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Comparative Assessment of Young Learners' Foreign Language Competence in three Eastern European Countries

Abstract

This paper concerns teacher practices in, and beliefs about, the assessment of young learner progress in English in three Eastern European countries (Slovenia, Croatia, the Czech Republic).

The central part of the article focuses on an international project involving empirical research into assessment of young learners' foreign language competence in Slovenia, Croatia and the Czech Republic. With the help of an adapted questionnaire, we collected data from a nonrandom sample of primary and foreign language teachers who teach foreign languages at the primary level in these countries.

The research shows that English as a foreign language is taught mostly by young teachers either primary specialists or foreign language teachers. These teachers most frequently use oral assessment/interviews or self-developed tests. Other more authentic types of assessment, such as language portfolios, are rarely used. The teachers most frequently assess speaking and listening skills, and they use assessment involving vocabulary the most frequently of all. However, there are significant differences in practice among the three countries.

Key words: Assessment of young learners, foreign languages, teachers' beliefs and practices.

I Introduction

In this article we present research into the assessment of foreign language learning at primary school level in three Eastern European Countries: Slovenia, Croatia and the Czech Republic. We also present basic issues concerning the competencies of foreign language teachers at the primary level in these three countries and these teachers' assessment of young learners. The background information has been supplied to us by colleagues in the countries involved and we have acknowledged their contributions by footnotes in the relevant sections of this paper. Information on approaches to the assessment of young learners' foreign language development in real teaching contexts is relatively scarce. Books such as Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou (2003), McKay (2006) usefully cover principles and best practice in the assessment of children learning a foreign language but their focus is not on actual practice in particular contexts. Rea-Dickens and Rixon (2000) carried out an international survey that revealed interesting trends and it was on this that we decided to base our own research on three particular countries. The Rea-Dickens and Rixon survey showed that the content of many tests aimed at young learners focused on grammar vocabulary items, often using gap-fill and multiple choice, which are easy-to-mark procedures. The tests did not often focus on the ability to communicate in speaking or writing and often ignored listening and speaking skills, especially because testing young learners' speaking skills can be difficult and time-consuming with a large class. A further finding was that many tests focus on testing language items at the word or sentence level and rarely focus on longer stretches of language (discourse level), although young learners are able to interpret longer texts, using a variety of clues (e.g. physical, visual context, working out the speakers' intentions). Our aim was to discover whether the state of young learner assessment in the context of Slovenia, Croatia and the Czech Republic was similar or different to the situation outlined above.

I.1 The context

Several changes in School curricula were introduced in all three countries in the last decade of the 20th century and in the first years of the 21st century. One of the most important changes made was lowering the start of foreign language learning to the primary level.

Table 1: Foreign language learning in Slovenian primary school

Grade	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
Age of learners	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14

Language learning	Extra classes	Obligatory 1 st foreign language							
					Optional 2 nd				
Hours per week (1 st foreign lang.)				2	3	4	4	3	3
Hours per week (2 nd for. lang.)							2	2	2

As shown in Table 1, since 1998 children have begun learning their first foreign language in Slovenia (English or German) as an obligatory subject in the fourth grade at the age of nine. Young learners should reach A2 at the end of the ninth grade (age 14) in their first foreign language, in accordance with the Common European Framework (CEF) for Languages. At the age of twelve, in the seventh grade, they may choose to begin a second foreign language. Many children, however, begin learning a foreign language in lower grades, in optional extra classes funded by the local community or by fees (Cagran, Brumen 2004, 126).

Table 2: Foreign language learning in Croatian primary school

Grade	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
Age of learners	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Language learning	Obligatory 1 st foreign language							
					Elective 2 nd foreign language			
Hours per week (1 st foreign lang.)	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3
Hours per week (2 nd for. lang.)					2	2	2	2

In Croatia since 2003 children have begun to learn their first foreign language (mostly English, but also German, French, Italian or any other language) as an obligatory subject in the first grade at the age of seven (see Table 2). At the age of eleven, in the fifth grade, they may start to learn a second foreign language as an elective subject. Children study the first foreign language for two hours per week in the first four years and three hours per week in the next four years of their primary school education. If they choose to study a second foreign language at school, they will have two additional classes per week. According to the Croatian National Educational Standard (2005) young learners should reach A1 at the end of the fourth grade (age 10) and should reach A2 at the end of the eighth grade (age 14) in the first foreign language and A1+ level (elective subject) according to CEF. However, many children begin to learn foreign languages in kindergarten, or when it comes to their second foreign language, before the age of nine or ten, a situation which creates a problem for foreign language teachers who then have to work with heterogeneous classes (Pavicic, Bagaric 2004).

