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Original research paper
UDC 004.738.5:371.26-053.5
UDC 371.3::811.111'243COVID2019
DOI: 10.19090/MV.2024.15.319-339

TEACHERS' PRACTICES WHEN ASSESSING YOUNG FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS' PERFORMANCES IN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

ABSTRACT: The paper aims to give an insight into primary English language teachers' assessment practices in Serbia in online teaching caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2022. The participants of this explorative study were 30 primary teachers of English representing a variety of teaching contexts in the country. The research aims to reveal the participants' experiences related to adjusting assessment to the online environment, the ways they gave formative feedback to the learners, and the perceived effectiveness of feedback for improving learning. The results show that the majority of the respondents adjusted their assessment practices to online teaching by relying more on formative assessment and apps. They also found a number of ways for giving feedback to the learners, but expressed a lot of doubts about its effectiveness. The implications of the study involve providing pre-service education and targeted in-service training for foreign language teachers in the area of applying formative assessment in online learning environments.

Key words: foreign language teachers, young foreign language learners, online teaching, formative assessment, feedback, COVID-19 pandemic.

PRAKSE NASTAVNIKA PRILIKOM OCENJIVANJA POSTIGNUĆA UČENIKA RANOG UZRASTA U NASTAVI STRANOG JEZIKA U ONLAJN OKRUŽENJU

APSTRAKT: Cilj rada bio je da se istraži praksa ocenjivanja postignuća učenika ranog uzrasta u nastavi stranog jezika u periodu 2020–2022. godine, kada su se nastavnici suočili sa izazovima onlajn nastave usled pandemije KOVID-19. Istraživanje je sprovedeno sa 30 nastavnika engleskog jezika iz osnovnih škola širom Srbije. Istraživački fokus bio je na nastavničkoj praksi prilagođavanja raznih aspekata ocenjivanja u onlajn nastavnom okruženju, od pružanja formativnog fdbeka učenicima do praćenja efikasnosti fdbeka na unapređivanje postignuća učenika. Rezultati su pokazali da je većina ispitanika prilagodila proces ocenjivanja onlajn nastavnom okruženju tako što je u većoj meri koristila formativno ocenjivanje i aplikacije primenom tehnologije. Ispitanici su takođe primenili raznovrsne tehnike pružanja fdbeka učenicima, ali su izrazili sumnju u efikasnost fdbeka

da unapredi učenička postignuća. Pedagoške implikacije rezultata istraživanja uključuju inicijalno obrazovanje i ciljano profesionalno usavršavanje nastavnika stranog jezika za primenu formativnog ocenjivanja u onlajn nastavnom okruženju.

Ključne reči: nastavnici stranog jezika, učenici mlađeg uzrasta, onlajn nastava, formativno ocenjivanje, fideb, pandemija KOVID-19.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment is one of the key components of foreign language (L2) instruction in a school context. It allows teachers to keep track of learners' progress and of the achievement of educational objectives. The information that teachers get through assessment enables them to adapt their teaching accordingly in order to meet learners' needs, enhance learners' language development, and raise the overall effectiveness of L2 learning and teaching (McKay 2006; Nikolov 2016; Nikolov, Timpe-Laughlin 2021). However, when teaching young learners (Ys), assessment can be rather challenging due to a number of factors affecting the classroom processes, such as the age and proficiency of learners, the complexity of Ys' linguistic development, the teaching and learning environment, and the teachers' assessment skills (Cameron 2008; Coombe et al. 2020; Nikolov 2016; Patekar 2021; Prošić-Santovac, Savić, Rixon 2019; Rixon 2016; Rea-Dickins 2000; Vogt, Tsagari 2014).

When in 2020, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a need arose to transfer teaching from face-to-face to online settings, L2 teachers faced new challenges in conducting assessment procedures (Al-Maqbali, Raja Hussain 2022; Coombe et al. 2020; Dong et al. 2020; Fahriany et al. 2022; Ghanbari, Nowroozi 2021; Giannikas 2022; Maaoui et al. 2023; Pressley et al. 2021). As school closures required changes in functioning of education systems, national education authorities worldwide set out to find solutions for their respective contexts and to build national coping strategies for examinations and classroom-based assessment (UNESCO 2020; United Nations 2020). Moreover, national education bodies and researchers monitored and studied these changes and their negative effects in order to provide suggestions and guidelines for effective online education and assessment (Giannikas 2022; Kuzmanović 2022; Pravilnik 2020, 2021).

