

Assessing Young Language learners to improve their language skills. A case study.

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5th grade. Final Degree Project (Primary Education)

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Degree in Preschool and Primary Education

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Vic, May 2019

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Abstract: Assessment is considered as an indispensable part of teachers and students' process of learning. As it is a controversial topic, a debate about the best way to assess primary language students has recently been created. This case study is aimed at analysing the strategies and tools used for assessing Grade 1 language learners in the International School of Helsinki. The qualitative data obtained through observation, document reviews and specially, the language specialists' interviews will provide evidences of how assessment is applied to Young Language learners in an International school. The results show the importance of carrying out informal, ongoing and individualized assessments in order to analyse each child's linguistic progress, to adapt lesson planning, and to identify areas of strength and areas needing extra support.

Key words: language assessment, International Schools, case-study, young learners

Resum: L'avaluació és considerada una part indispensable del procés d'aprenentatge tant dels mestres com dels mateixos alumnes. El fet de ser un tema controvertit, ha fet que es creés un debat sobre la millor manera d'avaluar la llengua a estudiants de primària. Aquest estudi de cas té com a objectiu analitzar a fons les estratègies i eines que s'utilitzen per avaluar la llengua en infants de 1r de Primària a l'Escola Internacional de Hèlsinki. Les dades qualitatives que s'han obtingut a través de l'observació, els documents i, especialment, de les entrevistes a les mestres especialistes en llengües, proporcionaran evidències sobre com s'aplica l'avaluació de la llengua en joves d'una escola internacional. Els resultats mostren la importància de realitzar avaluacions informals, continuades i individualitzades per tal d'analitzar el progrés lingüístic de cada infant, adaptar la planificació i identificar les àrees potents i les que necessiten suport.

Paraules clau: avaluació lingüística, Escoles Internacionals, estudi de cas, joves

Resumen: La evaluación es considerada una parte indispensable del proceso de aprendizaje tanto de los maestros como de los propios alumnos. Al ser un tema controvertido, se ha creado un debate sobre la mejor manera de evaluar la lengua a estudiantes de primaria. Este estudio de caso tiene como objetivo analizar las estrategias y herramientas que se utilizan para evaluar la lengua en niños de 1º de Primaria en la Escuela

Internacional de Helsinki. Los datos cualitativos que se han obtenido a través de la observación, los documentos y, especialmente, de las entrevistas a las maestras especialistas en lenguas, proporcionarán evidencias sobre cómo se aplica la evaluación de la lengua en jóvenes en una escuela internacional. Los resultados muestran la importancia de realizar evaluaciones informales, continuadas e individualizadas para analizar el progreso lingüístico de cada niño, adaptar la planificación e identificar las áreas potentes y las que necesitan apoyo.

Palabras clave: evaluación lingüística, Escuelas Internacionales, estudio de caso, jóvenes

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment is an essential component in the teaching and learning process. Its main purpose is to fill the gaps between the students' current knowledge and their goal (Toe, Lang, Paatsch, Yim, Jobling, Doig and Aranda, 2015). Assessment is also a key element in terms of knowing and understanding children's learning processes in order to adjust and adapt the teachers' planning. For students, especially those from primary, but also applicable to older learners, it is highly important to have feedback about their own learning process, reflect about it and find ways to improve and achieve their goals.

The main purpose of this case-study is to examine and investigate how teachers assess Young Language learners' progress in an International school which applies full immersion into English to speakers of other languages. Thus, this research project poses the following main questions:

- What should be assessed in language assessment?
- What is the school's approach towards language assessment?
- What types of assessment do teachers use to assess the students' language progress?
- What tools or strategies do they use?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. EDUCATION IN FINLAND

Finland has recently been very much on the news due to the academic success of its pupils. A number of factors have contributed to this success. In the first place, it is worth mentioning that most education in Finland is fully subsidized. Children attend school free at any level of education, from pre-primary to higher education (Harju-Luukkainen, Vettenranta, Kanervio and Pulkkinen, 2014). This enables equal access to basic education for all the children, regardless of their ethnic origin, age, wealth or where they live. According to the Finnish National Agency for Education (2012), all children must have the same opportunities to be educated. Taking for Helsinki, as an example, it "uses around 10,000 euros per student (2012) in basic education" (p.336), which covers all children between 7 and 16 years of age. However, less than 0,8% of the schools are private schools, such as the one in which the current study has been carried out, the International School of Helsinki. Tuition in these schools provide small class groups, high standards of learning and excellent facilities (Expat-Quotes, 2019) and are supervised and recognised by the Finnish education authorities as educational centres.

PISA results have demonstrated that Finnish students, including students in International schools, show high skills related to reading, maths and scientific literacy. However, Simola

(2005) states that this success is partly due to the “excellent Finish teachers and high-quality Finnish teacher education” (p.456). There is a high respect for teachers and their profession. The appreciation of teachers’ role is essential in terms of maintaining their status. In fact, “teachers apparently enjoy the trust of the general public and also of the political and even economic elite, which is rare in many countries” (p.459).

Teachers working in Finland are required to be trained up to master’s level and follow in service courses every year. They are independent and autonomous and free to make choices for curriculum implementation. Communities and schools have the responsibility to adapt the school-developed curricula and introduce possible and distinctive features. Through autonomous decision-making, teachers have the reliability to educate “good-quality pupils” (Kansanen, 2003, p.106).

