

# Techniques Used to Assess Language Areas and Skills at the Lower-Primary Level: Research Results

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**Abstract** The present paper focuses on the issue of assessing young foreign language learners in primary school. First, it presents the most important factors and principles in assessing young learners as well as basic assessment methods and techniques. Then, it describes a study which investigated classroom-based assessment implemented to evaluate lower-primary learners of foreign languages. More specifically, following the first part of the study which focussed on the reasons, means and methods implemented to assess young language learners (Rokoszewska, in press), this paper reports the second part of the study which has dealt with techniques used to test young learners' receptive and productive knowledge of particular language areas and the development of language skills. In general, the results indicate that teachers use a wide variety of techniques to test young learners' language areas and skills. The techniques often come from ready-made pen-and-paper tests and are mostly appropriate to the age and level of the learners. Yet, the most common techniques used by the teachers focus on single language items and thus reflect the view of language as a collection of discrete items which are not connected into a meaningful discourse found in natural communication.

## 1 Introduction

As the starting age of learning a foreign language has been lowered in many countries, including Poland, many teachers are faced with the challenge not only to teach foreign languages to young learners but also to evaluate their progress. The need for formal assessment of young learners is questioned by some methodologists who emphasize the primacy of attitude goals as opposed to content goals. However, school practice clearly points out that teachers are obliged to assess young learners

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in the formal educational system. It needs to be emphasized, however, that assessment based on classroom tests constitutes a rather under-researched area, in contrast to assessment based on standardized tests. Furthermore, assessing language learners at the lower-primary level requires a different approach because of the child's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. The aim of this paper is to present the second part of a questionnaire study whose aim was to investigate the reasons for and means of assessing young learners. The second part of the study focuses on techniques used to assess the receptive and productive knowledge of particular language areas as well as the development of language skills in young learners.

## 2 Assessing Young Language Learners

Assessing young language learners differs from assessing older learners due to such factors as age, aims, course contents, methods and techniques, and learning theories (Cameron, 2003). Assessment should be adjusted to the child's motor, linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional development. It should reflect the focus on attitude goals, which refer to attitudes and beliefs, as opposed to content goals, which refer to particular language areas and skills (Halliwell, 1996). It should be also based on course contents and techniques characteristic of teaching young learners. Furthermore, assessment should be congruent with learning theories, especially with the main concepts of the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). In a similar vein, McKay (2006) lists three features which distinguish young from adult learners and which entail the need for a special approach to classroom-based assessment for the former. The first feature refers to children's developmental needs which have to be taken into consideration as they influence their motivation, concentration and involvement. The second feature refers to the development of literacy knowledge and skills taking place during the development of L2, which contrasts sharply with adult mature literacy. The third feature is children's vulnerability to criticism and failure, accompanied with their need for individual positive attention.

In line with the factors mentioned above, Cameron (2003) enumerates the principles for assessing children. The principles advocate the learning-centred perspective which emphasizes the role of social interaction and which juxtaposes scaffolded (Gipps, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978) or dynamic (Feuerstein, Rand, & Hoffman, 1979) assessment with taking a test in silence and isolation. The principles also advocate adopting a more organic view of language learning, which contrasts sharply with a false concept of a linear accumulation of grammar and vocabulary items. In line with the principles, assessment should support learning and teaching by motivating learners, providing the model of language, encouraging further learning, and helping to plan lessons as well as improving courses and programs. What is more, assessing should be adjusted to learning in that assessment activities should be familiar to children, both in content and form, and in that not

only tests but also some alternative methods should be used. Finally, assessment should be valid, reliable and fair (Gipps, 1994).

When assessing young language learners, it is important to distinguish between different assessment methods and techniques. In general, assessment is divided into *formative*, *summative* and *global* (Komorowska, 2002). Assessment methods are *conventional* and *unconventional*. The conventional methods include tests, which are divided with respect to form into *pen-and-paper tests* and *oral tests* (Komorowska, 2002), with respect to content, into *tests based on pictures, words or both* (Komorowska, 2002), and with respect to function, into *achievement, proficiency, diagnostic, prognostic* and *placement tests* (Heaton, 1990; Hughes, 1989). In addition, tests are classified as *norm-referenced tests* (N-RTs) and *criterion-referenced tests* (C-RTs). The former compare learners' performance in relation to each other, whereas the latter in relation to language material or skills (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). A comprehensive set of testing techniques used to assess particular language areas and skills in young learners has been proposed by Komorowska (2002), and by Szpotowicz and Szulc-Kurpaska (2009). Unconventional methods of assessment for children include mainly observation, portfolio, self-assessment and peer-assessment (Gordon, 2007; O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996; Pinter, 2006; Rixon, 2007) as well as informal questioning, oral interviews, musical presentations, recitations, presentations, projects, products and journals (Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2002; Cameron, 2003; Moon, 2000).