In Serbia, however, no data have been published so far about the effects of the profound changes caused by the pandemic on young L2 learners' and primary L2 teachers' assessment experiences in virtual classrooms. Therefore, the paper aims to shed light on English language teachers' views on and practices in

assessing primary learners in online teaching environments in Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2022. We first provide a brief overview of YL assessment principles, a rationale for studying L2 teachers' assessment beliefs and practices in online environments, and changes in L2 education policy and assessment of YLs caused by the pandemic in Serbia. Then we present the findings of the study conducted with teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) working in primary school contexts in Serbia and teaching learners aged 6-12. Finally, we discuss the results and suggest classroom implications and further steps for pre-service and in-service education and training of L2 teachers in Serbia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Principles of assessing YLs

Children's individual development is diverse, each child is unique as a person, but children share a lot of age-specific characteristics, such as curiosity, delight in using new language in meaningful activities, such as singing, playing games, moving around, and interacting with teacher and their peers (McKay 2006; Nikolov 2016). They enjoy expressing themselves in speaking, drawing, acting out or role playing. In formal learning contexts, YLs learn L2 mainly through repetition, recycling, memorizing, and noticing patterns, rather than by explicit grammar teaching (Cameron 2008; Nikolov 2016). Consequently, classroom-based assessment should respond to YLs' developmental needs. Assessment tasks should be similar to classroom activities, familiar to children, and motivating. They should provide conditions for YLs to show what they can do in authentic and life-like language use (Cameron 2008; McKay 2006; Nikolov 2016). Classroom-based assessment for YLs should mainly focus on communicative language use in listening and speaking, while reading and writing should only be added when children feel ready for that (Nikolov 2016). Formative assessment and alternative assessment techniques, such as observation, role plays, games, songs, self- and peer-assessment, homework, portfolio and projects, have the potential to support learning through teachers' positive feedback and continuous scaffolding.

It is generally recognized that L2 teachers play a vital role in ensuring the effectiveness of any L2 programme, where classroom-based assessment is an essential part (McKay 2006). To assess YLs appropriately, L2 teachers need to develop and apply specific classroom assessment strategies that consider children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development relevant for assessment. Furthermore, they need to respect the requirements of the curriculum goals and

objectives and, also, to be able to adapt the assessment requirements to their particular context. Classroom-based assessment, which is defined as “ongoing collection of evidence leading to information-sharing with children and their parents [...] [and] to reporting against externally developed criteria” (McKay 2006: 145) involves two basic types of assessment: formative assessment, i.e. assessment *for* learning, and summative assessment, i.e. assessment *of* learning. The former is favoured in current assessment methodology because it enables YLs to show what they can do with L2, at the same time allowing teachers to monitor YLs’ progress, learn about their individual strengths and weaknesses, and plan how to further support their L2 learning (Nikolov 2016; Nikolov, Mihaljević-Djigunović 2011; Nikolov, Timpe-Laughlin 2021). Moreover, the application of formative assessment techniques supports learning by responding to children’s need to experience success in the language classroom, by enhancing their self-confidence, and by strengthening their motivation for L2 learning (McKay 2006). Motivation appears to be critical for success in L2 learning, but it can be negatively affected by failure, criticism and grades given by the teacher (Mihaljević-Djigunović 2019). L2 teachers play a crucial role in motivating learners to participate in classroom activities, first by giving positive feedback upon recognizing what individual learners know and can do well, and second, by supporting learners who need the teacher’s scaffolding for achieving successful performance (McKay 2006; Mihaljević-Djigunović 2019).

