By the Editor
At the 35th International Annual Conference in Brighton the Testing, Evaluation and Assessment Special Interest Group and the Young Learner's Special Interest Group joined forces to have a Pre-Conference Event. The event was a success and soon both committees agreed a joint Newsletter should follow up the reports on the Pre-Conference Event in the spring Newsletters in October 2001. We want to present you with a Newsletter that has a strong focus on the testing and assessment of young learners. This means we have decided to save some articles and reviews for a next edition, because they did not fit in with that focus. We hope that writers will accept our apologies and do not mind to much waiting to appear in print in the next issue.

YOUNG LEARNERS FROM 3-18!
For the TEA readers and all other incidental readers I think it is wise to indicate right at the beginning that 'Young Learners' includes the whole range of primary and secondary education and, in some cases, even pre-education. So there will be articles of interest for those who deal with toddlers (Barbara Roosken writes about the assessment of 3 to 5 year-olds) as well as for those who work with teenagers (Kjell Gulbrandsen dwells on tests meant for 16 to 18 year-olds). I hope you will enjoy reading this issue as much as I enjoyed putting it together. Thank you to all contributors and advertisers. Thanks once again for the interview, Niall. Special thanks to Debbie Smith, Eleanor Watts and Kari Smith in particular for their care and feedback.
A Note from the Young Learner SIG Joint Co-ordinators

Welcome to a special edition of the Newsletter and thank you to everyone who has put so much hard work into producing this issue. All our Newsletters are special but it is special this time because we have joined forces with the Testing, Evaluation and Assessment SIG to produce these information packed pages.

After the Pre-Conference Event in Brighton this year we agreed that it would be a shame for members who could not attend to miss out on the fantastic wealth of information and learning that happened for those who were there. For this reason we decided that we should produce a joint newsletter focused on the event and the workshops that ran that day. So a huge thanks goes to all the presenters who not only gave their time and knowledge but have also written up their workshop for us all to enjoy and benefit from.

In the last Note from the Co-ordinators Chris told you about our latest member of the committee Sandie Mourao, who has been very active as the Moderator of the discussion list and has also now organised our next conference, which will be held in Lisbon on 9th and 10th November. This conference is a joint event between APPI and the YL SIG and will focus on the teaching of English to young learners in Portugal. It is not too late if you would like to attend. Please contact IATEFL Head Office for the registration forms or download them from the YL web site.

Special mention should go to a member who has been working very hard behind the scenes to ensure that you have access to the most up-to-date teaching resources that can be found on the web. Beatriz Lupiano in Argentina has been keeping a watchful eye on our web resources page and she is in the process of colour coding it, so that you can see at a glance which age a particular resource is aimed at. Why not go and have a look at these pages? I am sure that you will be amazed at the wealth of resources available. Thanks Beatriz.

Finally a reminder that one of the aims of IATEFL is to bring English language teaching professionals together to share knowledge and resources for the benefit of the profession. You can do your part as members by contributing to the discussion list. If you have not already done so, then please join the discussion list and make a contribution.

You can join by visiting http://groups.yahoo.com/group/younglearners

Best wishes

Debbie Smith
Chris Etchells

Debbie Smith
I am writing these lines in the middle of August, and the temperature outside is about 35 degrees. The school children are on vacation, and most of them are probably on the beach somewhere. School, tests, and assessment are not on their minds these days. However, this is a good opportunity to take time out for teachers and testers to reflect on how they assess young pupils' language learning. Young learners and TEA SIGs have, since the IATEFL Brighton conference in April this year, taken time to jointly put this special issue of our Newsletters together, so we can provide members of the two SIGs with thoughts and ideas about how to assess and test young learners.

As a teacher trainer I share with students' teachers my conviction that the foundation for life-long learning is created in the early years of school. With young learners, the most important goal is not necessarily to teach new vocabulary items, or grammar structures, but to teach the young learners how to learn, 'learning-to-learn' skills, as I call them. If young children get used to healthy and efficient learning strategies, there is a good chance that these will stick with them in their adult life. When they grow up, they will probably change profession several times during their working life. This means ongoing learning, which requires efficient learning strategies.

How is this related to testing and assessment? I find assessment one of the most important educational tools we have. The way we assess young learners influences the way they approach learning. If we base assessment mainly on tests and examinations, the learners draw the conclusions that the most important thing is to cram for exams and to do anything to get a good grade on tests. However, if we assess the process of learning as well as the product of learning already from a young age, the chances are high that these learners will realise that effort and hard work pay off in all learning.

If we assess young learners in a way that makes positive and formative use of mistakes and less successful learning experiences, instead of seeing mistakes as failures, we empower the learners with a learning strategy that will help them grow as learners (and as people).

If we invite young learners to engage in self-assessment, we train them in becoming critical of their own work. Realistic self-assessment is a life-survival strategy many adults need to improve.

If we use assessment to help young learners form a positive self-image, we help create a generation of citizens who believe in themselves and are strong enough to meet challenges and think creatively.

TEA issues and Young Learners are too important to be ignored. It is important for society and the young learners, who will, in the future, become responsible citizens and life-long learners.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Young Learners SIG, represented by Chris and Debbie, for the co-operation we have had over the last year in planning the pre-conference event in Brighton, and in working on this Newsletter. TEA, and I personally, have learned much and enjoyed your professionalism and dedication. I hope we will continue working together in the future.

Finally, a very warm thank you to Carel Burghout, the TEA Newsletter editor, who agreed to take responsibility for editing this joint Newsletter. Carel has, as usual, done a great job by using his many professional and personal skills.

Kari Smith

TEA SIG Coordinator
Dear Editor

I have heard that your next issue is going to focus on testing. I am unqualified to contribute as an informed worker in the field but I would like to record a very personal view. Tests are inevitable and like cars can be helpful... but like cars they can kill.

I have visited so many countries in which teachers are guided by how they can get as many students as possible through the test or examination. Their motivation is admirable in the sense that they want to help their students to achieve what they want to achieve. Furthermore, the teacher's own reputation and standing partly depend on his or her students' exam results.

But the tail wags the dog.

Most designs of tail in nature offer their owner balance and guidance in terms of what the animal needs to do to live. If exams and tests can do this then that is fine.

My impression is that, unfortunately, tests and examinations are sometimes not designed to find out how well the student will do in life with language. Rather they focus on types of skill and memory, which can be tested and marked as easily as possible. Being clear, engaging and appropriate to purpose and context is a difficult set of criteria to mark. Correctness of form is much easier to mark.

I failed my public examination in English when I was sixteen. Since then I have written a hundred or more books and articles and television programmes and I have given lectures and told stories. Perhaps a better way of putting it is that I was failed 'rather than 'I failed'. The passive form asks the writer of the examination to share the responsibility.

I look forward to the special issue on tests and examinations and to seeing another step forward towards that sense of sharing the responsibility, with the examiner producing a tail which balances and guides the work of the teacher and students along their path towards conceptual and skills development which are relevant to their daily lives.

Andrew Wright
Email  iii@mail.pipenet.hu

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**YL SIG**

**Joint SIG Co-ordinators**

Christopher Etchells
etchells@countryschool.com

Debbie Smith
debbie.smith@britishcouncil.lk

**Events Co-ordinators**

Wendy Superfine, UK
Debbie Smith, Sri Lanke

**Discussion List Moderator**

Sandie Mourao, Portugal

**Web Site Manager**

Christopher Etchells, UK

**Newsletter Editors**

Carol Read, Spain
Eleanor Watts, UK

**Membership Secretary**

Andy Jackson, UK

Members can be contacted through IATEFL

The Newsletter is published twice a year. We welcome contributions or suggestions for future newsletters on any aspects of teaching English to young learners up to 17 years of age.
Testing English Language Competence in Real-Life Contexts: Norway’s Experience

By Kjell Gulbrandsen, Norwegian Board of Education

Imagine a person having neither read nor seen Shakespeare’s Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, and who has happened to miss the first four acts of the play, arriving at the theatre just in time to see Hamlet holding Yorick’s skull in his hand and later to witness sweet Ophelia’s funeral. This would of course represent a tragedy in itself: very little would our unlucky spectator know about the events in the play leading up to the famous fencing scene, Hamlet’s death and the order given by Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, to “Let four captains Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage” (Hamlet, V.ii).

The past is imperfect and the future is tense

Although this article, written by a Norwegian bureaucrat, a fellow countryman of Fortinbras by the way, is of less literary value than most English plays from the Renaissance and afterwards, I think that writing about final assessment without spending much time on the important part of the school year leading up to the exams, will leave the reader with the same sense of confusion that the spectator I have invented is facing when, ignorant of past events, he watches the final hours of Hamlet’s tragic life.

Nevertheless, I will concentrate on sharing Norway’s experience of assessing the pupils’ final competence with you. I will take a look at the past, deal a bit with the present and try to look into the future – not in terms of tense, but in terms of testing. Having said that, a headline from the Financial Times in December 1999, describing the economic situation in a European country, comes to mind: “The past is imperfect, and the future is tense.” This also holds true for assessment.

My topic is, as far as the main part of this article is concerned, national, centrally set written examinations and locally set oral examinations. And even though this might appear to be madness, I assure you, “there be method in it”. Centrally set examinations in Norway are the responsibility of the Norwegian Board of Education, of which the previous National Examination Board (the one and only in Norway) is a part. And I will restrict myself to the lower and upper secondary school, with pupils from the age group 16 to 19 (in Norway, pupils start learning English at the age of six). The background for the lecture is major school reforms that took place in the late 1990s. These reforms changed the

1 Translated from Norwegian by Charles Archer (Ibsen 1912).
syllabi rather profoundly by introducing the concept of goal-oriented teaching, learning and assessment.

In his book, *Testing for Language Teachers*, Arthur Hughes (1989) says something that is easy to agree with:

*Final achievement tests are those administered at the end of a course of study. They may be written and administered by ministries of education, official examination boards, or by members of teaching institutions. Clearly the content of these tests must be related to the courses with which they are concerned, but the nature of this relationship is a matter of disagreement amongst language testers.*

In quite a few cases the changes within the field of assessment are closely related to socio-economic changes and with the needs of certain forces in society. Unfortunately, time constraints will not permit us to look into this interesting topic.

**Moving graveyards**

When I was a boy, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school (cf. As You Like It, ii vii), dictation, questions, filling-in exercises and the writing of purely academic essays were used to test my knowledge and skills in written English, while the reproduction of texts I had learnt by heart was the means by which my oral skills were measured.

Things have changed, although more at the tortoise's than the hare's pace — as you know, "It is easier to put a man on the moon," to quote Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Jerold Zacharias, "than to reform public schools" (almost two decades later, retired Admiral Hyman Rickover, in a prepared statement given before the Virginia State Board of Education on July 28, 1963 (Cuban 1986), said, "Changing schools is like moving a graveyard")

To take the written exam after one year in the upper secondary school as an example, i.e. the exam for 17-year-old pupils, when I was a teacher before the school reforms, the questions had the following ingredients: Five questions on an enclosed text (three questions more or less related to details in the text and two asking for a more global understanding), a paragraph in Norwegian that had to be translated into English and an essay that should be written on some almost other-worldly topic within a context-free frame (e.g. "Discuss the statement 'Crime never pays'" and "Why do people collect things?" — in connection with a text about (I think it was) Peter Sellers' fascination for cars and an episode with a stolen car. In most cases, when an external examiner reading the pupils' products was asked, "What do you read, my lord", he or she would quote the Danish prince: "Words, words, words."

The paragraph that was to be translated from Norwegian into English is of special interest. It was a text constructed by the examination board with traps into which unsuspecting pupils were to fall, i.e. questions with catches. For instance, only a few Norwegian dialects distinguish between it and there as anticipatives or between the singular and the plural of the verbs. This means that it was — excuse me — there were a lot of traps into which the pupils could fall. This was also the case when it came to the distinction between adjectives and adverbs and other tricky aspects of the English language that differ from Norwegian. Indeed, a Norwegian teacher once wrote a book about The Tricky Twelve* (Arnesen 1985), i.e. twelve aspects of English that Norwegian pupils had special difficulties with, and in which they were tested in connection with the exam as if their competence of English depended on their ability to distinguish between it and there as anticipatives or to use expanded forms correctly (we do not have expanded forms either). Please do not misunderstand me here: of course we want pupils to learn this, and to learn it well. Their linguistic competence is to be assessed in the context within which the language is used.

This leads me to another writer, an English one: Winston Churchill, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for his autobiography *The Second World War*, wrote another autobiography, in which he tells the reader about his first day at school (Churchill 1989). Here he describes how he was taken into a class

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*These "Tricky Twelve" are the definite article, *ill*there, adjective/adverb, pronouns, concord, expanded forms, questions and negations, ask for verbs that Norwegians tend to mix up (hold, hold, rise, rise, raise, teach, learn, think, mean, list), put, become, feel, feel, (I), say, tell, come, get and lend (borrow), modal auxiliaries, prepositional phrases and orthography.*
room and told to sit down at a desk (and I will quote this, because it illustrates my main point the
difference between knowledge and competence):

[The Form Master] produced a thin greeny-brown, covered book filled with words in different
types of print.
"You have never done any Latin before, have you?" he said.
"No, sir."
"This is a Latin grammar." He opened it at a well-thumbed page.
"You must learn this," he said, pointing to a number of words in a frame of lines. "I will come
back in half an hour and see what you know."