Hence, teachers are important figures in Finland, as it is believed that it is only through a good education that you can go further in life. In other words, teachers are the ones who can change the path of children’s future.

2.2. ASSESSMENT

Assessment is considered as an integral part of teachers and students’ learning (Nikolov, 2016). It helps teachers to interpret and appraise their own teaching as well as to scaffold children’s progress. This idea is in line with Cameron’s (2001) statement of assessment as an instrument to support further learning. Assessment results with young learners can not only stimulate students, but can also be a strong tool in the process of teaching and learning, helping teachers in their future planning and in the general improvement of programmes in courses (Cameron, 2001).

Students will make the most of a positive and effective assessment if they can use a wide range of strategies and abilities to express their knowledge, share their understanding with others, participate in reflections, go further and relate issues with other topics, express other points of view and understandings without fear, and examine weaknesses that could be improved (IBO, 2009). However, Mckay (2006) affirms that assessment effectiveness is not always positive. In fact, many factors contribute in creating a valid and fair assessment. Assessment needs to provide the correct information for each student in order to allow teachers to know the learning process of each child, as well as the kind of guidance they need in order to continue improving. Taking this into account, it is a helpful tool for children to know at which point they are, and for the teachers to know how they should continue fostering the process of learning, including language learning, of each student.

2.2.1. Types of assessment

Generally speaking, two different types of assessment can be distinguished: formative and summative assessment. On the one hand, the formative assessment is also called assessment for learning. This type of assessment is ongoing and informal, and it is carried out by the teachers as well as the students in order to give them the necessary feedback which provides advice for improvement. Therefore, teachers constantly observe and take notes about children's work in order to know their student's strengths and weaknesses and then, reflect upon their own teaching practice (McKay, 2006). Moreover, Cameron specifies that formative assessment aims "at informing on-going teaching and learning by providing immediate feedback" (2001, p.222). It helps children to be involved and engaged in their own progress, as well as to be able to reflect on what they need to improve.

On the other hand, summative assessment or assessment of learning is the one taken at the end of the school year and it is based on results and broad goals (McKay, 2006). It is based on the teachers' judgements or tests results, therefore it often lacks students' reflection.

Apart from that, International Baccalaureate (IB) schools¹, like the one involved in this project, are also developing their own concept of assessment called assessment as learning, which is based on self-assessment tools.

Nevertheless, as stated in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*, there are many other types of assessment (see Table 1 below).

Norm-referencing (NR)	Criterion-referencing (CR)
Mastery learning CR	Continuum CR
Continuous assessment	Fixed assessment points
Formative assessment	Summative assessment
Direct assessment	Indirect assessment
Performance assessment	Knowledge assessment
Subjective assessment	Objective assessment
Rating on a scale	Rating on checklists
Holistic assessment	Analytic assessment
Series assessment	Category assessment
Assessment by others	Self-assessment

Table 1: Types of assessment (adapted from Council of Europe. Council for Cultural Co-operation. Education Committee. Modern Languages Division, 2001, p.183).

¹ The International School of Helsinki (ISH) is part of a group of schools known as IB schools.

2.2.2. Strategies and tools for assessment

Firstly, strategies are all the methods or approaches that teachers use when gathering information about students' learning. Observations are probably one of the most useful assessment strategies. By constantly observing what children do or say, teachers can provide them with the proper feedback, as well as adapt their practice to the different learning situations and needs. Moreover, observation is a process which does not require the interruption of the activities (Cameron, 2001). Teachers can also use performance assessments, which consist in giving children an open-ended question which they have to solve or selected responses such as tests and quizzes. Process-focused assessments are the ones in which the focus is on the process and skill application rather than the product. Some other strategies to obtain information would be the portfolios, which are a selection of students' work for demonstrate growth, creativity and reflection; recording keeping or self and peer assessments.

Secondly, tools are ways of recording the information. Teachers can have a wide range of instruments used to collect data. The most used tools are the rubrics with a set of criteria and checklists, made of specific points that should be checked off (Mckay, 2006). Samples of student's work are also used as exemplars, as well as anecdotal records based on observation. Last but not least, another useful tool are continuums which are "visual representations of developmental stages of learning" (IBO, 2009, p.49). These are constantly used in the context of this research, as they make explicit the understandings and learning outcomes developed in each phase. Continuums are helpful for further reflection in terms of the stages each child goes through.

2.3. LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

Language is essential if we want to examine cultural identify and keep up personal development. According to the information provided by ISH² (2019), language plays a central role in lifelong learning skills such as critical thinking, intercultural awareness and international mindedness. Thus, language is fundamental to all learning. With respect to language, Mckay (2006) states that "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" (p.5). Cameron (2001) mentions a metaphor which relates language learning with the growth of a plant. It compares the acquisition and development of the language with roots of knowledge extending and spreading out. Then, he adds what the contribution of assessment is:

² ISH stands for International School of Helsinki.

