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Assessment of Young Learners' Foreign Language in Slovenian Primary Schools

Summary

Assessment should regularly and systematically be integrated into the process of learning and teaching. That is, it should reflect the kinds of activity that regularly occur in class and with which pupils are familiar. It should have a strong diagnostic function that will provide useful information to teachers and learners in enabling them to take stock of where they are and if necessary to adapt their particular strategies. The research reported in this article focuses on an investigation of Slovenian foreign language teachers' experiences and attitudes toward the assessment of primary learners of a foreign language. By means of a survey questionnaire we present the characteristics of teachers' assessment in practice, and teachers' attitudes toward assessment at the primary level. The survey shows that all teachers assess their young learners of foreign languages, more often numerically than with comments. They also believe that they are responsible for assessment, just as they believe that teachers and young learners alike have the right to these the results.

Key words: assessment, primary learners of a foreign language.

Izvajanje preverjanja in ocenjevanja znanja mlajših učencev pri pouku tujega jezika v slovenski osnovni šoli

Povzetek

Preverjanje in ocenjevanje naj bi bila redno in sistematično vključena v proces učenja in poučevanja. Izražala naj bi dejavnosti v razredu, učenci bi morali biti z njimi seznanjeni. Preverjanje in ocenjevanje naj imata diagnostično funkcijo, ki zagotavlja uporabne informacije tako učitelju kot učencu, prav tako pa ju opozarja na uspešnost izbranega načina dela in če je potrebno tudi prilagajanje na določene učne strategije. Članek predstavlja empirično raziskavo o značilnostih in stališčih do preverjanja in ocenjevanja in sicer slovenskih učiteljev razrednega pouka in tujega jezika, ki poučujejo tuji jezik na razredni stopnji osnovne šole. S pomočjo prevzetega anketnega vprašalnika smo pridobili podatke o značilnostih preverjanja in ocenjevanja učencev tujega jezika na razredni stopnji osnovne šole, ki jih učitelji izvajajo v praksi ter stališča učiteljev do preverjanja in ocenjevanja. Raziskava kaže, da vsi učitelji preverjajo in ocenjujejo učence tujega jezika na razredni stopnji, številčno bolj pogosto kot opisno. Učitelji menijo, da so sami odgovorni za preverjanje in ocenjevanje, prav tako so mnenja, da imajo tako učenci kot njihovi starši pravico videti rezultate.

Ključne besede: pouk tujega jezika na nižji stopnji osnovne šole, preverjanje in ocenjevanje znanja, stališča učiteljev

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1. Introduction

Assessment at the primary level can be described as 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 (Brewster et al., 2002, 244). Assessment includes all methods used to gather information about children's knowledge, motivation, attitude, ability, participation, and cognitive development. Assessment can be carried out through a number of instruments (for example tests, self-assessment, peer-assessment). A teacher needs to be constantly aware of what the children know, what difficulties they are experiencing, and how best to help them. On the basis of assessment outcomes teachers are able to give individualized help to each pupil. Assessment results also give pupils tangible evidence of their progress or achievements.

In the last two decades, several educational changes in Europe have taken place and as a result, primary education programmes have also been revised in Slovenia. It was obvious that huge educational changes could not be introduced into all primary schools, so in autumn 1999 changes started in forty-two Slovenian primary schools. Changes were introduced into all other Slovenian primary schools by autumn 2003. The most important changes were:

- primary school entry (children now begin primary school at the age of six rather than seven; they finish at the age of 15);
- division of the primary school into three stages (stage 1: from the age of 6 to 8; stage 2: from the age of 9 to 11, stage 3: from the age of 12 to 14);
- the first foreign language is taught at the age of nine not eleven;
- the introduction of elective subjects;
- instruction of 12 to 14 year-old pupils at different levels in Maths, Slovene and the first Foreign Language;
- descriptive assessment in stage 1, a combination of descriptive and numerical assessment (marks) in stage 2 and exclusively numerical assessment in stage 3;
- using modern teaching methods in instruction and more focus on the stimulation of individual creativity.

The Slovenian National Curriculum of Foreign Languages (1998, 61) includes the following forms of assessment in the primary school:

- *Observation of pupil's language progress or achievement in performing different activities* (for example in peer or group work, in dialogues, role-playing, discussions, individual activities). Parents, teachers or pupils can observe. The teacher records the progress or achievement on his/her record card on the basis of the previously agreed criteria or the teacher makes notes of his/her general impressions.

