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ASSESSING ENGLISH FOR YOUNG LEARNERS IN INDONESIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: WRITTEN DOMINANCE, ORAL CONFIDENCE, AND FORMATIVE CLASSROOM PRACTICES

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Abstract

Assessment is an important but under-researched aspect of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), especially in primary school settings, where children continue to exhibit variable levels of oral confidence, language preparedness, and classroom participation. This study aims to investigate Indonesian primary school teachers' assessment of young learners' English learning, particularly in written dominance, oral confidence, and formative classroom practices. Data were collected using a qualitative design, including semi-structured interviews with 13 teachers and classroom observations in public and private primary schools in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The analysis was thematic and focused on patterns in assessment across the dataset to identify teachers' assessment practices, pedagogical reasoning, and classroom enactment. The findings show that assessment was largely dominated by written tasks, worksheets and test-based evidence. However, teachers also used oral questioning, role-play, presentations, visual matching, word-building games, classroom participation, praise, correction, and immediate feedback as formative assessment practices. A key tension was between teachers' concern for learners' speaking confidence and the limited use of systematic oral assessment. The study calls for developmentally appropriate, multimodal, and formative assessment models that better support young learners' English confidence, participation, and communicative growth.

Keywords: *English For Young Learners; Primary English Assessment; Formative Classroom Practices; Oral Confidence; Written Dominance; Indonesian Primary Education*

INTRODUCTION

In English language learning, one key aspect is assessment, which provides teachers with evidence of pupils' progress, difficulties, and learning needs. As one type of assessment, formative assessment can support successful independent learning by helping pupils set goals, monitor their learning progress and adapt learning strategies to suit their individual needs. In this process, teacher feedback is of great importance (Zhang et al., 2024). As technology advances, AI can now reduce teachers' workload whilst maintaining the quality of assessments; the most commonly used type of AI is large-scale language models. (Han et al., 2025). Consequently, assessment is not only regarded as a tool for measuring learning outcomes, but also as part of the pedagogical process that can help teachers make more informed decisions about teaching.

Assessment in English language learning for young learners has distinct characteristics that differ from learning at higher levels. Assessment at this level must take into account

several characteristics of children's development, including limited attention span, developing literacy skills, motivation, self-confidence, and the need for meaningful interaction. Positive, communicative, and empathetic feedback, along with the suggestion that partial corrections can provide scope for self-correction and help maintain self-confidence (Alghannam, 2024). When setting tasks, young learners' level of engagement in carrying them out must be assessed; this requires a specific assessment tool capable of measuring all dimensions of their engagement (emotional, behavioral, social, and cognitive) to guide pedagogical practice (Hiver et al., 2024). Young learners, with their unique characteristics, bring to the classroom challenges for teachers to design multimodal pedagogical experiences that support effective learning; assessment that relies solely on traditional (print-based) methods fails to comprehensively capture the developing literacies of young learners (Yakubu & Obafemi, 2023).

Assessment in English language learning for young learners is ineffective if it relies solely on traditional or written (paper-based) tests, as their development in English is reflected not only in written answers but also through oral responses, repetition, body language, classroom participation, games, songs and role-play. Several factors influence young learners' participation in oral activities, including emotional security, peer dynamics and a sense of belonging (Kuzu & Egmır, 2026). Furthermore, integrating cultural values, such as folk tales, can optimize student engagement, promote moral and linguistic development, and reduce anxiety (Rohani et al., 2026). This suggests that the assessment of young learners should take into account various forms of learning expression, rather than being limited to students' ability to write correct answers. Therefore, the assessment of English language learning among primary school pupils needs to be more flexible, formative, multimodal, and tailored to children's learning characteristics. Formative assessment is the most appropriate type of assessment for improving learning outcomes, as it provides ongoing feedback and enables teachers to adapt the learning process to pupils' needs. (Msimango & Mabusela, 2026). Flexible assessment enables teachers to cater for all pupils' needs and a variety of learning objectives (Cerón Urzúa et al., 2024). The use of appropriate assessment methods for young learners can improve children's language proficiency, particularly in diverse socio-economic contexts (Hassan et al., 2025). Consequently, appropriate assessment for young learners should be more dynamic, less rigid, and not solely focused on the outcome.