The plant develops through the nutrients it absorbs from its environment and different types of growth occur at different points in its life cycle. Assessment asks how well the plant is growing. However, growth is not just about the height of the plant, but concerns the strength of its root system, the quality of its leaves, the number and richness of the flowers. (p.219)

Taking into account the statement previously mentioned, teachers should take the responsibility in terms of modelling the language used with appropriate examples; provide children with challenges according to each student's language level; and teach reading, writing processes, listening and oral competencies in an active way (ISH, 2018). Brown and Hudson (1998) agree with the idea that language is a complex discipline and for this reason, and as seen before, a wide range of different strategies and tools can be used to assess children's progress and acquisition of a language. Their validity, reliability and the skills assessed should be taken into account, as every teaching tool teachers use has its own strengths and weaknesses and can be used towards assessment.

3. THE STUDY

The study was developed in an International School in Finland. It is a case study that has as its main objective to carry out a systematic investigation of the assessment methods employed by teachers in Grade 1 within a PYP curriculum³. It will mainly focus on how teachers assess children's language skills and what tools and strategies they take into account.

Participants and school context

The case study was carried out in the International School of Helsinki, from now on ISH. The participants in the study were 33 first graders, as well as 5 language specialists and the 2 Grade 1 teachers. In particular, the English as an Additional Language (EAL) specialist, the Finnish as a Foreign Language (FFL) teacher, the Finnish as a Mother Tongue (FMT) teacher, the French teacher and the Reading Support and Advanced EAL specialist.

Students representing more than 40 nationalities are enrolled in the ISH. In Grade 1, where this study was carried out, there were children from 14 different nationalities. The majority of the children come from middle and upper middle-class families who constantly travel for work reasons of their parents. Most of them are from Northern Europe and India, but there are also children from America, South Arabia and Japan.

³ The Primary Years Programme (PYP) is an international and transdisciplinary curriculum framework created for students between 3 and 12 years of age. It promotes the growth of the children as an inquirer and active learner, both in the school and the world which surrounds them (IBO, 2012).

As all the International Schools, ISH works on the idea of “international mindedness”. They are focused on promoting and developing the ability and the necessary skills to understand and apply things in all possible contexts, as well as to create opportunities to students in order to develop open-minded profiles.

The fact of having children from all over the world, offers the school a wide range of different languages spoken. Thus, even though the vehicular language of the school is English, for some of them it could be their second or third language. Language is highly valued in this school, as it is an essential tool for communication, intercultural awareness and international understanding.

The International School of Helsinki (2019) is based on student-centered and inquiry-based education. Their philosophy supports the idea that each student is unique, so they work on an individualized learning programme in which each of them can shape his/her learning process according to his/her speed and style.

They follow the PYP curriculum which covers children from 3 to 12 years of age and it is organized into the written, taught and assessed curriculum. The school curriculum is a transdisciplinary one which includes 5 essential elements that are important for children: knowledge (What do we want students to know about?), concepts (What do we want students to understand?), skills (What do we want students to be able to do?), attitudes (What do we want students to feel, value and demonstrate?) and action (How do we want students to act?)

As stated above, interviews to teachers and language specialists were also carried out. Teachers working in the International School Helsinki come from all over the world. However, they all are English native speakers. For instance, in Grade 1, one of the teachers was from United Kingdom, the other from Australia and the teacher assistant was from Philippines. What is more, and as mentioned before, teachers are required to be well-trained to meet the requirements of Finnish authorities in order to teach in Finland.

4. INSTRUMENTS AND DATA COLLECTION

Three different qualitative instruments were used to implement the research and gather the appropriate data: observation grids, analysis of formal documents and interviews to the teachers. First of all, several observations were carried out for three months in Grade 1 classes and a diary was written on a day-to-day basis. The information collected was later transferred to an observation grid (see appendix 8.2). Secondly, several documents used by the teachers in the developmental reading and language arts curricular areas were also

analysed. Finally, interviews with the relevant class teachers were also carried out (see appendix 8.1).

4.1. Language assessment through observation

Several class observations were carried out. The main focus of the observations was placed on different language assessment activities, differentiated between oral and written language assessments, as well as the language skills worked: Fry sight words, recorded oral presentations, handwriting notebooks, alphabetical chart, language sessions, Hi 5, guided reading sessions, jolly phonics and Oxford Reading Tree books.

In terms of oral language, teachers carried out a “Fry sight words” assessment which consisted in asking children, one by one, to read aloud 100 words to see how many words they could recognize and pronounce correctly. This form of assessment was carried out every 3 months approximately.

Another type of assessment was the art exhibition recording in which every child was explaining his/her pieces of art, and focusing on his/her favourite. Teachers used these videos for analysing if children had a clear idea of the art styles worked through the “How we express ourselves” unit, as well as to see language development aspects.

For promoting writing skills, children have handwriting notebooks which reinforce the creation of the alphabet letter, as well as a writing notebook in which they write about the weekend or they just copy tricky words. Clearly, all these materials help teachers to have a written record of the language progress of each child. There is a great difference on what some children can write at the end, compared with the beginning of the course. It is also important to add the strictness observed by all the teachers in terms of the position of the pencil, book, chair, body, fingers of each child while writing. What is more, and related to writing, they also use an alphabetical chart which needs to be filled with nouns starting with the correspondent letter. That is a way to see who can recognize the letters, as well as create a word using them.

Added to that, children are distributed into 4 different groups when they have language specialists. They have Finnish as a Mother Tongue, Finnish as a Foreign Language, French as a Foreign Language and English as an Additional Language. Each group works differently, as each specialist uses particular teaching strategies and tools. For instance, the Finnish as a Foreign Language teacher assessed children’s progress by doing many written exercises based on knowing and recognizing numbers and food. Focusing on those who need more

assistance, extra help is provided by the specialists. Children receive constant input, and materials and resources such as vocabulary flashcards, stories and songs are also provided.