- *Tests* (teachers assess the pupil's abilities in reading, listening and writing skills and the pupil's language proficiency (grammar on the morphological level and syntax), orthography and vocabulary).
- *Language portfolio* (A pupil collects samples of his/her work produced in foreign language lessons. A portfolio gives a review of the pupil's work over a period of time and shows his/her individual language progress. At the beginning of the year pupils and the foreign language teacher agree on which work samples they will collect in their portfolio. The choice of what goes into the portfolio is based on specific principles and criteria agreed on by the pupil and the teacher together. Pupils in higher classes give their own reasons for collecting their work samples in the portfolio).
- *Self-assessment* (with this approach pupils become aware of the foreign language aims; it reflects one's abilities and learning styles, promotes invaluable learning skills such as monitoring one's own progress and setting personal goals. Self-assessment can be carried out by the help of different questionnaires (for example questions supported by visual aids) and other instruments suitable for the age and level of pupils).
- *Checking of homework.*
The assessment should be carried out in a way that protects and enhances a positive learning atmosphere and attitudes towards foreign languages and learning in general.

2. Aims of the survey

We wanted to find out what foreign language teachers' experiences and attitudes are with regard to the assessment of primary learners of foreign languages in Slovenia. Because new changes brought foreign language teaching to the primary level this kind of education and assessment is new to the teachers who teach the foreign language at this level.

We present the existing foreign language assessment at the primary level in Slovenia focusing on the following issues:

1. Characteristics of teachers' assessment in practice, such as:

- performance of assessment,
- forms and types of assessment,
- assessment content and related skills,
- assessment activities,
- teacher training in assessing pupils' language development.

2. Teachers' attitudes toward assessment at the primary level, such as:

- taking over the responsibility in assessment,
- report/presentation of results (who sees the results),
- justification of young learners' assessment.

Our hypothesis about young learners of foreign languages was that assessment practices in Slovenian schools would follow the National Curriculum of Foreign Languages (1998) and

that the assessment results would give teachers who teach a foreign language at the primary level tangible evidence of how to support and improve the foreign language teaching.

Taking into consideration the fact that language teaching in Slovenia is carried out by foreign language teachers and primary teachers we checked for differences between the two groups in both issues, teachers' experiences and attitudes.

2.1 Procedure

A survey was carried on the occasional sample of Slovenian primary teachers (n = 18) and foreign language teachers (n = 32). They teach mostly English (88%) in the school year 2003/2004, in the age group of 5-6 year old learners (14%), 7-8 year olds (28%), 9-10 year olds (74%) and 11-12 year old learners (66%).

For the procedure of collecting the data we used an adaptation of the questionnaire used by Rea-Dickins and Rixon (1999) making some content and methodological changes (Rea-Dickins, Rixon, 1999). The questionnaire was rewritten. The sampling was carried out first by mail where 21 primary and foreign language teachers completed and sent back the questionnaire. It was also administered in two seminars of teachers (in Maribor and Ljubljana) who teach foreign languages at the primary level. We asked them to complete the questionnaire and we collected 33 questionnaires from this source. The results reported here are based on a sample of 50 teachers. 4 questionnaires were not properly completed so they were excluded.

The questionnaire was in English and was completed by all respondents in English.

The data were analysed on the level of descriptive and inference statistics. We also calculated frequencies (f, f%), the mean of numerical answers (always, frequently, sometimes, rarely, never), χ^2 -test and the Mann-Whitney-U-test of differences between the two groups of teachers according to their status.

3. Findings

3.1 The analysis of characteristics of teachers' assessment in practice in Slovenia

We will present the following issues:

- frequency of assessment and its reasons
- ways of assessment
- type of assessment and its purpose
- assessment content and related skills
- assessment activities
- teacher training in assessing pupils' language development.

3.1.1 The frequency of assessment

We wanted to find out how frequently assessment is carried out in the foreign language classroom and the reasons for which it is used.