"Behold me then," Churchill writes, "on a gloomy evening, with an aching heart, seated in front of the
First Declension":

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nom.</td>
<td>Mensa</td>
<td>a table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voc.</td>
<td>Mensa</td>
<td>O, table!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>acc.</td>
<td>Mensam</td>
<td>a table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gen.</td>
<td>Mensae</td>
<td>of a table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dat.</td>
<td>Mensae</td>
<td>to or for a table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abl.</td>
<td>Mensa</td>
<td>by, with or from a table</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Young Churchill asks himself: "What on earth did it mean? Where was the sense in it?" "However," he
continues, "there was one thing I could always do: I could learn it by heart." Then he goes on:

In due course the master returned.
"Have you learned it?" he asked.
"I think I can say it, sir," I replied, and gabbled it off. He seemed so satisfied with this that I
was emboldened to ask a question.
"What does it mean, sir?"
"It means what it says, Mensa, a table. Mensa is a noun of the First Declension. There are five
decensions. You have learnt the singular of the First Declension."
"But, I repeated, "What does it mean?"
"Mensa means a table," he answered.
"But why does mensa also mean O table?" I enquired, "and what does O, table! mean?"
"Mensa, O, table! is the vocative case," he replied.
"But why O, table?!" I went on curiously.
"O table – you would use that in addressing a table." And then seeing he was not carrying me
with him, "You would use it in addressing a table."
"But I never do," I blurted out in honest amazement.

No, we never do. This does not mean that, when it comes to Latin, we should not be able to
distinguish the vocative case from the nominative case.

The concept of competence

Certainly not. But it should not, neither in Latin nor in English, be tested explicitly in connection with
the exam because, in real life, we never address tables. Authenticity and Real-Life Situations have,
more or less, become obligatory ingredients of the vocabulary of the Teaching-English-as-a-Foreign-
Language and Teaching-English-as-a-Second-Language industry. At long last, the classroom and the
examination premises are beginning to catch up with life.

In Norway, the authorities are addressing the consequences of the fact that young people and adult
learners need to cope with the challenges not only in the labour market, but also in life in general.
According to the central guidelines from the Royal Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs,
both locally and centrally set examination questions are to be designed so that the so-called overall

4 It belongs to the story that the teacher's reply was "If you are impertinent, you will be punished, and punished, let me tell you,
very severely."
competence or comprehensive competence of the pupils can be assessed. This means that examinations of pupils' final competence should contain something else than conjugation of irregular verbs, although it by no means implies that the pupils should not be able to apply their grammar skills. The overall competence is the competence defined by the curricula, to which I will return. But this is not all. The pupils' competence is to be applied in what the central guidelines call "situations, tasks and approaches to problems that are close to real life". I shall deal with these concepts in turn and look at the various contexts within which these concepts are used.

First of all: The idea of competence is complex. I base my definition on the works of my compatriot Linda Lai. Her point of departure is the Latin noun competentia, which originally means "symmetry". I can add that the noun is derived from the verb competo (have power, be able to, be capable of functioning, be functional, have skills or power to carry out tasks and achieve a result). Another Norwegian, B. Baklien (1991), says that competence is associated with man's capacity to cope with circumstances of life in working life and in other situations and that competence is something more than applied knowledge; it is also development and application of skills – but also the learning of attitudes and the learning of new ones. He sees competence as the sum of knowledge, skills, attitudes, will and possibilities. Linda Lai, taking Baklien's concepts into consideration, defines competence as complete knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes that empower us to carry out current functions and tasks in accordance with defined demands and aims (Lai 1997):

![Diagram of Competence, Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, and Abilities]

In Norway, the pupils' competence is to be assessed in real-life situations, tasks and approaches to problems. This means that pupils should perform a professional, subject-related task that resembles a piece of work that is performed in real life – as far as it is possible in an exam situation within today's limitations (I shall also come back to these limitations later).

Competence is to be assessed, not tested. For there is a difference between testing and assessment: When we test, we examine and measure the qualities of somebody or something, especially, in our context, by examining and measuring somebody's knowledge or ability in a particular area. When we assess, however, we decide or fix the amount of something (e.g. "assess the damage at £350"), we decide or fix the value of something (e.g. to have a house assessed) or we estimate the quality of something. Yes, exactly. That is the point: The examination questions should enable us to estimate the quality of the pupils' competence.

Here it is important to state that testing partial competence by no means is out of date, but we must distinguish between learning-supporting exercises in the classroom during the school year and tasks designed to estimate the quality of the pupils' overall final competence. So of course we should test the learners (or rather: they must learn to test and assess themselves), but not in the examination questions. Of course we must test their reading skills, their vocabulary, their pronunciation, their morphology, their syntax and what they know about the English-speaking world (I have myself asked a lot of such questions, e.g. "What happened in 1066?" and got the answer "It was the battle of Trafalgar Square"). In such cases, we may even ask the pupils to address tables, but it is important to note that the PISA2 questions tend to underline the importance of testing e.g. global comprehension instead of the ability to find details in English texts.

Real-life contexts

2 The OECD-initiated Program for International Pupil Assessment.
Some seem to think that as soon as you use a text, written or oral, that may be proved authentic, you have met all the requirements in the central guidelines about real-life tasks. An authentic text is a text known to be true or genuine, but what matters is what the pupils are asked to do with it. Some institutions boasting of "authentic examination questions" because they use authentic newspaper texts, seem to forget that no such text is equipped with content questions, not to say multiple choice exercises or open spaces that the reader is invited to fill in as a breakfast or afternoon activity. The question is not whether a text has been adapted or not, but to what extent the pupils are invited to respond to it in a way that seems authentic or real also outside the examination premises and after school. In our opinion, expressions like "authentic examination questions" and "close to real-life" mean that the pupils will be asked to do a "job" which as much as possible reminds us of the way we work with the subject in reality, i.e., in situations related to social life, working life, further education and last, but not least, to our private and personal lives.

The question we must ask ourselves when constructing examination questions is: "When in life do we solve such problems?" If the answer is never, well, then the problem should not be given as an exam question at all. But what does real-life context imply when it comes to languages? For other subjects, e.g., electronics and health and social studies, pupils could be presented a case study and asked to solve practical problems. Of course, languages may be used for this purpose. But they should not be reduced to tourist communication, to buying tickets or beer or asking for directions (to me, being a person without any sense of direction at all, this is obviously a situation close to real life, but I am not able to apply the information I get anyway) or writing letters, reports and applications. Let me use an example: My mother, coming from a family of craftsmen, cotlers and industrial workers, once - it must have been in the 1930s - asked her mother, "People working in an office, what do they work with?" My grandmother answered, "They work with their minds." Later in life I have experienced that this is not always the case, but anyway:

Languages are used to communicate, to reflect. Languages are there for communication. The recipient in the communication process may be another person, or the pupil himself. Think of Hamlet, contemplating on life and death: "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (III.i). This is reflection at a high level. English is about education, culture and refinement, important constituents of the pupils' process of formation. To be able to communicate in English at an advanced level, you need knowledge about the world, about past and present. Therefore, we once asked the pupils (19-year-olds) to write a letter to the Editor of the 'Times' magazine in which they were to comment on a letter from a Norwegian reader thanking the United States for acting as a world police force. And therefore, asking pupils to comment on Polonius' advice to Horatio ['Hamlet', I.ii], would, in my opinion, be a task closely related to the challenges of real life.

Let me sum up, so far, and let me explain: English language competence should be displayed within a setting. Perhaps the oral exam would serve as a good starting-point to discuss the idea of testing English language competence in real-life contexts.

The classroom model

In Denmark, the school authorities have used the metaphor of pupils being shot in the back of the head, in true gangster execution style, to describe the kind of exams that the authorities want to avoid. Entering a room with examiners and a table with small pieces of paper in a pile from which you are to draw to find the topics you will be questioned about shows that something is rotten both in Denmark and any other kind of oral exam.

To avoid this chamber of horrors, a preparation section has become compulsory in the oral exam in the Norwegian lower secondary school, i.e., for 16-year-olds. It is not even close to real life to walk around alert to all the problems that may arise within your subject and which you may be attacked by any moment, just think of the Day of the Lord in Christianity: "it comes like a thief in the night. While they are talking of peace and security, all at once calamity is upon them, sudden as the pangs that come upon a woman with child; and there will be no escape" (1 Thessalonians 5. 1-2).

We want to avoid this. The most interesting model that the schools can use to organise the oral exam in the lower secondary school is the so-called "classroom model". Here, groups of pupils prepare for the test and sit for the exam together, simultaneously (the amount of time spent on preparation and examination varies according to the number of groups and the number of pupils in each group). To be
able to succeed, the pupils will have to co-operate throughout the whole school year. Although this is a group exam, the pupils are assessed individually. This means that the pupils must learn how to be active and eager, how to show consideration towards each other, how to give others a chance in the group discussion and how to practice coherence and interaction. Pupils who have participated in a project with these new models have been given comprehension texts, e.g. one called "Hobbies", with the following instruction:

Listen to the interview in which a schoolgirl named Rikki asks Peter who is 22 years old about his hobbies. You may be asked to:
- talk about what you have listened to
- give your opinion about what was said
- say something about your own hobbies

You may take notes or jot down keywords, but please do not write out in full what you are planning to say. You may ask your teacher about things that were difficult to understand.

Other tasks were connected with topics the pupils had been working on during the school year. Here is one example:

**Heritage**

Here are six topics for discussion:

1. UNESCO
2. Sámi cultural heritage
3. Wildlife
4. Pollution
5. Religious heritage
6. Norway's cultural heritage

Choose at least three of the topics to talk about. Remember to think about the reasons for your choices. You may present the topics in any way you choose, but please remember that you have limited time. Raise a hand when you are ready to be assessed on the first topic of your choice.

The teacher responsible for this task says that the purpose was to give each pupil the opportunity to show her or his competence, not to look for holes in their competence (we always practice positive assessment by giving pupils credit for what they can do instead of concentrating on a lack of competence in various fields). In this task the pupils had to co-operate to find at least three topics to talk about so that they had to make conscious choices. The examiners waited until the groups signalled that they were ready to discuss one or more of the topics they had chosen. The presentation or the conversation took several forms: one group staged a role-play and asked the examiners to watch, while another group wanted to have a dialogue with the examiners.

After the project, the pupils said that they particularly enjoyed using textbooks, notes, grammar and other things, and they were greatly relieved to have the opportunity to plan the presentation together with their fellow pupils. One pupil said that the test did not differ much from an ordinary lesson: "We sat talking all the time, and if there was something I didn't know, the others knew it and reminded me of it so that I remembered everything and could talk about it. Then I relaxed and wasn't nervous. It was cool." Another pupil emphasised the relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. In this way, the oral exam, being the pupils' arena, may become a normal form of communication close to real-life situations. The introduction to the new national curriculum says that the main goal is that children, young people and adults should learn to face the tasks of life and to surmount difficulties together with others. We think that, at this stage of the development, the classroom model contributes to meeting the requirements of the curriculum.

Other examples, this time taken from a test for 18-year-olds in the upper secondary school (Advanced Course I), show how we want to use the texts to trigger a discussion, to give the pupils something to talk about. The topic may be taken from everyday life, like a discussion we recorded about whether gay people should have the right to adopt children or not, or the pupils may be given a literary text to
discuss. Thus, we do not separately test how well they have understood the text (by the way, can this be measured?), but in connection with the discussion it is not difficult to say what they have understood and what parts of the texts they seem to have had difficulties with. This means that cloze tests, multiple choice and True and False exercises belong in the classroom as tools for learning English or to help the teachers see exactly what the pupils understand, but partial competence should not be tested in connection with a final exam. I remember Charlie Brown lying awake in the night asking himself if life is a multiple choice or a True or False test, when he suddenly hears a voice saying "Sorry, but life is an essay of a thousand words". We think the voice is right, and try to act accordingly.

Football and languages

Our attitude does not imply that pupils can manage well without basic skills in English. Here, in the country where football developed into an art, it might be appropriate to draw parallels between learning language competence well and learning to play football well. To become a good player, you need to be good at running, heading, marking, passing and finishing and at taking throw-ins, corners, penalties, free kicks and so on. But when the whistle blows for kick-off and the match starts, the players are to apply their skills to defeat the other team. There is, as far as we know, no world championship in penalties or corners. It is the general competence in football as such that counts.

Speaking for myself, I know several languages, but my bosses have never come to me with a list of irregular verbs and asked me to conjugate them before lunch. Instead I have had to apply my knowledge to reading documents in foreign languages and answering letters.

