

CHAPTER ONE

A special case for young learner language assessment

Introduction

This chapter sets out to establish a special case for young learner language assessment. What are the characteristics of young learners that need to be remembered in assessment decisions? We all know that young learners are different from adults, but how do we explain the important differences in a simple, accessible way? This chapter provides some central information about young learners – who they are, where they are learning, and what requires us to give them special consideration in assessment.

Young language learners and their language programmes

Young language learners are those who are learning a foreign or second language and who are doing so during the first six or seven years of formal schooling. In the education systems of most countries, young learners are children who are in primary or elementary school. In terms of age, young learners are between the ages of approximately five and twelve. Many young language learners can be called bilingual. **Bilingual learners** are those learners who learn two (or more) languages to some level of proficiency (Bialystok, 2001, p. 5). This rather vague definition – impossible to pin down because of the variety of experiences of learners – would tend to include children who are learning a foreign language in immersion and bilingual programmes and all children in second language programmes. The term would also include many, many children who learn a foreign or

2 ASSESSING YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS

second language as they interact with speakers of other languages and dialects outside formal language programmes.

Young language learners may be **foreign language learners**, learning a language in a situation where the language is seldom heard outside the classroom. They may be learning languages like Vietnamese, Spanish or Chinese in Germany or the United States or they may be learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in countries like Turkey, Malaysia or Spain. Other young learners may be **second language learners**. Second language learners are usually members of a minority language group in a country where the majority of their peers have spoken the language from birth. Second language learners do not need to speak both languages fully to be bilingual, especially in a second language situation. These learners learn the majority language as their second language. For example, they may be learning Japanese as a second language in Japan, where large numbers of Japanese have returned in recent years with their non-Japanese-speaking children; or Cantonese as second language learners in Hong Kong where numbers of Mandarin-speaking children have been granted residency. They may be learning **English as a Second Language**, also referred to as English as an Additional Language (referred to in this book as ESL) in Britain, Australia, Canada or the United States. They may have been born in the country and have spoken only their home language before school or they may have immigrated because of family decisions to migrate or because of traumatic events in their home country. For young second language learners, the language they are learning is usually the main language of communication in their classroom, school and community. They are spending every moment of the week engaged in learning the language and at the same time learning through the language; for these students the language is a vital and pervasive foundation to their life at school.

Young language learners around the world share many common characteristics and they learn in programmes that share many common beliefs and practices concerning the environment that young learners need in order to learn. Language programmes for young learners vary in their purposes and intended outcomes, their duration and their intensity.

Foreign language programmes

A range of different programme types exist around the world for young language learners. Some foreign language programmes are **language**

awareness programmes or **introductory programmes**, designed to raise children's interest in the language and to show that language learning can be enjoyable, but without the aim of achieving set language learning goals by the end of the course. Such language programmes for young learners often have a very small number of contact hours per week, perhaps only 20 minutes per week. However, regular **scheduled foreign language classes** are the most common type of foreign language programme in elementary schools. The contact hours for scheduled language classes for young learners are generally longer than introductory programmes, up to two hours per week or more. These classes are often taught by a foreign language teacher who moves from class to class, taking over the class from the classroom teacher for the lesson period. In some programmes classroom teachers are encouraged to work with the foreign language teacher to incorporate the language into children's content learning in other subject areas like social studies and science. **Partial immersion** and **total immersion programmes** are examples of foreign language programmes that are designed to ensure greater language learning gains. In partial immersion programmes, children study their curriculum subjects through the target language for part of a day or week and in total immersion programmes they learn through the target language for every day of the week and every week of the year. Immersion programmes are sometimes called **bilingual programmes**.

The learning outcomes expected in foreign language programmes for young learners depend on a number of factors, including the starting age, the amount of contact time and other factors, such as the appropriateness of the curriculum, the language *proficiency* and *teaching* skills of the teacher (**proficiency** is a general term denoting the degree of skill with which a person can use a language), and whether there are wider opportunities for the language to be encountered (e.g., in other subjects as part of everyday classroom learning or in communications with visitors or on the Internet). Generally, regular scheduled programmes for young learners focus on listening and speaking, especially in the first two years. Reading and simple writing may be introduced gradually, depending on the age of the children and whether the programme is an immersion programme. Children learning in immersion and bilingual programmes have opportunities to advance quickly and in more depth in their language ability because they have additional time to use the language, and expectations of what they are expected to do in the language are high.