On the other hand, tests, as frequently used forms of summative assessment, focus exclusively on achievement, errors and accuracy. Tests may be sources of anxiety and demotivation for YLs because they are formal, organised within limited time frames, result in achievement scores and grades, and may have a washback effect (Curtain, Dahlberg 2016; Mihaljević-Djigunović 2019). Research shows that L2 teachers still heavily rely on achievement tests for grading YLs although they understand the potentially detrimental effects of tests on YLs (Çakır, Genç 2021; Hild, Nikolov 2011; Prošić-Santovac et al. 2019; Rixon 2016). Summative assessment or assessment *of* learning may provide useful information about learners’ proficiency levels, the teacher’s effectiveness and the quality of an L2 programme, but it is not an age-appropriate way for assessing YLs. L2 teachers should therefore recognise the potential of formative assessment, i.e. assessment *for* learning, for assessing YLs in primary school contexts. Formative assessment is a child-friendly approach to assessment which benefits children’s linguistic development and helps maintain their motivation and self-confidence. If properly

planned and conducted, formative assessment can result in summative scores and grades and thus fulfil its double role (Bennett 2011).

2.2. Assessing YLs in online environments

Generally, to be able to use technology effectively in online assessment, teachers need continuous training for developing the right skills (Pressley et al. 2021). At the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 and subsequent school closures, most L2 teachers in formal education settings had not had any previous pre-service and/or in-service training to teach and assess their learners online (Giannikas 2022; Harrington, DeBruiler 2021; Milian et al. 2020; UNESCO 2020; United Nations 2020). The situation in Serbian primary education was not different in this regard (Kuzmanović 2022), causing L2 teachers to face this uncharted territory completely unprepared. The United Nations (2020: 24) argued that monitoring needed to be continuous at the level of the learner, teacher and school, and should be based “on a mix of existing data and assessment systems and potentially new approaches tailored to this specific context”. UNESCO (2020) surveyed the coping strategies of 188 countries related to high stakes exams and concluded that their solutions for the emergency online teaching during COVID-19 included cancelling performance tests of state examinations, determining grades based on continuous assessment only, using alternative assessment techniques, such as portfolio assessment, and changing legislation to include the new solutions.

Importantly, formative assessment techniques that were adapted to suit online environments and integrated into regular online teaching were found to respond well to the requirements of assessing YLs in virtual classrooms. Giannikas (2022) explored how traditional assessment tools, such as tests and written assignments, can be replaced by alternative forms of assessment in virtual environments. She argued that alternative forms of assessment were child-friendly and could help learners understand assessment as an integral part of the learning process, not only as a means of grading their performance. However, as the author explained, the transfer to online teaching in 2020 was so sudden that in regular schools L2 teachers of YLs found it too challenging to adapt assessment procedures to the new environment. Moreover, they received minimal guidance and no information about the types of assessment that may be effective in the new circumstances. In contrast, the situation was more favourable in language schools, the author claimed. The case study described and discussed by Giannikas (2022) gives evidence that alternative assessment tools were the right option in the circumstances due to their non-threatening quality, easiness to be incorporated into

online classroom dynamic, and their usefulness for providing teachers with feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching and the areas that need improvement. These tools involved quizzes, peer-assessment, misconception check, use of the surroundings while on an online platform, and learner recordings, all utilised for vocabulary assessment, while spelling was assessed with spelling quizzes, spelling online games, peer assessment, trace-write-remember and sound-it-out assessment activities. Virtual classroom-based assessment was conducted weekly and the feedback teacher shared with learners was descriptive and encouraging, rather than in the form of a numerical grade. This had a profound and positive effect on learners' engagement, their reflection and improvement plans, and eventually resulted in enhanced learning. The author argues that "ongoing assessment activities in vocabulary and spelling removed the pressure from the learner" (Giannikas 2022: 14) and thus contributed to success.

Savić (2021) claims that the key principles that ensure the effectiveness of L2 teaching and assessment do not change with the transfer from face-to-face to online instruction. What is more, the author adds, to be successful in teaching and assessing YLs online, teachers need new pedagogical skills for at least three reasons. First, the focus in online environments is generally not so much on teaching, but

"on learning as a process, on the need to develop learners' learning-to-learn skills, on providing more personal feedback and personalized learning, on allowing learners more autonomy and freedom of choice related to the activities and materials, and on ensuring participation of all learners" (Savić 2021: 126).