It is the general communicative competence in the target language that should be assessed in connection with the oral and written exams. In football, the players know the rules in advance, and in Norway, we inform the pupils about all the assessment criteria so that nothing is secret. In Britain, the police do not hide the fact that in this country people have to drive on the left hand side of the road to avoid penalties and things that are far worse (I thought this was a good and instructive example until I heard about a 36-year-old Englishman who had nearly collided with the police when driving on the left hand side in western Norway, where the roads are narrow – perhaps we had not informed well enough...). Anyway, the pupils and the examiners should have the same information about grading. The reason why this has become a success, is of course that we do not give the pupils questions to which we know the answers!

Stimulating language production

Now, we will look at writing tasks in particular. In the lower secondary school, 10th grade (i.e. 16-year-olds and adults), the pupils are given a booklet one and half days before the exam. In the preparation section they are encouraged to take notes from the texts in the booklet, find various approaches to the texts (i.e. words and pictures) in it and search for additional information. We want the pupils to encounter the texts together with others, ask questions, support each other, discuss and to interact to be as prepared as possible for the tasks they will meet when sitting for the exam. Our intention is, as you might have understood, to stimulate language production.

For obvious reasons I shall not present the exam questions for 2001. But in 2000, the title of the booklet for 16-year-olds was We are the world, we are the future... with the subtitle "Possibilities – Justice – Hopes – Fears". The booklet contained 20 pages of texts in various genres – short stories, a feature interview, a talk, a song lyric, an advertisement and a painting. They all dealt with various aspects of internationalisation and human relations. The tasks consisted of two main parts, Part A testing mostly global comprehension within a context that demanded written production in the form of sentences and a couple of paragraphs, and Part B testing free writing. Here are a couple of examples of the seven tasks the pupils could choose from (the pupils were encouraged to look in the booklet for ideas and inspiration when planning their writing):

- Write a text where you explain why you agree or disagree with Linn Ullmann's views [in the interview with her in the booklet]. Then express what you would have done if you ruled the world. You can write a letter to the editor of a youth magazine or express your views in a personal text or an article. Find a good title for your text.
You have read Fidel Castro's speech to the WHO, and have been asked to give your opinion of the content of the speech in an article or essay for your school magazine. Find a good title for your text.

Have you ever taken risks? Have you ever tried something new, something unfamiliar or even dangerous? Write a letter to a friend, telling him/her about such an experience and whether you learned from it or not. Call your letter Dear xxx.

As you can see, the tasks are fairly open-ended. We want everybody to find an approach and a topic that will trigger the highest level of their competence in English. When the pupils like the topic and are free to choose their favourite genres, their language skills become better. In such cases it is important that the examiners assess answers to open-ended tasks with an open mind – e.g. when encountering a text by a 16-year-old girl who wrote about taking risks, describing what she called "the best sex I ever had".

By the way, I would like to mention that a survey revealed that the most popular text in the booklet was the short story "The Boy Who Painted Christ Black" by American writer John Henrik Clarke, taken from a textbook for 19-year-old pupils in the upper secondary school (evidence of the fact that quality knows no age limits, neither in real life nor in connection with exams). I also hope you see the difference between these tasks and the ones I mentioned to describe what some of the tasks had been like before the schools reforms: "Why do people collect things?" and "Discuss the statement 'Crime does not pay'."

Open-ended tasks

When it comes to the first year in the upper secondary school's academic areas of study, I would like to present the exam question from spring 1999:

The point of departure for this exam was a real-life situation, albeit created by us for our purpose, where the pupils had to apply for a job as a writer and had to carry out certain tasks in order to qualify for the position. The first task, to write an application to The Writers Bureau in Manchester (we had seen the advertisement in the Time magazine, and only had to make minor changes). The instruction was as follows: "Do you want to be one of the young writers in our bureau? Send us an application where you tell us about your background and interests, why you want to work as a writer, and why we should choose you."

This exam, to come back to Hamlet, was organised like a play within the play. On the next page, the pupils found a letter from the bureau saying that they had been chosen to take part in the next stage of the selected process (yes, I know this perhaps sounds like a Reader's Digest marketing campaign). "To quality for the job," we added, "we ask you to show us that you can do the following two tasks: Please show us that you are able to read and understand an English text, and that you are able to write an English text." The English text we had chosen was an extract from George Orwell's Down and Out in Paris and London (Orwell 1933). The pupils were given three questions to answer:

a) What changes can you find when you compare the writer's mood in the first half of the text with his mood in the second half?

b) Find a suitable title for Orwell's text and explain briefly why you chose this title.

c) In Orwell's text you will find some sentences in bold face[ ]. Choose four of them, and explain what they tell you about Orwell's view of British society.

In the third and last task the pupils were asked:

Now we want you to write a text in English for 17-18-year-olds. All the pictures on the following two pages show various aspects of life in the UK – different people, different places, different

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8 By coincidence, the advertisement appeared in the Guardian Weekly (April 19-25) that was distributed to the IATEFL conference participants.

9 E.g. "England is a very good country when you are not poor," "when the train was coming into London through the eastern slums" and "I dared not speak to anyone, imagining that they must notice a disparity between my accent and my clothes"—to mention some of them.
times. Pick one or at most two of the following pictures and use it/them as a point of departure for a text that should tell your readers something you feel is important about life and/or work in the UK.

Write your text either as
- an article,
- a story,
or
- a promotional or informative text for a brochure.

State the number(s) of the picture(s) you have chosen, what type of text you have decided to write, and give your text a suitable title.

The pictures showed a variety of aspects of life and work in "this little world, / this precious stone set in the silver sea", and it was up to the pupils to decide genre and approach, but they were instructed that a good answer should display applied knowledge of British history, geography, social life, customs and values, education, industries and/or working life without a superficial listing of facts.

Such a question is open-ended. The pupils are free to choose their own approach and how deeply they will treat the subject matter. An important principle, at least in theory, is not to construct "easy" or "difficult" questions, but questions that will give the pupils the opportunity to answer well or less well (this is, I must admit, not always easy; cf. the teacher who wanted to be just and gave his pupils - a cat, an elephant, a seal, a snail, a goldfish, an ape, a bird and a mouse - the same exercise: to climb a tree).

Before the school reforms, in the in-depth-studies in English in the upper secondary school, i.e. after the foundation course that we just paid a visit to. 18-19-year-olds (and especially their teachers) had to go through a detailed syllabus with texts they were drilled in and which they knew they would be asked about when sitting for the exam. In many cases the pupils knew their textbooks by heart, but, for many of them, this was only the thing they knew. The reform changed this as the new curriculum established goals that the pupils were to reach, without prescribing the texts they were to study. In fact, teachers and pupils were free to choose their own texts and their own work methods - the exam questions would be open-ended and would challenge the pupils' competence, not their knowledge.

Predictability, knowledge and competence

A good example of this is the exam question for one of the Advanced Courses II in English, i.e. for 19-year-olds (we will skip the exam for Advanced Course I). The Ministry's guidelines state that the exam questions are to be based on the curriculum so that the pupils' general competence, as it is described in the attainment targets in the curriculum, can be assessed. Let us have a look at some of the attainment targets in the curriculum for one of the Advanced Courses in question. The curriculum states that pupils should (among other things concerning language skills, oral and written communication and knowledge of literature) have thorough knowledge of social and cultural conditions in English-speaking countries and have knowledge of central features of the national cultures (history, geography and society) in these countries. The pupils should be able to explain phenomena and concepts related to various topics, e.g. in connection with an unknown text.

In the preparation section of last spring's exam we gave the pupils information about devotion in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, about two pages they were to read and discuss and take notes from (here the preparation section is limited to one hour, and the pupils are not allowed to leave the classroom). The information was mainly taken from the British Consular Services, newspapers and magazines. The topic was deliberately chosen because the available textbooks had no information on it. We did not want to trick the pupils, rather we wanted to help them in such a way that they could not use the preparation section to copy information from their textbooks and use this "stolen" knowledge to answer the question (this would only have earned them low marks because their answers would only show the ability to reproduce knowledge, not to discuss, assess and analyse and reflect on it).

There were two tasks. one based on fiction, and then the following:
Write an article in which you discuss the following statement:

"Devolution is good for the regions (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), but is it bad for the United Kingdom?"

Some points to consider might include

- regional identity or national identity
- cultural diversity or cultural uniformity
- a common historic past or historic conflicts
- local government or far away Westminster
- strength through decentralisation
- the monarchy
- the role of the United Kingdom in the world

Decide your own title.

As you can see, the intention was to help pupils apply their knowledge of British history, geography and society (the political systems of the UK and the US and these countries' international roles are part of the focal points exemplifying the attainment targets) to reflect on a current problem. This was all we expected from the pupils, and the examiners were instructed not to require more knowledge about devolution than what the pupils would get from the preparation material.

We think that one positive aspect of exam questions is that they communicate the curriculum to the teachers better than circulars and in-service training. Of course the question was heavily criticised by teachers who had problems with the new age of educational science. The source of their complaint was what they maintained was an incongruity between the curriculum and the nature of the question. As you see, there are similarities between changing schools and moving graveyards: You cannot expect much help from the people involved. No, devolution as such is not in the curriculum, and curricula will never contain ephemeral topics like devolution (and, for that sake, the British monarchy). We do not include the details of history when constructing curricula.

In our opinion, exams should be predictable only within the framework of the curriculum, no more, no less. The pupils should know that they will be asked to show the degree to which they have reached the attainment targets, but this does not mean that they need to know the topic. Life is not predictable, and we should make no exception for exam questions. As one teacher said in this context: "Incidentally, a predictable exam means that somewhere along the way teachers stop teaching and pupils stop learning as they prepare for the 'predictable exam'."

Another teacher (Lokuge 2001) wrote the following:

What is evident from the previous years' questions, from foundation course to [Advanced Course II], is that the focus has changed from static knowledge to application of knowledge. As a result, the teachers' role is to harness their students' ability to analyse the material. Moreover, they ought to have a critical approach to the material they work with. That way, they will learn to cope with the myriad of information they are inundated with.

He defends the question in light of the attainment targets I just quoted (ibid.).

It is groundless to argue that the topic 'devolution' is peripheral. In fact, the question demanded not a four-page account of the devolution itself, but the students' ability to see the English, Scottish and Welsh and their respective historical, geographical and social background in relation to the UK. In other words, the question required the students to demonstrate their faculty of analysis rather than the mere reproduction of facts.

True enough, the textbooks carry little information on the devolution. However, the same textbooks carry enough background material on the three countries which could have been processed to answer the devolution question well. If we believe that textbooks should provide all the answers, we are gravely mistaken, especially in today's 'dot.com' society.
English and ICT

Yes, we are living in what some call the ‘dot.com’ society. Man has taken a revolutionary leap into a new age that will profoundly transform our culture. As a modest contribution to this, we are undertaking some experimental work with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in connection with the exam. Before presenting some of the questions, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that "ICT in connection with the exam" does not necessarily mean that the questions are asked online and/or that the pupils answer online. Whether smoke and blankets or keyboards and screens are used to convey the message is totally irrelevant: What counts, is whether the pupils are subjects or direct objects in the process leading up to the exam and whether the exam is there - whether they are in the nominative or in the accusative case, to put it with Churchill’s form master. But being fully aware of the fact that it is too early to draw final conclusions and that everything we have done so far can be improved, I would nevertheless like to share some of our experiences with you.

For the lower secondary school, we will give pupils access to a specially constructed website with links to other sites related to a specific topic. For one and a half days, they are to work together to find and discuss information and then to prepare for the day of the exam. On this day, they will be asked to answer a rather limited question connected to the topic and then to write a substantial text on the topic based on their notes and their own approaches to the topic. This means that we do not give them a traditional task to solve; rather they have to ask a question themselves and then answer it - in accordance with what is considered important competence in today’s society. On the day of the exam, they are not, however, allowed to co-operate, but they may use whatever other aid they choose except textbooks and the Internet.

For the foundation course in the upper secondary school we have tested several solutions. One of the questions developed by some teachers taking part in the project goes like this:

Two weeks before the test, the pupils are given the following information:

In the following two-week period, in your English lessons, you are to work on literature, more specifically science fiction. The information and knowledge you gather will be useful on the day of the test.

Task

Find and read some science fiction short stories and articles about science fiction. Focus on characteristics and functions of this genre.

You will find useful links on the following Internet site:
http://home.online.no/~ingskit/englesh_links/

This site will also give you the opportunity to communicate with other pupils who are taking the same test. You can share information and links. Make sure that you check the message board regularly to see if there are any new postings.

When the mock exam came, the pupils were instructed to work individually, but they were allowed to use whatever help they wanted except the Internet to do one of the following tasks:

a) Write a text in which you discuss the following statement: “One of the functions of science fiction literature is to be critical of today’s society.”

b) Write a science fiction story in which you criticise some aspects of society in the UK or the US.

I am not too happy with the lack of setting here (for what purpose are they to find texts and information, in which context is the statement to be discussed and who are the readers of the pupils’ own stories?). But, apart from that, we observed that organising the preparation section the way we did here was rather successful because it did not take time from other subjects.
Another solution than the preparation section and exam alternative is production and documentation. This implies that on the first day the pupils are given a task, e.g. this one here, which they are asked to solve without any restrictions on using aids and co-operating.

**Setting**

The United Kingdom is a popular place to visit. Families, pensioners, groups from various companies and organisations often go to this country on holiday or on excursions.