Answer	Status	Primary teachers (PT)	Foreign language teaches (FLT)	Total
Yes		18 100.0%	32 100.0%	50 100.0%
No		/	/	/
Total		18 100.0%	32 100.0%	50 100.0%

Table 1. The number (*f*) and percentage (*f*%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to the frequency of assessment:

According to the Slovenian school legislation and the National Curriculum of Foreign Languages (1998) all teachers, primary and foreign language teachers, should assess. It means that assessment is a fully enforced activity, carried out with preschool children (in the age of 5-6 year olds) as well as with pupils (in the age of 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 year old learners).

Reasons	Status	PT	FLT	Total	Result χ^2	χ^2 -test P
National FL standards		8 44.4%	12 37.5%	20 40.0%	0.231	0.630
Parents		12 66.7%	23 71.9%	35 70.0%	0.149	0.700
Pupils		16 88.9%	23 71.9%	39 78.0%	1,943	0.163
Language teacher		13 72.2%	23 71.9%	36 72.0%	0.001	0.979
Certification at the end of primary school		5 27.8%	15 46.9%	20 40.0%	1.751	0.186
Outside evaluators		1 5.6%	1 3.1%	2 4.0%	0.177	0.674

Table 2. The number (*f*) and percentage (*f*%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to the reasons of using assessment and the results of χ^2 -test

The majority of teachers use assessment to provide information to their learners (78%). It also provides information to them as language teachers (72%) and information is given to parents (70%). National foreign language standards (40%) and certification at the end of primary school (40%), especially outside evaluators (4%), are less important reasons for using assessment in the foreign language classroom.

The χ^2 -test results show that there are no statistically important differences between primary and foreign language teachers ($P > 0.15$).

3.1.2 Ways of assessment

We checked the usage of numerical and descriptive grades, scores and percentage.

Ways of assessment	Status	PT	FLT	Total	Result χ^2	χ^2 -test P
Numerical grade		10 55.6%	18 56.3%	28 56.0%	0.002	0.962
Descriptive grades/comments		7 38.9%	5 15.6%	12 24.0%	3.418	0.064
Grade and comment		2 11.1%	10 31.3%	12 24.0%	2.562	0.109
Scores		9 50.0%	13 40.6%	22 44.0%	0.411	0.522
Percentage		6 33.3%	8 25.3%	14 28.0%	0.397	0.529

Table 3. The number (*f*) and percentage (*f*%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to the ways of assessment and the results of χ -test:

It is obvious from the table 3 that teachers use numerical grades (56%) and scores (44%) frequently. The usage of percentages (28%), descriptive grades (24%) and the combination of grades and comments (24%) are not so frequent. The traditional way of assessment seems to prevail, although the national curriculum of foreign languages strictly states that teachers who teach foreign languages at the primary level should use a combination of grades and comments. We believe that teachers should use this combination more often.

There are no statistically important differences between primary and foreign language teachers according to the ways of assessment. However, there exists a slight (though statistically not important) tendency in the usage of descriptive grades according to its combination with the numerical grade; namely primary teachers use descriptive grades ($\chi^2 = 3.418$; $P = 0.064$) more often. Foreign language teachers use a combination of grades and comments ($\chi^2 = 2.562$; $P = 0.109$) more often than primary teachers. We believe that the differences mentioned are the consequence of using only descriptive assessment in all subjects at the primary level in Slovenia.

3.1.3 Types of assessment

We examined which types of tests teachers use in the foreign language classroom (e.g. tests created by individual teachers, tests made by a group of FL teachers, standardized tests, tests produced in textbooks, grammar tests, oral interviews, language portfolio, self-assessment).

Rank	Type of assessment	
1	My own made test	3.66
2	Oral interview	3.54
3	Grammar test	2.78
4	Test produced in textbooks	2.70
5	Self-assessment	2.48

6	Test made by a group of FL teachers	1.96
7	Structured observation leading to a written description of YL performance	1.72
8	Language portfolio	1.64
9	Standardized test from national and local FL educational authority	1.40

Table 4. The rank list of types of assessment according to its frequency (x)

Teachers (n = 50) use their own tests and oral interviews most frequently. Grammatical tests and tests produced in textbooks follow. Learners' self-assessment is in the middle of the rank list. Not so frequent is the usage of tests made by a group of foreign language teachers, structured observation leading to a written description of a young learner's performance and language portfolio. The least frequently used is the standardized test from the national and local foreign language educational authorities.