A survey by Rea-Dickins and Rixon (1999) reveals that 93 % out of 120 European teachers assess children, and that 87 % of the teachers understand the purpose of assessment as helping their teaching. However, classroom realities show that assessment is often carried out in conflict with the principles advocated in teaching and learning young learners (Rea-Dickins, 2000). Similar studies were conducted in different countries but not in Poland. Therefore, it is hoped that the present research project will provide useful insights into classroom-based assessment at the lower primary level. The aim of the first part of the project was to determine reasons, means and methods used by foreign language teachers to assess young learners (Rokoszewska, in press). This part of the project revealed that 98.8 % teachers believed that they should regularly assess learners' results in learning a foreign language in grades 1–3 and that they did so in their teaching practice. The teachers reported using mainly formative and summative, as opposed to global assessment. The rationale behind assessing young learners was providing information about the learners' results to the teacher, learners and parents. The most important specific reasons for assessment included obtaining information about learners' progress, encouraging systematic learning, motivating learners to learn, fostering individual work and autonomy, and giving grades. Reasons such as evaluating teaching methods and techniques, and modifying the plan of learning and teaching by the teacher, were also quite important. The least important reasons included controlling the quality of the teacher's work, school system and education system as well as ranking learners from the best to the worst, or stimulating competition. With respect to the frequency of assessment, most teachers said that they assessed young learners on a daily basis. They expressed the results of such

assessment in the form of grades or grades and comments, as opposed to symbols while on the certificate they used descriptions. The learners were assessed according to a scale which was composed by the teacher, a group of FL teachers or a school board. Different scales were binding in schools but their common characteristic was a low level required to pass and a very high level to succeed. The teachers reported using conventional and unconventional assessment methods. The former included ready-made achievement pen-and-paper tests based on words and pictures, whereas the latter comprised informal questioning, products, musical presentations and recitations but not presentations, reports, projects, journals or formal as opposed to informal observation. The teachers did not use portfolios, self-assessment and peer assessment. The most frequently assessed areas were vocabulary and pronunciation as opposed to grammar and spelling, while the most frequently assessed skills were speaking and listening, as opposed to reading and writing. The teachers also assessed other learners' characteristics, such as work during a lesson, motivation, co-operation and risk-taking, but not self-esteem, self-confidence and belief in one's abilities. What is more, they took into account learners' attitude to the target language but not to its users and their culture, not to mention the attitude to learning foreign languages in general. When asked about the problems in assessing young learners, the teachers listed issues related to organization, such as insufficient time, few lessons, large classes, the requirement of testing in the first grade, lack of parental involvement. However, they mostly complained about learning problems that young learners had, such as misunderstanding instructions, poor writing skills, dyslexia, hyperactivity, and inability to do test tasks. In general, the results are similar to the findings of the research undertaken in other European countries in that it appears that classroom-based language assessment at the lower-primary level is not conducted in full congruity with the principles discussed at the beginning of this section. The second part of the study further explored classroom-based assessment at the lower-primary level by focusing in detail on techniques used to test different language areas and skills.

### **3 The Study**

#### ***3.1 Aims and Research Questions***

The aim of the present study was to investigate techniques used to assess young learners' receptive and productive knowledge of particular language areas and the development of particular language skills. The study is both qualitative, as it was based on a questionnaire, and quantitative, as some basic statistical procedures were implemented. The following research questions were formulated:

- What techniques do teachers use to test young learners' receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, spelling and pronunciation?

- What techniques do teachers use to test young learners' language skills, such as listening, reading, speaking and writing?

### 3.2 *Method*

The participants were 84 primary school teachers of English, 80 females and 4 males. The teachers came mainly from the Silesian province (69 teachers). Most of them worked in public (79 teachers), as opposed to private schools (5 teachers). Around half of the teachers worked in the city (41 teachers), and the other half in small towns (12 teachers) and villages (31 teachers). As far as the subjects' education is concerned, 82 teachers held a degree in English philology, with 24 having a BA degree and 58 an MA degree. Some teachers also had an educational background in other disciplines, such as lower-primary education, pedagogy, psychology, Polish philology, music, and computer studies. As far as their methodological preparation for teaching young learners is concerned, 37 teachers indicated a separate methodological course during their studies, 14 teachers mentioned post-graduate studies, and 18 teachers pointed to methodological courses. On average, the subjects had 12.4 years of teaching experience in general (from 1 to 35 years), and 8.9 years of experience in teaching young learners (from 1 to 25 years). When asked about their teaching preferences for specific age groups, 35 teachers indicated lower- primary level (grades 1–3), 49 teachers indicated upper-primary level (grades 4–6), seven teachers pointed out junior high school, and six teachers - senior high school. The teachers taught on average around four groups of young learners per year (from 1 to 6). The groups were either small (4–8 learners), medium-sized (9–15 learners) or large (28–30 learners). The learners had usually two lessons of English per week in public schools and five lessons in private schools. They were taught according to such course books as *Bugs world*, *New happy house*, *English adventure*, *Our discovery island*, or *New bingo plus*.

