PERSPECTIVES ON ASSESSING YOUNG LEARNERS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCE IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The research reported in this article is concerned with perspectives on assessing young learners' English language competence in Romania and focuses on raising awareness about the current practices and challenges in assessment. Using data from teacher interviews, the study takes a qualitative approach and examines teachers' perspectives on assessment of young learners in Romania by identifying current practices in Romania, attitudes towards assessment methods, the challenges teachers face while assessing young learners, criteria used in assessment, linking assessment to learning, teaching and administrative purposes.The design of the study reported here is exploratory in nature, with a critical purpose, the data collected do not allow for decision-making by themselves, but they could provide a better insight into the assessment of young learners and enhance further research in the area.*

Keywords: *"assessment, young learners, testing, assessment methods, assessment standards, critical language testing"*

INTRODUCTION

As Shohamy [68] declares, assessment has the power to change people's lives because the consequences can be either positive or negative, depending on a wide variety of factors, such as assessment procedures and the way a test is constructed and used. Assessment helps teachers make decisions about students' abilities and their achievements within a period of time. The success of assessment depends on the procedures the teachers use and also on the correct interpretation of learners' progress. Assessment might become rather problematic when young learners are involved since they have special characteristics of vulnerability, literacy and development. Young learners are constantly developing and they are also sensitive to criticism and lack of success, which can affect their performance in a negative way. Nowadays, with the advent of learner-centered and communicative methodologies, control of assessment has moved into the classroom, making the teacher fully responsible for the evaluation of students' progress.

The research approach adopted was qualitative, focusing on the interpretation of data collected from four participants who agreed to take part in the study. Since there has been little past research in the assessment of young learners' English language competence across Romania, the current study will look into the assessment procedures mostly favored by four Romanian teachers, their attitudes towards young learners' assessment, critical issues concerning the assessment of young learners, and criteria teachers use while assessing students. Given the fact that the current study tries to examine empirically how assessment is used in a given context, report whether the assessment procedures have any effects or not both on teachers and students, and whether assessment follows specific standards or not, the current study is bound to reflect the critical language testing framework. The two research questions are: How do Romanian teachers of English assess young learners and which are the challenges they face as assessors of young learners?

The data were collected from a non-random sample of four English language teachers from three different public schools and one private school. The participants teach both primary and secondary levels and three of them are experienced language teachers, while one of them is a newly qualified teacher. The participants
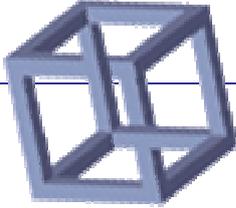
teach in schools where English is taught as a foreign language from grade1. The schools the teachers were selected from are all from the same town. The participants were selected through purposive sampling [13]. Within the data analysis process, two themes have emerged to interpretation:

- Assessment methods and attitudes towards them in the Romanian context;

- Critical issues and challenges concerning the assessment of young learners in Romania;

## 1. REVIEW OF ASSESSING YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Research into the assessment of young learners' foreign language competence is relatively scarce, but books such as "Assessing Young language learners" [45] and "Assessing young learners" [30] provide useful guidelines for teachers. Also Rea-Dickins and Rixon [56] carried out an international survey that disclosed important information concerning the assessment of young learners. The research pointed out that tests do not focus on the ability to communicate in English, ignoring speaking and listening skills because it might be time-consuming and difficult to achieve with a large class. Also the research revealed that too many tests focus mainly on grammar points and vocabulary.

The Common European Framework for Languages [14] contains assessment guidelines but they are not aimed at young learners. Also Johnstone [32] identifies several issues regarding the assessment standards within the European Framework, the European language standards do no reflect accurately the language content the young learners are exposed to. In terms of research articles, there were special issues of the journal *Language Testing* edited by Rea-Dickins, which dealt with issues concerning the assessment of young learners such as volume 18(4) which focused on re-thinking alternative assessment. McNamara [47] considers that too much language testing research has been done, and that researchers actually ignored the assessment at classroom level. Shohamy [68] exposes a political view on language assessment, disclosing the uses of tests as instruments of power, suggesting a few principles towards more democratic assessment methods especially in multicultural contexts.