In terms of assessing reading skills, 1st graders started a methodology following the scheme of 2nd graders. “Hi 5” is a tool that engages children in doing a variety of literacy tasks. Through the Hi 5 chart and the I-chart, children have to carry out different tasks to work and develop their literacy skills:

- Read to self: Children can choose 3 or 4 books and read them by themselves for a period of time decided by the teacher.
- Read to someone: Using the “eekk strategy” (elbow to elbow and knee to knee), children can alternate the reading with another peer.
- Listen to reading: Students have the possibility to scan a QR code with the iPads and individually listen to a story, using headphones.
- Work on writing: Children tend to work with a teacher who guides their writing. They get their notebook and write about the weekend, the holidays or even they can try to create a story. The teacher has white blackboards and gives the input needed for each child, as well as chunks.
- Word work: Children are given flashcards with tricky words, mostly of them related to phonetics and they have to copy them in their word work notebook. There are different levels.

Each student chooses one of the five activities in the scheme. Every week they should have done all 5 choices, so they can not repeat them. Once they introduced this method and when children were getting used to it, teachers decided to create level groups. Thus, each day each group has a choice on what to do and work on. Not all children have the same level, that is the reason why they have adapted every choice. In reading to self, in read to someone and in listen to reading, everyone can choose the books they want; in work on writing the teacher adapts the chunks given to each child and helps them to write; and in word work, the flashcards or worksheets are divided according to each group level. In Hi 5 sessions, the teacher can focus on each child or level groups. As it is worked in small groups and they swap, teachers can see each child’s progress, as well as pay attention to the ones who struggle.

Therefore, as mentioned before, reading is highly reinforced and strengthened in Grade 1. Apart from the Hi 5 methodology, they also work on writing in several other situations. For instance, during the week, they have some guided reading sessions in which children are divided in 5 groups, according to their level, and go through a book with the specialist or teachers. These sessions are sometimes used for inviting other grades in the class and do

individualized reading with our children. They also use the same level groups for jolly phonics, in which they work on phonetics and pronunciation.

Moreover, every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, each child has to read an Oxford Reading Tree book which is previously chosen by the teacher assistant, taking into account each child's level. The educator has a recoding notebook for each child in which it is written the books read, the dates and the level used. Thus, if someone finds that the books he/she reads are too easy, the child can choose a higher level. What is more, on Thursdays they go to the library and chose a library book to take home for the weekend.

Reading is also strengthened by parents. In fact, once a week, some parents come to the school and read with some children, one by one. They have a chart for each child and they have to write notes about how he/she is doing.

Additionally, the school is involved in promoting reading too, as it has organized a story workshop with the author of the "Lola" books, and the reading week. Children are really happy to read. For instance, when they have free time, some of them choose to read a book or do Razz, which is a reading app for the Ipad.

All in all, the methodologies, sessions and activities previously mentioned are ways of promoting and improving all the language skills. Most of the times, teachers assess children's language progress by taking notes and comments in post-its. They daily observe how children talk, express themselves, write or read. Teachers use a wide range of techniques to challenge children to use their language. For example, before starting each unit, both teachers make a brainstorming about the theme and ask an initial question which has to be answered by each child. Then, the teacher takes notes about the answers of all of them. Moreover, before getting ready for recess or lunch, they sometimes ask them a language question or ask them to tell something. For example, teachers could ask: "Tell me a letter starting with the /t/ sound". It is an individual challenge, so the ones who have been asked the question can go and get ready. It is also a game used for controlling the transition periods in the corridor.

Assessments done by the reading specialists could also be analysed. She did an assessment to a first grader which consisted in the identification of sounds and letters assessment. Each child does this task 3 times per year. The child has to identify the initial sounds and their letter. Before identifying them, he/she has to start with rhyming words. Then the teacher asks the child to revise the bad sounds and pronounce them correctly. After that, the child has to say the name of each letter (capital letters). It is important to state that the child has a different

sheet than the teacher. She takes without letting the child see them. Another test examined was the oral reading fluency assessment with another Grade 1 student. The teacher has several options of books according to different levels. She makes the child read a tittle, and according to that, she proposes the student to read one book or another. She also has an evaluation criterion based on those aspects which have to be covered: engagement, oral reading fluency, comprehension, reflection and continuum for the teacher.

It is important to state that each class and course has plenty of freedom to develop their own assessment criteria and the tasks. That is why teachers should be responsible enough to prepare the tasks and know what they need to get from each child.

In terms of reporting the information to families, teachers create online portfolios for all students with the Seesaw app. It is an online platform in which teachers (or even students) post relevant activities of stuff which they want to share with their families. It is a way of maintaining families informed and to see what children do in school. Teachers can also leave comments and families have the freedom to comment everything. Each student has a profile and only their families can see it. Before this online portfolio existed, 3 years ago, teachers had to do it with a written paper and it took lots of hours to finish that. This method is easy, quick and efficient. At the end of the year each child has a written review.

4.2. Language assessment through curricular areas

The analysis of the school official documents showed that language assessment is carried out through the different curricular areas: mathematics, developmental reading and language arts. For this particular study, two areas were taken into consideration: language arts and developmental reading.