The instrument used in the present study took the form of a questionnaire composed by the present author and consisted of three parts. The first part referred to general information about schools, teachers, learners and classes. The second part investigated the reasons, means and methods of assessment. It included 14 general questions with a number of sub-questions (Rokoszewska, in press). The third part focused in detail on techniques used to assess particular language areas and skills (Komorowska, 2002; Rokoszewska, 2011). It included 11 parts, each consisting of 10–12 closed-ended questions for which the subjects were requested to indicate the answer on a five-point Likert-type scale (1—*never or almost never*; 2—*seldom*; 3—*sometimes*; 4—*usually*; 5—*always or almost always*). The techniques were briefly explained to the respondents in the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed in person and via e-mail among primary school teachers of foreign languages. More specifically, they were sent by e-mail to primary schools in the Silesian province mainly around Czestochowa, distributed to teachers during teacher training

sessions on methodology, and administered by students during their teacher training at school. Next, they were filled in anonymously and sent back by e-mail or post, and delivered by the students. Finally, the questionnaires were statistically analyzed by means of Excel, which involved calculating means and standard deviations.

### 3.3 Results

The results indicate that, in order to test the receptive knowledge of vocabulary (Table 1), teachers usually use TPR techniques ( $M = 4.3$ ), in which the learner's task is to listen to the teacher's commands and carry them out, the technique of linking words with pictures ( $M = 4.2$ ), in which the learner is asked to read words and link them with appropriate drawings, the picture technique ( $M = 4.0$ ), in which the learner is required to listen to the word uttered by the teacher and point to one out of two or three pictures which illustrate this word, the technique of numbering pictures ( $M = 4.0$ ), in which learners respond to commands, such as "Number one is the cat", the technique of colouring pictures ( $M = 3.9$ ), in which learners listen to and respond to commands, such as "Colour the cat red", and the technique of grouping words ( $M = 3.8$ ), in which learners need to read a list of words and group them into categories (e.g., sport, clothes, food). From time to time, the teachers use techniques such as drawing ( $M = 3.6$ ), whereby the learner responds to instructions like "Draw a big ball", odd one out ( $M = 3.5$ ), which requires the learner to read a group of words and circle the one that does not match the rest, multiple choice based on pictures ( $M = 3.5$ ), in which the teacher says a word and the learner's task is to circle one out of three or four pictures that illustrates it, true or false based on pictures ( $M = 3.6$ ), in which the teacher utters a given word and the learner circles

**Table 1** Techniques used to test the receptive knowledge of vocabulary

Testing receptive knowledge of vocabulary			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Picture technique—"Show me what I am talking about"	<b>4.0</b>	0.90
2.	Picture technique with context—"Choose the right picture"	3.5	1.08
3.	TPR techniques (commands)	<b>4.3</b>	0.79
4.	Odd one out	3.5	1.07
5.	Grouping words	<b>3.8</b>	0.99
6.	Multiple choice based on pictures	3.5	1.05
7.	True or false based on pictures	3.6	1.00
8.	Numbering pictures	<b>4.0</b>	0.92
9.	Colouring pictures	<b>3.9</b>	0.93
10.	Drawing	3.6	0.96
11.	Linking words with pictures	<b>4.2</b>	0.77
12.	Other	–	–

yes or no depending on whether the picture illustrates the given word, and the contextualized picture technique ( $M = 3.5$ ), in which the teacher produces a sentence with a given word and the learner's task is to point to one out of two or three pictures.