Second, being isolated in their homes during virtual classes, YLs were vulnerable and needed teachers who could help them feel safe and supported. Third, new teaching strategies were needed for encouraging communication in the virtual classroom and for providing clear and comprehensible instructions because the use of body language and facial expressions was limited, while pair and group work depended on teachers' digital skills and creativity (Savić 2021). Monitoring learners' progress, noting down areas that needed recycling and improvement, and giving timely, specific and supportive feedback, was crucial for motivating learners and empowering them for autonomous learning in online surroundings (Harrington, DeBruler 2021; Shin et al. 2021). Teacher's positive feedback on learners' group or individual performance was crucial to strengthening trusting relationship with learners, encouraging further learning, and motivating learners to participate in online activities (Savić 2021). All these changes could potentially contribute to

bridging up children's inadequate self-regulation in virtual learning (Dong et al. 2020), and to providing conditions for their success in learning.

2.3. The Serbian context of assessing YLs in online environments

Even before the pandemic, newly adopted legal documents in Serbia supported formative assessment by prescribing compulsory application of both formative and summative assessment in primary grades (Pravilnik 2019; NAO RS 2017). New foreign language curricula instructed teachers to apply continuous assessment of learners' performance using learner-friendly assessment tasks and procedures. These new requirements made assessment a complex and difficult process and demanded teachers to develop adequate assessment strategies and skills. In the course of school closures during the pandemic, several legal documents were adopted to guide schools and teachers through the new teaching context (Pravilnik 2020, Stručno uputstvo 2021), but no specific in-service training on online assessment in primary L2 education was provided at the national level.

There have not been any studies focusing specifically on assessment in primary L2 education in Serbia during the pandemic. However, a comprehensive study performed by Kuzmanović (2022) on the challenges caused by emergency remote teaching in primary and secondary education in Serbia during the pandemic deals with assessment as an important segment of education in the new circumstances. This qualitative study was not specifically focused on L2 education, though some of the participants were primary and secondary teachers of foreign languages. The study involved content analyses of documents and interviews with three groups of stakeholders from different parts of Serbia: learners, teachers and parents. Although the organization of emergency remote teaching varied throughout the country depending on the level of education (lower primary, including grades 1-4, upper primary, including grades 5-8, and secondary, including grades 1-3 or 1-4), on a type of secondary school (grammar or vocational), and the availability of resources, the challenges associated with assessment appeared to be rather similar for all ages and school types.

The participating teachers shared an opinion that assessment in online teaching was the source of the greatest frustration and worry compared to all other aspects of emergency remote teaching. At the beginning of the pandemic, the participating teachers used the same kinds of tests they had applied in face-to-face teaching, transferred into electronic form. This appeared to be rather frustrating for successful learners due to the widespread cheating by unsuccessful ones. When they applied the mixed approach to teaching, i.e. online teaching combined with in-person classroom teaching, teachers tended to assess YLs only when they attended in-person classes at school. Teachers reported that this solution made assessment

procedure less demanding for them. The survey showed that it took some time for teachers to realise that the new way of organising teaching in virtual classrooms required a new approach to assessing learners (Kuzmanović 2022).

Significantly, formative assessment was highlighted as the most appropriate way of assessing learners in online environments. The examples of good online teaching practice shared by EFL teachers in the interviews and presented in the comprehensive study by Kuzmanović (2022) indicated several adaptations of classroom-based assessment techniques introduced in Serbia to fit the new environment. The new techniques involved the following: 1. the use of technology and a number of apps appropriate for formative assessment of young learners, such as digital flashcards, Google Form, Quizlet, and Quizezz; 2. the change of criteria made to respond to the altered content, objectives and materials; 3. the use of a compulsory oral test to confirm the online test results; 4. the application of cognitively complex tasks that required learners' independent work, such as involving learners in asking questions based on the content and giving the answers to their own questions; 5. lowering the assessment criteria to take into account enhanced stress and anxiety of young learners and shorter class periods, i.e. 30 minutes online compared to 45 minutes in-person. However, the author concluded that teachers did not apply formative assessment techniques at the appropriate level nor relied enough on the advantages of using technology for differentiating assessment. Consequently, the author proposed taking a number of steps for improving assessment in emergency remote teaching: first, it is crucial "to empower teachers for formative assessment in the digital environment, since teachers, according to the findings of this study, do not use the potential of digital tools enough to monitor student progress and support students' learning" (Kuzmanović 2022: 168); second, it is necessary to train teachers and learners to regularly apply self-assessment and peer-assessment as forms of formative assessment useful for getting and giving feedback on the learning progress; third, teachers should systematically give timely and individualized feedback to learners; fourth, teachers should be provided with free digital assessment apps appropriate for the learners' ages and levels; and fifth, legal documents related to assessment should be updated to put more focus on formative assessment.