In terms of Language Arts, the teachers use different tasks and assessment worksheets which are carried out during the year. Teachers use a Writing Continuum to assess each child and see their progress. In this document, the aspects children should cover in each age range in terms of types of texts, content and traits, process, mechanics and conventions, and attitude and self-evaluation can be seen. The continuum is divided into 10 stages, starting with the preconventional in ages 3-5 and finishing with independent, up to 14 years old students. Besides, the teacher also uses a Writing Formation Observation Grid in which she takes notes about the writing process of each child individually. Post-it's are also used as a reminder of what teachers have observed in a particular situation and in a particular child. Related to that, there is also the Reading Continuum which works the same as the Writing Continuum, but the aspects taken into account are types of texts and oral reading, attitude, reading strategies, comprehension and response, and self-evaluation.

In relation to the recognition of letters and words, they use the Fry Sight Words worksheet mentioned before, which is done each semester. Teachers also carry out a Language Readiness Assessment, which consist on asking each child the beginning and final sound of some words, create a word joining sounds, rhyming words, circle the name of the alphabet letters the child knows, read easy words aloud, as well as the recognition of some sight words. The Letter Find assessment is about completing the lower-case letter or capital letter in the alphabet. Children have a letter which can be lower-case or capital, and they have to complete the missing one.

There is also an Individual Child Checklist related to skills. Teachers tick each aspect according to if it is not yet developed, it is emerging or already achieved, as well as comment each skill. The indicators taken into account are the follows: thinking/early mathematical understanding, language learning and communication, social learning, personal learning, health and physical learning, and investigating environments. What is more, there is also a Child Skills Checklist based on more specific items such as self-identity, emotional development, social behaviours, gross and fine motor development, cognitive development, spoken language, and prereading and prewriting skills. Each of them is specified according to some evidences, which the teacher must take into account.

Teachers have some worksheets based on assessing alphabet knowledge by asking the child the name of some letters, both lower-case and capital letters. Another one is "Write the room" exercise for the children to relate the letter with an object, animal or word. For this, they have to draw or write a word for each alphabet letter. Furthermore, there is also a letter sounds and tricky words test in which children have to circle unknown sounds divided into 7 groups, according to their difficulty; and circle unknown words.

Additionally, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is based on the Student Assessment Form in which it is seen the reading level of each child and his/her progression through the year. The teacher fills in an observation guide according to the child's reading level. While they read a book, teacher value the reading engagement, the oral reading fluency with a record of the oral reading, and the comprehension. After that, there is a teacher analysis of the child's accuracy, plus a DRA2 Continuum in which the teacher has to mark in a rubric where is the child in all the aspects according to the levels of emerging, developing, independent or advanced. Finally, the last part is based on the focus of instruction for further improvements. It is important to state that at the beginning of the course, each child has to read, so teachers can see their initial level.

Teachers collect all the data obtained in the DRA2 in a Class Reporting Form. Thus, it is easy to see how each child is progressing in the class. In this paper, the name of the child is stated, as well as the text level used (F/NF), the engagement score, the oral reading fluency score, and the printed language concepts/comprehension score.

Other important documents are the Continuum Correlation Chart with the age stage, the grade level, the book format which they read, the reading level by Fountas & Pinnell, the Oxford Reading Tree (ORT) level and the DRA. In terms of the ORT, the books each child has to read at home are adapted to their needs. As mentioned before, if one child finds his/her level books are too easy, the teachers give him/her higher-level books. However, in each grade there is a scale where all the children should achieve at the end of the course. There is also a specific chart for the correlations between the DRA and the ORT.

4.3. Language assessment through interviews

In order to deeply examine the way the school, and in particular teachers, assess students' language progress, interviews to all Grade 1 language specialists, as well as to both teachers were carried out (see appendix 8.1). Results have been drawn through a deep analysis of each topic mentioned in the interviews. Teachers' answers for each theme have been separated and examined carefully. The topics selected for the study were: the school's approach towards language assessment, assessment purposes, what needs to be assessed, types of assessment, tools and strategies, what to have in mind when assessing, when to assess, the characteristics of an effective assessment, individual assessment and how to communicate information to families.

5. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The results of the case study show that assessment in the International School of Helsinki is seen as a part of the teaching process. Each International school follows the Primary Years Programme (PYP) and Middle Years Programme (MYP) criteria and assessment guidelines published by the IB organization. Specifically, PYP offers a wider and more open guidelines so that teachers can create and adapt the assessment.

Regarding the first research question (What should be assessed in language assessment?), the interviews demonstrated that in terms of language assessment, children need to be tested in all strands of language arts: listening and speaking, viewing and presenting, and reading and writing. What is more, and as the French specialist mentioned in the interview, teachers also take into account what children say or write if it has sense.