Your class is now planning an excursion to learn more about the United Kingdom. You will be away for about one week. You are to work in groups to plan your excursion.

Your group's assignment is to find three goals for field trips within the same geographical areas. You are to focus on history, education and trade and business.

You have been instructed to visit

- a museum or a historical site
- a school and
- a company or other business

Other people in your class will also suggest goals for field trips, so make sure you are prepared to argue in favour of your proposals so that you can convince your teachers and fellow pupils that your choices are best.

It is important that you co-operate with others to find material and information, but each of you will hand in your own individual presentation. You should start your work by agreeing on how responsibility for the group work should be shared. Tomorrow you will hand in your presentation together with the text you write during the documentation part of the examination.

You may want to try this link as a starting point for your group work today:

http://dir.yahoo.com/Regional/Countries/United_Kingdom/

**Task**

Write a short presentation of your destinations in which you include convincing arguments in favour of each of them.

The following day they were not given a new task. They would work independently, without any other aid than dictionaries and their product from the first day, which was to count up to 50% when it came to assessment. The purpose of the next day was to make the pupils document that they had understood the information they had found and could answer for their product from the first day by doing the following:

As part of the preparations for the trip you are asked to write a text for your classmates and your English teacher. In this text you should do the following:

- Report on the way you and your group worked in order to find information. Also, tell your readers whether your research and group work taught you something new about the United Kingdom.
- When visiting the museum or historical site, a school and a company or business, you may have noted something that strikes you as "typically British". Report on findings that you think are typical of the country and/or its people and give reasons why you think your examples are "typically British".
- Finish your text by suggesting other things you would like to do as part of your preparation for an excursion to the United Kingdom. You may, for instance, touch upon culture and entertainment, sports, tourist attractions, geography, etc.

Write your text as one coherent piece. Your answer should not be longer than five pages.
Clearly this is testing at another and, hopefully, higher level. But is the difference between these "ICT exam questions" and the ones I presented earlier in the lecture, really so great? Are we testing knowledge, or are we testing competence?

Neither sages nor guides, but midwives

A bit of both, probably. But roughly speaking, one of the lessons from this experimental work is that everything we have been doing more or less reminds us of the title of one of Charles Dickens' novels — The Old Curiosity Shop (not to speak of The Little Shop of Horrors). Thinking of co-ordinates with knowledge and competence representing the axes, I think most of the questions would be far closer to the knowledge axis than to the competence axis. One of the reasons is probably the rules and regulations connected with the examination system. Another reason is that our scope is limited.

The Norwegian writer Aksel Sandemose concludes his novel En flyktning krysser sitt spor ("A refugee crosses his tracks") by describing an 800-metre high mountain in the interior of Newfoundland, Halfway Mountain. It takes a day to walk around it, the main character says, and it is interesting to see how the mountain changes when you look at it from different directions. There are a thousand different descriptions of Halfway Mountain, and all of them are correct, he continues, "I feel a strong need to tell you this now," he says, "that the mountain is big and many-sided, but he who was lying in chains on the ground only saw Halfway Mountain from where he was lying." (Sandemose 1962).

It is strange to note how certain teachers seem more fascinated by the Vanity Fair of keyboards and screens than by the opportunities this new tool provides us to make the pupils the masters of their own learning process. Not a few ICT freaks in the classrooms spend too much time on doing the same old things in a quicker and more entertaining way and are not able to see how ICT can help us change learning conditions and the exams. The tradition from all the dead generations, Karl Marx once wrote, weighs heavily like a mare on the minds of the living generations...

Whatever the degree of Great Expectations we had when starting the experimental work, it is evident that ICT is no shrew that needs to be tamed, no Treasure Island by itself. ICT is there to help us change the teacher's role. It has been said that the "the teacher should not be the sage on the stage, but the guide on the side." It rhymes, but that is no excuse for this slogan: Pupils need more than guides; they need midwives to help them find their own way to knowledge and to deliver!

The 'dot.com' society is only one of the names that may be used about our society. Some weeks ago, I listened to a director in the offshore industry talking about key words describing the desired competence in his firm: flexibility, initiative and cross-curricular competence. The collaborators work in independent teams on project work. Today's society wants workers who are innovative, independent, creative, and versatile workers with broad competence who can cooperate and be responsible for their own life-long learning. There is no need for assembly-line workers.

Whether we like these ingredients in the profit-making process or not, our pupils must be prepared for the job-market. It has been said that in a society where knowledge is the most important resource, learning will be the most important process. What we need, then, is a pedagogical framework that suits the individual learner (more than the individual teacher). The director I am referring to said that his firm wanted to cultivate the unique competence of each collaborator. Why should not the school system be able to do the same, and why should not the exam questions reflect such an attitude? Since it is important to teach the pupils in accordance with their future needs, not in accordance with our past, we will have to change both the conditions for and the content of the learning process, and the form of examination and assessment.

Construct knowledge

I wrote before that the question we must ask ourselves when constructing examination questions is: "When in life do we solve such problems?" If the answer is never, well, then the problem should not be given as an exam question at all. But I think we must add: When in life do we solve such questions under these circumstances? Then even the exam questions that we have developed in Norway, and that we have every reason to be proud of within the limitations we are forced to take into account, still need to be scrutinised.

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5 Translated by me for this lecture. — KG.
consideration, will be inadequate: It is difficult to combine the desired competence in business and administration with answering centrally set exam questions in splendid isolation, with or without preparation sections, and with or without ICT. Therefore not only the past, but also the present, can be labelled imperfect.

Professor Sandra Wills, director of the centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources at the University of Wollongong, Australia, quoted, in a lecture in Oslo before Easter, one of her own slogans: "Discuss and construct rather than instruct". Such an attitude may contribute to a change in the teacher's role and, if the required conditions are there (I will come to that soon) transform the learning process. The pupils must learn to construct their own knowledge (and, let me add, be able to defend, discuss and answer for it). This is where the teacher as midwife comes in. "To learn is to develop a relationship between what the learner knows already and the new system presented to him, and this can only be done by the learner himself" (Barnes 1976). This idea is not new, however, and it has, in principle, nothing to do with ICT, because it was developed by the Greek philosopher Socrates 2430 years ago.

It will therefore be necessary to introduce problem-based learning in the educational system before we can draw conclusions about assessment in the digital age. More than encouraging the quest for the correct answers, the teachers must help the pupils to learn, like Hamlet, to formulate the appropriate questions in the given circumstances. They must learn to transform information found on the Internet and other places into knowledge and find out what to do with it.

This is a question of seeing the opportunities, of describing Halfway Mountain from another angle, of accepting that there are more things in heaven and earth than have been dreamed of in our pedagogical practice. "It's not that it / isn't the world / that i'm seeing / from my window," says the Danish poet Inge Pedersen, "but that the frame / is so narrow.

Since today's employees need broad competence more than in-depth competence, centrally set exams, although we make the questions as open-ended as we can, will probably have difficulties coping with demand. Then we need to do something with the exam to meet the demands and work towards a more participatory evaluation.

Lessons from the experimental work

Perhaps the lower secondary school question, where one defines one's own topic and approach, is a good beginning. The idea of production and documentation that I described earlier, may be another of the starting-points; something that could be developed further, at least in a stage of transition, as long as we know that Linus in Peanuts is not right when he thinks he has grasped the point. Linus asks Charlie Brown: "How come you won't help me with my homework?" When Charlie Brown replies, "You don't really want help. What you really want is someone else to do the work for you!" Linus says: "That's education, isn't it?" he is not right because he does not see Halfway Mountain from all possible angles. If the production part of the exam had been written, and the important documentation part had been oral, Linus would easily have been unmasked if Charlie Brown had written the production part for him.

Anyway, to sum up what life demands of us when constructing questions testing competence: The pupils should be given the opportunity to co-operate and use as many aids as possible. Theory should have to be applied in a practical setting. The questions must be open-ended, they must include more than isolated knowledge, and it must be up to the pupils to define the problem and the approach to it. Just as when running broad jump outside the classroom, the pupils' competence decides the quality of the result. So, the examiners must accept individual solutions not only because of the different abilities, but - most of all - because of the different approaches. Consequently, there should be no keys to the answers, and the examiners should be instructed to take the strong sides of each individual into account.

When Bob Dole was asked to define the essence of his presidential campaign, he replied gravely: "It's about the future. Because that's where we're going." Exams as they are today, whether with or without ICT, are not the final stop along the road for the independent learner who can display his or her competence of English in real life. In a way it could be tempting to change Cato major a bit and make "Praetereor censo examen esse delendum" the new slogan, but on the other hand we must bear in mind that the question is probably not "to assess or not to assess", but how and when and for what
purpose assessment should be carried out. In any case, it must be possible to find ways of assessing pupils' competence that are more lovely and more temperate than a system developed in China 2000 years ago...

So my final words will not be "Good night, sweet assessment". The rest is not silence, and especially not history, but the rest belongs to the future "because that's where we're going". An examination system based on oral documentation of a written product and more emphasis on continuous assessment during the learning process is not self-contradictory. But if we want to change conditions for and the content of learning, we must start with the final achievement tests. If we introduce a new element together with, or perhaps instead of the exam, we will, because of the enormous wash-back effect that exams have on the learning process, focus (more) on this new element, even despite the questions I have described here, which are certainly better than the questions I was subjected to in my youth.

School reforms demand new ways of working and a shift of focus from teaching to learning. This, in turn, requires other methods of assessment than those we have been practising up to now (including those I have presented here). Changed exams may contribute to changing the work in the classroom. To put it even more strongly. Changing the exam is no doubt the strongest power of change we possess. This change is what I called the required conditions for a real change in the teacher's role.

Whatever method we use, and whatever ideology we are influenced by, the cost of the traditional exam system is tremendous. What if we distribute the money spent on examinations in May and June (and in my country also in November and December) over the entire school year? Would the effect on the learning process be equally tremendous so that we could concentrate on portfolio assessment, perhaps the assessment method that more than others corresponds to real life?

We want emphasis on alternative assessment methods. Compulsory use of portfolio assessment will, much more than the exam questions I have shown you, stimulate self-reflection and self-assessment and learner-initiated learning and assessment. The general part of the national curriculum in Norway says that pupils are to be active participants in the assessment activities and that their competence to take responsibility for assessing their own work should be strengthened. So, paradoxically, we will have to change or even abolish the strongest element in our assessment system, today's examination forms, to make these words come true and make pupils "the participants, rather than the objects of assessment" (Paulson et al. 1991). Such a goal would certainly be in accordance with the concept of language competence being applied in real life.

As a beginning, steps are being taken to introduce the European Language Portfolio in the educational system all over Europe. There is no doubt that this will have a tremendous effect on learning. In Norway, the English Department at the University of Bergen is experimenting with a digital portfolio for evaluation of the pupils' linguistic competence with support from the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, Austria.

Like other things, assessment may be used for various purposes according to the interests of the parties involved. But applied with the necessary human touch, assessment may be used to empower pupils with tools to change the world for the better, not by means of Prospero's magic wand or cloak, but by means of their own strength and competence.

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How do we know how well the children are learning?
By Barbara Roosken

In 1996 I became involved in a Lingua A project entitled 'Teacher Training and the Teaching of Foreign Languages to Young Children'. It concerns the teaching of a foreign language to young learners in Spain, Scotland, Belgium, Austria, Italy and The Netherlands. The young learners are children in the age range three to six. They are learning English, Spanish, French or Dutch mostly within the framework of an official educational system.

In the first year of the project the partner universities collected teaching materials, teacher's input and observation sheets. Together we came up with a hypothesis of the curriculum for young learners, taking into account the different socio-cultural backgrounds of the infants and the six national curricula regarding pre-school teaching. In the second year we focused on the instructional approach and on questions such as how to assess young learners, why assess young learners, who are the assessors and how do we train the assessor? In the final year (this year), the Lingua group will come up with a training model based on action research.

It is right that in any innovative project, such as the introduction of a foreign language at pre-school stages, a great deal of effort should be focused on the planning and preparation, and that this work should take careful consideration of theoretical underpinning and other influences which will impinge on the effectiveness of learning and teaching. However, it is also important to measure in some way the success (or otherwise) of such a development. This article will therefore explore the topic of assessment in relation to young learners of a foreign language. The following questions need to be addressed:

What does the concept 'classroom-based assessment' mean?
Why do we want to assess young learners?
What might be appropriate assessment instruments?
Who is responsible for the assessment of young learners?

Classroom-based

It must be emphasised at the outset that assessment is viewed within the project as classroom assessment not the kind of summative assessment used to award grades to learners or to satisfy the accountability demands of an external authority. Much more appropriate in the present context is formative assessment that can be used as part of the teaching process to support and enhance learning. Smith (1999, p. 143) defined assessment as "a set of processes through which we try to understand and make inferences about a learner's development, skills and knowledge." This means that assessment is not based on one instrument only, but information is gathered from a set of instruments, from various sources.

Secondly, given the ethos of pre-school learning, it would seem appropriate not to separate assessment from learning and teaching but to regard it as an integral part of the process. In order to learn more about the progress of the individual learner, assessment should not be an activity carried out only on set occasions at the end of the learning process.