According to the results it seems that teachers are fairly autonomous in using types of assessment. They use their own tests and carry out oral interviews. Young learners have less autonomy; self-assessment is less used than tests and oral interview, and the language portfolio is not frequently used. Although the National Curriculum of Foreign Languages (1998) includes the language portfolio for use in the foreign language classroom we believe that teachers are not familiar with using it. This might be the reason why language portfolio is ranked so low.

Type of assessment	Status	The average rank	/z/	P
My own made test	PT	26.19	0.263	0.793
	FLT	25.11		
Test made by a group of FL teachers	PT	27.19	0.654	0.513
	FLT	24.55		
Oral interview	PT	24.53	0.370	0.711
	FLT	26.05		
Grammar test	PT	25.64	0.005	0.958
	FLT	25.42		
Test produced in textbooks	PT	29.11	1.401	0.161
	FLT	23.47		
Structured observation leading to a written description of YL performance	PT	28.19	1.082	0.279
	FLT	23.98		
Standardized test from national and local FL educational authority	PT	28.81	1.565	0.118
	FLT	23.64		
Language portfolio	PT	26.36	0.351	0.726
	FLT	25.02		
Self-assessment	PT	26.36	0.326	0.745
	FLT	25.02		

Table 5. Results of the Mann-Whitney-U-Test (z-value) of differences between primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to the frequency of individual types of assessment

There are no statistically important differences between primary and foreign language teachers. On the basis of means we can pay attention to primary teachers who make rather more frequent use than foreign language teachers of tests produced in textbooks and standardized tests from national and local foreign language educational authorities.

What the purpose of using these tests is in the primary foreign language classroom is evident from the following table.

Type	Purpose	To monitor progress & get feedback	To diagnose problems	To check achievement of learners	To encourage learning/motivate learners	To establish standards
My own-made test		40 80%	21 42%	26 52%	17 34%	10 20%
Test made by a group of FL teachers		5 10%	7 14%	16 32%	7 14%	5 10%
Oral interview		20 40%	15 30%	29 58%	23 46%	5 10%
Grammar test		16 32%	19 38%	16 32%	9 18%	7 14%
Test produced in textbooks		19 38%	13 26%	17 34%	16 32%	5 10%
Structured observation leading to a written description of YL performance		6 12%	3 6%	5 10%	7 14%	5 10%
Standardized test from national or local FL education authority		3 6%	/	1 2%	1 2%	8 16%
Language portfolio		5 10%	2 4%	6 12%	7 14%	2 4%
Self-assessment		7 14%	10 20%	8 16%	15 30%	1 2%
Total		121 26,9%	90 20%	124 27.6%	102 22.7%	48 10.7%

Table 6. The number (*f*) and percentage (*f*%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to the purpose of individual types of assessment:

Teachers use different types of assessment (different tests, oral interviews, self-assessment, language portfolio) mostly to check the achievement of learners (27.6%) and to monitor young learners' progress and get their feedback (26.9%). To encourage learning and motivate learners follows (22.7%). The least frequent purpose for using these tests is to establish standards (10.7%). We might find the reason for this in the fact that tests and standards have still not been worked out on a national basis.

If we look at individual types of assessment we find out that teachers use tests that they have devised themselves firstly with the purpose of monitoring a young learner's progress or getting his/her feedback (80%), tests made by a group of foreign language teachers are used mostly with the purpose of checking the achievement of young learners (32%), grammatical tests are used to diagnose problems (38%), tests produced in textbooks for getting the learner's feedback (38%) and standardized tests for establishing standards (16%). In the case of oral interviews the most important purpose is to check the achievements of young learners (58%). In structured observation leading to a written description of learners' performance the main purpose is to encourage and motivate learners (14%). Motivation is also the main reason for using language portfolio and self-assessment.

3.1.4 Assessment content and related skills

We checked the teachers' content focus (grammar, lexis, spelling) and skills focus (oral, listening, reading, writing skills and pronunciation) in the assessment of young learners.

Rank	Assessment content and skills	(\bar{x})
1	Listening skills	3.22
2	Oral skills	3.18
3	Lexis	3.02
4	Pronunciation	2.94
5	Reading skills	2.78
6	Writing skills	2.70
7	Spelling	2.70
8	Grammar	2.48

Table 7. The rank list of assessment content and skills according to its frequency (\bar{x})

Regardless of their status teachers focus mostly on listening and speaking skills in assessing young learners. Lexis and pronunciation follow. Below the middle rank line follow reading and writing skills and spelling. Grammar is ranked last.

