently (often once a month) and this would cause too much time for scoring to be completed and recorded. Second, they also have problems looking for tasks which have similar format as dictated by the MOET instruction on summative assessment. As 3 interviewees indicated that they tend to focus more on aligning the tests (35-minute tests) to the format required for summative assessment by the MOET to prepare students for final summative end-of-semester/year test and do not have time to really think more clearly about the coherence and fair coverage of the tests (in comparison with what they have taught up to the point they implement the tests). Third, with limited time and large class size, they cannot assess speaking as effectively as they want. When they have to do so, often they give students 3-4 topics in advance. Students are asked to prepare their talk about those topics following a model, often a passage provided in advacne by the teacher. On the assessment day, each student is given about 2-3 minutes to talk about the topic they are randomly assigned with. Fourth, also because the test tasks in the summative assessment dictated are not always found in the textbook, in order to help students to be familiar with the assessment tasks they then have to find time and resources to help students practice on test tasks and items mimicking the summative large-scale test items used by the DOET. Due to the weight of the summative test, it is umderstandable that the teachers feel forced to engage in “test-like” materials. While this style of assessment may have a cultural basis in Asian contexts the use of test-like assessment as formative assessment practice, however does not support assessment for learning (Gipps, 2002).

*Limited teacher professionalism*

The investigated teachers show that teachers’ ignorance of learning outcome and lack of knowledge and skills of assessment also cause them problems in assessment practice. Typical data of this trend are teachers’s claim that they are not so sure what A1 level as their students’ learning outcomes means, what the manifestation of this proficiency level are, and so they do not not quite know what type of assessment should help their students develop their proficiency to that required level. The questionnaire data and information from interviews also confirm the fact that many of the participants are not so clear about how what forms of assessment would be most beneficial to their students and what assessment methods would help language skills. These problems are even worse in the situation where primary EFL teachers are evaluated to have limited language proficiency and lack formal training on how to teach English to young language learners (Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2007).

**Conclusions**

The findings have shown that despite various efforts by the MOET to improve assessment practice of primary EFL teachers, there are still quite a number of obstacles which prevent the teachers from adopting effective assessment practice. These obstacles vary from heavy teaching loads, to class size, to their limited profesionalism. More training and coaching on language assessment especially for primary school students should be provided for English language teachers. Facilities and conditions supporting the adoption of a wide range of assessment methods should be provided. Training on how to relate assessment to learning outcome is significant to make sure that teachers have a general, common goal in their teaching and assessment, that is helping their students reach learning objectives.

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**Title:** Primary EFL teachers’ obstacles to assessing young language learners

**Biodata:**

Nguyen Vu Quynh Nhu has an MA in language edcation. She has been working as a lecturer and teacher trainer at Hue University of Foreign Languages (HUFL) and is pursuing her PhD with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the USA. Pham Thi Tuyet Nhung has an MA in French education. She is a full time lecturer of the Department of French of HUFL and currently pursuing her second university degree in English.

Email: 1st author: nvqnhu09@gmail.com

2nd author: nhungpham2481@gmail.com