The teachers involved in our project spent a considerable amount of time with the young learners. They had many opportunities to observe and assess informally and were in the best position to record the young learners' progress. If classroom-based assessment is carried out systematically and is well-documented, it can furnish teachers with a full picture of learners' development over the year.

A helpful distinction is made between testing and assessment by Vale and Feunteun in their consideration of teaching children English (Vale and Feunteun. 1995: p227).

"Testing: A means of checking learning that has taken place with respect to a specified teaching context or input, often by means of a particular task. The results are usually concrete and can be expressed quantitatively, for instance as a mark or as a percentage.

Assessment: An attempt to analyse the learning that a child has achieved over a period of time as a result of the classroom/teaching/learning situation. Assessment does not need to be based on a
particular task, nor is it usually expressed as a mark or percentage. It may include a subjective (teacher) opinion of the achievement of a child in terms of attitude, participation, socialisation, and general cognitive and physical development, etc. Assessment may be expressed relatively in that the progress of a single child can be measured against her/his individual starting points and abilities rather than compared against the skills and abilities of other children, as in the traditional testing situation.

The use of tests and other assessment instruments is discussed in more detail in section on 'how to assess'. It is important, however, to emphasise that it is the wider definition of assessment rather than the restricted testing techniques that is favoured in the present project.

Why assess?

Smith (1999) classifies a variety of functions for assessment into three major groups: accountability, certification, and to form and encourage learning. Assessing young learners for accountability or certification purposes is of little or no help to the learners. With regard to young learners, the major function of assessment is therefore to form and encourage learning, and it is mainly carried out within the classroom under the responsibility of the teacher.

Goleman in 'Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ’, (1996) argues the case for account to be taken of a separate emotional intelligence. He describes the significance of self-knowledge and belief systems, the ability to defer immediate gratification and set purposeful goals. His work provides a powerful argument for the key prerequisites underlying our classroom-based assessment model:

- create a positive and supportive learning environment;
- build and maintain positive self-esteem;
- encourage the setting of personal performance tasks;
- develop reflective and meta-cognitive thinking as part of a regular review activity.

If assessment forms an integrated part of the work that goes on every day in the communicative classroom, the children should not be able to distinguish any difference between practice activities and assessment activities. As far as they are concerned they perform a task which they find interesting, enjoyable and challenging. It is the use the teacher makes of the activity that can turn it from a practice into an assessment activity. By observing the children's behaviour the teacher can assess the activity itself, the progress of the group and the success of the individual children.

Most activities which promote learning can be assessed in some way, by the teacher or by the children themselves. The teachers involved in the project posed the following types of questions when attempting to assess the effectiveness of the learning taking place:

Did the class/ the individual:

- understand the task/ activity?
- complete the task/ activity?
- interact well together?
- seem interested in the task?
- lose or maintain interest until the end?
- take part or were passive?
- seem happy with their achievement?

How to assess?

A range of assessment instruments are needed to follow the individual learner's development and progress. Information has to be gathered from a variety of sources. The following assessment instruments have been found useful during the project.
Self assessment

Self assessment is a basic requirement for meta-cognitive learning and for independent learning. This form of assessment involves looking at oneself in a mirror, although it is not a subjective opinion formed out of context and without input from others. Information can come from three sources:

1) feedback one gets from important others,
2) previous experience with similar tasks and
3) how one's peers succeed in doing the same task.

People self-assess every task they do and also during the learning process. Learners compare themselves to their peers, they show their work to their teachers, knowing more or less if they have done a good job or not. They complete a task with a rough idea of how well they have done. They know, however, also which tasks they were able to do and which they could not. Teachers can see only the outcome of the learning process, they have no inside information which might be useful in forming a comprehensive picture of the learner.

Portfolio

For several years now in the Netherlands, portfolio assessment has been promoted by many educators as being the best alternative for language testing. The motivation behind this idea is to avoid the danger that teachers may 'teach towards the test', especially when the results of the tests have serious consequences. As a result of this approach, often children's understandings are 'fragile' instead of 'robust' (Shepard, 1997). They appear to know a concept in one context but appear not to know it when asked in another way or in another setting. Mastery of the subject appears to be secure but does not transfer because the learners have mastered classroom routines and not the underlying concepts. "Good teaching constantly asks about old understandings in new ways, calls for new applications, and draws new connections" (Shepard, 1997, p.27). Good assessment does the same.

Portfolio assessment appears to provide a more authentic means of assessing a learner's ability. The portfolio is an ideal instrument to develop learning skills as well as a good tool for establishing a learning dialogue with individual learners within the Proximal Development Zone, the zone in which the learner functions with assistance (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus learning takes place if it is located in the zone beyond the level of already mastered material, but below the level that cannot be connected to previous learning.

Smith (1999) defined the learner portfolio as a purposeful collection of a learner's work collected over a period of time. If the portfolio is used for learning as well as for assessment purposes, she suggests that it includes a compulsory part as well as an optional part. Such a process can be seen to have distinct advantages for older learners but will require considerable modification if it is to succeed with very young learners. It has been found useful with young learners to have less extensive portfolios and to work out a portfolio outline for a theme or a topic. It is obviously inappropriate that young learners should be presented with large assignments and with long-term feedback.

With young learners, too, it is wise to inform parents about the portfolio work which can be used as documentation of the child's learning of a foreign language at parents' meetings. The child is invited to present the portfolio to the parents, so that the parents can become engaged in their child's learning of a foreign language.

Suitably adapted, as a means of charting children's progress the portfolio can be immensely useful to teachers, parents and the children themselves.

Tests

We finally come to discuss the use of tests in the language classroom for young children. We do believe that tests play an important role in motivating and assessing young learners, but they are only one out of several instruments used to get information about the language learning and ability of the learner. Leuven University presented the children with a pre-test and a post-test. The purpose of the pre-test was to find out how much English the children already knew before the introduction of the
foreign language into the nursery school. The post-test was meant to measure how much progress had been made beyond the result of the pre-test.

The Dutch partner, as well as the Spanish and Italian partner used The Initial Child Profile to produce a formal assessment of every child in their classroom. In addition the teachers wrote personal observation sheets of each child. Elements such as personal development, language and literacy, mathematics, knowledge and understanding of the world, creative development, physical development, gross motor skills were included.

Who carries out the assessment?

The answer to the final question asked in the introduction is given in what is written above. The main responsibility of assessment lies with the teacher. It takes place in the classroom during the learning process. The main difference between assessing language learning of young and adult learners is that with older learners the most important goal are the content goals revealed in the product of learning whereas with young learners the attitude goals and the learning to learn goals are most important. It is the process of learning more than the product of learning teachers should be interested in.

The second group of assessors are the learners themselves. Training young learners in self-assessment is related to learning to formulate goals. However, learners will not want to assess themselves, unless their assessment is taken seriously.

Conclusions:

There are several conclusions to be drawn from this article. For a full account of the Lingua A Project (56330-CP-99-ES-LA) I would like to refer to the report which will be published at the end of this academic year by Brussels. It will also include a video together with a booklet which has a small selection of the recordings made in the Foreign Language lessons.

According to the Lingua group assessment should be on-going/ continuous rather than one-off and infrequent, deal with topics that have relevance for the children, take account of the child’s abilities in the first language and be learner-centred. The Lingua group of teacher trainers is fully aware that much more work needs to be put into the assessment of young learners. We hope that our research will promote reflective debates on teaching Foreign Languages to very young learners.

References


"Ways and Measures " A Review

Teaching and Assessing Young Learners of English as a Foreign Language

Edited by Charles Mifsud and Gorg Mallia
Msida, Malta
Published by World Academic
ISBN (Paperback) 99932-606-0-6

This book is the proceedings of the very successful joint IATEFL Young Learners/TEA SIG and the University of Malta conference on ‘Teaching and Assessing Young Learners’ held in March 1999 at the University of Malta.

The Introduction to the book says that the teaching and assessment of young learners of English as a Foreign Language have become especially important in recent years. One reason for this has been the introduction of English as a foreign language in a number of countries throughout the world. The issues of teaching and assessment are closely linked. How they come together or at times do not come together, is a matter of grave concern for all those involved in education. The papers in this collection range from theoretical discussions of issues and policy implementation to research and practical classroom suggestions. They provide opportunities for enlightened reflection on a number of issues and present ideas for effective practices.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section presents both research and practical teaching and learning considerations.

The second section explores the interplay between teaching and learning and assessment. A number of country cases and research reports are presented in this section.

With such a wide variety of material there is something for everyone involved in teaching and assessing young learners from early childhood to teenagers. It is a very useful book that will also make interesting reading for teachers and university research students and educators alike.

It is available from the INTEL office at the special conference price of £12.

Cartoon: Calvin and Hobbes by Bill Watterson. From The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book, page 184. Copyright © Bill Watterson, 1995 CALVIN AND HOBBES. Reprinted with permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved.
YL SIG Discussion Group Report number 1

The YL sig discussion group began mid September 1999 and we have seen 836 messages go out to teachers all over the world. It’s a fantastic resource, and I really enjoy reading people’s contributions. However, I have noticed a trend in the number of messages:
- they are decreasing;
- it appears to reflect periods of the year.

I looked at the stretch of messages from September 1999 till July 16th 2001, and came up with the following division:
1) September to January - most active time
2) February to June - beginning to dwindle
3) July & August - playing dead on the beach!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time span</th>
<th>Nº messages / time span</th>
<th>Nº messages / day</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 1999 to January 2000</td>
<td>227 messages</td>
<td>1.5 messages / day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2000 to June 2000</td>
<td>197 messages</td>
<td>1.3 messages / day</td>
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<tr>
<td>July &amp; August 2000</td>
<td>15 messages</td>
<td>0.25 messages / day</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2000 to January 2001</td>
<td>205 messages</td>
<td>1.3 messages / day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2001 to June 2001</td>
<td>108 messages</td>
<td>0.7 messages / day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fascinating stuff!

The comments I have had on the discussion group are very positive, and thank you for those, but as moderator the final figures for February to June 2001 are quite disappointing. The discussion group is everybody’s tool. It is such a rich resource, which we should all be using to share ideas and findings and solve problems. So, what is happening?

A point which was brought up by Eleanor Watts is that all over the world, people are "chatting" less over the internet - perhaps because the novelty has worn off and we are frustrated by the difficulty of developing friendships with people we are never likely to meet.

I have two theories. One, based on being involved in several discussion groups from the very beginning, is that initially teachers are excited and keen to see who is there, what they are up to and what they do. After a while this enthusiasm dies and a set of people are left replying to messages, often sent by newcomers who are just starting and also very keen to find out what’s going on! Another theory is that this discussion group has focussed on VERY YOUNG LEARNERS. This perhaps indicates the interests some of the more vocal of us feel in this area, but I am sure does not reflect the age group with which the majority of teachers are working. It would be good to read more messages covering the Young Learner bracket enabling a larger number of teachers to discuss, share or divulge ideas and problems concerning TEENAGERS.

Let me just explain why I have written VERY YOUNG LEARNER and TEENAGER. Messages in January 2000 were fascinating as we realised that we were talking about Young Learners, and not really knowing what age group this involved. IATEFL defines Young Learners as young as 3 years and as old as 18 years. Our discussion included reasons for dividing the term into sub sets and involved many teachers’ points about what it meant to be a Young Learner. The discussion was very diplomatically brought to a close by Christopher Etchells, our sig co-ordinator, who defined the age groups thus:

Very Young Learners < 7
Children = 7 - 12
Teenagers = 13 to 17

YOUNG LEARNERS
However, he believes, and rightly so, that these distinctions can only be taken seriously if used appropriately, for example a separate section in our newsletter.

Another thread of interest, which has dominated many of the messages, is stories and their use in the Young Learner classroom. We shared examples of traditional stories from all over the world, and Eleanor Watts chose several for our Story themed newsletter.

REALBOOKS have played a major role in much of what we have read. Realbooks are "REAL picture BOOKS written for children's enjoyment and enrichment with no specific language teaching aim. The language that accompanies the pictures is authentic to native speaker children." (Dunn 1997)

Christmas 1999 saw us enthralled with 'Little Robin Red Breast', a Realbook suggested by Linda Hugget in Germany. Many of us bought the book and used it in our classes or in training sessions, and messages about the book were still being sent into the new school year and through to Christmas of 2000. We've had lesson plans, poems and songs, amazing really!

Many websites have been passed around and Christopher Etchells and Beatriz Lupiano have added them to the YLSig website. We have had job and training course advertisements, pleas for end of term or Christmas party ideas, requests for definitions of terms and help in finding references. There have been opportunities to read about what people are doing in different parts of the world too. I especially like reading about teacher associations which are being set up for YL teachers, the most recent being in Bulgaria. It is a fascinating site and I really enjoy moderating it.

I hope this very short review will have brought those of you who are not yet on the discussion group up to date; it's been very brief and I have only touched on a very little of what has gone on. In September we are hoping to revitalise the discussion group and set up some themed discussions, with your input we can make the site a real learning tool.