Shaaban [61] points out that even if formative assessment is recommended with young learners, it also has some drawbacks. Brown and Hudson [7] also consider that formative assessment methods are sometimes time-consuming and difficult to realize.

In terms of classroom formative assessment, Rea-Dickins and Gardner [20, 57, 58] investigated the nature of formative assessment in elementary classrooms by focusing on assessment procedures, issues and the quality of teacher assessment. Their research provides a detailed comprehension into classroom assessment and reveals the fact that classroom assessment should not be considered as low-stake in nature because very important decisions concerning the student can be made based on it. Accordingly, the principles of reliability and validity gain a high importance also in classroom assessment, not only in testing.

Morris et al [49] noticed that there is a current theme in assessment literature concerning the tension between assessment for administrative purposes and assessment for pedagogic purposes. Teachers' practices are influenced in a number of ways by pressures put forward by educational authorities who are responsible to collect data regarding the students' progress. One of the possible outcomes would be the tendency to teach to the standards without regard to individual needs and to limit the possibilities of the curriculum. Brindley [5] is the one who acknowledges that in such situations it is usually the administrative purposes that will win. McKay [45] considers that some characteristics of assessment tasks affect the performance of young learners, therefore influencing the validity and fairness of the task. Nowadays most of the countries would include standards in the curriculum documents. However, McKay [45] considers that writers of standards would not bring anything new to what has already been published in terms of standards, questioning thus the validity of those new standards. Consequently, McKay [45] asserts that if the standards do not provide separate descriptions for young learners, then we deal with an issue of validity. The problem of standards' validity may be at the core of many assessment irrelevances in the assessment of young learners. Katz [36] mentions that "young learners are notoriously poor test taker...the younger the child being evaluated, assessed, or tested, the more errors are made...and the greater the risk of assigning false labels to them." Smith [70] also considers that testing procedures generally cause young learners anxiety which affects their self-esteem and also their language learning. These authors believe that young learners should be assessed in an anxiety-free environment which is only possible if assessment becomes part of the
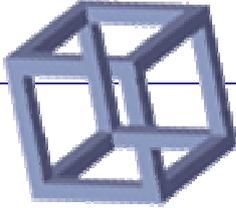
learning and teaching process, and not a separate activity. Formative assessment seems to be the best solution to decrease the level of anxiety and to increase communicative fluency [61]. Accordingly, several authors like Shohamy [64], Wiggins [76], Shaaban [61] recommend alternative assessment for young learners not only because it is anxiety-free but also because it is performance-based focusing only on tasks which focus on oral and communication skills.

1.1 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND AND CURRENT ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN ROMANIA

In Romania the study of the first foreign language starts in the third grade (age 9), being included in the core curricula with 2 hours per week. However, most of the children begin learning their first foreign language in kindergarten and also in grade 1 and 2 as an optional class. There are also several private schools with extended foreign language teaching, where students would study their first foreign language earlier. Given these differences between schools and students, the teachers most often deal with heterogeneous classes. In Romania, English is favored as the first foreign language, while the second foreign language is usually German or French. Guidelines for foreign language teachers, as found in the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages [51], focus on the fact that teachers should pay attention to the development of all four language skills (listening, speaking, writing and reading) in accordance with the Common European Framework [14]. In Romania local curriculum documents provide some guidelines related to assessment, but they are not detailed enough and do not refer specifically to young learners. In Romania there are significant differences between the assessment in the primary school and the assessment in the secondary school. At the primary level, assessment is descriptive, meaning that there are no grades, just an "appreciation". These appreciations (Very Good, Good, Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory) are based on performance descriptors and allow an assessment closer to reality through the performance levels: superior, medium and minimum. The performance descriptors are written in accordance with the curriculum, the descriptors correspond to the reference and core objectives described in the curriculum. For each objective, teachers can extract performance descriptors.