Table 3: Foreign language learning in Czech primary schools

Grade	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
Age of learners	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Language learning	Optional classes			Obligatory 1 st foreign language					
							Optional 2 nd		
Hours per week (1 st foreign lang.)				3	3	3	3	3	3

In the Czech Republic the curriculum for schools was changed in 1998, and currently children start learning English in the fourth grade of primary school (see *Table 3*). In September 2004 a new school act was approved, which was implemented in the year 2007. Within this new act, a new Framework for basic education was introduced. According to this Framework, young learners start learning the first foreign language (English is recommended) in grade 3 at the age of 8, the second foreign language in grade 8 at the age of 13. At the end of compulsory education, children who began learning English in grade 3 should have reached level A 2 (in accordance with the Common European Framework for Languages); those who began learning English in grade 8, will have achieved level A 1. Many children begin learning a foreign language in lower grades, in optional extra classes for which fees are payable.

There are some schools with extended foreign language teaching. Children start learning the 1st foreign language in grade 3 and the second in grade 6.

The research group is aware that, because of differences in the school systems for teaching young learners, statistical comparison among the three countries in the assessment of foreign language policy needs to be based on a comparison among particular age groups of young learners.

In all three countries guidelines for foreign language teachers, stated in the National Curricula for Foreign Languages, emphasize that foreign language teachers should pay equal attention to the development of all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) suitable for young learners. However, in Croatia in the first four years of foreign language learning (especially in the first year) the accent is placed on developing listening and speaking. The importance of vocabulary learning is emphasized in all three countries. As for grammatical forms and structures, these are to be learnt meaningfully and practiced through communicative activities in a wide range of contexts. In all three countries teachers are encouraged to use varied teaching materials. They even have the liberty to choose a course book from several prescribed by the Ministry of Education; these approved course books are subsidized by the government – pupils do not have to pay for them. In the Czech Republic the

new Framework for basic education (obligatory for all schools from 2007) gives schools/teachers freedom to choose teaching materials and methods used for ELT classrooms and also the subject matter. Each school has to create its curriculum and teaching plans for each subject, and schools are fully responsible for these.

I.2 Competencies of foreign language teachers at the primary level in three Eastern European Countries

Foreign language teaching at the primary level in all three countries is carried out by two main types of professional:

- 1 specialist foreign language teachers, who are specifically qualified through university degrees to teach foreign languages but are not necessarily primary school specialists.
2. primary teachers, who are qualified to teach all subjects in the curriculum, including one foreign language. In order to gain this qualification they have to finish an additional module of primary teacher training.

There is a shortage of qualified teachers of foreign languages in all three countries. Although there are many courses for these teachers organized by local educational authorities or Universities, many teachers methodologically unqualified to teach foreign languages work at the primary level.

This mixed provision in which professionals with very different skills and qualifications profiles operate is echoed in the young learners provision in many countries in which the supply of teachers to meet rapid policy changes is an issue [see Rixon 1992].

I.3 Guidance for the assessment of young learners' progress in three Eastern European Countries

In Slovenia and Croatia the National Curriculum Guidelines for Foreign Languages include a section about foreign language assessment. In the Czech Republic there is no particular description of how teachers should assess their learners. The only thing teachers have to take into consideration is the allocation of marks from one to five, but this is only a general rule valid for all school subjects.

The Slovenian National Curriculum of Foreign Languages (1998, 61) includes some guidelines and forms of assessment for primary school, like the observation of pupil's language progress or achievement in performing different activities, using tests, language portfolios, self-assessment, and checking homework.

Young learners in Slovenia are mostly observed during lessons. Teachers assess their oral activities (dialogues, independent speech, projects) and they are given tests, which usually focus on vocabulary and short sentences, texts (e.g. putting parts of a sentence in the correct order, or writing about your bedroom) and sometimes focus on the usage of grammatical structures and reading and listening skills. Young learners are assessed by descriptive comments and grades (from one to five – five is the best); both ways of assessment are included in the school reports. Other/older learners (age 12 – 14) are assessed only by grades. Both learners are assessed twice a year using a long-form test (it usually lasts for 45 minutes), and it must be announced in advance.

The Croatian National Educational Standard (2005) includes standards and guidelines for teachers on how to assess (young) learners. It also recommends using the Croatian versions of the European Language Portfolio (7-10 years, 11-15 years and 15+). It is recommended to observe young learners during lessons. Teachers should focus on receptive skills in the lower grades and on productive skills in higher grades. During the first semester of the first grade young learners are assessed only by descriptive comments (in all subjects). During the whole first grade reading and writing is not assessed in foreign language instruction. From the second semester onward young learners are assessed by grades from one to five. Five is the best grade. Descriptive comments stay as a very important part of the final grade throughout primary school. Teachers assess oral activities during lessons. It is recommended to assess projects and homework, too.

In the fourth grade, tests are introduced in the foreign language classroom. The short version of tests (the so called “five minute written test”) must be announced in advance. The longer version of tests (that can last 45 minutes) is allowed only in some subjects (Croatian, Maths, and Foreign Language) once or twice a year.

The Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports decided in 2007 to introduce external evaluation in the fourth and eighth grade of primary school. Young learners in all primary schools are tested in their first foreign language, as well as three obligatory subjects (Croatian, Maths and Science).