If you have access to an email system, do join us, and if you are working with the older age bracket of our Young Learner sig, send in some contributions. If you've got an idea that works, a problem that you can't seem to overcome or issues that you'd like to explore, why not air your views, share your ideas and discuss solutions with colleagues on your list? I look forward to the returned enthusiasm of September, when the YLSig discussion group comes back to life

References

Dunn O. 1997 REAL BOOK NEWS Issue 2 page 1

You can find out more about Opal Dunn's REALBOOK newsletter at www.realbooks.co.uk

Sandie Jones Mourão

SIG Co-ordinator
Kari Smith, based in Israel

Deputy
Dave Allan, based in UK

International contacts
Niall Henderson, based in Italy

General duties
Christine Coombe, based in the Emirates

Web Site Manager & Newsletter Editor
Carel Burghout, based in The Netherlands

TEA SIG

Members can be contacted through IATEFL.

The Newsletter is published three times a year. We welcome contributions or suggestions for future newsletters on any aspects of Testing, Evaluation and Assessment. Contributions to the Newsletter will be easier to edit if you send them as Word attachments to an email message.

E-mail to carel.burghout @planet.nl if you have no access to e-mail, hard copy (a printed document) scans best if you send it in bold type with a large font, for instance Arial 12. Hard copies can be mailed to:

C.F. Burghout, Kloosterstraat 59, 5038 VN
Tilburg, The Netherlands
Can you think of a more exciting venue for a conference than in the beautiful refurbished building of the British Institute overlooking the Ponte Vecchio in the centre of Florence? The Young Learners SIG were lucky enough to be invited to join the British Institute of Florence Young Learners language centre to hold a conference for teachers of English in both the primary and secondary schools in Italy. The conference was opened by John Ayres (coordinator for SEAL Italy). He was followed by Shelagh Rixon, (University of Warwick) who gave the opening plenary which asked “What can Young Learners tell us?” In this talk she gave examples of children’s perceptions of language and of what language learning is all about, perceptions which were surprising as well as refreshing to many adults. Some implications for classroom teaching and for general approaches to language learning with Young Learners were also discussed. The main data was collected from children in Scuola Elementare in Tuscany.

Shelagh also gave a Workshop. Title - Language Awareness – an aid or a positive opportunity? The development in Primary school learners of Language Awareness through the experience of meeting a foreign language is something that has been widely – but not always clearly – discussed in the literature on Young Learners. In this workshop, she looked at a number of different interpretations of the “slippery” term Language Awareness, and for each she had developed some materials and teaching plans that would support the particular type of Language Awareness development.

This was followed by the concurrent workshops.
Helen Barrott, (British Institute Florence) introduced her workshop - Discipline – A Truly UnTEFL Topic! by asking “What’s the difference between participating in lively classroom activities and noting! Yeah Giovanni is enjoying his English lessons but at the expense of other children’s learning and the teacher’s sanity!” How to establish a positive learning environment in the YL classroom whilst maintaining a sense of order and a teacher/student relationship can often be a daunting task for a teacher which, if you get it wrong, can have disastrous consequences. In this workshop participants looked at some character studies which highlight common behaviour patterns in Young Learners and from this material we had the opportunity to discuss experiences with fellow colleagues and help each other by suggesting solutions to deal with difficult students.

Elizabeth Foody (Longmans Italy) gave a Workshop - Hands on is Minds On. She looked at “How to involve all your students in a meaningful language learning experience” - Getting children to actively participate in lessons means they learn more effectively. However, this doesn’t just mean involving the children in language learning activities (songs, games etc), it can also mean involving the students even further in the learning process by actually getting them to create learning tools, tools that they can use again and again in the classroom. This seminar provided ideas on how to involve all students in the creation of useful language learning tools, and therefore make the lessons more creative, personal and motivating.

Mark Fletcher, (English Experience, editor of BRAIN) talked about - Development of the Brain and Early Learning in his plenary session. He looked at what we know (and don’t know) about how the brain develops— and how that information relates to teaching children. He also gave a workshop on “Game Story” which gave some interesting activities which can be used to teach grammar—as well as building confidence and fluency.

Jim Robinson (O.U.P. Italy) followed with a workshop on - Listen, don’t just repeat. The ‘easiest’ of the 4 skills risks being underdeveloped if it is not activated. “Listening” activities work is best when done in conjunction with other skills or actions. In this session he outlined the importance of Listening and illustrated a wide range of practical examples of Listen and...... (not just repeat).

Wendy Superfine, (O.U.P author) also gave a Workshop on - Making Topics Memorable. This looked at ways to support an E.F. L topic based curriculum and gave the teachers of Young Learners ways to adapt and adopt the wide range of materials and methodologies. Ways of extending and improving the topics found in course books were explored using activities involving stories, songs, games and rhymes.
Maria Toth's (Heinemann) plenary on *Children and Chunks* looked at how a range of activities such as songs, dances and games can be used to expose children to useful language chunks that can then be transferred to other contexts within the child's world.

She analysed the importance of transfer in meaningful language learning. Her workshop *Act it Out!* This session developed ideas on how to prepare children for an acting out activity in the classroom. She looked at how to set up and carry out different types of drama activities based on stories with 5 and 7 year-olds.

Gabby Pritchard, (Macmillan Heinemann) also gave a workshop on *Sight and Sound*. She discussed how can we channel young children's natural enthusiasm and energy in order to get the best out of them? Through appealing to both the visual and auditory senses, we can help to create a fun and exciting language learning environment.

This practical session focused on a variety of ideas to exploit visual material including the use of imaginative photographs, cartoons and games. Ways to use sound, ranging from fantasy to music, were investigated through stories, practical activities and songs.

Phil Lazzaro's (Florence) workshop was on *Dealing with the multicultural classroom*.

Education departments in many countries have addressed multiculturalism in different ways. In Italy this is a relatively recent phenomenon. This workshop concentrated on how some Australian Schools have dealt with multiculturalism; why a multicultural perspective in curriculum development is important and what the implications are for language teachers in particular. Practical activities in fostering multicultural awareness were provided and discussed throughout the talk.

The conference closed with a delicious display of Italian delicacies and drinks and a conference dinner leaving the participants replete in both mind and body!

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**Bridging the Gap:**

**Teacher Collaboration in Cross-Phase Assessment**

by Elaine Coleman and Wendy Segal

Elaine Coleman teaches English as a foreign language in "Mavo HaGalil", a primary school in the Upper Galilee in Israel. Wendy Segal teaches English and is English Head at "Har VaGalil" Regional High School, also in the Upper Galilee.

The writers are involved in a partnership between primary and secondary school teachers of EFL in the Upper Galilee, the aim of which is to ease the transition and placement of pupils across the 6th to 7th grade divide through agreed-upon assessment tools and related professional dialogue. The ongoing enterprise could be called an experiment in "cross-phase collaborative action research".

The problem of transition

The gap we are attempting to bridge is the division between primary and secondary education systems. The transition from primary to secondary school is a stage at which reliable assessment techniques and the effective transfer of information constitute critical elements in the process of pupil placement and successful adjustment to the secondary school system.

Until recently, concern for smooth transition has not featured as a major issue in primary and secondary school debates, at least in Britain and Israel. Although problems were identified and general exhortations to teachers made, it was acknowledged that "cross-phase liaison has been neglected" (National Primary Centre of Britain 1994:1). In Israel, it was assumed that having a continuous, "seamless", primary-through-secondary school national curriculum for English (as EFL) guaranteed smooth transition and curriculum continuity without intervention. In Britain, a continuous national curriculum has existed since the early 1950s, yet even one of its architects expressed concern over "loss of momentum" across the primary-secondary divide (Dearing, in Foreword to SCAA 1996). He suggests that "the continuity of pupils' educational experience can be significantly enhanced by the quality of the professional links established between primary and secondary schools" (ibid).

In the literature, these "professional links" are commonly divided between information transfer and curriculum continuity. However, we believe that the two are interdependent. This is because information transfer requires norms or standards for common communication, and these norms, which are in the main related to assessment, must, if they are to be of use, be arrived at "through negotiation and debate over interpretation of the curriculum" (Segal 2000:4).
Thus, in the process we describe in this article, it can be seen that our initial concern was with the transfer of information regarding pupil assessments and that our engagement with this issue led us to address the issue of curricular continuity. Our experience over the past number of years definitely supports the contention cited above that the educational experience of pupils in transition can be enhanced by the "quality of professional links" across the interface or, in other words, by inter-school, cross-phase teacher collaboration. This article describes how we as teachers of EFL dealt and still deal with the problems of cross-phase transition between one Israeli secondary school and its feeder primary schools.

**Background**

Har VaGai (literally "Mountain and Valley") Regional High School is a rural high school (7th -12th grades) in the Upper Galilee. It has an intake of over one thousand pupils from different kinds of rural settlements, villages and small towns spread over a wide and varied catchment area. The eight primary schools that feed into Har VaGai are scattered over the same wide geographic and demographic area.

There is considerable diversity in teaching methods and conditions amongst the primary schools. Groups of pupils enter 7th grade having experienced different approaches and emphases in language skills, learning skills and types of assessment. These variations make the placement of pupils in suitable classes a difficult task and, of course, create a considerable challenge for curriculum continuity. In addition, as schools grew larger and small village schools were replaced by regional schools with large, diverse student and teacher populations, a growing sense of communication breakdown and alienation developed between the primary and secondary stages of schooling. Teachers at both stages felt that the existing procedures for assessment and relaying of relevant information were inadequate. This feeling of dissatisfaction prompted mutual consultation which grew into collaborative action research in assessment and evaluation.

**Action research**

Action research is generally considered appropriate for a teacher or teachers in a classroom situation (Nunan 1993, Wallace 1998) or, at the next level, for a staff within a school, where it becomes collaborative action research (Kemmis & McTaggart 1984, Burns 1999). Even at the staff level, the obstacles are great (Little 1986, Hargreaves 1994) and more often than not, the collaboration turns into "contrived collegiality" (Hargreaves 1994).

It follows from this that collaboration between schools and across phases (in our case primary-secondary) offers even greater obstacles, among them logistics and differences in every facet of school culture, from school ethos to methodological approach. Nonetheless, we have found ourselves involved in such collaboration for about seven years now, and the process has been almost as interesting as the outcomes, which are often unpredictable. One significant outcome has been a marked improvement in our assessment techniques and procedures, related to a reduction in formal tests and the opening up of assessment to many alternative forms.

A great advantage of action research is its cyclical or spiral nature, which sustains the collaborative endeavour and enriches the professional experience of the teacher participants. The cycle could be described thus: reflection - problem identification - preliminary investigation - hypothesis - plan implementation or action - outcome - reflection / reporting - new problem identified (Kemmis & McTaggart 1984, Nunan 1992, 1993). This cyclical, momentum-giving quality can be seen below in the stage-by-stage description of how we have tackled cross-phase assessment over the years. In retrospect we see that we have followed all the stages outlined above by Nunan and others and thus that our experience is in fact a case of "cross-phase collaborative action research".

**Cycles of collaborative action research on cross-phase assessment**

The account is based on Segal (2000:50-51) who interviewed teachers and examined records and minutes relating to collaboration between Har VaGai and primary school EFL teachers.

**Problem identification**

In the early 1990s, primary school teachers complained that the placement test sent to the primary schools by Har VaGai for use at the end of 6th grade created undue pressure and did not always test what was taught (content validity). Har VaGai teachers also wondered about both the reliability of a test administered under different conditions in different schools and marked by the class teachers, and
the fairness to pupils, for whom the test determined the set (level A, B or C) in which they would be placed. However flexible setting may be, suitable placement can still be crucial for a pupil's future in English learning.

Preliminary investigation and hypothesis
Discussions were held amongst 7th grade teachers and between 7th and 6th grade teachers to establish the source of the problem. They concluded that the pressure in 6th grade was due to the test falling in the midst of other class activities and the need to "teach to the test" (backwash effect). Sixth grade teachers also claimed that they had other means of assessing their pupils on a formative basis. It was proposed that the test be moved to the beginning of 7th grade. Content validity could be improved by consulting with primary school teachers over relevant content, and reliability, by uniform administration and marking.

Intervention (action) and outcome
The test was transferred to Har VaGai and took place during the first week of 7th grade. The content was adapted in accordance with input from primary school teachers. The outcome was that the pressure at the end of 6th grade was relieved, and both test validity and reliability improved. Primary teachers reported on a better atmosphere at the end of 6th grade and 7th grade teachers reported on greater reliability of the test in placing pupils. However, new problems emerged.

New problems identified
Teachers noted that pupils were suffering anxiety at having to undergo testing at the very beginning of the year in their new school. Classes underwent upheaval for the first few weeks as pupils were assigned to levels (sets) according to results of the test. The instability of the sets continued throughout the year.

Investigation, action and outcome
The results of the placement test were compared with written assessments provided by primary school teachers, which were based on yearlong, ongoing observation of the pupils. In addition, an analysis was made of the performance of pupils according to level. Another, two-fold hypothesis was proposed:

a) Primary teacher assessments are as reliable as any placement test.
b) Heterogeneous classes (as opposed to setting) would remove the need for "fine tuning" in allocation of pupils.