In relation to the second research question (What is the school's approach towards language assessment?), specialists agree on the idea that the main purpose of language assessment is to evaluate, provide evidence and monitor each child's learning process for further learning. What is more, confirming the idea that Cameron (2001) and McKay (2006) stated, assessment is also a tool that helps teachers to develop critical thinking skills and get important information and reflect on students' learning and development. Moreover, they also are used as evidence of ways of teaching and techniques in order to choose another style if necessary. Furthermore, as the Reading Support and Advanced EAL specialist explained, assessment tells teachers what needs to be taught or where teachers should focus their efforts, and the areas in which a child has strengths or weaknesses in order to monitor progress and guide and inform lesson planning. In other words, it helps teachers to know where gaps are, in terms of who needs support in certain areas, who needs extending, or just to know if there is a learning disorder or it is a language issue. It is a way to ask yourself questions such as: "*Why is the student not grasping the concepts? Do I need to teach the material in a more visual way to suit some students? Are the students thinking critically or are they just recalling information? Assessments make arise many questions to teachers.*" (Grade 1 teacher).

For students, assessment is a tool which tells them whether they have been successful in their efforts and understand their learning and skills. For families it is also important, as it tells them how his/her child is performing in class.

What is more, the EAL specialist claims that assessment is also used as an orientation (where did the child start, where is the child now, where is the child going?), to profile a student on entry, to inform expectations and set appropriate targets, and to give feedback to parents, teachers and for management.

When assessing teachers and specialists have to take into account that all students are individuals, and as the FMT teacher reiterates, they should be considered as holistic learners. In the EAL specialist interview, the factors that need to be considered when evaluating children are mentioned. She highlights that we should have in mind the age of the student, the language background of each one, the length in which they have been in a school in their county, if they and their parents are fully literate in their mother tongue, if their parents can communicate in English and support them at home, the length in which they have been at ISH, and the age in which they started to learn English. Grade 1 teacher states that as educators, they should know "*if the pupils can follow 2-step instructions, or how their letter formation is developing, what they know and can do, and their social/emotional well-being*". The time of the day, their tiredness, their family situation can make children be distracted and

not focused. Even if all these criteria should be emphasised specially with those children attending the EAL programme, the school philosophy is based on *each child is unique*, so they should adapt the assessment criteria to each child. The focus should always be on an individual learning rather than on standardised group tests.

Teachers should create supportive and encouraging assessments for the students, meaning that students should be able to show what they have learned and not try to catch them in what they have not learned. As one of the teachers in Grade 1 stated in the interview: *“Assessments are only effective if the information is USEFUL and the teacher is able to use the data to inform planning, differentiate lessons, change grouping, etc.”*. In other words, they should be useful for all, as it is a continuous guidance for reflection which provides the information needed constantly. What is more, teachers have to create authentic and meaningful tests, as well as varied and individualised in order to make children solve them with a huge range of strategies and having the chance to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding.

According to the third and fourth research questions (What types of assessment do teachers use to assess the students' language progress? and What tools or strategies do they use?), teachers mostly use the summative, formative and continuous types of assessment, reiterating what McKay (2006) stated. They also use fixed and holistic assessment. The one they use the most in their everyday sessions is the ongoing informal assessments. Results are in line with Cameron (2001) statement of the importance of observation, as it is the tool which most of the teachers use to collect and analyse the data. Process-focused, open-ended tasks, selected responses, exemplars, continuums, rubrics, checklists, and anecdotal records are also used. They adapt and select the best strategy for each situation and child.

At the start of the year, teachers check children's reading levels, speaking and a writing example. During the course, teachers and specialists do ongoing informal assessments every day, as they observe children continuously. Thus, informal assessments are done all the time. In terms of formal assessments, they are done every 2 or 3 months, normally at the end of each 6-week units and usually before parent conferences. EAL testing is done twice a year. It is important to mention that in ISH there is no assessment schedule in which teachers need to stick to, it is up to the discretion of the teachers to plan and perform assessments.

In order to assess each student, it is highly important to do individual assessments, which does not take a long time, teachers just need good planning. In fact, oral exams are quite individual, as well as student's autonomous work. Teachers carry on formative assessments

during classroom activities and carpet time real-time assessments by observing all the time and listening to conversations during play. What is more, they sometimes have to do more focused assessments for a quick check of certain skills such as handwriting or number concepts, and some unit of inquiry summative assessments. In terms of EAL students, teachers and specialists have to provide them differentiated assessments in class. Furthermore, as Brown and Hudson (1998) explain, not all students are able to complete the same assessment and teachers should modify it according to each student level of ability. But, to conclude, as Grade 1 teacher stated in her interview: *“the best assessment is being with the students on a daily basis”*.

Their process and progress is done through Seesaw app, in which parents are able to see all the posts made daily. In Lower School there are also 3 parent-teacher conferences per year, and a student led conference once a year. At the end of the year, every child has a written report. EAL student also receive an EAL Progress Report twice a year. What they also do are unit shares in the school for parents, so they can come and see the work done throughout the unit of inquiry.

Last but not least, the EAL specialist referred to the importance to ask parents about student’s interests, hobbies, friendships, how they feel at school and what they miss from their home country, as a consideration for further tests.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained from this case-study highlight the importance of assessing students’ language process. Assessment helps to monitor student progress, to inform planning, and to identify areas of strength and areas that need extra support.