On the basis of the previous studies on online assessment experiences of L2 teachers of YLs, it can be concluded that formative assessment was found to be highly effective for monitoring YLs' progress and making judgements about the grades (Giannikas 2022; Savić 2021). In order to find out how L2 teachers in Serbia coped with online assessment of YLs during the pandemic, we surveyed

their experiences related to adjusting different aspects of the assessment procedure and examined their attitudes to the role of formative feedback for keeping learners engaged and motivated.

3. THE STUDY

3.1. Method

This explorative study reports preliminary results of a larger study focused on the relationship between the assessment policy in Serbian primary education and assessment practices of English language teachers. The results presented in this paper aimed to investigate the online assessment practices of primary L2 teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. More precisely, the study focused on the adaptations that EFL teachers made to their regular assessment practices to respond to the change of the teaching environment, the ways they gave feedback to the learners in the online environment, and the perceived effectiveness of feedback on improving learners' performance. The study was qualitative, so content analysis was conducted to describe and discuss the results. The following three research questions (RQ) were posed:

RQ1: How did the participants adapt their assessment practices to fit online L2 teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How did the participants use formative feedback in online L2 teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: How did the participants perceive the effectiveness of feedback on improving learners' performance?

The respondents' replies were used to answer the above two research questions.

3.2 Participants

The participants were 30 primary teachers of English, representing a variety of teaching contexts in the country (see Table 1).

Participants		N	%
Gender	Female	24	80.00
	Male	6	20.00
Age	M = 44.47 (SD = 6.29)	-	-
Academic Degree	Bachelor	13	43.30
	Master & PhD	17	56.70
Years of Teaching English	M = 19.57 (SD = 6.49)	-	-
Years of Teaching English to YLs	M = 15.37 (SD = 5.43)	-	-
Type of School	urban primary school	12	40.00
	rural primary school	12	40.00
	both urban and rural primary school	6	20.00
Professional Title	Primary school English language teacher	28	93.33
	Class teacher	2	6.67
Training in Assessing YLs	Pre-service course or part of a course at BA or MA studies.	17	56.66
	In-service professional development on assessment.	22	73.33

Table 1. Demographic data about the participants

The participants in the study were mainly female and had a variety of professional backgrounds: city and village school contexts; different geographical regions with more or less favourable socio-economic conditions; varied opportunities for professional development; different duration of experience in teaching English to YLs. A great majority were specialist English language teachers, almost equally divided in relation to the bachelor/master's degrees they possessed; most of them were in the middle of their careers, more than a half reported having had training in the assessment of YLs during their preservice education, while the majority reported having attended professional development on assessment of YLs (see Table 1).

3.3. Instrument and procedure

The data were collected in May 2022 via an online questionnaire distributed by email to primary EFL teachers in Serbia. The link to the online questionnaire was sent through professional networks to hundreds of potential participants, but the response rate was only about 10%. As the questionnaire was rather comprehensive, focusing on teachers' application of formative assessment

both in face-to-face and online teaching, it may be concluded that the respondents were enthusiastic and reflective professionals willing to share their assessment practices. Apart from presenting the demographic data, the paper focuses on the results obtained by a set of open-ended questions related to online assessment experiences (3 items). The participants were asked to provide short narrative answers to the following questions (items 1-3):

1. How did you assess your 6-12-year old learners in online English language teaching? Did you use the same tasks, activities, tests, tools, practices, or did you change or adapt them? Please explain.
2. How did you give feedback to the learners in online teaching? Please explain.
3. If you gave oral and/or written feedback to your learners in online teaching, how effective was it in terms of the learners' engagement, motivation and language development? Please explain.