Second language programmes

Second language learners may be learning through **intensive language programmes**, sometimes called **sheltered programmes**, in which groups of second language learners are brought together, usually for a limited period of time when they first arrive in the country, to study the language together and to be introduced to the school curriculum. Many second language learners go directly into the **mainstream classroom**, that is, the regular classroom where they begin immediately to study the established curriculum alongside their majority language-speaking peers. Their **mainstream teacher** is an important person in young second language learners' school lives, as she or he will be their main language teacher and helper. Mainstream teachers possess varying degrees of knowledge about the language needs of second language learners. Some fortunate second language learners are given additional **language and learning support** by specialist teachers; for example ESL specialists in many English-speaking countries work with the mainstream teachers in various ways to provide language-based support to help ESL learners access the mainstream curriculum. **Bilingual programmes for second language learners** are those programmes that teach children in their first language or in both the first and the second language. The philosophy behind bilingual programmes is that children need to gain access to learning through their first language, often their stronger language, until they have developed the cognitive maturity and language ability that enables them to transfer this knowledge to the second language (Cummins, 1979). Second language learners are surrounded by the target language in their work and play at school and therefore have many more opportunities than foreign language learners to learn the language. But second language learners are expected to (and need to) make huge language learning gains almost immediately in the target language; they need the language to make friends and survive socially at school and they need the language to study the curriculum. Indeed they are often unrealistically expected to use language in the classroom as efficiently as their majority language-speaking peers who have been learning the language since birth.

This brief overview of language programmes for young learners illustrates that programmes differ in their purpose, their context, in the nature of their learners and the expectations of foreign and second language learning. In all these types of programmes, whether for foreign language or second language learners, teachers and assessors have

something in common; they all need to assess the language of their young learners. In this book, **teachers** are foreign language teachers, classroom teachers and second language specialists who need to assess to inform their teaching decisions, to report on progress to others (as required by their Education Department) and to monitor growth over time. **Assessors** are those personnel who have testing expertise and are commissioned by schools, Education Departments and/or governments to develop and administer tests. The differences amongst the languages, the programmes, learner characteristic and assessment or testing purposes are very real; these differences can be addressed through a common, principled, framework approach to assessment. This book describes a framework-driven approach to assessment for young learners. Every assessment decision is different; therefore teachers and assessors play a central role interpreting assessment principles and frameworks, basing their decisions on their knowledge of the particular programme and the particular characteristics of the learners to be assessed. Yet there are also many characteristics that young language learners share.

The special characteristics of young language learners

Children bring to their language learning their own personalities, likes and dislikes and interests, their own individual cognitive styles and capabilities and their own strengths and weaknesses. Multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 1993) has suggested that children vary individually across eight types of intelligence – linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily kinesthetics, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic. Furthermore, because of differences in their socio-economic, cultural and home background, children bring with them an experience and knowledge of the world that is individual. Thus, with regard to individuality, children are no different from older learners. Their individuality is, however, linked to the special characteristics that are discussed below. These characteristics of children set them apart from older learners. These characteristics fall into three general categories: growth, literacy and vulnerability. Since understanding of these differences is central to effective assessment, I will describe these in some detail. The descriptions are indicative only, since children develop at varying and individual rates and in ways influenced by background experiences.

Cognitive, social and emotional, and physical growth

The general assessment literature is designed for what Bialystok (2001) has called the 'stable state' of the adult mind. However, children are in a state of constant cognitive, social, emotional and physical growth. They have a limited but growing experience of the world. The following descriptions of the cognitive, social and emotional and physical characteristics of young learners are a general representation only; it is not possible to describe exactly the characteristic or the approximate age at which it occurs. Cognitive growth characteristics present clear differences between young learners and adults. The attention span of young learners in the early years of schooling is short, as little as 10 to 15 minutes; they are easily diverted and distracted by other pupils. They may drop out of a task when they find it difficult, though they are often willing to try a task in order to please the teacher. As children progress from 5 years old to 12 years old, they are developing abilities to think in new ways and are moving towards being able to reason in a systematic and logical fashion in adolescence. Children are *novices* as they learn, with help from others, to become more expert in solving problems, in reading and in many more activities.

