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**MA TEFL Year 2000/2001 TAKE-HOME EXAM, TERM 2.**

**TITLE OF OPTION FOR WHICH WORK IS BEING SUBMITTED:**

**Teaching Young Learners.**

**TITLE OF QUESTION:**

‘Researchers disagree about the importance and desirability of assessment and testing at primary level (Rea-Dickins’ & Rixon 1999). Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of testing young learners’ achievements in English, and explain how schools could improve the quality of tests and/or other forms of assessment’.

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## **INTRODUCTION.**

In this essay I intend to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of testing young learners' achievements in English, and explain how schools could improve both the quality of tests and of other forms of assessment. I will make particular reference to the recent research carried out by Rea-Dickins and Rixon and published in the article 'Assessment of Young Learners' English: Reasons and Means' ('Young Learners of English: Some Research Perspectives', (1999)), as well as to course notes and personal beliefs and experiences.

I believe it important to address the issue of why testing is being done, where it takes place and how and to whom the results are reported, to ensure that observations are rooted in practical experiences, our own or those shared with others, as well as the results of research, such as that of Rea-Dickins and Rixon.

It is useful to remember that cultural differences have an important impact on assessment and testing. As an EFL professional operating in foreign environment I believe flexibility of approach to be very important: 'knowing' something in one culture may not be so regarded in another. Tests must have 'face validity' - must look like tests in order to be taken seriously by some students (and parents), who may be dissatisfied if their expectations are not met. More difficult to accept however may be the flexibility of approach sometimes required when tests are being marked. In one school in which I was employed parents were able to have the mark received by their child altered on application to the headteacher of the school, which could be said to make a mockery of the results in their entirety. Such practices encourage an examination of the rationale behind testing and assessment, whether it is being carried out in order for as accurate an assessment as possible to be made of a pupil's ability, whether it has an investigative function with a long-term formative outcome, or whether the teacher is testing for the benefit of parents, who increasingly demand it as a result of the tendency for ever-earlier academic competition. As the latter has unfortunately been my personal experience of testing and assessing young learners, I am interested in exploring objectively the advantages and disadvantages from an informed pedagogic standpoint, as opposed to testing intuitively in response to parental 'pester-power'. It is also of importance to address the issue of who is doing the marking and of who, if anyone, is keeping a record of the marks. Extra-pedagogic massaging of test results may well occur, but does not preclude teachers from recording the true marks themselves, and using them formatively, as an indicator of appropriate subject-matter for future classes. Rea-Dickins and Rixon's research showed the majority of results being recorded by the teacher concerned, but with some not being recorded at all, raising the question of whether these tests were purely evaluative, and generating no further action once completed.

The rationale behind testing and assessment may of course not be local/institutional but national, which raises the issue, not always addressed, of different methodological approaches being necessary for differing subjects. Rixon and Rea-Dickins hypothesise (p.88) that 'assessment practices in each country would tend to follow the assessment traditions that apply for other curricular content in that country, and that these may not always be the most useful in eliciting better information on how Young Learners'

learn languages'. The 'who' behind the testing is likewise significant - young learners are generally tested in-situ, by their teachers, with the results being made available to the parents and, occasionally, members of the institutional academic body. Tests can test language use (what a child can do with the language), usage (what command the child has of the linguistic system), or knowledge of grammar and culture (what the child knows about the grammar and culture of English). Use and usage can be tested in English, whereas knowledge of grammar and culture can be tested in the mother tongue, if the teacher him/herself is aware of it.

Although methods of testing and assessment differ it is more likely when testing young learners that the tests are carried out within the school by the teacher concerned, rather than being of the formal, public variety. Issues such as whether circumstances render it preferable to test en-masse, individually or in small groups should be addressed, or alternatively teacher-designed continuous assessment, based on the learners' daily work, may be the preferred method. One-to-one testing may not be possible for the teacher working alone, but for those with recourse to a classroom assistant more individual testing and assessment methods may be possible, if deemed appropriate. Classroom ergonomics may preclude the movement of furniture, or alternatively the class may be re-organisable to the extent that small, private corners could be created where assessment could take place. One or all of these factors may significantly affect the teacher's choice of procedure. Experienced teachers will know how to take into account and address issues such as these, although they may not be immediately apparent to those with little teaching experience.