These results are encouraging because they show that teachers focus in their assessment on content and skills suitable for young learners, on active not passive language knowledge, and this also follows the national curriculum guidelines.

Whether there are differences between primary and foreign language teachers is evident from Table 8.

Content and skills	Status	The average rank	<i>z</i>	P
Grammar	PT	26.61	0.430	0.667
	FLT	24.88		
Lexis	PT	21.97	1.397	0.162
	FLT	27.48		
Spelling	PT	28.08	1.033	0.301
	FLT	24.05		
Oral skills	PT	23.67	0.716	0.474
	FLT	26.53		
Listening skills	PT	26.75	0.495	0.621
	FLT	24.80		
Reading skills	PT	28.11	1.089	0.276
	FLT	24.03		
Writing skills	PT	29.94	1.732	0.083
	FLT	23.00		
Pronunciation	PT	26.00	0.191	0.848
	FLT	25.22		

Table 8. Results of the Mann-Whitney-U-Test (*z*-value) of differences between primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to the frequency of content and skills in assessment of YL

As is evident from the table there are no statistically important differences ($P > 0.05$) between primary and foreign language teachers in their focus on contents and skills in the assessment of young learners. However, we should note that they tend to differ in the usage of writing skills ($P = 0.083$); primary teachers, as evident from the mean, use assessment of writing skills more often than foreign language teachers. If we have a closer look at the means in using assessment of reading skills and spelling, it can be seen that primary teachers assess these more often, but foreign language teachers assess lexis more frequently. We might find the reason for these results in the fact that primary teachers are already teaching young learners how to read and write in their mother tongue and because they frequently assess reading and writing in the mother tongue, they also pay attention to their assessment in the foreign language.

From the differences mentioned we may conclude that foreign language teachers emphasize an active level of foreign language knowledge (speaking and listening) more than primary teachers; maybe because they are more fluent in the target language than are primary teachers.

3.1.5 Assessment activities

We checked how frequently 15 different activities are included by teachers in their assessment. These activities assess a young learner's knowledge, skills (especially communication skills), and attitudes, demonstration of understanding by doing, as well as the ability to apply these to new situations.

Rank	Assessment activities	(\bar{x})
1	Matching	3.14
2	Filling gaps	2.94
3	An oral dialogue	2.84
4	Comprehension questions (e.g. true/false) about a short text	2.74
5	Listening to audio material (e.g. cassettes)	2.68
6	Listening to the teacher talking	2.68
7	Reading of short words/sentences	2.58
8	Role-playing and demonstrating actions	2.54
9	Identifying a picture from different descriptive texts	2.54
10	Creating learner's own short sentences/texts	2.54
11	Solving grammatical activities	2.28
12	A young learner repeats and drills vocabulary or sentences	2.22
13	Copying words, short texts	2.16
14	Creating learner's own long sentences/texts (e.g. letters)	1.98
15	Dictation	1.86

Table 9. The rank list of assessment activities according to its frequency (\bar{x})

According to the table the most frequently used assessment activity is, regardless of the status of the teacher, matching. Then follow assessment activities with similar means: filling gaps, an oral dialogue, comprehension questions, listening to audio materials and to the teacher. These

assessment activities focus on language practice, are cognitively simple and provide controlled, guided practice. In the second part of the rank list the following assessment activities appear: reading of short words/sentences, role-playing and demonstrating actions, identifying a picture from different descriptive texts, learner's creating their own short sentences/texts. They provide opportunities to develop interaction and fluency, and provide young learners with more independence and choice. Less frequent are the next assessment activities: solving grammatical activities, a young learner repeats and drills vocabulary or sentences, copying words, short texts. The least frequent are creating learner's own long sentences/texts (e.g. letters) and dictation. These assessment activities are cognitively more demanding and encourage production and creative use of language and so are difficult for some young learners. We have also noticed that teachers use vocabulary activities more frequently than grammatical and orthographical activities, probably because teachers want their learners to feel confident in the early stages of the target language learning.

We have also analysed assessment activities according to the use of primary and foreign language teachers.