At first there seems to be too much to concentrate on at once and if we focus on one part, we lose control of another. But once we have mastered it, everything seems to fit together smoothly, we can perform efficiently and flexibly. The skills become more and more automatic and as this happens, progressively more of our attention becomes freed so we can begin to focus on new information, for example other aspects of the task. (Shorrocks, 1995, p. 267)

In early elementary grades, from ages five to seven, children are continuing to learn from direct experience. They are developing their understanding of cause and effect ('I can have a pet if I take care of it.') They are continuing to expand their use of their first language to clarify thinking and learning. Their understanding of words like 'tomorrow' or 'yesterday' is developing, but they may still be unsure about length of time. They are developing the ability to count and to organize information to remember it (Puckett and Black, 2000). Before they are eight years old, children do not find it easy to use language to talk about language. The language children need to talk about and understand talk about grammar and discourse (known as **meta-language**) does not come until this age and upwards.

As children move into upper elementary grades they move towards more objective thought, being able to recognize, for example, that three

or four children can have three or four different interpretations of a single cloud formation in the sky (Slavin, 1994). They are still gaining understanding from direct experience – through objects and visual aids. At 11 to 13 years of age, they are beginning to develop the ability to ‘manipulate’ thoughts and ideas, but even at this age still need hands-on experiences. Their use of language has expanded to enable them to predict, hypothesize and classify. They are continuing to expand their understanding of cause and effect and are developing a sense of metaphor and puns and by around eleven to thirteen can understand double meaning in jokes. Their understanding of time has developed by 12 years of age to the point where they can talk about recent events, plans for the future and career aspirations (Puckett and Black, 2000). A small percentage of children in the upper elementary years are moving into what Piaget called the *formal operational stage*, when they begin to hypothesize, build abstract categories and handle more than two variables at a time. Their interpretation of symbols in stories and art becomes less literal and their understanding of abstract social concepts, such as democracy, becomes more sophisticated. Most children move into this stage during secondary school (Slavin, 1994).

The cognitive development of bilingual learners has been the subject of much research over many years (Bialystok and Hakuta, 1999; Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2001a), but, despite this, Bialystok (2001) points out that the research literature on the development of bilingual children is thin and suggests this is because of the difficulty of doing research in the area. In an early summary of research findings, Cummins wrote the following:

Recent research findings indicate that access to two languages in early childhood can accelerate the development of both verbal and non-verbal abilities. There is also evidence of a positive association between bilingualism and both cognitive flexibility and divergent thinking. (Cummins, 2001, p. 51)

In a more recent account, Bialystok (2001) finds that there are some cognitive processes, namely attention and inhibition, that develop earlier and possibly more strongly in bilinguals, contributing to metalinguistic awareness and language learning. But Bialystok points us to advantages that go beyond those found in specific cognitive processes.

For the most part, the cognitive and linguistic differences between bilingual and monolingual children who are otherwise similar turn out to be small. Some may even consider that the differences that have been established are arcane and trivial. But that would be to

8 ASSESSING YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS

miss the point. The development of two languages in childhood turns out to be a profound event that ripples through the life of that individual. (Bialystok, 2001, p. 247–8)

Bilingual children not only experience and learn to master the social conventions and conversational styles of at least two languages. Their bilingual experiences ‘challenge their world views and social identity’ (Bialystok, 2001) and possibly give them different and broader perspectives on events and people around them. The cognitive development of bilingual learners is qualitatively different in these ways, even though they follow the generally expected steps in cognitive development outlined above.

Knowledge of children’s cognitive stage of development is important for the effective assessment of young language learners. The cognitive demand of tasks should be commensurate with children’s age-related abilities. Young learners are unlikely to see the ‘whole’ in a complex task that spans several parts. Older children, however, can see and enjoy some kind of coherence across parts in tasks if the parts are connected within a thematic or narrative approach. Assessment tasks should not extend beyond the child’s experience of the world; if children have never seen or talked about the sea or sandcastles, they may not be able to respond to the instructions in the input, regardless of the general language ability. Children should not be asked to analyse a picture or an idea or to describe a language rule – this type of abstract analysis is likely to be beyond most elementary learners’ cognitive ability. Assessment should take place in a quiet, calm setting that helps children to concentrate and not be distracted by noise or movement. These are just some of the kinds of actions and decisions in language assessment that teachers and assessors make when they take account of the nature of their young learners’ cognitive development.