In the Czech Republic, although there is no particular description of how learners should be assessed, teachers follow some general assessment criteria: assessment and student progress is based on teacher observations during lessons, i.e. how a particular child is involved in activities (pair work, group work). Teachers mostly assess oral activities during lessons (dialogues or independent speech). Children's project work and homework might also be assessed in some schools. Additionally, pupils are given tests, which usually focus on vocabulary development, correct usage of grammatical structures (usually translation), and occasionally reading and listening skills (unfortunately, this is still not common in all schools). Children get marks from one to five (five is the worst) or are assessed verbally (in some schools), and their school reports can show either marks or a verbal assessment. Language portfolios and self-assessment are being introduced to some progressive schools.

II. Aims of the research

Since the onset of foreign language teaching to the primary level is so recent in these three countries; this kind of education, especially assessment, is new to the teachers at this level. Through the *studies* presented here, we wanted to find out what foreign language teachers' experiences and attitudes are with regard to the assessment of primary learners of foreign languages.

III. Research questions

The studies focus on the following research questions:

1. What are general characteristics of foreign language teaching for young learners?
2. What are the characteristics of teacher assessment in practice?
 - 2.1. How is assessment carried out in the classroom?
 - 2.2. What forms and types of assessment are used?
 - 2.3. What kind of assessment content and related skills are used?
 - 2.4. What kind of assessment activities are used?

IV. Procedure

a) The sample procedure for data collection:

Data were collected on a nonrandom sample of 108 primary school teachers involved in the teaching of foreign languages (English and German), to learners aged from 5-12 years. The total was composed of teachers from Slovenia-SI (n=50), the Czech Republic-CZ (n=30) and

Croatia-CRO (n=28). The sampling was carried out first by slow mail, where primary and foreign language teachers completed and sent back questionnaires to the research group. It was also administered to seminars of teachers who teach foreign languages at the primary level. The results reported here are based on a sample of 108 teachers. 4 questionnaires were not properly completed, so these were excluded.

b) *The research instrument*

We used an adaptation of the questionnaire devised by Rea-Dickins and Rixon (1999), having made some content and methodological changes (*see appendix*). The first part of the questionnaire focuses on general characteristics of teachers (e.g. status, working period, age groups), then it includes characteristics of teacher assessment in practice (e.g. execution of assessment, forms and types of assessment, assessment content and related skills).

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

c) *The procedure for data analysis*

The data were analysed at the level of descriptive and inferential statistics.

At the level of *descriptive statistics* we calculated the following:

- frequencies (f, f%) of nominal variables (Tables 4, 5, 6, 9),
- mean (\bar{x}) of numerically stated (5-always, 4-frequently, 3-sometimes, 2-rarely, 1-never) answers (Tables 7, 11).

At the level of *inferential statistics*, in accordance with the data collected on nominal and ordinal levels, we used the following:

- non-parametric tests: χ^2 -test (test of independence; analysis of frequencies – nominal variable, Tables 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12) and the Kruskal-Wallis-Test (analysis of the mean rank – ordinal variable, Tables 8, 10, 12) of differences among the groups of teachers according to country.

V. The analysis of general characteristics of foreign language teaching of young learners

We wanted to find out the status of teachers, their working period, age groups of young learners and the foreign language they teach.

As regards to the *status* of foreign language teachers of young learners there exists a statistically significant difference ($P=0.003$) among the respondents from the three countries. In Slovenia (64%) and especially in Croatia (89.3%), foreign language teaching is performed mostly by foreign language teachers. In the Czech Republic, foreign language instruction is more frequently performed by primary teachers (53.3%).

As regards the *working period* of teachers there is no statistically significant difference among the respondents from the three countries ($P=0.710$). The foreign language teaching of young learners is mostly performed by young teachers (60.2%), who have up to five years of working experience. The results here probably reflect the specific situation of the teachers involved in our research; the majority of the data were collected at teacher training seminars, which are usually attended by younger teachers.

There are no statistically significant differences among the respondents in terms of teachers who teach the youngest *age group* of the youngest learners, 5 – 6 year old learners (16,7%); in all countries this segment is the lowest. As explained in the introduction, many children begin learning a foreign language in lower grades (age 6-8) in optional extra classes, except in Croatia. However, in all other age groups statistically significant differences do exist; in Croatia teachers mostly teach 7– 8 year old learners (78,6%), in Slovenia (74%) and in the Czech Republic (76,7%) 9 – 10 year old learners. In the latter countries teachers teach more 11 – 12 year old learners than in Croatia. These results coincide with the National Curriculum of Foreign Languages in all three countries. In Croatia, students start learning their first foreign language at the age of 6 or 7, whereas in Slovenia and the Czech Republic they begin at the age of 9.

According to the *foreign language* taught in classes there exists a statistically significant difference among the three countries ($P=0.002$). English is mostly taught in Slovenia (88%) and in the Czech Republic (90%). In Croatia, alongside English (53.6%), German is also taught (28.6%).