Rea-Dickins and Rixon roughly define school-based language assessment as: 'collection of data on language use by pupils in classroom language learning', and indeed I would concur with this definition from a common-sense standpoint. They suggest collecting the data by 'observing day-to-day oral or written performance in class or in written homework, or by setting specially-designed challenges in oral or written tests'. They suggest that data may be analysed for quantity, accuracy and complexity as well as for the 'quality(ies) of communicative use to which they can put their linguistic resources'(p.90).

Rea-Dickins and Rixon furthermore support the view that 'In an ideal situation the means of assessment would be very much determined by the reasons for assessment, and by the concerns of those individuals or stakeholder groups who receive reports on the results'. Although it may prove difficult to address the concerns of all interested parties concurrently when assessing, particularly if the desires of the parents conflict with our beliefs as teachers regarding best-practice for example, reality dictates that the interests of parties outside the classroom must be taken into account when carrying out assessments. Indeed I personally prefer a pragmatic approach to assessment, with importance attached to pedagogic as well as non-pedagogic factors in providing a more balanced overall picture of achievement.

## **SOME DISADVANTAGES OF TESTING/ ASSESSMENT FOR YOUNG LEARNERS.**

A problem identified by Rixon and Rea-Dickins is one which I will refer to as 'crossover'. Crossover difficulties arise when experienced teachers, who may even have apriori experience with young learners in subjects other than EFL, are required to test and/or assess young learners of English. Teachers trained to teach secondary school children may experience difficulty in setting appropriate challenges for younger pupils that will elicit information appropriate for decision-making in the classroom. To these issues raised by Rixon and Rea-Dickins I would like to add one of my own, namely the lack of general teaching experience of some teachers of EFL, teaching for the first time and faced with a foreign educational system and curricular expectations of which they have little knowledge, experience or possibly understanding. This is not a general criticism of EFL certificate courses, since they are only designed to provide the prospective new teacher with a basic grounding in EFL teaching, a 'driving-licence' for the classroom so to speak, and there is little time, in such condensed training courses as these frequently are, to deal with every pertinent issue. However, lack of information and training on this subject does mean that new teachers embark upon their first teaching post with significant gaps in their knowledge in an area which frequently proves problematic for even experienced teachers.

Not a disadvantage of testing per se, but a difficulty attached to the execution of it which may well be off-putting to some, particularly newly-qualified teachers, is lack of facilities. Most newly-qualified specialist EFL teachers are from the developed world where scarcity of resources is not an issue, and might find, as I did myself on arrival at my initial posting in Sudan, either total lack of facilities for copying or listening for example, or machinery of such antiquity that its operation is either forbidden to anyone other than a specific operator, or restricted due to lack of spare parts or materials. Such difficulties may well seem insurmountable to some, and adapting to situations where such conditions are the norm can be difficult. This is not necessarily an argument against testing/assessment however, but one which calls for ingenuity and experiential resources which newly-qualified teachers are more likely to lack.

Some teachers may believe that testing is neither necessary or appropriate for young learners - 5% of those respondents to Rixon & Rea-Dickins' survey for example, carrying it out solely to fulfil administrative requirements. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that those who test reluctantly may do so neither sensitively or thoroughly, neither recording the results adequately if at all, nor using them formulatively to aid post-test teaching or to guide the setting and/or achievement of long-term pedagogic goals. Test results give teachers certain expectations of learners' future potential which can change the way they treat their pupils and tends to 'set' their level permanently. Additionally teachers may be reluctant to test in the belief that results obtained are at the expense of more useful teaching time, and do not justify the expenditure of time and effort involved.

From personal experience new teachers unfamiliar with methods of testing and assessment, and possibly under pressure from both parents and institutional requirements to carry out these procedures, are more likely to fall back on the 'paper-and-pencil' type of test than any other. Furthermore, not only may the inexperience of new teachers in setting tests render questionable the value of any results obtained, but they may also prove counter-productive insofar as lack of sensitivity to young learners' differing needs and learning styles may considerably raise the affective barriers of the pupils concerned, providing an inaccurate picture of their ability. Many children become worried about tests and suffer from stress, with the knock-on effect of under-performance giving an unreliable measure of true ability. In addition, students who do poorly in tests may be discouraged from learning languages. Inexperienced teachers and those unfamiliar with testing procedures are unlikely to utilise test results effectively, and the five per-cent of Rixon and Rea-Dickins' respondents who thought testing and assessment was not useful are unlikely to utilise results at all. Some teachers may be unwilling to set tests in the belief that testing and assessment is a complex area in which they lack sufficient experience to carry out procedures and analyse the findings effectively. Furthermore lack of conviction about subject knowledge and ability in the area of testing/assessment can effectively discourage teachers from undertaking the process voluntarily. Rixon and Rea-Dickins contest that 'the extent to which teachers are trained to perform this important function' (of test construction) is 'particularly relevant', especially as most teachers prepare tests individually, and not in the more supportive setting of a group. Knowledge that certain (in my own experience, occasionally severe) corporal punishment awaits those young learners unsuccessful or failing to meet parental expectations in tests can influence attitudes to testing among teachers, especially those who are in the first place unconvinced of its necessity. Although one has to appreciate cultural attitudes and expectations vary in respect of corporal punishment it can be extremely disconcerting, particularly to those from Western cultures, to know the fate that may await a child should they fail to do as well as expected in a test designed and set by oneself.