Both the questions and the answers were in English. When analysing the survey data, content analysis was employed. The survey extracts provided in the paper to illustrate the themes were coded using 'P' (participant) and numbers 1-30 (e.g. P1 = participant number one).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results will be presented, analysed and discussed in the order of the three research questions.

4.1. Adapting assessment to the online environment

The answer to RQ1 was obtained by analysing the content of the participants' replies to the first survey question (item 1). The content analysis of the responses showed that a great majority of the respondents (76.7%) either adapted the assessment tasks they had used in face-to-face teaching or created new ones taking advantage of technology. Their adaptations involved the following strategies: 1. minimizing the use of tests (reported by about a half of the respondents); 2. applying formative assessment techniques and tools; 3. designing new assessment tasks using apps, such as Google forms, Mentimeter, or Livesheets; and 4. giving learners projects for assessment purposes. About a third of the respondents reported multiple ways of adapting assessment to the new environment. The following samples of survey extracts describe the adaptations reported:

Extract 1: *“I avoided giving test because I knew answers would be distributed amongst students, or aunts & uncles would be engaged to assist them, etc. I used Google forms to create diagnostic tests for formative assessment purposes. Also, I created or adapted tests/quizzes/games on platforms (& included the links in the assignments) such as LearningApps for revision and self-assessment purposes. Students (half of each class) were invited to school to take their achievement tests and get summative grades.”* (P5)

Extract 2: *“There were no formal tests; I used projects more.”* (P8)

Extract 3: *“I adapted most of the activities so that I could get their replies during the class. I used Microsoft Forms for interactive tests on some occasions, I often asked the students to take part in Mentimeter activities (for feedback and formative assessment) and I often asked older learners to send photographs of their classwork so that I could make sure they understood the tasks and did them correctly”.* (P13)

The above results are mainly in line with the studies that find formative assessment techniques more appropriate than summative tools, such as tests, for online language assessment (Giannikas 2022; Kuzmanović 2022) and for assessing children in different contexts (Nikolov 2016; Prošić-Santovac et al. 2019). The results also show that EFL teachers may have been faster in understanding the needs of children in online environments than teachers of other school subjects surveyed by Kuzmanović (2022). This may imply that EFL teachers already possessed formative assessment strategies and digital skills and knowledge that helped them apply a number of apps to assess YLs formatively or to employ alternative assessment tools, such as self-assessment, projects and games.

However, 23.3% of the respondents claimed they did not adapt their assessment to the online teaching mode, but applied the same assessment tasks and activities, or conducted in-person end-of-semester summative assessment. Only a couple of the participants gave the reasons for not making any adaptations, as it is illustrated in the following samples of survey extracts:

Extract 4: *“I must admit I used mostly the same tasks in Word documents, because many of the students had difficulties with the internet connection”.* (P30)

Extract 5: *“I used the same oral activities.”* (P24)

The results indicate that, when faced with assessment issues in the new teaching environment, a quarter of the participants did not look for more child-friendly ways of assessing learners, but rather relied on in-person summative assessment. This is not in accordance with the prevailing theoretical implications and may have resulted from the limited support on assessing young language

learners that teachers in regular schools received during the pandemic (Giannikas 2022; Kuzmanović 2022). Overreliance on summative assessment in the online environment disregarded one of the basic principles of assessing young learners: assessment tasks for YLs should be similar to their L2 learning activities, so that learners can show what they can do with the language they have acquired (MacKay 2006; Shin, Crandall 2014; Shin et al. 2021). YLs who attended online lessons most of the time during COVID-19 school closures were hardly prepared to take the tests given to them at the end of the semester or at the end of the academic year. Similar results were obtained in other studies that found that L2 teachers did not use the suitable child-friendly forms of assessment in online environments during the pandemic (Bui 2022; Çakır, Genç 2021; Kuzmanović 2022).