Primarily young learners need to be assessed either for pedagogic or administrative purposes [45] in order to provide information about their performance. A very common distinction is made between formative and summative assessment, which sometimes overlap, given the current tension between pedagogic and administrative assessment [45]. Formative assessment is usually ongoing, informal, it occurs during teaching and learning and it is often used for pedagogic purposes since the teacher is the most interested person in collecting the data. Summative assessment takes place at the end of a course and it is generally based on the results of a test, the stakes of this type of assessment can be quite high since the results are most likely reported to parents, school administration, education departments or government authorities.

Young learners (children aged 7-10) in Romania are mostly observed during the lesson, teachers would generally assess young learners' oral language through various oral activities, such as role play, dialogue and independent speech, if the level is appropriate. Young learners are also given tests, which focus on testing items of vocabulary and grammar. Regular summative assessment tests are introduced as early as the learners are able to write. The general tendency is to assess receptive skills in lower grades and productive skills in upper grades. Teachers also use alternative assessment methods, such as homework, language portfolios, projects, class work etc.

To sum up, young learners' assessment in Romania is based on teacher observation during lessons, oral language, projects, homework, language portfolios, tests, translation of grammatical structures is avoided. Children get descriptors for "Very Good", "Good", "Satisfactory" and "Unsatisfactory" performance. The Grade Point Average (GPA) is given by the weighting of the most frequent mark (e.g. 2 "very good" marks and 1 "good" results in the GPA "very good" mark). Young learners get on average one mark in the register per month, therefore over one semester they can get up to 4 marks.

2. ASSESSMENT METHODS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THEM IN THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT

In Romania assessment is basically used in the classroom first of all because teachers need to provide information to parents, head teachers, young learners and also to themselves concerning the progress of the students in the foreign language. Also according to the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages [51] and
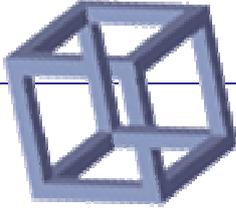
school legislation, assessment is an enforced activity. The interview responses suggest that the participants assess learners both orally and in writing.

> **Researcher: "Describe how you assess young learners of English in the school you teach (ways of evaluating students' language)"**
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> **Participant C: " In the case of primary school students we assess them on a regular basis. We assess them orally and in writing (if they can already write). We test vocabulary by having them match words and pictures or by giving them a gapped text where they have to write the missing words.. Simple structures with auxilaries, tenses, etc. are tested through tasks like "Choose the right alternative", "Choose the right verb form" , transformation exercises."**
>
> **Participant D: "At the beginning of the school year, all classes (I-VI) had an initial English test to assess their level. Secondly, continous assessment at our school includes test papers at the end of each unit and/or module taught, project work in pairs or groups and portfolios (which include homework, written assignments, book projects, drawings, posters). Once a semester, there is also a Level Assessment Test, which checks students' knowledge."**

The participants identified different activities through which they assess students' progress, such as: identification, repetition, TPR, role-play, matching, true/false, multiple choice, ordering sentences, poems and songs, description, interviews, fill-in exercises, dictation, question-answer, class and home tasks, portfolios, simple structures with auxilaries, tenses are tested through tasks like "choose the right alternative", "choose the right verb form", transformation exercise. Usually test papers are given at the end of each unit/module and they focus on reading and listening skills, grammar and vocabulary. The participants also use for formative assessment projects, portfolios (which include homework, written assignments, book projects, drawings and posters). Participant D stated that besides these types of assessment procedures, at the end of each semester there is a multiple choice Level Assessment Test (LAT) which is controlled by the school administration and whose results offer data as to the learners' progress over a semester. These tests contain only 20 multiple choice questions, which might not be sufficient and reliable proof of language acquisition over a semester. Still, they are considered the most practical way of assessing young learners' foreign language knowledge over a semester. They also do not focus on listening or speaking skills, most of the questions are grammar and vocabulary related and also some questions are not relevant to the young learners' cultural background and lifestyle.