Assessment activities	Status	The average rank	/z/	P
Filling gaps	PT FLT	24.47 26.08	0.464	0.643
Matching	PT FLT	24.75 25.92	0.339	0.734
Role-playing	PT FLT	25.03 25.77	0.192	0.847
Copying words, short texts	PT FLT	21.89 27.53	1.417	0.157
Comprehension questions (e.g. true/false) about a short text	PT FLT	26.08 25.17	0.263	0.793
Dictation	PT FLT	26.86 24.73	0.550	0.583
Solving grammatical activities	PT FLT	21.56 27.72	1.501	0.133
Creating learner's own short sentences/texts	PT FLT	22.08 27.42	1.333	0.188
Listening to audio material (e.g. cassettes)	PT FLT	27.00 24.66	0.576	0.565
An oral dialogue	PT FLT	23.11 26.84	0.946	0.344
A young learner repeats and drills vocabulary or sentences	PT FLT	26.94 24.94	0.383	0.701
Creating learner's own long sentences/texts (e.g. letters)	PT FLT	25.89 25.28	0.151	0.880
Reading of short words/sentences	PT FLT	26.61 24.88	0.444	0.657

Listening to the teacher talking	PT FLT	24.75 25.92	0.284 0.777
Identifying a picture from different descriptive texts	PT FLT	29.11 23.47	1.438 0.150

Table 10: Results of the Mann-Whitney-U-Test (z-value) of differences between primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to the frequency of assessment activities

As is evident from the table there are no statistically important differences between primary and foreign language teachers in using assessment activities in their foreign language classrooms ($P < 0.05$). However, we should highlight some assessment activities where the differences (though not statistically important) do occur. The following activities: copying words, short texts, solving grammatical activities and creating a learner's own short sentences/texts are more frequently used by foreign language teachers. On the other hand, primary teachers more frequently use the assessment activity of identifying a picture from different descriptive texts. We assume that the reason for these results might be found in the knowledge of the methodology for teaching children. Primary teachers use a variety of activities and material (e.g. authentic) in their everyday teaching (in language and non-language subjects), whereas foreign language teachers need additional teacher training in methodology for working with young learners.

3.1.6 Teacher training in assessing pupils' language development

We analysed the existing assessment also from the viewpoint of teacher training in preparing and carrying out assessment of young learners.

Teacher training	Status	PT	FLT	Total	Result χ^2	χ^2 -test P
Yes		3 16.7%	6 18.8%	9 18.0%	0.034	0.854
No		15 83.3%	26 81.3%	41 82.0%		
Total		18 100.0%	32 100.0%	50 100.0%		

Table 11. The number (f) and percentage (f%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to the teacher training in assessment and the results of χ^2 -test

The majority of teachers had had no additional teacher training in assessing pupils' language development. Those (18%) who did participate in it were trained by national or local school authorities. There are no statistically important differences between primary and foreign language teachers.

The results indicate that only a few teachers (18%), from among both primary and foreign language teachers, involved in this demanding and responsible job participated in the additional teacher training in assessment of young learners. To what extent they need additional training in assessment is shown in the next table.

Status	PT	FLT	Total	Result χ^2	χ^2 -test P
Necessity of teacher training					
Yes	18 100.0%	30 93.8%	48 96.0%	1.172	0.557
No	0 0.0%	2 6.2%	2 4%		
Total	18 100.0%	32 100.0%	50 100.0%		

Table 12. The number (f) and percentage (f%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to the necessity of additional teacher training in assessment and the results of χ^2 -test

Except for two teachers, all others (96%) express the desire for additional teacher training in assessment of young learners. There are no statistically important differences between primary and foreign language teachers. Both teachers who do not express a need for additional teacher training in assessment of young learners are members of the foreign language teacher group, while all primary teachers express their wish for additional teacher training in assessment.

3.2 The analysis of teachers' attitudes toward assessment of young learners

We present teachers' attitudes in the following areas:

- taking over of the responsibility in assessment (preparation and performance of young learners' assessment, responsibility for marking tests and keeping records)
- presentation of assessment results
- justification of young learners' assessment.

3.2.1 Taking of the responsibility in assessment

We analysed teachers' beliefs about preparation and implementation of young learners' assessment and about marking tests and keeping records. We present firstly data about the responsibility for preparation and performance of young learners' assessment.