To sum up, foreign language instruction (predominantly in English but also with some German) is mostly carried out by young, less experienced teachers who have been in the profession for up to 5 years. In Slovenia and Croatia it is mostly foreign language teachers who carry out the foreign language instruction, whereas in the Czech Republic it is primary teachers. They teach in the age group of 5 – 12 year old learners; in Croatia teachers mostly teach 7– 8 year old learners, in Slovenia and in the Czech Republic 9 – 10 and 11 – 12 year old learners.

In the wider national context in all three countries, parents may, together with the school administration, choose the first foreign language; we can see that in the majority of schools English is chosen. Alongside English, other foreign languages are taught, usually German, especially because all three countries border on a German speaking country (Austria).

VI. Findings

VI.1 The analysis of characteristics of teacher assessment in practice

We will present the following issues:

- frequency of assessment and its reasons
- methods of assessment
- type of assessment and its purpose
- assessment content and related skills
- assessment activities.

VI.1.a The frequency of assessment

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

Table 4. Do you assess your young learners in any way on their achievements in a foreign language?

Country	SI	CRO	CZ	Total	χ^2 -test	df	P
Answer							
Yes	50 100.0%	28 100.0%	30 100.0%	108 100.0%	/	/	/
No	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%			
Total	50 100.0%	28 100.0%	30 100.0%	108 100.0%			

In all three countries, according to their School legislation and the National Curriculum of Foreign Languages, assessment is a fully enforced activity. All teachers assess their young learners, and it is carried out across all age groups (5 – 12 years).

Table 5. Why is assessment carried out in your foreign language (FL) classroom?

Country	SI	CRO	CZ	Total	Result χ^2	df	P
Reasons							
National FL standards	20 40.0%	7 25.0%	14 46.7%	41 38.0%	3.051	2	0.218
Parents	35 70.0%	21 75.0%	24 80.0%	80 74.1%	0.993	2	0.609
Pupils	39 78.0%	20 71.4%	20 66.7%	79 73.1%	1.283	2	0.526
Language teacher	36 72.0%	19 67.9%	17 56.7%	72 66.7%	2.008	2	0.366
Certification at the end of primary school	20 40.0%	15 53.6%	10 33.3%	45 41.7%	2.547	2	0.280
Outside evaluators	2 4.0%	1 3.6%	0 0.0%	3 2.8%	1.994	2	0.369

The majority of teachers use assessment to provide information to young learners' parents (74.1%), to their learners (73.1%) and to themselves as language teachers (66.7%). Certification at the end of primary school (41.7%) and national foreign language standards (38.0%), especially outside evaluators (2.8%), are less significant reasons for using assessment in the foreign language classroom.

The χ^2 -test results show that there are no statistically significant differences among the three countries ($P > 0.15$). The reason for collecting assessment data on young learners is to provide information to the learners' parents, to learners themselves and to teachers, in fact to all the stakeholders in the process of foreign language acquisition.

V.1.b Methods of assessment

We investigated the usage of numerical and descriptive grades, scores and percentages in foreign language instruction.

Table 6. How are results reported?

Country	SI	CRO	CZ	Total	Result χ^2	df	P
Methods of assessment							
Numerical grade	28 56.0%	21 75.0%	22 73.3%	71 65.7%	3.940	2	0.139
Descriptive grades/comments	12 24.0%	9 32.1%	7 23.3%	28 25.9%	0.765	2	0.682
Grade and comment	12 24.0%	12 42.9%	14 46.7%	38 35.2%	5.200	2	0.074
Scores	22 44.0%	12 42.9%	3 10.0%	37 34.3%	10.864	2	0.004
Percentages	14	1	4	19	7.908	2	0.019

	28.0%	3.6%	13.3%	17.6%	
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The table shows that these teachers use numerical grades (65.7%) the most frequently, and that the use of percentages to represent grades (17.6%) is the least frequent. The use of scores (34.3%) and the combination of grades and comments (35.2%) is quite similar; the use of only descriptive grades or comments (25.9%) is not so frequent.

Statistically significant differences among the respondents exist in the use of scores ($P=0.004$) and percentages ($P=0.019$); and there is a slight tendency in the existence of differences ($P=0.074$) in the usage of a combination of grades and comments. From the frequencies we may notice that teachers in Slovenia (44.0%) and in Croatia (42.9%), use scores more often. In Slovenia the use of percentages (28.0%) is more frequently found than in the other two countries; however, in Slovenia the use of a combination of grades and comments (24.0%) is not as often found as in Croatia and the Czech Republic.