The data suggest that all participants use various assessment methods in order to track the ongoing progress of young learners and the choice of assessment methods usually depends on the objectives of assessment, as the following extracts show:

> **Participant B: "When receiving oral or written messages in different situations, the exercises are quite a lot: identification, repeating, TPR, role-play, matching, true/false, listen and do, multiple choice, ordering, poems and songs etc. When producing messages in various communicative contexts, the types of exercises are multiple, too. Some examples are: pronounciation and intonation after a model, repeating, short dialogues, ordering, reciting, singing, describing, interviews, copying, fill-in ex, dictation, question-answer, didactic games etc. I also use projects, the class and home task, portfolio."**

Participant C noticed a mismatch between learning activities used in the classroom and assessment methods:

> **Participant C: "We tend to assess mainly grammar and vocabulary and seldom take pronunciation into consideration. Spelling is given a lot of attention and listening is used mainly in teaching and only occasionally in testing."**

It is well-known that effective assessment is necessary to high-quality teaching because assessment informs instruction. Accordingly learning and teaching could both improve and be integrated within the assessment process. The study is limited since it cannot tell us which is the most frequent form of assessment used by teachers of young learners in Romania, however it underlined the fact that an assessment strategy using various methods is mandatory in order to measure objectively students' knowledge and the assessment methods most common used with young learners should account for the students' developmental needs. The participants' responses confirm the fact that different assessment methods provide different types of information about the students by measuring aspects necessary to give a more meaningful account of what students know.

2.1. ORAL ASSESSMENT-TIRESOME FOR THE TEACHER

It is generally agreed that assessment is necessary, but the attitudes towards it may vary and the participants' answers disclose relevant critical issues. Participant A considers individual oral assessment quite tiresome even if the learner might benefit from the feedback. Accordingly, oral assessment can be time
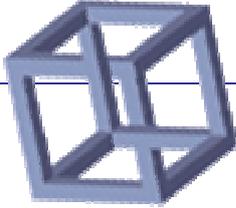
consuming and demanding, but on the other hand it requires professionalism and it forces the teacher to think about the positive side of the learners too, making the learner a unique person.

> **Participant A: "It becomes a difficult task if you are not paying enough attention, because they all want to speak and show you what they know or not, so a good monitoring is indeed required. That is why oral examination may become tiresome for you as a teacher. If it is not effective enough, the other pupils, except the one assessed, shall get easily bored and will start talking. Moreover, it may also take a longer time, in comparison to the written examination, which is considered by many as more comfortable."**

Oral assessment might not be appropriate for all students since some of them need continuous encouragement when they are assessed and the output teachers get from these students might not reflect the students' ability, therefore it may not be fair to the student.

> *Researcher: "What do you think about the way you evaluate students' language?"*

> *Participant A: "I am not quite satisfied with the way I manage to evaluate them orally, because those who are weaker refuse to communicate and must be continually encouraged… I am satisfied with my evaluating them in writing, that is with the test papers I assign unto them."*

The fact that participant A considers oral assessment tiresome is significant since as Stake [71] considers, "a negative example can establish limits to grand generalization", revealing deeper aspects as far as teachers' roles in assessment are concerned.

Several studies [2, 28, 29,35] indicate that generally students respond in a positive way to oral assessment mostly because the students spend more time through preparation since they do not want to appear foolish in front of the class. Also, students consider oral assessment more personal and satisfying than written assessment.

The data collected suggest that teachers consider oral assessment as necessary whether at primary level or at higher levels, therefore the problem is finding oral assessment practices which could be incorporated into instructional strategies.

Participant D states that too much importance is given to the written test as well, implying that students' learning styles should be taken into account while assessing them. Overall, none of the participants is completely satisfied with the way assessment is done, and the following extracts underline this aspect:

> **Participant B: "In my experience, I have come to the conclusion that, for better results, one should work with and evaluate groups of less than 20 students."**

> **Participant D: "I think it is a good way to combine as many forms of assessment as possible so as to enable young learners to develop all their abilities. I also believe that sometimes too much emphasis is placed on test papers as a means of measuring a student's knowledge and this may not always be as accurate as one might hope."**

On the whole, participants' responses are significant since they disclose a certain dissatisfaction with the assessment methods used in the classroom meaning that there might be a lack of alignment between assessment and instruction caused by several factors, such as the number of students, the need to take into account students' learning styles, and also a certain routine in the use of assessment methods.