**Table 2** Techniques used to test the productive knowledge of vocabulary

Testing productive knowledge of vocabulary			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Describing single pictures	<b>4.6</b>	0.64
2.	Describing a large picture	<b>4.0</b>	1.00
3.	Picture technique with context	3.5	0.92
4.	Pantomime	3.7	1.02
5.	Labelling pictures	3.3	0.97
6.	Labelling pictures with a model	<b>4.1</b>	0.76
7.	Filling in the gaps (open gap-fills)	3.3	0.98
8.	Filling in the gaps with a model (close gap-fills)	<b>3.9</b>	0.87
9.	Oral translation	3.2	1.20
10.	Written translation	2.6	1.34
11.	Writing down words from memory	2.9	1.23
12.	Other	–	–

In order to test the productive knowledge of vocabulary (Table 2), the teachers most often ask learners to describe single pictures ( $M = 4.6$ ) or single items in a larger picture ( $M = 4.0$ ). They also often ask learners to label pictures ( $M = 4.1$ ) or fill in the gaps ( $M = 3.9$ ) on the basis of a model. The technique of labelling pictures with a model requires learners to copy words from a list or table under appropriate pictures. If the words are not given, learners are required to write the words they remember ( $M = 3.3$ ). When filling in the gaps with a model, the learner has to read the sentence and write from memory a word which is shown in the picture (close-gap fills). If pictures are not provided next to the gaps, the learner has to first guess the missing item and recall its name (open gap-fills) ( $M = 3.3$ ). Furthermore, the teachers quite often use pantomime ( $M = 3.7$ ), during which one learner shows various things, like jobs, animals or actions, while another provides the names for them. Sometimes the teachers use the contextualized picture technique ( $M = 3.5$ ), in which the teacher provides a sentence with a gap and the learner has to fill it in on the basis of a picture, as in “Betty’s ball is very...” (a picture with a girl holding a big ball). As far as L1 translation is concerned, the teachers admit that they sometimes use oral translation ( $M = 3.2$ ) and seldom written translation ( $M = 2.6$ ). In these techniques, the teacher provides words in L1 and the learner is instructed to say or write their L2 equivalents. Finally, the teachers sometimes ask learners to write down words from memory, for example, numerals from 1 to 10 or days of the week.

In order to test the receptive knowledge of grammar (Table 3), the teachers usually use TPR techniques ( $M = 4.3$ ), in which learners respond to commands, such

**Table 3** Techniques used to test the receptive knowledge of grammar

Testing receptive knowledge of grammar			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Picture technique with context—"Choose the right picture"	<b>3.9</b>	0.94
2.	TPR technique	<b>4.3</b>	0.79
3.	Multiple choice based on pictures	<b>3.9</b>	0.97
4.	True or false based on pictures (1)	3.7	0.94
5.	True or false based on pictures (2)	3.6	1.13
6.	Colouring	<b>4.0</b>	0.98
7.	Drawing	3.7	1.15
8.	Linking pictures	3.4	1.19
9.	Linking sentences with pictures	3.7	0.96
10.	Numbering pictures	<b>3.9</b>	0.94
11.	Other	–	–

as "Put the ball on the table", coloring ( $M = 4.0$ ), in which the teacher describes a picture and learners color it accordingly (e.g., "The teddy bear is wearing blue trousers"), the contextualized picture technique ( $M = 3.9$ ), in which the teacher provides the learner with a structure in a given sentence and the learner's task is to point to one out of two or three pictures this sentence describes (e.g., "He is jumping"), multiple choice based on pictures ( $M = 3.9$ ), in which the learner circles the right picture (e.g., "He can swim"), and the technique of numbering pictures ( $M = 3.9$ ), in which the teacher says sentences with a given structure and the learner numbers the pictures they describe (e.g., "Number 1 - I have dog", "Number two - You have a frog"). The teachers also quite often rely on such techniques as true or false ( $M = 3.6$ ;  $M = 3.7$ ), drawing ( $M = 3.7$ ), linking sentences with pictures ( $M = 3.7$ ) or linking pictures ( $M = 3.4$ ). The true or false technique may be used in two ways. As was the case with vocabulary, the learner may be asked to circle *yes* or *no*, depending on whether the picture illustrates the teacher's sentence or not (e.g., "I want to swing"), or the learner may be asked to draw a happy or sad face, depending on whether the teacher's sentence is positive or negative (e.g., "I like oranges, I don't like apples"). While drawing, learners may be asked to respond to instructions, such as "Draw a ball under the table". When linking sentences with pictures, the learner's task is to read sentences with a given structure and connect them with appropriate drawings. In contrast, while linking pictures, learners only listen to the sentences produced by the teacher and link two appropriate pictures, as in "Tomek would like to get a train for Christmas" (linking Tomek and a train) or "Ola would like to get a teddy-bear for Christmas" (linking Ola and a train).