A balanced assessment can provide teachers with a comprehensive understanding of their pupils' learning progress, as pupils' learning outcomes are not only derived from what they write but also from how they participate, respond, and speak, as well as their self-confidence in the classroom. Formative assessment is one of the forms of assessment considered balanced, as it assesses pupils not only on their written answers but also on their engagement and participation in the learning process. Through this type of assessment, teachers can evaluate pupils' progress and deliver tailored teaching to their needs (Hasan et al., 2025). In English language teaching, creative assessment methods that incorporate interactive elements can indirectly encourage active participation among pupils, which, in turn, can help build their self-confidence (Ho, 2022). Furthermore, the role of feedback should not be underestimated; teachers can provide feedback combined with positive reinforcement to pupils, which can boost their self-confidence and motivation to learn (Ali & Mjenda, 2024).

Although assessment in English language learning for young learners is considered important and sensitive, in practice, English assessment in primary schools is still dominated by written tasks and exam-oriented exercises. To date, there has been no in-depth research into standardized English-language assessment—such as tests on grammar, punctuation, and spelling—and its impact on pupils and teachers. The tests still administered by English teachers in primary schools remain a reductive and coercive process, with the broader implications for children's language development yet to be examined (Cushing, 2021). Primary school teachers who teach English are considered to lack the necessary expertise and time to design comprehensive assessments that can cater for pupils with a wide range of linguistic abilities (Robinson-Jones et al., 2026). The main difficulty teachers face in this regard is interpreting the assessment criteria for writing skills, which results in low validity and reliability in the assessments (Clarkson, 2024).

Teachers often choose assessment types that are easy for them to administer and document, without considering how complex the resulting assessment results might be. The tests chosen by these EFL teachers are predominantly worksheets, vocabulary exercises, and written exams; they make little use of alternative approaches that involve pupils (Gkogkou & Kofou, 2021). Several studies have found that teachers often rely on subjective judgments rather than assessing pupils' actual behavior through a comprehensive assessment process, resulting in assessment outcomes that do not reflect the true results (Coombe et al., 2020; Nurdiana, 2021). This indicates a tendency for administrative convenience to take precedence over efforts to conduct a comprehensive assessment capable of providing a holistic view of pupils' language development.

The assessment methods generally used by teachers to date have limited their ability to observe pupils' confidence in speaking, their pronunciation progress, their interactions with one another in the classroom, and their willingness to communicate in English. There is still very little research exploring the impact of learning-oriented assessment, particularly on communication skills, especially amongst younger pupils (Matyakhan et al., 2024). The limitations of this assessment prevent teachers from providing appropriate guidance on pupils' language development, particularly in oral skills, as it does not provide a complete picture of pupils' progress and the challenges they face during the learning process (Ali & Mjenda, 2024). Several studies suggest that young learners' metalinguistic awareness is still developing; therefore, assessment strategies that provide a comprehensive view of their language development are essential (Gallardo-del-Puerto & Martínez-Adrián, 2022). In other words, when assessment places too much emphasis on written results, there is a risk that oral skills, willingness to participate, and the process of building self-confidence will not be adequately documented.

In Indonesia, primary school teachers' assessment practices are influenced by their diverse backgrounds, interpretations of the curriculum, institutional expectations, and classroom resource availability. One competence that plays a key role in classroom teaching is the teacher's pedagogical competence. Equipped with adequate pedagogical skills, teachers can deal with pupils in all their diversity, including in assessment (Rosmiati et al., 2025). In addition to internal factors related to the teachers themselves, external factors, such as institutional support in the form of funding and professional development, also influence the effectiveness of teaching and assessment. Research on inclusive education indicates that teachers often do not receive systematic institutional support and instead rely on their own personal abilities (Tarjiah et al., 2026). Another challenge faced by teachers in

relation to assessment is the large number of pupils per class and the limited availability of teaching materials (Prastikawati et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, research that thoroughly examines how primary school teachers balance written, oral, and formative assessment remains very limited. Existing studies have not sufficiently explored why teachers continue to use written assessments—which are easy to mark and document—how this format influences the learning process, and whether it can reflect the language development of young learners. Instead, they have focused solely on the types of assessment frequently used by teachers in English language teaching for young learners (Naz et al., 2025; Oey et al., 2026). According to Kaur & Lim-Ratnam (2023), at present researchers tend to focus more on general policies and the dominant assessment methods employed by teachers, without examining more specific aspects, such as the implications of the decisions taken for pupils' language development. Therefore, research is needed that not only describes the assessment methods used by teachers but also explains how these assessments relate to the predominance of written evidence, the development of oral confidence, and the formative practices that occur during learning.