Status	PT	FLT	Total	Result χ^2	χ^2 -test P
Responsibility					
Foreign language teacher	17 94.4%	30 93.8%	47 94.0%	0.010	0.921
Teachers' committee at your school	5 27.8%	9 28.1%	14 28.0%	0.001	0.979
National school authority	1 5.6%	1 3.1%	2 4.0%	0.177	0.674
Local school authority	0 0%	1 3.1%	1 2%	0.574	0.449

Table 13. The number (f) and percentage (f%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to teachers' beliefs about the responsibility for preparation and performance of young learners' assessment and the results of χ^2 -test

According to the table the belief prevails (94%) that the foreign language teacher alone is responsible for the preparation and performance of young learners' assessment. The role of the

foreign language teachers' committee is not so important. National and school authorities are all but excluded from this process. There are also no statistically important differences between primary and foreign language teachers.

The prevailing belief is taken as evidence of how foreign language teachers are in practice independent in their preparation and implementation of young learner assessment.

Who is responsible for marking tests is evident from the next table.

Responsibility	Status	PT	FLT	Total	Result χ^2	χ^2 -test P
School Administration		1 5.6%	1 3.1%	2 4.0%	8.465	0.076
Learner		1 5.6%	0 0.0%	1 2.0%		
Foreign language teacher		13 72.2%	31 96.9%	44 88.0%		
Teachers' Committee		3 16.7%	0 0.0%	3 6%		
Total		18 100.0%	32 100%	50 100.0%		

Table 14. The number (f) and percentage (f%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to teachers' beliefs about the responsibility of marking tests and the results of χ^2 -test

The majority of teachers (88%) believe that they are responsible for marking tests. Only a few see the teachers' committee as responsible for marking. There are no statistically important differences between primary and foreign language teachers. However, there exists a slight tendency (P = 0.076) revealing that foreign language teachers are more unified in this opinion than primary teachers. Namely, primary teachers (16.7%) believe that the teachers' committee is also responsible for marking tests. One primary teacher even believes that young learners are responsible for marking.

Who is responsible for keeping young learners' records is evident from the following table.

Responsibility	Status	PT	FLT	Total	Result χ^2	χ^2 -test P
School Administration		3 16.7%	2 6.3%	5 10.0%	2.040	0.564
Learner		1 5.6%	3 9.4%	4 8.0%		
Foreign language teacher		14 77.8%	27 84.3%	41 82.0%		
Teachers' Committee		0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%		
Total		18 100.0%	32 100.0%	50 100.0%		

Table 15. The number (f) and percentage (f%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to teachers' beliefs about the responsibility for keeping YL records and the results of χ^2 -test

The majority of teachers (82%) believe that they are responsible for keeping records on young learners. Only some (10%) believe that school administration and learners (8%) are responsible for keeping the records. There are no statistically important differences between the two types of teacher.

The comparison of the responsibility for marking tests and keeping records shows that in both cases teachers believe that they should take the responsibility for these two actions. They expect more support from the school administration keeping young learners' records than in marking tests.

3.2.2 Presentation of assessment results

This issue deals with the question of who sees the results: the children, parents or administrators in the school.

Status	PT	FLT	Total	Result χ^2	χ^2 -test P
Seeing Learner	17 94.4%	32 100.0%	49 98.0%	1.814	0.178
Parents	17 94.4%	32 100.0%	49 98.0%	1.814	0.178
Administrators in the school	2 11.1%	9 28.1%	11 22.0%	1.943	0.163

Table 16. The number (f) and percentage (f%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to teachers' beliefs about seeing the results and the results of χ^2 -test

Teachers believe (98%) that both children and parents have an equal right to see the results and are equally capable of understanding them; administrators in schools are not so important. There are no statistically important differences ($P < 0.05$) and no distinctive tendencies ($P < 0.01$) between primary and foreign language teachers. However, some frequencies indicate that all foreign language teachers show the assessment results to young learners and their parents, and also to administrators in schools in the higher percentage (28.1%) than primary teachers. It remains an unsolved question why there is a tendency for foreign language teachers to show the results more than primary teachers. The national curriculum does not state who should see the results.

3.2.3 Justification of young learners' assessment

We also analysed whether teachers agree with formal obligatory assessment (National Curriculum of Foreign Languages, 1998) of young learners and to which type of assessment they give priority (numerical, descriptive).