For teachers with a heavy multi-class workload quantity vs. quality issues may arise, when classes are many and time insufficient the quality of tests both in construction, analysis, and the potential for formative use may easily suffer. Rixon and Rea-Dickins believe that there is a 'need for 'results' to feed into teaching and learning', but that it was unclear whether assessments as generally implemented were an integral part of learning, or more a means of measuring the summative performance of the child. It could be argued that the need for 'results' emphasised by parents and (some) schools is apparently at odds with another aspect of assessment, that of providing a basis for formative action in future curriculum considerations, as much is made of the former and the latter has a tendency to be neglected. There is another aspect to evaluation, in that results are sometimes believed to evaluate the success of the teacher's pedagogic practice as well as an indication of the child's ability and summative achievement. There is some resistance to this evaluative element in some quarters, particularly as parents dissatisfied with their child's performance not infrequently blame the teacher as well as the child; a school colleague having a gun brandished at him on one occasion for exactly this reason.

The three respondents to Rixon and Rea-Dickins' survey who believed primary learners should not be assessed (p.94), 'justified as follows:

'...the aim of language learning/teaching is that children should like the language and we have to develop them in this way'

'A lot of children are afraid of making mistakes and it is discouraging for them.'

'.....because sometimes they lose their motivation and interest in English'.'

These respondents seemed to feel that interest in English should be nurtured, and feared that nascent interest in and possible affinity for the subject could be crushed if tests were administered. This standpoint however seems to be congruent with the teacher administering the more traditional-style 'paper and pencil' test, as, with sensitivity and awareness it is possible to develop low-profile, low-anxiety tests which recognize individual learning-style differences, and do not encourage the formation of affective barriers with a resulting loss of interest and motivation on the part of the learners. Tests do not always reflect the range of activities in the EFL classroom, nor 'capture the different aspects of language use that are taught at a primary level' (p.97). Rixon and Rea-Dickins reported a significant number of tests 'which reflected a proficiency type of approach', and which 'reflected a fairly narrow interpretation of language learning in terms of the linguistic system plus a bit of functional language use' (p.97). Testing 'seems to be about whether children have learned specific points of language ('apprentissage') rather than whether they have developed an awareness of the nature of the foreign language ('sensibilisation'), and.....a mismatch is frequently observed between curricular aims, pedagogy, and test content'(p. 96). Teachers test what is easiest for them to test, with Rea-Dickins' respondents' tests concentrating mainly on grammar and lexis, with little or no mention of testing oral or listening skills respectively, their neglect justified due to the perceived difficulty of testing these areas. Rixon and Rea-Dickins postulated that what 'the tests did not do was to encourage learners to create coherent text, or to demonstrate understanding.....above the level of a single sentence.....Being given a very strange message about the communication systems of the....new language, and.....being trained in reading and listening habits that will be most unprofitable for them when they come to more advanced levels of learning'. According to Rixon and Rea-Dickins' findings therefore, it could be argued that teachers untrained in testing and assessment are unwittingly adversely affecting the study habits of their pupils by using badly-designed, grammar and lexis-heavy tests, based almost exclusively on the paper-and-pencil model.

Faced with this formidable array of disadvantages, what then may be the justification for the popularity of testing, and the perceived importance and popularity of it within pedagogic practice?