This research is considered to be of great importance as it examines in greater depth the assessment practices employed by English teachers in primary schools, particularly how these practices may broaden or, conversely, narrow the teachers' own understanding of their pupils' language development. Furthermore, this study makes a further contribution by viewing assessment not merely as the act of awarding marks, but also as a pedagogical process in the classroom that involves written evidence, oral participation, fostering self-confidence, feedback, correction, and formative responses from the teacher. In this way, assessment can be understood as part of the learning interaction, rather than simply an administrative task carried out after the material has been taught. In this study, too, teachers were regarded as pedagogical practitioners who independently determined the type of assessment they used, taking into account the needs of the class, the characteristics of the pupils, the time available, documentation requirements, and their understanding of children's language development. Through this focus, this study offers a more balanced perspective on English assessment in primary schools, namely by examining how the predominance of written assessment relates to the oral and formative practices that actually occur in the classroom. This contribution is significant because it can serve as a basis for the development of assessment models that are better suited to the characteristics of young learners, more responsive to the learning process, and more comprehensive in capturing pupils' language development.

This study therefore aims to investigate how primary school teachers in Indonesia, particularly in West Nusa Tenggara, assess English language learning amongst young pupils, with a specific focus on the predominance of written assessment, confidence in speaking, and the practice of formative assessment in the classroom. This focus was chosen because these three aspects represent the key tensions in the assessment of English for young learners: the need to produce easily documented evidence of learning, the need to encourage pupils to use the language orally, and the need to provide feedback that supports ongoing learning development. By examining these three aspects simultaneously, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of how English language assessment is understood, practiced and negotiated by teachers in primary school classrooms. The findings of this study are also expected to provide a conceptual and practical basis for the

development of assessment that is more multimodal, formative and tailored to the developmental needs of young learners in the context of primary education in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative design to explore teachers' assessment practices when teaching English to young learners. This qualitative approach is particularly appropriate, as the study aims to understand how teachers conceptualize, implement, and negotiate assessment in relation to written tasks, speaking confidence, and formative classroom practices. This study was conducted in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The respondents comprised thirteen English teachers working in state and private primary schools in West Nusa Tenggara. They were selected because they are directly involved in teaching English to young learners and therefore have relevant pedagogical experience in planning, delivering, and evaluating English language learning activities at the primary school level. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information on teachers' beliefs regarding assessment, their pedagogical reasoning, and the considerations underpinning their choice of assessment practices. Classroom observations were conducted to examine how assessment is implemented during teaching and learning activities, particularly through written assignments, oral questions, feedback, marking, monitoring of participation, and other formative interactions. The use of interviews and observations enabled this study to compare teachers expressed assessment perspectives with their actual classroom practices. The data were analyzed thematically by identifying recurring patterns in written assessment, oral confidence, formative feedback, learner participation, correction, and classroom-based evidence of learning. Through this analytical process, this study identified themes that explain how assessment is practiced and negotiated in English language classrooms for young learners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The research findings indicate that three main assessment approaches are used by primary school English teachers in West Nusa Tenggara: written assessment, oral assessment to gauge pupils' confidence levels, and formative assessment carried out during classroom learning. Interview data indicate that teachers generally rely on written assignments, worksheets, vocabulary exercises, spelling activities, matching exercises, sentence-completion tasks, and written tests to assess pupils' English language learning. Teachers frequently mentioned these forms of assessment as part of their regular classroom routine and were also observed using them during the lessons. In classroom observations, written assessments are often used after vocabulary presentations, pronunciation exercises, or the teacher's explanation, thereby enabling teachers to assess pupils' understanding through their written work.