The analysis of the interviews’ answers has shown that ISH educators agree on the idea that assessments should be informal, ongoing and real-time in order to be efficient and effective. Therefore, as the EAL specialist highlighted in the interview, they should also be adapted according to each student needs, as everyone has a particular background, family situation, nationality, different level of the language and even education in which they have been instructed. What is more, they also emphasize the idea that assessments should help students to see their own progress throughout their education process and not make them frustrate and try to catch them in what they do not know. Related to this idea, McKay states that assessment “needs to evoke positive emotions in children about language learning, about themselves and about others” (2006, p.46). Students have to be considered as active learners, so they should be involved in their own progress and be able to reflect on what they need to improve. This result reiterates Cameron’s (2001) idea about the importance of

assessment as a guidance tool not only for teachers, but for students, the school and the administration.

Although teachers and specialists mostly use the summative and formative assessments, they consider that it is important to employ multiple and varied assessment strategies according to the students and the aspect or language skill they want to observe. Thus, they are the ones who have the freedom to choose the type of assessment they want to do, how they want to do it and when. This confirms what Kansanen (2003) explained in his article, teachers in Finland have the freedom and autonomy to adapt the school curricula.

During this research project, there have been some limitations that should be acknowledged. First of all, focusing on language assessment in both Grade 1 classes has reduced the possibility to focus on specific children's processes and improvements. The observations were generalized and not as accurate as they could have been. Secondly, teachers provided many documents related to language arts but they did not have time at all to explain me them in detail (when do they use them?, how they do it?). Finally, the observational period in the school was short to observe how teachers implement or carry out different types of assessments. Hence, I could observe just few of them.

Finally, a line for further research could be done in order to investigate if the methodology used in this school is similar to the one applied in other grades in ISH or even in other schools in Finland. Besides, a deep analysis could be done in order to implement some of those assessment tools here, in Catalonia.

Acknowledgements

This study has been possible thanks to contribution of all the language specialists from the International School of Helsinki, and in particular to both Grade 1 teachers, S and M. Moreover, Anna Vallbona, the tutor of this research project, who has also supported and guided me.

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8. APPENDICES

8.1. Interview about language assessment in ISH

Teacher's name:

What do you teach? Which is or are your title/s?

In which grade/s do you teach?

**You can base your answers according to your teaching speciality.*

- 1) What is the school's approach towards language assessment?
- 2) Does the school provide guidelines for teachers in order to assess the linguistic process of the students?
- 3) What are the purposes of assessment for all the components of the school community (students, teachers, parents, administrators)?
- 4) In terms of language education, what do you assess or what do you think should be assessed?
- 5) Which types of assessment do you use? (E.g. summative, formative, continuous, fixed, direct, indirect, subjective, objective, holistic, analytic assessment...)
- 6) In terms of assessment tools or strategies, what type or types do you use? (See the table below).

Assessment strategies and tools					
Assessment tools	Rubrics	Exemplars	Checklists	Anecdotal records	Continuums
Observations	✓		✓	✓	✓
Performance assessments	✓	✓		✓	✓
Process-focused assessments	✓		✓	✓	✓
Selected responses		✓	✓		✓
Open-ended tasks	✓	✓		✓	✓

- 7) Do you use the same strategies for assessing all types of competences? Are they the same for oral language and written language?
- 8) What considerations do you have in mind when evaluating/assessing?
- 9) How and how often do you assess students?
- 10) What are the characteristics of effective assessments?
- 11) When do you consider that they have learned or progressed in terms of language?
- 12) What does assessment tell teachers? Why is it important for them? And to students?

13) Do you assess each student individually? How do you do it?

14) How do you communicate information about assessment to families? How and how often do you communicate it to families?

15) Anything else that you consider important in terms of assessment and that it is not written or taken into account?

THANK YOU!

8.2. Observation grid

The following grid has been used to transfer the information collected through the observations and the written diary.

ASSESSING: how we discover what the students know and have learned.

Types of assessment

Norm-referencing (NR): placement of learners in rank order, their assessment and ranking in relation to their peers.	Criterion-referencing (CR): the learner is assessed purely in terms of his/her ability in the subject, irrespective of the ability of his/her peers.
Mastery learning CR: which a single “minimum competence standard” is set to divide learners into “masters” and “non-masters”.	Continuum CR: which an individual ability is referenced.
Continuous assessment: by the teacher and possibly by the learner of class performances, pieces of work and projects. The final grade reflects the whole course or semester.	Fixed assessment points: grades are awarded on the basis of an examination of a particular day.
Formative assessment: ongoing process of gathering information which the teacher can feed back into their course planning and can give feedback to learners.	Summative assessment: sums up attainment at the end of the course with a grade.
Direct assessment: assessing what the candidate is actually doing.	Indirect assessment: uses a text, usually on paper, which assesses enabling skills.
Performance assessment: requires the learner to provide a sample of language in speech or writing in a direct test.	Knowledge assessment: requires the learner to answer questions.
Subjective assessment: judgement by an assessor.	Objective assessment: the subjectivity is removed.
Rating on a scale: scale made up of a number of such levels or brands.	Rating on checklists: list of points relevant for a particular level.
Holistic assessment: global synthetic judgement.	Analytic assessment: looking at different aspects separately.
Series assessment: isolated assessment tasks which are rated with a grade.	Category assessment: single assessment task which is judged in relation to the categories in an assessment grid.
Assessment by others: judgements by the teacher or examiner.	Self-assessment: judgements about your own proficiency.