Approval	Status	PT	FLT	Total	Result χ^2	χ^2 -test P
Yes		15 83.3%	27 84.4%	42 84%	0.009	0.923
No		3 16.7%	5 15.6%	8 16%		
Total		18 100.0%	32 100.0%	50 100.0%		

Table 17. The number (f) and percentage (f%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to their belief of approval of young learners' assessment and the results of χ^2 -test

The majority of teachers (84%) approve of young learners' assessment. There are no statistically important differences between the two groups of teachers. The teachers stated that young learners should be assessed for the following reasons: to motivate them for language learning; to observe or monitor learners' progress; to get used to English comments; to encourage them to work on their weak points; to get feedback for their own work; to take their language learning more seriously, learners like to see how much they have learned; if young learners were not be assessed they would not learn at all. The teachers who do not approve of young learners' assessment argued that it presents an additional stress for learners and that they are too young for any kind of assessment (some are in kindergarten; 5-6 year old learners) and that they are not capable of understanding why they are assessed.

The extent to which the teachers agree with one of the formal assessment methods (numerical, descriptive) is evident from the next table.

Approval	Status	PT	FLT	Total	Result χ^2	χ^2 -test P
Comments		13 72.2%	22 68.7%	35 70.0%	0.744	0.689
Numerical grades		5 27.8%	10 31.3%	15 30.0%		
Total		18 100.0%	32 100.0%	50 100.0%		

Table 18. The number (f) and percentage (f%) of primary (PT) and foreign language teachers (FLT) according to their approval of young learners' numerical or descriptive assessment and the results of χ^2 -test

The table shows that teachers agree more (70%) with the descriptive than numerical assessment of young learners. In this case there are no statistically important differences in the status. This indicates that teachers beliefs' agree with the national school legislation (National Curriculum, 1998) which states descriptive assessment in stage 1 and a combination of descriptive and numerical assessment (marks) in stage 2.

4. Conclusion

By means of a questionnaire adapted from that used by Rea-Dickins and, Rixon (1999) we carried out a survey of foreign language assessment of young learners in Slovenia. The sampling was carried out on the occasional sample of Slovenian primary and foreign language teachers who teach mostly English in the school year 2003/2004. Herewith we summarize some main points of the survey:

1. All teachers in accordance with the national school legislation (National Curriculum of Foreign Languages, 1998) assess young learners of foreign languages, numerically more often than with comments.
2. The most frequent use is made of classical tests devised by the teachers. Of other types of assessment the oral interview is used very often. Other (authentic) types, such as a language portfolio, are rare.
3. Teachers assess listening and speaking skills more often than reading, writing, orthography or grammar. They assess the active level of language knowledge. Vocabulary activities prevail over grammatical and orthographical activities.
4. The majority of Slovenian teachers were not additionally or formally trained for preparation and implementation of young learners' assessment. They perceive an explicit need for additional teacher training.
5. Teachers believe that they are the most responsible for assessment (from preparation and performance through to marking tests and keeping records). They acknowledge the right of young learners and their parents to see the results.
6. The majority of teachers agree that young learners should be assessed in a foreign language, but more with descriptive than with numerical grades.
7. The statistical controlling of the teachers' status shows that both in the area of teachers' assessment in practice and in the area of teachers' attitudes to assessment at the primary level there are no statistically important differences between primary and foreign language teachers; only some tendencies exist (e.g. more frequent descriptive assessment with primary teachers and more assessment of reading-writing than speaking skills).

To sum up, on the one hand there is more frequent traditional numerical and writing-oral assessment of young learners, on the other hand there is often use of content and active skills (the emphasis is on listening skills and oral communication and vocabulary). Primary and foreign language teachers agree with the young learners' assessment in principle, but for its qualitative performance they express the need for more knowledge (training).

On the basis of the survey we have come to the following conclusions:

1. The homogeneity between the groups of primary and foreign language teachers in the areas of experiences and attitudes allows a reflection that the existing model of additional training for primary teachers in the area of foreign language teaching is successful and has reached, with regard to the topic of assessment, the same level as the university studies of foreign language teachers. However, we should focus on areas where some statistical

tendencies towards differences between the 2 groups can be found, namely in the area of the frequency with which assessment takes place and the content and skills of passive language knowledge; primary teachers assess them more often than foreign language teachers.

2. Planned teacher training should be provided for both groups of teachers in the area of assessing the foreign language learning of primary school pupils.

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