The traditional method of assessment seems to prevail: teachers use numerical grades (65.7%) the most frequently. Although numerical grades may be easy and fast, they do not give the learner, the parent, or even the teacher any real information. We believe that foreign language teachers of young learners should use other methods of assessment more often. We recommend that very young learners (5 – 8 years old) should be assessed only by descriptive grades or comments (usually in the mother tongue), addressing the individual performance of the child. If young learners cannot read at all, teachers should consider commenting on children's work during a short one-to-one conversation; whereas with slightly older learners (9 – 12 years old), teachers should use a combination of grades and comments.

V.1.c Types of assessment

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

Table 7. The ranked list of types of assessment according to its frequency (\bar{x})

Rank	Type of assessment	\bar{x}
1	Oral interview	3.769
2	An individually developed test	3.574
3	Tests taken from textbooks	2.694
4	Self-assessment	2.333
5	Test created by a group of FL teachers	2.037

6	Structured observation leading to a written description of YL performance	1.824
7	Language portfolios	1.500
8	Standardized test from national and local FL educational authority	1.324

Teachers in all three countries use oral interviews and their own tests the most frequently. Tests taken from textbooks follow. In the middle of the ranking list we find learners' self-assessment and tests created by a group of foreign language teachers. Not so frequent are the use of structured observation leading to a written description of young learner's performance and of language portfolios. The least frequent are standardized tests from national and local foreign language educational authorities. We might find the reason for this in the fact that national tests for young learners of foreign languages and specifications for standards have not yet been developed, except in Croatia (see I.3). Teachers therefore frequently use their own tests. They prepare their own tests mostly to achieve short-term goals (e.g. to test whether pupils know the colours, animals, clothes, weather).

The results show that teachers are aware of the fact that listening and speaking are the leading language skills in foreign language instruction at primary level; therefore oral interviews (e.g. being able to describe a young learner's family) rank very high. It is generally known (see also Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou 2003; Brewster et al. 2002; Curtain and Pesola 1994, Moon 2000) that the aim of speaking is to achieve oral communication, to be able to convey messages. When assessing young learners in speaking, the emphasis should be on realistic and genuine communicative interaction, and in contexts familiar and interesting to young learners. Self-assessment seems to be less important to the teachers, although, as stated in The Slovenian National Curriculum of Foreign Languages (1998, 61), it promotes learning skills such as monitoring one's own progress, reflects one's abilities and learning styles, sets personal goals, gives young learners an insight into the assessment criteria used by others and permits them a say in their assessment. We believe that teachers are unfamiliar with using self-assessment methods (such as portfolios, questionnaires, graphic representations) in their instruction. This might also be the reason why language portfolios rank so low. Although experts (Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou 2003; Brewster et al. 2002; Curtain and Pesola 1994, Moon 2000) and even the National Curriculum of Foreign Languages (e.g. in Slovenia, 1998) suggest that language portfolios should be used in the foreign language classroom, teachers do not follow these guidelines.

The next table shows the differences in the three countries according to the type of assessment.

Table 8: What type of assessment do you use in your FL classroom?

Type of assessment	Country	The average rank \bar{R}	χ^2	df	P
Individually developed test	SI	58.61	9.462	2	0.009
	CRO	40.50			
	CZ	64.05			
Test created by a group of FL teachers	SI	51.90	1.654	2	0.437
	CRO	52.80			
	CZ	60.42			
Oral interviews	SI	48.42	8.546	2	0.014
	CRO	50.98			
	CZ	67.92			
Tests taken from textbooks	SI	54.33	10.988	2	0.004
	CRO	41.20			
	CZ	67.20			
Structured observation leading to a written description of YL performance	SI	50.89	6.871	2	0.032
	CRO	66.84			
	CZ	49.00			
Standardized test from national and local FL educational authority	SI	56.49	0.742	2	0.690
	CRO	52.09			
	CZ	53.43			
Language portfolios	SI	60.01	6.205	2	0.045
	CRO	44.79			
	CZ	54.38			
Self-assessment	SI	58.05	1.955	2	0.376
	CRO	48.23			
	CZ	54.43			

It is evident from the table that, in the frequency of individual types of assessment, statistically significant differences among the three countries do exist. Teachers in the Czech Republic often use different tests (the teachers' own tests, especially tests taken from textbooks) and oral interview. In Croatia teachers use structured observation leading to a written description of young learners' performance more frequently than teachers in the other two countries. A language portfolio is most frequently used in Slovenia.

The traditional method of assessment seems to prevail (written assessment with tests and oral interviews) in the Czech Republic; however, it is not as common in Croatia and Slovenia.

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

Table 9. What is the purpose of your assessment?