### **SOME ADVANTAGES OF TESTING/ASSESSING YOUNG LEARNERS.**

Rixon and Rea-Dickens' research indicates that the majority (80%) of respondents to their survey (p.91) believed primary children should be assessed. When asked why assessment was carried out, the following results were obtained:

To help you in your teaching:	87 %
To provide information for administration purposes.	3 %
To provide information to parents	2.5 %
A part of certification at the end of primary school	2.5 %
No response	5 %

*Why is assessment carried out? (Rea-Dickins & Rixon, 1999).*

I personally find the results obtained by the researchers in this area to be of interest as they directly contradict my own experiences. I believe, with reservations, in testing primary-age learners of English, but have always tested because it was part of my administrative duties required by the school, rather than voluntarily. I also discerned a great deal of indirect parental pressure for testing to be carried out, via the school administration. In my previous working environments results-driven apprenticeship testing was the primary motivation behind the exercise, with huge amounts of parental pressure being applied even to primary-age children to achieve the academic success desired by the parents, in some cases causing observable psychological trauma to the child, manifested in the appearance of eczema for example. I do not believe in itself however that this is necessarily an argument against testing, rather a result of inappropriate social expectations.

I believe that in an ideal situation the results obtained by the researchers, namely that teachers regarded testing as a useful formative tool in assisting classroom teaching, would pertain. No child would feel pressurised or adversely affectively influenced, resulting in the likelihood of more valid results, providing of course that the test was well-designed. According to the researchers' findings (p.97), teachers' production of

their own tests, where those commercially-provided are not extant, indicates that 'teachers want and need tests'.

It could be argued that tests measure learners' progress so useful records can be kept, and Rixon and Rea-Dickins' research shows the majority of records are kept by the teachers themselves (p.92). However, it should be remembered that the results are only useful insofar as a true representation of a child's ability is obtained, and, according to the study, 18% of respondents failed to indicate who, if anyone, kept a record of the results. My personal interpretation of this statistic is that if no records are being kept in the majority of these cases, this is a possible indicator of parent-driven, results-oriented testing with little or no formative pedagogic value. Rixon and Rea-Dickins hypothesise (p.91) 'the main purpose for assessment was to inform classroom planning and action.....The formative dimension of testing was ..... supported by 59% (of those who indicated 'to help teaching') stating that they used tests to check learner progress, as a diagnostic tool (5.7%) and to provide feedback to learners'. This contrasts with my own experience, where a much greater emphasis was placed on the use of tests to provide results to parents. Furthermore, the respondents who indicated they used tests diagnostically, which presupposes a direct formative effect upon future classes, is very small. Those who used the tests to check learner progress (59%) may not necessarily see the results as informing or affecting future class content, poor performers may simply be required to study the subject further at home.

In the study however, some of Rixon & Rea-Dickins' respondents (p.95) did report 'the importance of the formative dimension of assessment in their work':

'.....and from the gaps we can find out where we should help the children more'.

'.....and the children also need .....feedback about their achievement in language learning'.

But as the researchers themselves acknowledge: 'it is not clear from our data ..... how the findings .....were ....used in informing classroom planning and action. The data ..... suggests an awareness of the need for 'results' to feed into teaching and learning. However, it was not clear whether learner assessment as implemented in schools was an integral *part* of learning, or whether assessment was actually implemented as the means to measure the summative achievement of their learners'.

Testing is sometimes justified because of its possible motivational propensity for children. Although I believe that this can be the case, it must be remembered that individual learning styles differ greatly. One child might find a test motivating, to the next it might have the opposite effect. Furthermore, those whose affective barrier is greater under traditional 'pencil and paper' test conditions fail to perform to the level of their true ability, and can be subsequently regarded as less able, although I see this more as an indictment of methods used rather than assessment itself.

I believe the idea that tests can motivate teachers to teach better must be treated with

caution. Test results may be formatively utilised by teachers planning future class content - although results can be useful pedagogic tools in this respect, this is no guarantee that the material will actually be taught better/more effectively. Testing can have a 'washback' effect, where material is revised in class as test-preparation, but simply including material will not guarantee effective teaching of it. Teachers concerned about negative feedback from parents whose children perform poorly are arguably less likely to teach better, possibly not treating those children concerned objectively.

Test results can be used to compare achievement amongst schools. This however remains a very contentious issue, 'league tables' failing to provide a true picture of what goes on inside schools. Schools who wholly or partly-select pupils (as happens even at primary level in some UK schools), or who are in socially-deprived areas, or who have a high proportion of 'special needs' pupils cannot in my opinion, be compared equably. Analysis of test results can prove extremely useful however in helping to evaluate course objectives and syllabus, and providing a general overview of effectiveness. It should be remembered however that results can only be utilised effectively if they are not only recorded by the classroom teacher but also collated administratively, something which happened in only 2.5% of cases in the survey. It appears therefore that opportunities extant for effective macro-utilisation of information provided by results is not generally actioned.