When testing the productive knowledge of grammar (Table 4), the teachers usually use mini-dialogues ( $M = 3.9$ ) and the picture technique ( $M = 3.8$ ). They quite often ask learners to sing a song ( $M = 3.7$ ) or recite a rhyme ( $M = 3.6$ ) which requires repetitive use of a given structure. Equally often the teachers involve learners in pantomime ( $M = 3.7$ ) and TPR activities ( $M = 3.5$ ). In the former, one



**Table 4** Techniques used to test the productive knowledge of grammar

Testing productive knowledge of grammar			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Picture technique	<b>3.8</b>	0.96
2.	Picture technique with context—"Choose the right picture"	3.1	1.18
3.	Recitation	3.6	1.06
4.	Musical presentation	3.7	1.09
5.	Pantomime	3.7	0.97
6.	TPR technique	3.5	0.98
7.	Oral translation	2.6	1.22
8.	Written translation	2.1	1.20
9.	Mini-dialogue	<b>3.9</b>	0.87
10.	Story-telling	2.8	1.23
11.	Other	–	–

learner acts out single actions or a sequence of actions and another produces sentences with a given structure (e.g. Present Continuous), whereas in the latter, one learner gives commands to another learner (e.g., "Put the ball in the box"). The contextualized picture technique is used from time to time as well ( $M = 3.1$ ). In this case, the teacher produces a gapped sentence and the learner fills it in with an appropriate verb form. It is important to point out that storytelling is also occasionally used ( $M = 2.8$ ). Seldom do the teachers ask young learners for oral ( $M = 2.6$ ) or written ( $M = 2.1$ ) translation of sentences with a given structure.

The results of the study show that the teachers sometimes use three techniques which test the receptive knowledge of pronunciation (Table 5). In the first technique, called *Picture and sound—Choose the right picture* ( $M = 3.0$ ), the teacher provides a minimal pair of words and the learner points to the pictures in the right order, as in *sheep, ship*. In the technique called *Picture and sound—Which word is your picture for?* ( $M = 2.9$ ), the teacher says one word from a minimal pair and the learner chooses the right picture. In the technique called *Minimal-pair words—The same or different?* ( $M = 2.9$ ), the teacher says two sentences and the learner decides if they are the same or different. Other techniques are rarely used. In the technique *Color and sound—Two colors, three cards* ( $M = 2.9$ ), the teacher pronounces two sounds or words; if they are the same, the learner is to raise two cards of the same color and if they are different, the learner picks up two cards of a different color. The technique *Movement and sound—A jumping puppet* ( $M = 2.2$ ) is similar but the learner's response to the teacher's input involves physical action—if the sounds or words are the same, the learner stands still, and if they are different, the learner jumps spreading his or her arms and legs. In the technique called *Number and sound—Give two numbers* ( $M = 2.3$ ), the teacher pronounces three words for the learner to give the numbers of the words that were the same, as in *cup, cap, cup*. In the technique *Pantomime and sound—What are we doing now?* ( $M = 2.5$ ), the

**Table 5** Techniques used to test the receptive knowledge of pronunciation and intonation

Testing receptive knowledge of pronunciation and intonation			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Color and sound—Two colors, three cards	2.4	1.23
2.	Movement and sound—A jumping puppet	2.2	1.08
3.	Number and sound—Give two numbers	2.3	1.18
4.	Pantomime and sound—What are we doing now?	2.5	1.36
5.	Picture and sound—Which word is your picture for?	<b>2.9</b>	1.16
6.	Picture and sound—Choose the right picture	<b>3.0</b>	1.17
7.	Minimal-pair words—The same or different?	<b>2.9</b>	1.14
8.	Repeated intonation contour—Which sentences have the same melody?	2.4	1.27
9.	Other	–	–

teacher pronounces a word and learners act out an activity connected with a given sound, yawning for /a:/, smiling for /i:/, or poking out one's tongue for /θ/. The technique *Repeated intonation contour—Which sentences have the same melody?* (M = 2.4) checks the receptive knowledge of intonation. The teacher says three sentences for learners to decide which of them are the same.

In order to test the productive knowledge of pronunciation and intonation (Table 6), the teachers often use imitation (M = 4.5) asking learners to repeat words or sentences with a given sound or sentences with a given intonation contour (M = 4.1), but not to sing the sentence (M = 2.7), that is to repeat the intonation of the sentence in L2 using syllables, as in *la-la-la-la*, instead of words. The technique *Picture—Look and say* (M = 4.1), in which the learner is prompted to say a word with a given sound on the basis of a picture, is usually used.

