

## Trends in the assessment of young English language learners

### What this overview was about and why it is important

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) starts at a young age for most learners because of the social and financial benefits that knowing English can bring and because of the commonly held belief that the younger the language learner, the better the learning. This book chapter first indicates research trends in early language learning. Then it outlines the implications that the rise in the number of child EFL learners has for EFL test development.

### Recent trends in early language learning, teaching and assessment

- Contrary to widespread belief, the age when someone starts learning a foreign language does not determine how well someone will ultimately know this language; other factors, such as one's motivation and the quality of teaching provided can be more important.
- Extensive research is under way on the effect that individual learner characteristics (e.g., motivation, anxiety, strategy use) and teaching approaches have on EFL learning.

### Challenges faced by policy makers, materials and test developers, researchers and teachers

Research indicates that early language learning:

- is not the same for all young learners because it varies among educational settings;
- varies in terms of how focused it is on content taught vs the second language itself, depending on the curriculum used in each school.

Broadly speaking early language learning programmes can be placed on a continuum with traditional Foreign Language (FL) curricula on one end and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) curricula on the other. FL programmes set specific learning goals for young learners using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a point of departure although it was not made with young learners in mind. CLIL programmes do not set any specific learning goals, by contrast.

Projects testing young learners have been conducted nationally and internationally. These projects have a broad scope and do not address questions that could influence language instruction, such as the use of assessment by teachers or test washback.

### Implications for future research

This overview indicates the need for:

- research on teachers' assessment practices and knowledge with a view to inform teachers' test choice and use
- cross-fertilisation between second language research and language testing research in order to develop tests appropriate to young learners.