Purpose	To monitor progress &	To diagnose problems	To check achievement of	To encourage learning/motivate	To establish standards
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Type	get feedback		learners	learners	
- Individually developed test	83 76.9%	44 40.7%	54 50.0%	33 30.6%	17 15.7%
- Test created by a group of FL teachers	13 12.0%	13 12.0%	23 21.3%	10 9.3%	13 12.0%
- Oral interview	52 48.1%	40 37.0%	58 53.7%	46 42.6%	10 9.3%
- Tests taken from textbooks	38 35.2%	26 24.1%	35 32.4%	28 25.9%	15 13.9%
- Structured observation leading to a written description of YL performance	13 12.0%	6 5.6%	14 13.0%	16 14.8%	10 9.3%
- Standardized test from national or local FL education authority	7 6.5%	2 1.9%	5 4.6%	1 0.9%	10 9.3%
- Language portfolios	12 11.1%	4 3.7%	10 9.3%	12 11.1%	3 2.8%
- Self-assessment	16 14.8%	15 13.9%	14 13.0%	34 31.5%	3 2.8%
Total	269 27.2%	191 19.3%	243 24.6%	191 19.3%	94 9.5%

Teachers use different types of assessment (assorted tests, oral interviews, self-assessment, language portfolios) mostly to get feedback or to monitor young learners' progress (27.2%) and to check the achievement of learners (24.6%). Diagnosis of problems and motivation of learners follow (19.3%). The least frequent purpose for using these tests is to establish standards (9.5%). We might find the reason for this in the fact that tests and standards have not yet been worked out on a national basis (except in Croatia).

The results show that teachers say that they aim to use assessment types and tasks to identify, monitor and aid the language-learning progress of young learners. In this way they are aware of what young learners know, acquire feedback on their strengths and problem areas, adjust learning tasks to suit their needs, and give individualized help to each child. They use assessment results to decide if young learners are to be moved to the next learning level.

Teachers check the achievement of learners over a term or year at frequent intervals (24.6%). In this way they identify what young learners have learnt. These assessment outcomes help them to monitor their performance in order to evaluate their own work, how effective they have been and how successfully they chose methodologies and teaching aids. This also helps them to adjust their teaching plans, modify aspects of teaching (materials, books) as necessary, decide which young learners are to be moved to the next class, and develop methods and techniques that respond to the young learner's individual needs.

If we pay attention to individual types of assessment, we find that teachers primarily use tests that they have devised themselves (76.9%) and tests taken from textbooks (35.2%) with the

purpose of getting data on young learners' achievement and progress. Tests created by a group of foreign language teachers are mostly used for checking the achievement of young learners (21.3%), and tests from a national or local foreign language education authority are used in establishing standards (9.3%).

In the case of oral interviews, the most significant purpose is to check the achievements of young learners (53.7%). In structured observation leading to a written description of learners' performance (14.8) and in self-assessment (31.5%), the main purpose is to encourage and motivate learners. Motivation and getting data on young learners' achievements (11.1%) are also the main reasons for using language portfolios.

For the last 50 years the National Curriculum in different subjects (not only Foreign Languages) has in all three countries recommended that feedback to young learners should be given in the form of grades. The introduction of descriptive grades/comments and a combination of a grade and comments has indicated some changes in the curriculum. However, as learners, parents and teachers report, descriptive grades have sometimes not developed in the right direction, teachers may namely give a very stingy descriptive grade.

In Slovenia in 2006 a research project (Komljanc and Marsh 2007) was introduced into 30 schools with the aim of improving the quality of assessment. The project includes some aspects of the assessment model developed in Hong Kong and some national specifics and has introduced formative assessment into schools. The goal of the project is to change the assessment philosophy, in the sense that in some elements in the assessment system, where a grade is the usual feedback, that grade has been substituted by a different kind of feedback in the form of giving instructions to (young) learners how to learn. Not grades, but the results and the individual learner, are the dominant feature of assessment. A pilot project in Slovenian schools shows young learners' satisfaction in such assessment, along with greater motivation for learning and higher self-esteem. Their parents believe that young learners are more active, informed and engaged in their learning. In the future some changes will be made in the Slovenian primary school curriculum, formative assessment will be included as a self-reflective process in which learners are provided with feedback from both the teacher and their peers to improve learning (e.g. by teachers' observation of (young) learners' response in asking/answering questions, interaction with other learners during activities).

Therefore we recommend to school authorities in all three countries that there should be changes made to some aspects of assessment in foreign language education (at the primary level). A focus should be placed on the processes which help teachers to check the status of

(young) learners' target language ability (what learners know and do not know). This gives learners an opportunity to participate in modifying the classes. Such active cooperation in their learning stimulates (young) learners' motivation to learn the foreign language and increases learners' awareness about their foreign language. This in turn leads to improvement and successful achievement of their own goals, and it also helps teachers to foster (young) learners' foreign language ability. Changes in (primary) schools are first of all methodological: assessment activities in the foreign language classroom (at the primary level) may include short quizzes, reflectional (daily) journals, projects, conferences, or portfolios, which requires additional teacher training.

V.1.d Assessment content and related skills

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

Table 10: What is your content/skills-focus in assessment of young learners?