### **HOW SCHOOLS COULD IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF TESTS AND/OR OTHER FORMS OF ASSESSMENT.**

Rixon and Rea-Dickins state 'it has been taken for granted that assessment is necessary' (p.93) but believe that the apparent rebellion of many primary teachers against the idea stems from the view that 'assessment equals a .....paper-and-pencil test more suited to older .....learners'. It is therefore apparent that primary teachers value testing and assessment, but that their reservations stem from uncertainty in respect of the optimum modus operandi, and uncertainty in respect of their own capabilities vis-à-vis test construction. The researchers further state '.... mismatch is frequently observed between curricular aims, pedagogy, and test content. This represents something of a challenge for EYL assessment, that is to find procedures that capture.....language awareness and social/communicative dimensions of language and language-use'. One of the respondents (p.94) observed that testing should be done:

‘.....as a means of creating self-esteem, independence.’

Other comments, which echoed the sentiments expressed above were also made:

‘.....tests in primary school are often related to games.....activities which do not arouse anxiety, so they are quite different from traditional tests pupils are used to.’

‘ .....children should be assessed orally and in writing too.’

‘ .....written tests are not .... best. We should find other ways to check....  
achievement (games, orally, situations).’

This comment reflects awareness of different EL goals:

‘ .....primary school children should be assessed to verify their interest to the  
language and culture of other countries.....’

A teacher wrote of her own school:

‘ .....first the assessment is oral.....pupils.....are happy about it ....this type of  
assessment is encouraging.’

and that testing is conducted:

‘ ....in an informal way because English in primary schools is taught in a friendly  
way and a formal test could condition the children’s spontaneity’. ‘

I believe, despite the multiplicity of difficulties which may appear to be congruent with testing/assessing young learners, that theoretically it is both useful and necessary. I believe it may be achieved most effectively by the use of informal, possibly interactive, activities other than the traditional ‘paper and pencil’ type tests which would seem to be most commonly utilised. I believe in the importance of informality as a disincentive to affective barriers being raised in young learners which may create subsequent attitudinal difficulties towards English and testing/assessment. I am inclined to favour, in addition to oral and listening tests, continuous assessment of coursework. However, results obtained from older learners would indicate a resulting gender division apparently favouring girls over boys, indicated in recent U.K. ‘A’ level results for example. As yet it is unclear whether a gender-divide would also be apparent among younger EL learners.

Asking children to cope with language above sentence-level would be presenting, and asking them to cope with, more natural language, encourage top-down knowledge use and estimation-of-meaning from context-clues: presenting primary learners with ‘big’ texts (eg. stories) could encourage tolerance of ambiguity, simultaneously being an informal assessment of listening, a skill difficult to test.

Better-trained teachers have more confidence in their ability to produce better-written tests, efficiently administered and recorded, not in response to parental pester-power but with results assimilated administratively and utilised creatively, on a micro-level within everyday classroom pedagogy and a macro-level, influencing and recording the efficacy of the curriculum and long-term academic objectives.

## **CONCLUSION.**

Rea-Dickins and Rixon's research reveals that teachers want and need tests – when not available, they write their own. The report also reveals many primary teachers' resistance to testing young learners, ascribing this to 'paper-and-pencil' type tests, which they believe inappropriate for young learners. Lacking confidence in their testing skills however, maybe pressurised by parents and schools for this type of test, formal tests are the type generally administered. Teachers describe tests as useful indicators of classroom-teaching effectiveness and the results as formatively useful, but it is apparently (according to the report) unclear how, in practice, test and assessment results affect class content. The results which are not recorded, a surprisingly-large 18%, can have only limited, if any, formative value.

If wrongly designed and administered, without taking into account varying learning styles and the likely validity of results obtained, I believe testing can impact negatively both on the learners themselves and subsequent pedagogic attitudes towards them. Conversely, a preponderance of informal tests, administered in an interactive, naturalistic way, with efficient recording of the results and utilisation of them on a macro-level can help improve curricula and assist in realistic goal-setting for both school and learners. Despite my own negative experiences when testing/assessing young learners to date, I continue to believe that there are valid reasons for testing/assessing and believe that on subsequent occasions I will feel more confident in designing, administering and utilizing tests/assessments for the overall benefit of all concerned stakeholders.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY.**

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Course notes.