Which type of assessment do they use? **Formative assessment**

How often do they use it? **They always take notes about children’s performance, so they can see their progress.**

Everyday	Quite a lot	Once a month	Occasionally
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Which type of assessment do they use? **Summative assessment**

How often do they use it? **At the end of the course, each child obtains a final report.**

Everyday	Quite a lot	Once a month	Occasionally
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Which type of assessment do they use? **Rating on a scale, rating on checklists and continuum CR**

How often do they use it? **Teachers have continuums grids for writing, reading, etc., as well as checklists.**

Everyday	Quite a lot	Once a month	Occasionally
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Which type of assessment do they use? **Continuous assessment**

How often do they use it? **Teachers always assesses children's everyday tasks. Everything matters.**

Everyday	Quite a lot	Once a month	Occasionally
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Which type of assessment do they use? **Performance assessment**

How often do they use it? **Sometimes, the teacher just asks challenging questions to students in order to see samples of language. Recording is also used.**

Everyday	Quite a lot	Once a month	Occasionally
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Which type of assessment do they use? **Knowledge assessment**

How often do they use it? **Teachers provide students' activities, specially maths' tasks, in which they have to answer specific questions or solve situations.**

Everyday	Quite a lot	Once a month	Occasionally
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Which type of assessment do they use? **Analytic assessment**

How often do they use it? **Teachers have a lot of assessment tasks and criteria adjusted to different skills or the parameters that need to be observed.**

Everyday	Quite a lot	Once a month	Occasionally
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Which type of assessment do they use? **Criterion-referencing (CR)**

How often do they use it? **Each child is unique, and teachers need to adapt their teaching methodologies to the class diversity. Each one progresses in a particular way and in a particular path. Each one is taken into account as an individual.**

Everyday	Quite a lot	Once a month	Occasionally
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RECORDING: how we choose to collect and analyse data.

Strategies: methods or approaches that teachers use when gathering information about a student's learning.

- **Observations**
- Performance assessments: students are presented with a task that represents the kind of challenges that adults face in the world beyond the classroom. It consists on an open-ended problem which has to be solved.
- **Process-focused assessments or transdisciplinary skills assessments: the focus is on the process and skill application rather than on the product.**
- **Selected responses or classroom tests (tests/quizzes)**
- **Open-ended tasks: students are presented with a challenge and asked to provide an original response.**
- Others:
 - On-the run-assessment
 - **Portfolios: selected students' work for demonstrate growth, creativity, and reflection.**
 - Self-assessment and peer-assessment
 - **Recording keeping**
 - Teachers' folders
 - _____

Do they use the same strategies for assessing all types of competencies (oral language, reading and writing)? Yes/**No**

Why? Which one do they use in each case?

Oral language: recording keeping, open-ended tasks (mainly to know their previous knowledge about a topic), observation.

Reading: observation, selected response tests.

Writing: selected response or classroom tests, classroom writings.

Which is the one they use more? **Observation, with no doubt.**

Why? What does this strategy provide?

Teachers constantly observe each child and take notes about what has he/she said or done. It is a way of having a basis of the child in terms of where is he/she, and see if he/she improves and progress. As well as see his/her weaknesses.

Do they use the same type of assessment strategy for every child? Yes/**No**

If the answer is “no”, which criteria do they follow?

EAL students go with a specialist.

Language specialists’ groups: Finnish as a Mother Tongue, Finnish as a Foreign Language, French as a Foreign Language and English as an Additional Language.

Each child is unique. Each one obtains the help needed to ensure he/she does his/her own progress and improves.

There are assessments such as maths which are the same for everyone, but the language ones are adapted to each child and level.

Tools: A way of recording the information. Instruments used to collect data.

- **Rubrics: sets to criteria used for scoring.**
- Exemplars: samples of student’s work.
- Checklists: lists of information, data, attributes or elements that should be present.
- **Anecdotal records: brief, written notes based on observations of students.**
- **Continuums: visual representations of developmental stages of learning.**
- Others:
 - _____
 - _____

In which moments do they use them?

They always take notes of each child (anecdotal records) in post-its.

Teachers have the rubrics and continuums in their folder. So, when a child does a particular assessment, they keep it there, and update or modify their improvements, if necessary.

How often do they use it? **It depends on the child. EAL students are assessed regularly in order to see their improvements. Children who struggle in reading or pronunciation tend to do tests regularly as well. Not all children need to do the same assessment at the same time.**

Everyday	Quite a lot	Once a month	Occasionally
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Which is the one they use more? **Anecdotal records**

Why? What does this tool provide?

A tool which helps you to see the progress of the child immediately.

REPORTING: how we choose to communicate information.

Who is involved when reporting children's results?

Parents	Students	Teacher	All
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Conferences

Which is the structure followed?

Teacher-student	Teacher-parent(s)	Student-led	Three-way
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The written report

There isn't any mark, just a rubric.

Which is the teachers' role?

Teachers are the ones who decide which type of assessment are they going to use to see each child's progress. They are responsible of its choice and the time in which they will test them. As they want to adapt assessments to each child individually, they don't tend to evaluate all of them at the same time. Normally, they have checklists or rubrics, and they orally assess each child separately.

Which is the student's role?

Students don't even know when teachers are assessing them. They always have an active role and teacher observe and take notes about their performance. Normally, when they have to do written exams, teachers don't tell them that they are assessing them. They just ask the children to do their best individually and tell them that they can ask for any doubt. Teachers don't want them to be nervous while doing tests, they have to be done naturally.
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