Content and skills	Country	The average rank \bar{R}	χ^2	df	P
Grammar	SI	53.52	25.206	2	0.000
	CRO	35.13			
	CZ	74.22			
Lexis	SI	47.54	5.812	2	0.054
	CRO	62.86			
	CZ	58.30			
Spelling	SI	59.23	6.102	2	0.047
	CRO	42.91			
	CZ	57.43			
Oral skills	SI	48.75	4.167	2	0.125
	CRO	57.29			
	CZ	61.48			
Listening skills	SI	50.67	1.710	2	0.425
	CRO	58.46			
	CZ	57.18			
Reading skills	SI	53.34	13.106	2	0.001
	CRO	41.14			
	CZ	68.90			
Writing skills	SI	54.41	12.902	2	0.002
	CRO	40.07			
	CZ	68.12			
Pronunciation	SI	44.51	11.251	2	0.004
	CRO	64.64			
	CZ	61.68			

As is evident from the table, there are statistically significant differences ($P < 0.05$) among the three countries in their focus on content and skills in the assessment of young learners. Teachers in the Czech Republic assess grammar, reading and writing skills more often than

their colleagues in Slovenia and especially in Croatia. Croatian teachers focus on lexis more often than teachers in the Czech Republic and Slovenia. However, Slovenian teachers assess spelling more frequently than teachers in the Czech Republic and Croatia. There are no statistically significant differences in assessing speaking and listening skills among the three countries.

Based on these differences, we can conclude that teachers in Croatia emphasize assessment of active, oral, levels of foreign language knowledge (listening skills, pronunciation) more than teachers in Slovenia or the Czech Republic. The latter focus more on passive levels of foreign language acquisition (grammar, reading and writing skills). We might find the reason for these results in the age groups of young learners. In Croatia teachers mostly teach 7– 8 year old learners, for whom grammar, reading and writing skills are considerably less significant; listening and speaking skills and pronunciation are the primary language components. In Slovenia and in the Czech Republic teachers mostly teach 9 – 10 and 11-12 year old learners, for whom development of grammar, reading and writing skills are an integral part of foreign language instruction. This thesis may also be supported by the National Curriculum of Foreign Languages in all three countries, where we find that in Croatia children start learning their first foreign language at the age of 7 on the national level, whereas in Slovenia and in the Czech Republic this happens at the age of 9 (see also I.1).

V.2.e Assessment activities

We investigated how frequently 15 different activities were included by teachers in their assessment. These activities assess 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.

Table 11. The ranked list of assessment activities according to frequency (\bar{x})

Rank	Assessment activities	\bar{x}
1	Matching	3.093
2	An oral dialogue	3.000
3	Listening to audio material (e.g. cassettes)	2.944
4	Listening to the teacher talking	2.967
5	Gap-fill activities	2.741
6	Reading of short words/sentences	2.713
7	Role-playing and demonstrating actions	2.685
8	Comprehension questions (e.g. true/false) about a short text	2.639

9	Identifying a picture from different descriptive texts	2.565
10	A young learner repeats and drills vocabulary or sentences	2.546
11	Learners creating their own short sentences/texts	2.500
12	Copying words, short texts	2.287
13	Solving grammar problems	2.120
14	Dictation	1.926
15	Learners creating their own long sentences/texts (e.g. letters)	1.843

According to the table, the most frequently used assessment activity in all three countries is matching. Then follow assessment activities with similar means: an oral interview, listening to audio materials, listening to the teacher and gap-fill activities. These assessment activities focus on language practice, are cognitively simple and provide controlled, guided practice. In the second part of the ranked list the following assessment activities appear: reading of short words/sentences, role-playing and demonstrating actions, comprehension questions, identifying a picture from different descriptive texts, repeating and drilling vocabulary and sentences. These provide opportunities to develop interaction and fluency, provide more choice and independence for young learners. Less frequent are the next assessment activities: learners creating their own short sentences/texts, copying words or short texts, solving grammar problems. The least frequent are dictation and learners creating their own long sentences/texts (e.g. letters). These assessment activities are cognitively more demanding and encourage production and creative use of language and so are difficult for some young learners.

The ranked list of assessment activities reveals that teachers in all three countries use vocabulary activities more frequently than grammar and orthographic activities, which is, of course promising since the emphasis in young learners' methodology is on functional communication activities in real-life situations. Vocabulary and expressions are taught in context, not in isolation and grammatical structures are learned by imitation and repetition (Brewster et al. 2002; Moon 2000). The foreign language production or utterance of young learners is limited to short sentences, texts, and as Brewster et al. (2002, 105) suggest, much of the foreign language children will learn to produce in the initial stages will be formulaic language, language that is produced as whole chunks rather than being assembled word by word. It often consists of routines or patterns that children memorize and that enable them to communicate with a minimum of language competence. Therefore teachers should encourage production and creative use of language and provide more pupil independence and choice, even in assessment; however the activities should not be too cognitively demanding.

We have also analysed assessment activities according to their use by language teachers in all three countries.

Table 12: What kind of activities do you use in your assessment?