Table 1. The types of written assessment used by teachers

No	Forms of written assessment	Source of data	Description of classroom use

1	Worksheets	Interviews and observation	Teachers used worksheets to assess students' understanding of vocabulary, simple phrases, and lesson content.
2	Vocabulary exercises	Interviews and observations	Students were asked to write, translate, match, or complete vocabulary items related to the lesson.
3	Spelling activities	Interviews and observations	Teachers assessed students' ability to recognize and write English words correctly.
4	Matching tasks	Interviews and observations	Students matched words with pictures, meanings, or corresponding items as evidence of vocabulary comprehension.
5	Sentence completion	Interviews and observations	Students completed simple sentences to demonstrate their understanding of basic English structures.
6	Written tests	Interviews	Teachers used written tests as formal evidence of students' achievement and learning progress.

In addition to written assessments, observational data show that teachers also assess pupils through oral activities and classroom activities. These practices include asking oral questions, pronunciation exercises, repetition, role-play, short presentations, and pupils' spontaneous responses during learning activities. Teachers use these oral activities to assess whether pupils can pronounce words, answer simple questions, repeat phrases, and participate in classroom interactions. However, the data show that oral assessment is largely conducted informally during lessons rather than through explicit assessment criteria or structured oral assessment rubrics.

Table 2. Oral and Formative Assessment Practices in the Classroom

No	Assessment Practice	Source of Data	Evidence from Classroom Practice
1	Oral questioning	Interviews and observations	Teachers asked simple questions to check students' understanding and ability to respond orally.
2	Pronunciation practice	Observations	Teachers asked students to repeat words or expressions and corrected pronunciation when needed.
3	Roleplay	Interviews and observations	Students performed short dialogues or classroom expressions to demonstrate oral participation.
4	Short presentations	Interviews and observations	Some students were asked to present simple vocabulary, answers, or short expressions to the class.
5	Repetition and drilling	Observations	Teachers used repetition to monitor students' pronunciation, memory, and participation.

6	Participation checks	Interviews and observations	Teachers observed whether students were active, responsive, and willing to engage in classroom activities.
7	Immediate correction	Observations	Teachers corrected students' mistakes directly during written and oral activities.
8	Praise and encouragement	Observations	Teachers praised students' efforts to maintain motivation and confidence during learning.
9	Task-based support	Observations	Teachers assisted students who experienced difficulty in completing classroom tasks.

The data above shows that teachers frequently monitor pupils' understanding through classroom interactions. During the lessons observed, teachers checked pupils' written answers, observed their participation, corrected mistakes, provided immediate feedback, and helped pupils who were struggling to complete tasks. These practices demonstrate that assessment is not only carried out at the end of a lesson but also occurs continuously throughout the teaching and learning process. In this regard, the assessment practices employed by teachers combine formal written evidence with informal oral evidence and formative evidence gathered in the classroom.

Overall, the findings indicate that assessment in the English language classes observed was largely dominated by written tasks, whilst oral and formative assessment practices also took place during classroom interactions. Written assessment provides teachers with visible, documentable evidence of learning, whilst oral and formative assessment practices allow teachers to observe pupils' confidence, participation, pronunciation, and the learning difficulties they experience first-hand. Therefore, a combination of interview data and observations suggests that teachers' assessment practices are not limited to written tests, although written evidence remains the most dominant and systematic form of assessment used in primary school English classes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study address a gap in the literature by revealing that the assessment processes carried out by English teachers in primary schools in Indonesia, particularly in West Nusa Tenggara, are not merely intended to test pupils' understanding but constitute a pedagogical process that is also adapted to the classroom realities faced by teachers. The predominant assessment practice among teachers is written assessment, as this form is more visible, practical, and easier to document. This is consistent with previous research, which indicates that teachers widely use written assessments due to their practicality, ease of analysis, and simplicity of documentation. This preference aligns with the need for standardized, summative assessment methods, particularly within an examination-oriented education system (Nguyen & Truong, 2021). Worksheets, vocabulary exercises, spelling tasks, matching activities, sentence-completion exercises and written tests provide concrete evidence of learning that can be collected and reported. However, this reliance also indicates that assessment practices are heavily influenced by administrative practicalities, rather than by a fully comprehensive understanding of the language development of young learners (Rao & Banerjee, 2023).