One possible explanation is the fact that current assessment practices in Romania might not reflect the changes based on the new learning theories, new knowledge or skills, which are necessary to students nowadays. Still, the following interview extracts suggest that alternative assessment has the potential to provide the abilities and skills required in an ever changing world.

2.2. ALTERNATIVE OR TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT?

> **Participant A: "I recommend assessment through alternative methods of teaching English, as drama, songs, short movies and chain stories, for example. The point is that they should not feel themselves pressed by the concept of evaluation, but it all should occur as a natural part of language acquisition ."**

> **Participant D: "I think it should be less centered on test-papers or written assignments and more focused on project work, portfolios, drawings and posters. To be able to perform well, young students should be assessed in a fun and relaxing way that would not inhibit them. Emphasis should be placed on visuals as much as possible and on age-appropriate content."**

In Romania too much emphasis is put on the written test paper, even at primary level and the participants confirm that assessment should be as varied as possible in order to meet all the learners' needs and abilities, therefore the attitude towards assessment is positive and focused on meeting mostly the students'
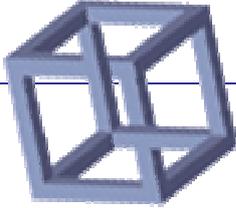
needs not the administrative purposes. However, even if teachers are open to alternative assessment methods, still the traditional methods account for the students' knowledge in Romania. Teachers choose traditional methods in order to be able to assess a large number of students, but also to be able to provide a more consistent feedback to parents and educational authorities. Traditional assessment methods usually involve a strict and rigid learning approach, which might affect the overall early language learning process, as participant C observes:

> **Participant C: "Assessment should be very friendly and non-threatening. It should boost students' confidence. I have seen more than once young students giving up learning English because of a very strict approach."**

Participants suggest alternative assessment means such as songs, drama, role-play, stories, projects and portfolios. These alternative methods are thought to represent both a way to check comprehension and production of language, but they also develop imagination and encourage students to use language naturally, to express their creativity and personality.

> **Researcher: "Which assessment procedures are best for young learners in your opinion?"**

> **Participant D: "I believe that project work is one of the most suitable means of assessing students at this age. Besides checking comprehension and production of language, it also develops imagination and encourages students to be creative and express their personality."**

The factor that contributed to a positive attitude towards alternative assessment is probably the fact that alternative assessment is based on the existing relationship between assessment-teaching and learning [50, 72]. Alternative assessment reflects the learning process [42], providing thus a more holistic and unifying view of language without focusing on a comparison between individuals.

3. CRITICAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES CONCERNING THE ASSESSMENT OF YOUNG LEARNERS

3.1. DOUBLE ROLES

The main challenges participants face are the number of students in the class, the different levels of interest in English, the double role a teacher has to play while in an assessment situation. On the one hand, the teacher has to encourage students and be as supportive as possible especially when they make mistakes, and on the other hand, at the same time, the teacher has to be objective and detached when assessing students, as the following extract suggests*, "The main challenge is the two opposing roles I have to play: on the one hand I have to encourage students and be supportive especially when they make mistakes (I use feedback for their progress) and on the other hand, I have to be objective and detached when assessing students (Participant C)".*

The participant recognized playing this double role while assessing young learners and the difficulty to cope with these tensions. Gibbs, Habeshaw and Habeshaw [23] also identified the problem of both encouraging students and keeping them on track at the same time. The alternative approach of assessment implies that the teacher's role has also changed within the new perspectives on assessment. Therefore since the student is actively involved in the learning process, he/she should equally be involved in the assessment process as well. Within this context, the role of the assessor has also changed, meaning that he/she could become a "helpful guide" with the role of giving young learners further guidance in learning.