**Table 6** Techniques used to test the productive knowledge of pronunciation and intonation

Testing productive knowledge of pronunciation and intonation			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Imitation—Repeat a word or sentence after me	<b>4.5</b>	0.72
2.	Picture—Look and say	<b>4.1</b>	0.86
3.	Imitation—Sing this sentence	2.7	1.37
4.	Imitation—Repeat a sentence with the right intonation	<b>4.1</b>	0.93
5.	Other	–	–

When testing spelling (Table 7), the teachers often rely on tracing (M = 4.4) and unscrambling words (M = 4.0). They usually use techniques such as labelling pictures (M = 4.0) and filling in the gaps with (M = 3.9) or without pictures (M = 3.9) accompanied by a model of the words in the form of a list or box. The corresponding techniques without the model, that is labelling pictures (M = 3.5), open gap-fills (M = 3.1) and open gap-fills with pictures (M = 3.5), which require learners to recall and spell the words, are used from time to time. Activities, such as

**Table 7** Techniques used to test spelling

Testing spelling			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Tracing	<b>4.4</b>	0.84
2.	Unscramble the words	<b>4.0</b>	1.01
3.	Labelling pictures	3.5	1.11
4.	Labelling pictures with a model	<b>4.2</b>	1.01
5.	Open gap-fills with pictures—replace a picture with a word from memory	3.5	1.00
6.	Close gap-fills with pictures—replace a picture with a word from the list	<b>3.9</b>	1.03
7.	Open gap-fills—fill the gaps with words from memory	3.1	1.07
8.	Close gap-fills—fill the gaps with words from the list	<b>3.9</b>	0.91
9.	Partial dictation	2.6	1.18
10.	Dictation	2.0	1.21
11.	Other	–	–

partial dictation ( $M = 2.6$ ), during which the learner fills in the gaps in a text read by the teacher, or dictation, during which the learner writes down the whole text, written on the board and erased sentence by sentence ( $M = 2.0$ ), are seldom used.

As far as the evaluation of language skills is concerned, the results indicate that in order to test listening comprehension (Table 8), the teachers use a number of techniques which involve learners' physical response, the most common being TPR activities ( $M = 4.5$ ). Other similar activities include listening and raising one's hand on hearing a given word ( $M = 3.8$ ), and listen and do activities, in which the learner builds something out of bricks or dresses a doll or a teddy-bear according to the teacher's instructions. It is worth mentioning that the technique *Listen and raise your hand* may be very attractive if learners receive hats, masks, headbands or bracelets with pictures of words which they are to recognize, and if, instead of raising the hand, they perform a different action, such as jumping or clapping. The teachers also use a number of techniques based on pictures, such as listening to the text and choosing one out of two or three pictures that illustrates it best ( $M = 4.2$ ), listening to the text and pointing out the elements of one big picture that are being described, such as people, things, actions ( $M = 4.3$ ), colouring ( $M = 4.2$ ) or drawing ( $M = 4.2$ ) a picture or its parts according to the teacher's instructions, listening to a story and ordering pictures ( $M = 3.9$ ), and true or false ( $M = 3.8$ ), in which the teacher illustrates a picture with a given sentence for learners to decide if it is true or false. This technique may be implemented with the use of cards of different colour or different actions for *yes* and *no*, the latter being called *energetic true/false*. The teachers also often use mini-interviews ( $M = 3.9$ ), during which the teacher asks each learner the same set of questions, for instance about their names, age, likes and dislikes. In this case, listening is checked in a more natural way as it is integrated with speaking, just as it happens in real communication.

**Table 8** Techniques used to test listening comprehension

Testing listening comprehension			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Picture technique—Choose the picture that is described	<b>4.2</b>	0.94
2.	Pointing out the elements of the picture—Listen and point	<b>4.3</b>	0.85
3.	Listen and raise your hand when you hear	3.8	1.11
4.	Listen and colour	<b>4.2</b>	1.05
5.	Listen and draw	<b>4.2</b>	0.94
6.	Listen and do (build sth from bricks, dress up a doll)	3.4	1.20
7.	True or false	3.8	0.99
8.	TPR technique	<b>4.5</b>	0.83
9.	Questions and answers—student-teacher mini-interview	<b>4.2</b>	0.92
10.	Listen and order the pictures	3.9	1.01
11.	Other	–	–

In order to evaluate learners' speaking skill (Table 9), the teachers rely mainly on student-teacher mini-interviews ( $M = 3.9$ ), role-plays conducted by two learners (e.g., a shop-assistant and a customer) ( $M = 3.9$ ), guessing games ( $M = 4.0$ ), in which the learner has to ask questions such as "Are you a pilot?", "Is it a cat?", or "Have you got a train?" in order to guess what the teacher's or peer's picture shows, musical presentations ( $M = 3.9$ ) or recitations ( $M = 3.8$ ). The teachers also quite often use picture description with ( $M = 3.7$ ) or without ( $M = 3.6$ ) the teacher's guiding questions. Such techniques as picture differences ( $M = 3.3$ ), in which the learner's task is to look at two similar pictures and name the differences, odd picture out ( $M = 3.2$ ), in which the learner examines a set of pictures on a given topic (e.g., animals), or a set which creates a story and explains why a given picture does not fit, and storytelling ( $M = 3.2$ ), in which a learner describes two, three or more pictures, are used only from time to time.

