Assessing young language learners: Motivation and sense of progress across the age, gender and proficiency range.

What this research was about and why it is important

An increasing number of countries have introduced foreign language learning into the primary school curriculum. At the same time, the need for teachers to track learners' progress and provide assessment data on that learning has also grown. While assessment can give learners the sense of progress that is important for maintaining motivation, it may also cause them anxiety and take away from the sense of enjoyment that is central to early language learning. This may be especially true for learners of lower levels of attainment. It can be particularly challenging for teachers to assess in a way that meets the needs of the wide range of learners they have in their classes. This study examined how well a computer game provided solutions to these challenges, drawing conclusions about the importance of employ assessment methods that protect rather than diminish motivation for all learners.

What the researchers did

- 3437 learners of English, Spanish, German, Italian and French in England, Spain, German and Italy (ages 6-13) played a computer game that scored their competence in listening, reading and writing (*The Language Magician*) by asking them to complete language tasks in order to win the freedom of animals imprisoned by an evil magician.
- Learners then completed a questionnaire asking them whether the game was fun to play, whether it told them how well they were doing in language learning, whether the game was easy or difficult and whether they would like to play it again. Open-ended questions asked them to identify the aspect of the game they liked or disliked.
- The researchers analysed learners' responses to the questionnaire to explore their perceptions of it. They focused in particular on whether perceptions varied according to how well learners had scored on the game, whether they were male or female, and how old they were.

What the researchers found

- Overall, learners held very positive attitudes to the game.
- The vast majority (94%) agreed that they would like to play the game again; 88% felt that the game told them how well they were doing at language learning.
- Learners liked the game's storyline, the challenge of completing the tasks to free the animals, and feeling that they were better at the language than they had previously thought. Finding some tasks hard was the most commonly mentioned aspect that they disliked.
- Quite a number of learners (40%) did not feel the game was easy. However, statistical tests showed that learners found the game enjoyable and worthwhile even if they did not find it easy.
- There was no significant relationship between age at testing and overall positivity towards the game, showing that it appealed to learners from across the age range.
- Girls and boys alike were very positive about the game but girls found it significantly more fun to play and were more willing to play the game again than boys were.

Things to consider

- Digital game-based assessment offers a potential solution to the challenge of assessing young learners, especially for meeting the needs of a range of learners in mixed-attainment classes.
- The positivity such games encourages from learners seems to stem from their elements of fantasy and strong storyline, and the emotional engagement, challenge and sense of competence they promote.
- Future research should explore whether using such forms of assessment has a positive impact on learners' motivation for language study in the long-term.

Teaching and testing materials available at www.iris-.database.org