3.2. ASSESSMENT STANDARDS

In Romania there has not been any recent attempt to improve the current assessment standards for primary school as far as foreign languages are concerned even though assessment criteria are important to consider when it comes to assigning value judgements to young learners. Even if the local curriculum documents provide some information on the type of activities one can choose while assessing and what the students should achieve by the end of the class, still, given the heterogeneous nature of classes, it is very difficult to base one's judgements on those general criteria. Participants acknowledge that these official documents do not provide sufficient information as far as the assessment of young learners is concerned:

> **Researcher: "Which standards/criteria do you use when you make your own judgments/decisions?"**

> **Participant C: "The teacher's books that go along with the coursebooks are more helpful."**
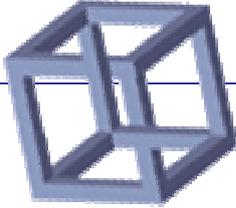
Participant B: "There are the European standards – B1 and B2 – that we can use in the process."

The participants' responses suggest the need of an "assessment strategy" which could assist teachers to plan and monitor long-term English language development. This strategy should be built on progressing stages and be located in broad age groups with aims, objectives and assessment activities for each stage. The current official document is inadequate since it is too general, with only few details as far as assessment is concerned, determining some teachers to become the "slaves" of the teacher's book. However, some teachers consider that this document is better structured and teachers do not need to rush through the programme. The understanding and use of this official document are problematic since its content is too general and ambiguous and different people might understand different things, therefore the use of the teacher's book or of the European standards are preferred. Consequently, the main drawback of the official document is that it is likely to give the teacher too much "freedom" which made some teachers feel that they lack a sense of direction as far as teaching and assessment are concerned. It is important to mention that the current official document gives teachers the opportunity to adapt the teaching to the needs of the class, respecting thus the learning styles and abilities of students, but on the other hand, this freedom is sometimes misunderstood and teachers can also periceve it as a lack of guidance.

3.3. CLASSROOM REALITIES

Another challenge faced by participant D is the difficulty to assess students with different learning styles, therefore finding those methods that could suit all learning styles requires effort. Selecting the assessment methods according to the students' learning styles becomes a less maneagable task with large groups of students. The following extracts account for different challenges the participants face in the classroom:

Participant B: "The large number of students in a class, as well as the great difference in attitude between those interested in learning English, and those lacking this interest."

Participant D: "One of the biggest challenges is how to assess fairly students with different learning styles."

Students are different, they have various levels of motivation, a wide range of attitudes about learning and they respond disparately to different instructional strategies or assessment methods. It is not a matter of finding an assessment method that would suit each individual in particular, but of understanding these differences, which would improve teachers' chances to meet the learners' needs. One of the teaching aims is mainly to equip students with the skills related to every learning style because they will need them in order to be successful learners. The participants' responses support the idea that assessment should allow for diversity in learning styles and abilities since all students should be provided with opportunities to learn and be assessed.

CONCLUSIONS

In Romania, in the primary school teachers do not use numerical grades, children are assessed using descriptive grades, which address the individual performance of the child. All the participants agree that oral assessment is suited for young learners' assessment because pressure can inhibit thinking and decrease the accuracy of assessment.

The structured observation proved to be the preferred assessment method, even though it is difficult to say exactly to what extent it is used. It is agreed [3,15,30,48] that the purpose of speaking and listening is mainly to achieve oral communication, and that there should be a focus in assessment on these skills which render real life communication situations.

Although it is difficult to assess the oral learning experiences a child goes through, still one can acknowledge that assessment of young learners could involve all the experiences through which young learners construct their knowledge about the world by interacting with each other, therefore at this stage assessment should focus more on the interactive experiences with the others. The study focused on uncovering the participants' attitudes towards different assessment forms. Therefore the main problems the participants identified with oral assessment are its time-consuming nature, its lack of reliability when clear standards are missing, but also the fact that it may be subject to bias. Undoubtedly it is much more difficult to assess oral language fairly, therefore paper and pencil tests are still widely used even with young learners.
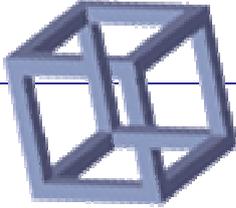
Traditional assessment methods are not enough as far as young learners are concerned, and there are other means through which young learners can show their competence in a foreign language. Research supports the idea that young learners learn better through engaging activities, therefore assessment should also be instructionally-embedded. Rea-Dickins [57] focused on assessment procedures at classroom level, examining the importance of formative assessment methods. All participants agreed that alternative methods are better suited for assessing young learners, such as oral interactions, homework assignment, class work, portfolios, posters etc. These activities can be used as assessment tools within instruction enabling the teacher to assess students in an anxiety-free environment being a proof of natural use of language, of spontaneity and of creative use of language structures.