**Table 9** Techniques used to test speaking

Testing speaking			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Picture description	3.6	1.12
2.	Picture differences	3.3	1.12
3.	Storytelling	3.2	1.19
4.	Odd picture out	3.2	1.19
5.	Picture description with questions in L2	3.7	1.02
6.	Role-play	<b>3.9</b>	0.91
7.	Guessing	<b>4.0</b>	0.96
8.	Questions and answers—student-teacher mini-interview	<b>4.2</b>	0.95
9.	Recitation	3.8	1.05
10.	Musical presentation	<b>3.9</b>	1.08
11.	Other	–	–

When testing reading comprehension (Table 10), the teachers most often ask learners to read words, phrases or sentences and link them with the right pictures ( $M = 4.4$ ) or choose one out of two or three pictures that illustrates them ( $M = 4.2$ ). Alternatively, they often ask learners to read and colour ( $M = 4.2$ ), draw ( $M = 4.0$ ), order pictures ( $M = 3.8$ ), answer true or false questions on general topics ( $M = 3.8$ ) or about the text ( $M = 3.6$ ), and follow instructions ( $M = 3.5$ ). The true/false technique on general topics involves learners in reading statements, such as “Cucumbers are green”, or “Apples are blue”, and deciding whether they are true or false. As with listening comprehension, the technique may be implemented in different ways. Reading instructions, the learner may be asked to find the way on a map or link some points to discover a given shape, etc. The study also shows that the teachers quite often use the technique of reading aloud words, sentences or short texts. From time to time, they use the technique of reading and translating sentences from L1 to L2 and vice versa.

**Table 10** Techniques used to test reading comprehension

Testing reading comprehension			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Match the right text to the right picture	4.2	0.77
2.	Marking the elements of a picture—Read and link	4.4	0.74
3.	Read and colour	4.2	0.78
4.	Read and draw	4.0	0.89
5.	Follow instructions	3.5	1.07
6.	Read and order the pictures	3.8	1.02
7.	True or false—general topics	3.8	0.99
8.	True or false—questions to the text	3.6	1.09
9.	Reading aloud	3.7	0.97
10.	Read and translate	3.1	1.25
11.	Other	—	—

When testing writing (Table 11), the teachers usually rely on filling in the gaps ( $M = 3.5$ ) or picture gaps ( $M = 3.8$ ) with words, and on inserting missing letters in words below pictures ( $M = 3.7$ ). From time to time, learners are asked to write simple texts according to a model, for example a letter to Santa Claus, a postcard or a note ( $M = 3.4$ ), describe pictures with single sentences ( $M = 3.3$ ), write a short description of a given picture ( $M = 3.0$ ), and unscramble sentences or short texts ( $M = 3.1$ ). Sometimes learners are also instructed to read simple questions and answer them in writing, which constitutes a written version of the oral interview mentioned above. Story writing ( $M = 2.5$ ) and creative writing ( $M = 2.3$ ) are rarely used, as is punctuating the text ( $M = 2.4$ ).

**Table 11** Techniques used to test writing

Testing writing			
No.	Techniques	Mean	SD
1.	Insert missing letters	<b>3.7</b>	1.02
2.	Filling in picture gaps with words	<b>3.8</b>	0.99
3.	Filling in the gaps with words	<b>3.5</b>	1.15
4.	Punctuate the text	2.4	1.23
5.	Describing pictures with single sentences	3.3	1.13
6.	Picture description	3.0	1.19
7.	Unscramble the sentences/text	3.1	1.15
8.	Writing a story	2.5	1.28
9.	Questions and answers	3.0	1.22
10.	Simple texts	3.4	1.03
11.	Creative writing (stories, poems)	2.3	1.19
12.	Other	–	–

## 4 Discussion

The results of the study indicate that the teachers use a large variety of techniques to assess young learners' receptive and productive knowledge of language areas as well as the development of language skills. The number and variety of techniques are probably connected with the fact that the teachers assess young language learners on a daily basis not, only by means of tests but also observation. This means that testing techniques often overlap with teaching techniques and that classroom activities have a dual task, namely to teach and to test. The problem is that the teachers declared the use of formal observation, which, in contrast to informal observation, is based on pre-determined criteria, but they do not really keep any record of their observations, which makes assessment intuitive and sketchy (Rokoszewska, in press). What is more, the number and variety of techniques are also probably connected with the fact that the teachers mostly use ready-made tests.