The test was abolished and replaced by teacher assessment and consultation. Assessment rubrics, at the time called "skill levels", were formulated and standardized through group consensus. In the 7th grade, heterogeneous classes were introduced. Only the weak learners would study in separate, smaller groupings.

Teachers reported on a smoother, less stressful transition for pupils and more stable class groupings. However, primary school teachers found some of the assessment rubrics unsatisfactory and so the rubrics underwent modification and continued to do so as the need arose. A specific instance of this ongoing modification was the need to refine assessment rubrics to incorporate developments in TEFL and in information technology, and to adapt to the New Curriculum for English (Israel Ministry of Education 1998), which came into effect in September 2000.

We would like to point out three aspects of the process described above. Firstly, our placement methods have evolved empirically and through consensus. Secondly, our endeavours have led us to broader professional issues - a case of positive backwash. In other words, as suggested earlier in this article, we became attentive to the interaction between assessment and curriculum and realized that norms on assessment can only be achieved through "interpretation of the curriculum". We have, therefore, begun to take a more holistic approach to assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Thirdly, the joint work has given rise to the development of a framework that has helped us continue to collaborate.

A framework for collaboration
Our framework consists of regular twice-yearly meetings of all 6th and 7th grade teachers, one in May, the other in October. The dates, venues, agendas and procedures are announced well in advance.
The aim is to maintain a two-way flow of information, both oral and written, through standard forms for assessment and for program evaluation that we regularly review and modify if necessary. These forms are sent out to the 6th grade teachers to be filled out and brought to the meeting.

At the May meeting (towards the end of the school year), time is allotted for one-to-one discussions between primary and secondary teachers about the pupils soon to be moving from 6th to 7th grade. The primary teacher presents their assessment sheet to a secondary colleague and the two teachers are able to discuss the pupils and their needs, ask and answer questions, or clarify points in a more immediate and direct fashion.

At the October meeting, soon after the start of our new school year, the secondary school teachers report in general on the pupils’ progress in 7th grade and how they fit in. They may further consult primary teachers about specific pupils, if they feel the need to do so. In addition, all teachers report on their teaching programme for the year. Thus, there is ongoing exchange of feedback and consultation. This is accompanied by continuous evaluation of assessment rubrics and curriculum. These meetings also provide a platform for open discussion of needs, problems and mutual expectations on both sides of the primary-secondary divide.

The creation of this forum has many other advantages, not the least being the contact it has provided between the primary school teachers, many of whom work, as EFL teachers, in relatively isolated conditions and who welcome the opportunity to discuss common issues and concerns. It is also very reassuring to parents of 6th graders, concerned about the impending transition, to hear that there is communication and cooperation between primary and secondary schools and to find the 6th grade teacher familiar with the situation, procedures and staff in the secondary school.

Quite early in the process, we felt that it would be appropriate to add elements of professional development and enrichment to each meeting. Teachers were asked to present topics of interest based on their own experience in work, studies or research. This initiative in professional development illustrates the way in which our initial goal, improving our cross-phase assessment procedures, also led us to address wider curricular and pedagogical issues, including curriculum continuity. The process gathers momentum as we write. The forum of teachers has become increasingly aware that a seamless national curriculum, whether the defunct 1993 or the new 1998 one, does not necessarily guarantee curriculum continuity. We are not alone in this gradual awakening. In Britain, Nicholls and Gardner (1999, 3) have stated it thus: "A continuous curriculum is all so logical that the non-educationalist might just wonder what could possibly go wrong". In fact, a whole litany of factors (Segal 2000:2) can trip up the momentum.

In order to confront these factors we decided that we needed to examine the continuum of learning between primary and secondary school and discover what breaks, if any, occur in the transition. We felt we did not want to interfere with each teacher’s freedom and independence in the classroom, nor with individual teaching style, so we chose to concentrate on the more tangible aspects of the continuum: teaching materials, development of study skills, computer literacy in English, and the relationship of all these to assessment.

We know that an in-depth reflection on these matters could not be achieved within the limited time available in our twice-yearly meetings (which take place on school days after teaching hours). We have, therefore, initiated a series of one-day workshops in school holidays. The first of these, in July 2001, was devoted to a mutual learning of textbooks and materials, and a comparison of the kinds of formative and summative assessment employed by the different primary schools and by Har VaGaI. All this naturally invites reflection on our cross-phase assessment rubrics, and this will take place in the winter recess. It seems that once embarked on this collaborative action cycle, there is no stopping it.
SKILL LEVELS – HAR VAGAI HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
Guidelines for completing the form “Sixth grade pupil assessment”

Reading Comprehension
0 – Doesn’t know the ABC
1 – Recognizes some of the letters, can’t put together words
1 ½ – Knows ABC, reads simple words
2 – Reads simple words and short sentences and understands
3 – Reads short paragraphs and understands in general
4 – Understands paragraphs and short stories and is able to answer content questions
5 – Reads fluently. Finds the 6th grade reader easy

Writing Ability (independent)
0 – Unable to form the letters
1 – Able to copy reasonably accurately
2 – Able to write words only
3 – Able to produce short simple sentences, with mistakes
4 – Able to produce reasonably correct longer sentences
5 – Able to write a short paragraph on a simple topic

Speech
1 – Cannot speak English at all
2 – Can say words
3 – Can make him/herself understood
4 – Reasonably fluent for 6th grade
5 – Native or near-native speaker

Oral Understanding
1 – Doesn’t understand anything
2 – Understands simple commands
3 – Understands simple sentences
4 – Understands most of what is said in class
5 – Native or near-native speaker

Estimated Level of Pupil
In Har VaGai, English classes are heterogeneous and based on the homeroom class. The aim is to give every pupil a chance. We call this class level A/B. However, weak pupils with minimal reading and understanding levels of 2-3 and who in your opinion would not survive in the large homeroom class are placed in a smaller “C” class. The non-readers are placed in a small group (4-6 pupils) for remedial teaching.

All pupils whom you estimate to be at an A, A/B or B level will automatically be placed in the heterogeneous (“A/B”) class. Those that you list as B/C will also most probably be placed, at least initially, in the heterogeneous class, unless you recommend otherwise. There is plenty of flexibility and fluidity between classes, so that nothing need seem final.

It is about these “borderline” pupils in particular that it will be important and helpful for us to hear from you in person, in face-to-face discussions.

Note: We are currently reexaming these rubrics as the new curriculum for English in Israel uses the concept of domains rather than the four traditional skills.
Bibliography


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THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK

M.A. IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS (BY DISTANCE)

The EFL Unit of the Department of Educational Studies, University of York, was the first Unit to run this highly specialised MA in TEYL in Britain. The course starts in July of each year (or in-country at other times of the year).

Course Director: Annie Hughes

This is a 2-year course comprising 8 multimedia self-study modules, plus participation in an annual 2-week preparatory course at York. Students can choose to focus on one of the following age groups: 6-11 years, 11-16 years, or 6-16 years.

Assessment is by eight module assignments over the course, some of which require the carrying out of small-scale classroom-based research projects. Emphasis is placed on the linking of theory and practice, making extensive use of material from authentic classrooms.

For further information contact:

The MA Secretary, EFL Unit,
University of York, York YO10 5DD, UK.
Telephone: +44 1904 432483 Fax: +44 1904 432481
E-mail: efl2@york.ac.uk

www.york.ac.uk/inat/ltc/efl/courses/ma/teyl.htm
Interview

The following interview of Melanie Williams by Niall Henderson took place in July 2001 at the Norwich Institute for Language Education.

Niall: Melanie, could you begin by telling us about your background and current areas of work?

Melanie: I started out in secondary teaching, but my real background is in EFL, in which I've been involved for a long time, in Young Learners. I work mostly in teacher-training, and my areas of interest are methodology and the assessment of young learners.

Niall: Are you involved in the Cambridge Young Learners exams?

Melanie: I was involved to some extent at the beginning, and I've done some work in China with teachers who are using the exams, helping them to see what's behind the questions, looking at tasks they might do in class to prepare learners for what they will meet in the exams, if this is different from what they would normally do in the classroom.

Niall: To clear up one point, on which people's answers vary widely - in your view, what are young learners?

Melanie: Yes - in my view, learners between 5 or 6 and 11 or 12.

Niall: That's narrower than some see it.....

Melanie: Yes, it is. At the University of York, where I work on the M.A., there we consider 6 - 16 to be young learners. Most people, when they think of young learners, correlate the concept with primary school. In the U.K. it's 5 - 11, but in other countries it might run up to 14, or even 16. It's looking at what learners are able to do, and their level of cognitive development. It depends what field or area you are working in.

Niall: Earlier, you talked about "assessment" of young learners - you didn't use the word "testing". Was that deliberate?

Melanie: It was, yes. As we said before, I've been involved with the Cambridge Young Learners exams in English to some extent, and I see that with assessment there is a place for testing. I would think of it as classroom testing, integrated testing. With young learners there are so many factors we take account of in addition to teaching them English: we're also thinking about their general development, development of confidence, motivation..... Those are often our objectives, and when I think about assessing young learners, I'm thinking that we need to assess them in relation to our objectives in teaching English at that age. What might our objectives be? Yes, some of them are linguistic, but some of them are non-linguistic; and within the linguistic there are the receptive skills of listening and reading, which may be easier to test in some circumstances. With the productive skills, speaking and writing, in terms of testing young learners, it's quite challenging.

So I would use "assessment" to mean continuous, integrated assessment the teachers, during their teaching programme, are observing, monitoring the learning, and keeping notes in relation to the objectives they are working towards.

Niall: And do you think (I know I'm asking for a blanket statement, but) do you think, by and large, that tests act as a motivating factor at those younger ages, or can they have the opposite effect? Obviously, they can do both, but...

Melanie: They can do both, but I think it's important to remember that in a lot of contexts tests are a part of the educational structure, part of the educational system, and learners do expect to do them. They can be very motivating for young learners if they are formative, if there is some feedback, if the learners know what's going on, and if there is a chance to "revisit" what has been tested. It's also important that they have adequate notice of what's going to be tested, and how it's going to be tested. However, if that information is kept secret, or if the outcome of the test doesn't feed back into the learning process, there is the danger that learners can become demotivated, particularly young learners, because they don't understand what's going wrong, or why, why they got a lower mark than someone else, and so on.
Niall: In your experience, do you think that learners up to, let’s say, the age of 12 are capable of self-assessment in any really meaningful way?

Melanie: I think they are, but it’s more about us finding out where they are in terms of cognitive development than about them being able to, in any objective way, assess what their level is. We can find out if they’re motivated, we can find out if they feel good about English, we can find out what they think they might have learnt... but that may not necessarily be the same as what they actually have learnt. So, if we think about portfolio assessment and self-assessment – yes, it can help us to see where learners are in terms of development, but it’s not always an accurate picture. It tells us something....

Niall: Is assessment an area that stimulates you?

Melanie: Yes, it is.

Niall: Why?

Melanie: “Challenge” is a word I’d put there, too. In the past, assessment always seemed to be something that was avoided. There were the tests, but nobody talked about them, or what effect they had. I wanted to get to grips with this, which I have over the last few years, and I do find it challenging and stimulating, because I think that if we’re going to be fair to learners, and if we’re going to have any valid outcomes from what we do, we do need assessment. In many situations, because there’s a mismatch between the teaching and the assessment (often testing), the methodology changes, the teaching changes, the materials change. The testing and assessment doesn’t change. How can we be fair, and how can we get a valid assessment of what they really know?

Niall: I imagine that the conflict between validity and reliability is even greater than usual when dealing with young learners. How do you view that conflict?

Melanie: It’s very true. Most people, and I’m one of them, would say that it’s validity that matters. 

What’s going on in the classroom? And how can the assessment reflect that? We need a match. It needs to be fair. The operations, the tasks, need to be similar, the expectations similar, the outcomes similar. We’re not doing discrete item testing when that is not what has been going on in the classroom. It’s the validity that matters. This is often problematic in making an objective statement about where the child is, and so we end up sometimes trying to correlate that significant aspect with a mark or a grade, which is what the parents want or what the school requires.

Niall: My final question is whether there are any changes or developments which you can see coming, or which you would like to see.

Melanie: One of the things I’d like to see is attempts to break things down – there are things we can assess through tests, there are things for which we need a combination of tests and continuous assessment, and so on – and also developments in building up profiles of learners. Profiling is done in portfolios, but I’m not thinking of that. Teachers often find that they have built up a picture of the whole child through various forms of assessment, but at the end of the year the school, the parents, the pressure of the system tell them that they should only contribute the marks from tests to the overall final assessment. So the teachers have been collecting all this information, but “Well, that’s all very interesting, but what did she get in the test?” But the continuous assessment, the profiling, is valid too... so how can we present the whole picture?

The other area is portfolio assessment, which has many merits. However, for many teachers of young learners portfolio assessment is a difficult proposition, if they have perhaps seven classes, each of 40 children, and only two or three hours a week with each class. They’re expected to keep portfolios for all these children who they don’t really know, and it’s a large amount of administration. There are parts of the world where portfolio assessment is being taken up with adequate thought about what it means for the teacher....