The current study uncovers that assessment is not a straight-forward process because when teachers choose the assessment methods to be used, their choice is guided by the objectives to be achieved. Also most of the time teachers have to choose what is available with large groups of students and also what is more effective because assessment should help both the learner and the teacher. Accordingly, the teacher is faced with several issues when it comes to choose the best assessment methods and the quality of assessment depends on the choices the teacher made.

As far as assessment criteria for young learners are concerned, in Romania teachers use their own assessment criteria, the ones provided by the teacher's book and eventually those provided by educational authorities, which are not very detailed. As McKay suggests [45], the lack of specific standards as far as assessment of young learners is concerned, might affect the validity of the assessment process.

Even though the participants are aware of the methods of teaching used with young learners and of the fact that young learners learn better through social interaction, assessment does not focus on the skills acquired while being instructed, which is exactly what a survey on young learners suggests [57]. Therefore, even if the teaching methods and approach as perceived in the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages [51] have changed, still the changes are not wholly reflected within the assessment procedures. The same international survey [57] points out that tests do not assess the students' capacity to use English for communication, the tests being focused on grammar or vocabulary items easier to assess, which seems to be the case in the current study as well.

The study indicates that more research in the assessment of young learners should be done [45] and more emphasis should be given to assessment as a process, as part of instruction [70] because, as Katz [36] considers, young learners are "poor test takers" and the results might not be as reliable and valid because other factors, such the level of anxiety and the lack of familiarity with the task, may affect the students' performance. Researchers [55,75] think that assessment approaches based on constructivist views [75] promote integration of assessment and instruction.

A change in assessment methodology means that more attention should be given to assessment of oral language at the primary level [64, 76, 61]. Stiggins [73] also acknowledges the importance of using various assessment methods because teachers need different information in various forms in order to make a decision. However, even if the participants agree that alternative assessment would better meet young learners' needs, still as Brown and Hudson [7] point out, these methods can be time-consuming, subjective and difficult to achieve with a large class.

These findings are not representative given the small-scale nature of the study, still they might be able to mirror the context of young learners' assessment in Romania and also raise possible critical issues in assessment methodology as far as young learners are concerned. Also self-reporting is not the most reliable data collection method, and probably a combination of data collection methods methods would have provided a more detailed picture.

The current small scale study only scratches the surface of assessment challenges concering young learners in Romania. However, Holliday [27] considers that even a small qualitative study "can be just one piece of a very large jigsaw puzzle", therefore the study could inform up to a certain extent professional practice.

Accordingly, crowded classes, the time-consuming nature of formative assessment methods, as well as the contradictory role a teacher plays during oral assessment, can be considered obstacles in implementing efficient and reliable assessment strategies. Therefore, the National Curriculum for Foreign Languages in Romania [51] should provide more detailed guideliness as to the assessment of young learners.
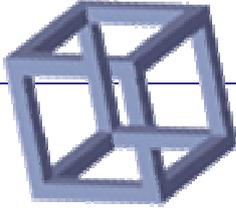
Furthermore, it is recommended that this study be replicated on a national scale so that the findings could inspire more research into the area of assessing young learners in Romania. The instrument developed was composed of twelve open-ended questions, but other large scale studies could involve questionnaires and classroom observation in order to get a broad picture of assessment practices in Romania.

BIODATA

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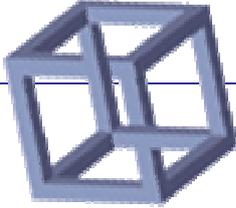
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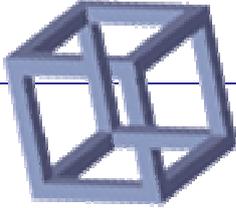
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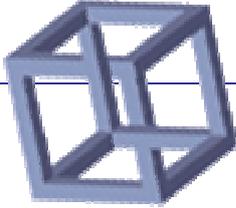
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