Children are also growing socially and emotionally as they are learning language in their elementary school years. They are gradually developing from a main interest in self towards greater social awareness. They are also developing a growing understanding of the self in relation to others and an ability to function in groups. Their need for love, security, recognition and belonging accompanies a gradual shift from dependence on adults to peer group support and approval. Socially, most children are gaining in confidence and reducing dependency as they progress through from 5 to 12 years of age. Children’s contact with their peers expands greatly during their school years. They learn to interact with peers, to deal with hostility and dominance, to relate to a leader, to lead others, to deal with social problems and to develop a concept of self. Between five and seven, they

are learning to cooperate and share and take turns with others, which means that they are developing the ability to take part in small group tasks. They are beginning to develop feelings of independence but may become anxious when separated from familiar people and places. By the time they are around 11 years of age, children have become sociable, spending time with friends of the same sex. They are continuing to develop the ability to work and play with others. They may appear relatively calm, with short-lived moments of anger, sadness or depression. They are often able to hide feelings of anxiety; their behaviour may appear over-confident because of this. At this age, they are defining themselves in terms of their physical characteristics and their likes and dislikes. They are sensitive to criticism and their feelings of success or failure are dependent on how adults and peers respond to them.

The influence of the peer group may be stronger in some cultures than others, but the increasing influence of peer groups on a child's motivations and interests from 5 to 12 is likely to influence the learner's participation in different kinds of tasks. A task that requires a 12-year-old child to stand up and perform alone, for example, would not ensure that all learners were going to participate or if they did, some would be able to do the task only with a high degree of nervousness. From around 7 years of age, right up until 12, children continue to prefer to play in same-sex groups, enjoy team games and may show a strong sense of loyalty to their group or team. Characteristics of sharing and cooperating, of being assertive and of fitting into the society they live in are social skills that vary from culture to culture and generation to generation (Phillips, 1993). Children need to be helped to learn appropriate social skills, particularly if they are in a new culture. Children in a second language context react to their new situation in many different ways. A child with an outgoing personality most likely moves into groups quickly and subsequently learns the language faster; another may be more introvert and take more time to learn the language (Wong Fillmore, 1976). Some children are traumatized by terrible events in their past or by the changes caused by migration to a new country and/or transition to a new language and culture. Again children react differently depending on their personality and the nature of their experiences. Some are withdrawn; others extremely angry; others adapt well with care and consideration from others. Bilingual children's experiences, their reactions to them and the reactions of others to their needs may influence their social development for several years.

Assessment should therefore, wherever possible, be familiar and involve familiar adults, rather than strangers. The environment should be

10 ASSESSING YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS

'psychologically safe' for the learner. Texts used in assessment tasks should deal with familiar content – with home and family and school and with familiar, simple **genres** (culturally based forms of discourse that have distinctive forms of structure and are used to achieve particular communicative goals) like children's stories and folktales. If the assessment situation permits, interlocutor support should be available to encourage the children, remind them, keep them on track as they complete the task. Immediate feedback is valuable – thus computer assessment tasks that give immediate responses (with sounds and visual effects) and teachers responding kindly to the child's efforts, are ideal for young learners. Such feedback maintains attention and confidence. As children grow they are able to work more independently and for long spans of time without ongoing feedback.

Children's physical growth is characterized by continuing and rapid development of gross and fine-motor skills. From 5 to 7 years of age, children are developing in their ability to move around (climb, balance, run and jump) and are increasing their fine-motor skills (handling writing tools, using scissors), which involve developments in hand–eye coordination. As development progresses, children can progress towards holding thinner pens, drawing finer pictures and building intricate models. At this age they are still very active, tiring easily and recovering quickly. Important for many school activities, children tire more easily from sitting than from running. They usually love physical activities, which they often participate in noisily and sometimes aggressively. Young learners around this age have a need to play and to engage in fantasy and fun. They are often enthusiastic and lively. By the time they are 9 to 12 years of age, children are still developing hand–eye coordination, but they are better coordinated than seven- or eight-year-olds. These abilities continue to develop on into secondary school. Their large muscle coordination is also continuing to develop, so that they have shown gradual increase in speed and accuracy during running, climbing, throwing and catching activities. Boys can be 12 to 18 months behind girls in physical development in the later years of elementary school. Physical development needs to be taken into account in language assessment tasks, perhaps particularly with regard to tiredness, ability to sit still and hand–eye coordination. Assessment tasks that involve physical activity to accompany the language-related response – moving, pointing, circling or colouring in a picture – are helpful to encourage young learners to complete the task, especially for children in the early grades. Children in upper elementary classes are more able to respond without this type of requirement.