4.2. Forms of formative feedback

The answer to RQ2 was obtained through the participants' accounts of the forms of giving feedback to YLs online and the effectiveness of feedback for enhancing learning. The results showed that the participants used a great variety of ways for giving formative feedback to learners on their performance, from oral feedback to automatically generated scores. Online feedback was reported to be given in Google classroom (4 participants), on Microsoft Teams (3 participants), by email (1 participant), and in Viber groups (1 participant). The purposes of feedback ranged from checking homework (2 participants) and giving private messages to individual learners (13 participants), to discussing homework and classroom tasks with learners either orally in online lessons (5 participants) or in private chats (6 participants). Some learners received automatic responses and results upon doing online quizzes and diagnostic tests, as reported by one participant. Teachers also used electronic class register (2 participants) to write descriptive grades and to suggest areas of improvement to individual learners. Three participants utilized all the advantages of available technology and apps, as can be seen in the following sample extracts from survey replies:

Extract 6: *“Diagnostic tests would generate automatic results or I would write feedback to each student and elaborate on their achievements where necessary. They would also get automatic responses/ results from the tests/quizzes/games on various platforms.”* (P5)

Extract 7: *“I wrote answers to their submitted homework where I suggested what they needed to improve and praised them for their good work.”* (P12)

Extract 8: *“I used the chat integrated in Microsoft Teams for individual feedback.”* (P13)

Extract 9: *"I posted private comments in Google Classroom"* (P15)

Extract 10: *"I used online tools, emojis, and wrote down comments."* (P29)

On the other hand, a third of the participants relied more on immediate feedback given orally in an online lesson, as the following sample extracts from their responses illustrate:

Extract 11: *"By oral advising and guidelines."* (P6)

Extract 12: *"Mainly orally and sometimes I wrote some comments and recommendations for improvement."* (P14)

The above results are in line with pedagogical recommendations pointing out that both oral and written feedback is decisive for keeping YLs engaged and motivated (MacKay 2006; Shin et al. 2021). However, to be effective, feedback should be given immediately upon learners' performance, it should be personal, clear and detailed, and it should offer guidelines for improvement (Savić 2021; Shin et al. 2021). It is not always clear from the respondents' answers if their feedback satisfied these requirements.

4.3. Perceived effectiveness of formative feedback

The answer to RQ3 was obtained through the analysis of the respondents' perceptions on the effectiveness of the formative feedback they had provided for their learners. Not all of the respondents were sure that their feedback encouraged children to put more effort into their learning or become more autonomous: almost a half of the cohort (N=14) reported they believed there had been no effect on learning, while a little more than a half (N=16) said they could observe moderate to high effect. The following sample extracts from survey replies illustrate the participants' perceptions:

Extract 13: *"I don't think it was effective at all."* (P5)

Extract 14: *"Not very effective."* (P7)

Extract 15: *"It helped them be more efficient in performing the tasks."* (P11)

Extract 16: *"It was effective because they tried to learn from their mistakes."* (P12)

Extract 17: *"The use of chat for feedback proved quite effective because it was tailor-made for a particular student and it helped them improve their learning."* (P13)

Extract 18: *"My feedback had a positive effect on their motivation and engagement."* (P15)

Extract 19: *“It is difficult to answer, since our students were not prepared for online learning. Their motivation towards learning English didn't change - the problem was their individual inability to focus.”* (P18)

Extract 20: *“To some extent effective - some learners considered feedback and some didn't.”* (P19)

Extract 20: *“It was more time-consuming for me but the learners got a much clearer picture.”* (P28)

The above extracts show that most of the participants applied a reflective approach to their online teaching and that at least a half of them managed to find ways to give constructive and positive feedback and to observe its effect on learner motivation and performance. However, the scope of the effectiveness of the participants' feedback on learning remains vague as the participants' answers expressed their beliefs and did not provide information about specific learning outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION

The paper aimed to investigate assessment strategies developed by primary EFL teachers in Serbia when they were suddenly faced with the challenge to transfer their in-person lessons to online environments at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the study revealed that online teaching influenced different aspects of the assessment procedure. First, most of the respondents adjusted their assessment approaches and developed new assessment tasks and activities. Second, some respondents were fast in applying a number of age-appropriate apps to create their own quizzes and interesting activities for stress-free assessment. Third, most of the respondents applied different forms of formative assessment, a half of them gave personalized feedback to their learners and provided support when needed. All these changes were in line with the age-appropriate assessment pedagogy and new primary curriculum requirements in Serbia. However, at least a quarter of the respondents could not cope with the challenges of online assessment, lacked skills of planning and carrying out formative assessment properly, and stuck to summative testing in the classroom environment.