The number and variety of techniques frequently used by the teachers to assess young learners' language areas indicate that they pay more attention to vocabulary than grammar. More specifically, when assessing vocabulary, they pay attention to both receptive and productive knowledge, whereas in assessing grammar, they pay attention mostly to the receptive as opposed to productive knowledge. Such testing practices most probably reflect a teaching practice in which teaching grammar is neglected at the cost of teaching single words. Such instructional practices in turn result from oversimplified beliefs that vocabulary is more important than grammar and that young learners should not be taught grammar because it is abstract. However, vocabulary is more important than grammar in the semantic processing of input, whereas grammar is more important than vocabulary in the syntactic processing of output (Ellis, 2007). In other words, while young learners rely on lexis in

the comprehension of commands, songs or stories, they need grammar to string words together to produce a sentence, a dialogue or a short written text. As Cameron (2003) points out, using words and phrases in oral and written communication leads to the grammaticalization of young learners' language. What is more, learning separate words is possible only for a limited period of time after which words which are not linked and used in a meaningful way are forgotten as new items need to be remembered. Thus, it is necessary to combine vocabulary item-learning with grammar rule-learning (Thornbury, 2002), remembering that learning and teaching grammar should be inductive and informal, as opposed to deductive and formal because of children's cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Another possible reason for the fact that the teachers rarely test the productive knowledge of grammar may be that they assume that their learners can produce single words but not whole sentences, which raises the question of the quality of teaching and evaluation. With respect to the former, regular background listening and appropriate revision of grammatical structures in meaningful contexts are recommended (Rokoszewska, 2011). With respect to the latter, scaffolding young learners' performance during dynamic assessment, that is helping the young learner produce the whole sentence on his or her own by modelling, mouthing or prompting, is advised (Rokoszewska, 2011). Still another reason may be that the teachers lack the techniques to test the productive knowledge of grammar as well as the skills needed to organize and conduct such evaluation.

As far as the assessment of other language areas is concerned, it is clear that the teachers focus on the productive as opposed to the receptive knowledge of pronunciation, and that intonation, as opposed to spelling, receives little attention. Focusing on the productive aspect of pronunciation is contrary to the main principle of teaching this aspect of language which states that learners should first perceive and then imitate the sounds of a foreign language. Little focus on intonation may be due to lack of belief in its importance as well as lack of knowledge and skills necessary to practice it. However, it is also the consequence of focusing on teaching and testing single words in conventional ways in non-communicative situations. In fact, rhythm and intonation seem to be important factors in such activities for young learners as rhymes, songs, mini-dialogues, role-plays, listening to and reading aloud texts, telling and acting out stories. Finally, in line with the claim that testing spelling is less important than testing vocabulary and pronunciation, spelling receives little attention.

The number and variety of techniques used by the teachers to assess young learners' language skills show that they focus mainly on listening and speaking, as opposed to reading and writing. It should be emphasized that the teachers mostly use techniques which focus on discrete language items, such as specific sounds, letters, words or sentences, but not those which focus on discourse in a given context. Although the teachers use commands, mini-dialogues, interviews or role-plays, often learnt by heart, they do not often fall back on story-telling, story-writing or creative writing. This is rather surprising as it is required in the national curriculum that young learners, after three years of learning a foreign language at the lower-primary level, can understand and tell a simple story.

In general, most techniques used by the teachers to assess young learners' language areas and skills are appropriate to the level of the learners. They seldom use such techniques as written translation of words and sentences, punctuating the text, partial dictation or dictation but they do sometimes employ oral translation of words, writing words from memory, or reading and translating texts. However, it should be pointed out that the questionnaire listed few testing techniques which can be viewed as inappropriate for young learners. This means that the questionnaire might have not revealed other inappropriate testing practices that are used. Still, the teachers did not mention other testing techniques they implement, even though they were asked to do so. This reflects a common problem in questionnaire studies in which respondents are more likely to answer closed-ended as opposed to open-ended questions.

## 5 Conclusions

The aim of the present paper was to review the main principles of assessing young learners of foreign languages and to present the second part of the study which has focused on techniques used by teachers to assess young learners' receptive and productive knowledge of language areas as well as the development of language skills. The results indicate that teachers use a variety of techniques to assess young learners. As far as language areas are concerned, they mainly evaluate receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary, receptive, as opposed to productive, knowledge of grammar and pronunciation, and focus to some extent on spelling, as opposed to intonation. As far as language skills are concerned, they assess mainly listening and speaking, as opposed to reading and writing. The techniques are mostly appropriate to the level of the learners but they focus on discrete language items in non-communicative situations. Choosing such teaching and testing techniques, the teachers seem to underestimate young learners' language abilities. Such practices seem to leave teachers and young learners half way between the need to communicate and actual participation in meaningful discourse in simple communicative situations.

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