Assessment activities	Country	The average rank \bar{R}	χ^2	df	P
Gap-fill activities	SI	61.87	10.017	2	0.007
	CRO	40.86			
	CZ	54.95			
Matching	SI	55.85	2.738	2	0.254
	CRO	59.30			
	CZ	47.77			
Role-playing	SI	49.60	2.875	2	0.237
	CRO	58.04			
	CZ	59.37			
Copying words, short texts	SI	50.06	2.176	2	0.337
	CRO	58.80			
	CZ	57.88			
Comprehension questions (e.g. true/false) about a short text	SI	58.33	9.624	2	0.008
	CRO	40.46			
	CZ	61.22			
Dictation	SI	52.04	4.802	2	0.091
	CRO	48.86			
	CZ	63.87			
Solving grammar problems	SI	59.37	7.442	2	0.024
	CRO	41.29			
	CZ	58.72			
Learners creating their own short sentences/texts	SI	54.98	6.325	2	0.042
	CRO	44.11			
	CZ	63.40			
Listening to audio material (e.g. cassettes)	SI	45.72	8.350	2	0.015
	CRO	60.16			
	CZ	63.85			
An oral dialogue	SI	49.08	4.292	2	0.107
	CRO	62.93			
	CZ	55.67			
A young learner repeats and drills vocabulary or sentences	SI	44.39	10.784	2	0.005
	CRO	64.71			
	CZ	61.82			
Learners creating their own long sentences/texts (e.g. letters)	SI	60.01	15.556	2	0.000
	CRO	35.80			
	CZ	62.77			
Reading of short words/sentences	SI	50.28	7.817	2	0.020
	CRO	48.25			
	CZ	67.37			
Listening to the teacher talking	SI	47.51	5.088	2	0.079
	CRO	60.29			
	CZ	60.75			
Identifying a picture from different descriptive texts	SI	52.80	1.689	2	0.430
	CRO	60.70			
	CZ	51.55			

As is evident from the table, there are several assessment activities where there are statistically significant differences among respondents from the three countries in using assessment activities in their foreign language classrooms ($P < 0.05$), as well as explicit tendencies ($P < 0.10$) towards difference among teachers in the three countries. It is evident from the average rank (\bar{R}) that teachers in Croatia less frequently than teachers in the other two countries use the majority of assessment activities, such as gap filling, comprehension questions about a short text, solving grammar problems, learners creating their own short and long sentences/texts, reading of short words/sentences and dictation. On the other hand, they more often use assessment activities such as repeating and drilling vocabulary and sentences and identifying a picture from different descriptive texts.

Respondents from Slovenia more frequently use gap fill and solving grammar problems in the assessment of young learners; whereas they make less frequent use of the assessment activities listening to audio material, repeating and drilling of vocabulary and sentences, and listening to the teacher talking.

Croatian teachers are more listening-speaking oriented in using assessment activities than teachers in the other two countries; the Czech teachers focus more on assessment activities that include reading and writing, while the Slovenian teachers make more frequent use of grammar and vocabulary assessment activities.

Respondents in the Czech Republic say that they focus more on comprehension questions (e.g. true/false) about a short text, learners creating their own short and long sentences/texts, listening to audio material (e.g. cassettes), reading of short words/sentences and dictation in their assessment.

These findings are based upon samples which may not be fully representative of the teaching profession in each country. However, we feel that they are substantial enough to capture some of the reality and to raise issues concerned with young learners' assessment.

Some of the differences in results from country to country, particularly those concerning means of assessment might be found in the different ages of the young learners taught by the respondents.

We are also aware that self-reporting is not the most reliable of data collection modes. The use of other research techniques (e.g. systematic observation in classes) would certainly be useful triangulation for the findings of our research and this is planned for future studies.

VI Conclusion

The results of this international research project show that, in the assessment of young learners' foreign language competence, traditional written-oral assessment by numerical grades is still carried out, with greater frequency (statistically significant) in the Czech Republic; on the other hand, assessment of content and skills emphasizes the active level of language knowledge (the emphasis is on speaking-listening skills and lexis). In accordance with this, vocabulary assessment activities prevail over grammar and orthographic activities (Croatian and Czech teachers have a statistical advantage in this over Slovenian teachers). Teachers in all three countries do not reject assessment of young learners. However, for the sake of the quality of their teaching, they express the need for more knowledge and training in this area.

On the basis of this research, we have come to the following conclusions:

- the National Curricula for Foreign Languages in all three countries should include more concrete guidelines with regard to the assessment of young learners;
- teachers, especially those in the Czech Republic and Slovenia, need additional teacher training in the methodology for using assessment activities in foreign language education. Planned teacher training should be provided for all teachers in the area of assessing the foreign language learning of primary school pupils;
- teachers should consider more naturalistic assessment methods (e.g. portfolios, projects, self- and peer-assessment) alongside traditional written-oral assessment;
- teachers should continue to develop ways to make more frequent use of assessment of content, skills and activities on the active level of language knowledge (learner-developed assessment activities, e.g. activities in which young learners demonstrate understanding by doing).

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Notes:

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