Considering the fact that formative assessment is learner-cantered, allows YLs to show what they can do with language, strengthens their autonomy in L2 learning, and provides conditions for them to experience success, it is critical that EFL teachers develop knowledge and skills to apply it regularly not only for monitoring learners' progress, but for making summative judgements on learners'

achievement. Teachers of English need to understand that regular feedback and assessment of learners' performance is even more important in online environments than in face-to-face lessons because young learners may be reluctant to participate in online activities and may therefore feel insecure of their progress. Professional development and horizontal learning may greatly contribute to teachers' awareness of the importance of using assessment results to adapt their own teaching in order to help all learners enhance their L2 development. We believe that the unique experience of emergency distant teaching in Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic can offer guidelines for effective assessment of YLs in a number of similar circumstances in the future and that the results of our study can contribute to the field by helping EFL teachers to reflect on their online assessment strategies and to find ways for improving them further.

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PRAKSE NASTAVNIKA PRILIKOM OCENJIVANJA POSTIGNUĆA UČENIKA
RANOG UZRASTA U NASTAVI STRANOG JEZIKA U ONLAJN OKRUŽENJU

Sažetak

Cilj rada bio je da se istraži praksa u ocenjivanju postignuća učenika ranog uzrasta u periodu 2020–2022. godine, kada su se nastavnici suočili sa izazovima onlajn nastave usled pandemije KOVID-19. Ovo istraživanje sprovedeno je sa 30 nastavnika engleskog jezika iz osnovnih škola širom Srbije. Podaci su prikupljeni korišćenjem onlajn upitnika sa četiri pitanja otvorenog tipa, sa ciljem da se dobiju odgovori na sledeća istraživačka pitanja: 1. kako su ispitanici prilagodili svoju praksu ocenjivanja uslovima onlajn nastave?; 2. kako su ispitanici koristili formativni fidebek u onlajn okruženju? i 3. kako su ispitanici procenili efikasnost formativnog fidebeka za unapređenje učeničkih postignuća. Rezultati su pokazali da je velika većina ispitanika prilagodila proces ocenjivanja onlajn okruženju tako što je koristila prilagođene zadatke i aktivnosti za ocenjivanje, ili je kreirala nove uz pomoć tehnologije. Ispitanici su takođe davali učenicima pravovremeni, detaljan i lični fidebek, od usmenog do automatski generisanog. Što se tiče efikasnosti fidebeka za unapređivanje uspeha učenika, polovina ispitanika smatrala je da nije bilo nikakvog učinka, dok je druga polovina uočila umeren ili visok uticaj fidebeka na napredovanje učenika. Sve ove promene koje su ispitanici uveli u svoju onlajn nastavu bile su u skladu sa pedagoškim smernicama u pogledu pristupa ocenjivanju učenika mlađeg osnovnoškolskog uzrasta, sa zahtevima reformisanog plana i programa za nastavu stranog jezika na ovom uzrastu, kao i sa smernicama Ministarstva prosvete za realizaciju onlajn nastave. Međutim, najmanje četvrtina ispitanika nije bila u stanju da na pravi način odgovori na izazove onlajn nastavnog okruženja. Rezultati ukazuju na to da su im možda nedostajale strategije planiranja i adekvatnog sprovođenja formativnog ocenjivanja. Uzimajući u obzir sve prednosti formativnog ocenjivanja, kako za praćenje napretka učenika i poboljšanje njihovog uspeha, tako i za sumativno ocenjivanje, smatramo da je neophodno da nastavnici engleskog jezika unaprede svoje kompetencije formativnog ocenjivanja.

Ključne reči: nastavnici stranog jezika učenici ranog uzrasta, onlajn nastava, formativno ocenjivanje, fidebek, pandemija KOVID-19.

Received: 25 September 2023

Accepted: 14 February 2024