Niall: Earlier, you said that you would like to see less reliance on pure testing. Are you optimistic that this is coming?

Melanie: I think I am. Part of the motivation behind portfolio assessment is saying that there are alternatives, we can do it differently. There is still the washback effect from secondary schools and higher education, where tests are still seen as the normal mode of assessment, but I do see a way forward through seeing that objectives and teaching techniques in the primary situation are different from what comes afterwards, complementary but different.
The Language Village Revisited (article based on a presentation at TDTR 5 at METU, Ankara, 10th of September 2001).
By Charles Burghcutt.

In the May issue of the TEA Newsletter I reported on the Language Village a number of my students at Fontys Teacher Training College helped to set up. Over the summer I have looked into the phenomenon of the Language Village to see if this form of assessment, which is now used at random, deserves more attention, possibly in the shape of serious research.

A language village is an environment created (mostly) at schools in which a number of typical situations that learners at the Threshold Level might run into when abroad are simulated. For instance: the learner goes through customs and is asked about the purpose of his or her visit, buys a ticket for public transport at a ticket-window, does some shopping, buys and writes a postcard, has a soft drink an so on. The setting is the next-best thing to the real-life situations in which a pupil at that level should be able to communicate reasonably successfully. The number of assignments and situations may vary.

Language villages are not a new phenomenon. I first learned about them in the early 1990s, when I came across an article by de Koning and Kroon in the Dutch journal for language teaching ‘Levende Talen’. It became clear from the article that what was new then was not the language village in itself but its use as an assessment tool at that specific stage (Dutch ‘basisvorming’, i.e. more or less Threshold Level for 13/14-year-olds).

In The Netherlands, language villages were not used much, till fairly recently, because much work is involved in setting them up. A team needs to select situations, design forms for rating the pupils’ performance and, last but not least, the money, tickets, passports, postcards and all the props to build the village must be made. Yet recently I have noticed an increase in language villages at schools. Teacher Training Colleges give workshops and send teachers and students over to schools to help setting up the ‘villages’. schools have Language Village Websites and so on.

How to account for this increasing interest? I think that after years of talking about communicative skills and the need for authentic texts and situations in language learning, more and more teachers are finding out that the way in which we test and assess does not match the way we think and teach. At this year’s IATEFL conference a number of speakers in the Testing, Evaluation and Assessment track indicated clearly that test boards in various European countries are devising (reading comprehension) tests, using authentic materials that are likely to be within the learners’ sphere of interest. Kjell Gulbrandsen (of the Norwegian Board of Examinations) emphasised that “In Norway, the authorities are addressing the consequences of the fact that young people and adult learners need to cope with the challenges in the labour market, but also in life in general. Therefore, examination questions are designed so that the overall competence or comprehensive competence of the learners can be assessed in situations, tasks and approaches to problems that are close to real life. This means that English language competence should be displayed within a setting.”

Kari Smith touched upon a number of issues that for me are very closely linked to the idea of the Language Village in her talk on Performance Assessment. She stressed that “when we talk about performance assessment, we first have to be clear what performance is. Performance means exhibited behaviour, and that underlying it are ability, which is what is latent and can be developed, and competence which is what we know and can do and which reflects the current stage of development and ability.” I think that in a language village setting we should be aware of what we are assessing: the measurable features such as the correct use of structures and the speed of speaking as well as the features that cannot be measured such as comprehension, awareness and communication. In her talk, Kari used McNamara’s distinction between assessing language in a strong sense and in a weak sense. The strong sense requires a real-life context. We cannot always have performance in a strong sense; the question is in how far we can approach real-life situations
when we set tasks for performance assessment in the weak sense, meaning there is an artificial context. I think the Language Village does just that: it suggests a real-life-context as far as we can approach it in an artificial way. We have the context in the settings: a hotel, a tourist information office, a police station or a shop. But the speakers are not genuine hoteliers or tourist-information officers or policemen. They are teachers and students and the learners are aware of this. The strong point is that the assessment activities in the Language Village mirror the learning activities based on various functions as described in the Threshold Level. If the Language Village assesses the learning activities, if it truly examines the learners at the level they need the language for, then we are on to a good thing.

It would be interesting to see if a link can be made here to the European Framework published by the Council of Europe. This Framework presents Common Reference Levels through a large number of descriptors. It recognizes ten levels, from the C2 top level (Mastery) to the tourist or ‘smattering’ level that lies below the A1 Breakthrough level. In his paper ‘Common Reference Levels and Educational Levels’ (Babylonia issue 1, 1999) Brian North indicates that a combination of descriptors from the A1 and A2 (Waystage) levels may be used to assess a basic user at lower secondary level, and descriptors from B1 (Threshold) for an independent user. In the Netherlands and elsewhere, language portfolios and logbooks are being published for the lower secondary school level. The Dutch example, developed by SLO (an institute for curriculum design), the European Platform, Tilburg University, CITO and CPS (a pedagogical studies centre) has translated the descriptors from the European Framework into Dutch ‘Can Do’ statements which form a checklist for the learner to map his progress. Examples are:

I can start off, maintain and finish a conversation.” “I can buy something and ask its price.” “I can ask for directions or show somebody where to go.” But also “I can indicate what I want, by making gestures, when I cannot find the right words.” “I can say something in a different way when I fail to make myself understood.”

I have no idea how widely such language passports and logbooks are being used but I think it would be both interesting and useful to see how far a learner’s self-assessment in such a document correlates with the assessment of very similar ‘Can Do’s’ in a language village assessment. In what ways could working with such a language passport (i.e. one that covers a learner’s school career) contribute to one’s personal and professional performance in a language village?

Why use a language village? What are its advantages over other forms of testing/assessment? As I mentioned above, I think first of all it is a form which creates a low threshold for the learner. If properly prepared for the situations chosen to be represented in the language village, and trained in the use of communicative skills and compensating skills, most pupils should feel less anxiety than when confronted by one or more teachers behind a table who attempt to get an unnatural dialogue going. In this sense it is a learner-friendly testing or assessment situation, and, by its nature, truly communicative. In rating communicative skills and the use of strategies should be balanced with range, correctness and content to create a mark that is fair in the sense that it measures the student’s performance on a number of skills rather than on language content or grammatical correctness alone. This is one of the problems that the ‘tension’ between the need to keep the flow of learners ‘moving’ through the language village and therefore to have a fairly simple set of criteria to tick off and the desirability of a more sophisticated scoring form which does justice to all the elements of a learner’s performance mentioned above.

Another advantage of setting up a language village is that it involves many more people than just the teachers and learners. Learners from top-grades and / or students from teacher training colleges, colleagues may all be asked to help out (indeed, in most cases I know of this help is indispensable.) At one of the schools that reported on their (German) Language Village on their website, the situation ‘At the bank’ was already claimed for the next year by the economics teacher. Thus it is a training-opportunity, a showcase of what young learners can do and a community thing as well as an assessment. Finally, both learners and teachers stress there is a fun element.
The set-up at Fioretti College, Veghel

In Dutch secondary education the first two years are a foundation course. It would take far too much space here to explain all the intricacies. To simplify, for the group of learners most likely to continue in vocational secondary education there are two levels at which they can take their exams, an AB (lower) level and a CD (higher) level. For English, the level aimed at at the end of the foundation course (basisvorming) ties in with many aims described in the Threshold Level of the European Framework. Listening Comprehension and Reading Comprehension tests are provided on request by Dutch CITO group who have a long tradition of developing tests. The testing of oral skills is largely left to the teachers of English. The teachers at Fioretti College wanted to try out a language village and asked for help. Six fourth-year students volunteered for the experience and credits. All had, at some time or another, taught at the foundation course level. They helped to develop the materials used in the language village, worked out forms for scoring and rating and functioned as 'English persons' in the village and as raters.

Their first task was to determine a number of situations which would feature in the language village and to design practice materials and a booklet containing the situations and tips for the learners, which they called the 'language passport'. For each situation, there had to be two set-ups; at the AB level there was a description in Dutch of those elements the learner's responses in a conversation should contain. At the CD level the passport contained more general prompts. There are some examples in the handouts. Given the number of learners to be assessed or 'processed' in the language village the students had to aim at conversations of at most two minutes.

Next, they developed a teacher's manual, in which they described the situation and the questions and possible responses of the 'English persons' in the conversations.

The hardest nut to crack was the rating system. First, the students developed a form in which, in accordance with the principles of communicative language learning, there were separate scores for compensation strategies, communicative skills, fluency etc. It appeared the scoring would get in the way of the smooth running of the language village and so, grudgingly, a scale for one impressionistic mark was developed. The next problem was that, when using a five-point-scale, one did not want the learner to see how he or she had scored. An interpretation of the score might influence the performance in the next situation. But the scale of the operation made scoring afterwards or in a separate teacher administration impossible, the teachers wanted the score in the learner's 'passport'. I very much like the idea my students came up with: they arranged the five-point-scale in a circle, the starting-point was pre-arranged but unknown to the learners. The final problem here was the distribution: on a five-point scale we may have two sufficient and three insufficient grades (marks?), or the other way round. Compromise was found in determining the middle grade as 5.5 on a scale of 10.

A number of problems the students ran into when the language village took place:

As they had never taught at this particular school, they did not know the learners. This made it somewhat harder to help along learners who got stuck or were nervous at the beginning of a conversation. A teacher who knows his learners well may find it easier to find a particular learner's 'triggers'. On the other hand, it is more realistic, true to the real-life situations that are being simulated, of course.

There was a central area where learners waited until they could move on to the next situation. It was impossible to arrange everything in such a manner that there was a constant flow and no learners stood around idle. In this central area there were, of course a lot of exchanges of information about how the conversations ran. This had a noticeable effect on the quality of the conversations after a while. How to counter this for the sake of fairness? Maybe by preparing for a greater number of situations and conversations, thereby introducing a random factor. But this, of course, not only affects the amount of preparation which is already considerable, but also means the learners need to train for more situations beforehand. The students suggested that next time there might be a number of versions for each situation, or perhaps different versions for the morning- and afternoon sessions. For instance at the Tourist Information centre the learners had to ask for information on the Tower of London. It should not be too hard to work out dialogues for, say The Houses of Parliament or the 'Jack the Ripper Walk'.

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The students reported they had seen great differences in the marks teachers gave. It is hard for me to judge what they based their observations on. This is a factor that influences any type of oral examination, and again, there does not seem to be an easy solution. Perhaps the idea the students had at the beginning: a scoring passport with entries for the various aspects of the learners' performances, such as fluency, range of vocabulary, correctness but also compensatory and communicative skills could have made a difference here, but not to the point where the human factor would no longer be of influence.

At the lowest level, the learners had already trained with the Language Village Passports as used during the test. Some teachers did not like the idea that this group also had ready-translated vocabulary in their passports to help them along. It was suggested to train the next 'generation' in vocabulary and situations from an earlier point in the year on, so they would be better prepared and not need these back-ups.

Things that went well:

The conversations in the passport tied in with the level the learners had attained. The scores showed no significant deviation from the scores in former years. Pupils reacted well to the set-up. They indicated that they had enjoyed being tested in this way; 'relaxed' was an often-used qualification.

The variation in difficulty for the two groups of learners worked. The different colours for the covers of the passports for the two groups was useful.

450 learners were tested in three days, there were few hitches and the time-schedule worked, quite a feat. A certain measure of objectivity was guaranteed by the fact that all pupils had six chances to prove their skills and there was a different rater for each situation.

A seventh student, a trainee teacher who knew many of the learners was present all the time to talk with the learners about their experiences, to comfort and stimulate them. She managed to take away stress and send the learners back to their next task with renewed confidence.

Comparison with other language villages

I have spoken to three organisers of Language Villages and visited a number of sites on the Internet, and it seems we can call the use of Language Villages a rising trend. The Language Village Passports which contain not only the student's scores but also sketches the required situations and gives prompts and examples in Dutch are a common feature to most Language Villages. The form may differ but the idea is the same. That holds true for the rating system as well. Mostly there is a four- or five-point scale. In various ways bonuses for range and correctness or marks for compensating strategies have been included. There does seem to be a tendency on the part of students as examiners to reward motivation rather than performance. Instructions for all examiners should be clear and it should be checked that they are clearly understood. As for the discussion on what is more important, my colleagues at Teacher Training College Rotterdam suggested that the Language Village supervisor should let the teachers and students work out their rating system themselves, generally the correctness freaks and the competence aficionados found a workable compromise that also did justice to the learners' abilities.

Research questions:

A research paper from a teacher at EFA (Educatieve Faculteit Amsterdam, a Teacher Training College) landed on my desk this week, too late to incorporate its findings in this article. It does underline the rising interest in the phenomenon and I do hope it will be followed up by more research focusing on the following questions:

• Does a language village help learners to perform better, achieve better results?
• Does it increase motivation?
• How to carry out assessment? Are the commonly used passports reliable tools?
• How does the assessment carried out in a language village correlate with traditional language assessment?
• What is the transfer to the teaching of English as a foreign language?