The predominance of written assessment creates significant pedagogical challenges in the teaching of English to young learners. On the one hand, written tasks help teachers to assess pupils' vocabulary recognition, spelling accuracy and basic comprehension in a controlled manner. On the other hand, the development of English language skills in early years learners cannot be fully reflected in written work alone. In primary school classrooms, children often demonstrate language progress through oral responses, repetition, attempts at pronunciation, participation in class, role-play, body language, and a willingness to respond to the teacher's instructions. When assessment is dominated by written evidence, these key indicators of early language development may remain under-represented. These findings therefore underscore the need to view assessment as a broader classroom process that encompasses both outcomes and performance. Teachers must clearly set learning objectives and design tasks that enable them to observe and interpret evidence of pupils' performance. This is to ensure that assessment provides useful information for teaching strategies and pupils' learning.

This study also revealed that teachers recognize the importance of confidence in speaking, even though oral assessment is less systematically conducted than written assessment. Teachers use oral questions, pronunciation exercises, repetition, role-play, short presentations, and spontaneous responses in the classroom to observe pupils' abilities and confidence in English. These practices indicate that oral performance is indeed part of classroom assessment but is largely treated as informal evidence rather than as a structured component. This situation highlights a discrepancy between teachers' pedagogical awareness and their assessment documentation. The same point was highlighted in a previous study, which found that teachers demonstrated an asset-based perspective in their reflections but adhered to a monolingual ideology in their lesson plans, indicating a discrepancy between their pedagogical awareness and its implementation (Wong & Du, 2025). Teachers recognize that pupils need confidence to speak, use words, and participate, but they do not always have clear criteria, rubrics, or recording mechanisms to systematically assess oral development.

Another key finding of this study is the presence of formative assessment practices in day-to-day classroom interactions. Teachers monitor pupils' understanding, check written answers, correct mistakes, praise pupils' efforts, observe their participation, and support pupils who are struggling whilst working on tasks. These practices demonstrate that assessment occurs on an ongoing basis throughout the teaching and learning process, rather than solely at the end. Although teachers may not always explicitly define these practices as formative assessment, their classroom actions show that they use assessment to respond directly to pupils' learning needs. This finding is significant because it shows that teachers already possess the potential for formative assessment, which can be strengthened through more explicit pedagogical tools and clearer assessment procedures. Teachers often use formative assessment informally, focusing on diagnosing learning difficulties rather than guiding their teaching (Lajane et al., 2020). Confidence in speaking and the formative learning process are indeed present in classroom teaching practice, but are often not formally documented. This situation can lead to an incomplete picture of young learners' English progress. Pupils who are active, responsive and show progress in their oral skills may not be fully recognized if assessment records rely primarily on written tasks. Conversely, pupils who perform well in written exercises may be regarded as successful even though their oral participation, pronunciation or communicative confidence remain limited.

Therefore, this study recommends that English language teaching assessment for early-age learners be redesigned as a multimodal, formative process. Such assessment should not eliminate written tasks, as written evidence remains useful for documenting vocabulary, spelling and basic comprehension. Conversely, written assessments need to be balanced with oral and formative evidence that reflects pupils' participation, self-confidence, progress in pronunciation, responsiveness and their engagement in classroom activities. Simple observation checklists, oral performance assessment rubrics, participation records, teacher notes and task-based feedback forms can help teachers document the progress of young learners more comprehensively. In this way, assessment can be better aligned with the developmental characteristics of young learners and the communicative objectives of English language learning in primary schools. Based on the overall research findings, the main problem with English language assessment in primary schools is not the existence of written assessment itself, but rather its dominance over other forms of assessment. The findings of this study indicate that teacher assessment practices take place amidst a tension between practicality, documentation and the need to support children's communicative development. By examining the simultaneous prevalence of written assessment, speaking confidence, and formative practices in the classroom, this study provides a more balanced understanding of how English language assessment is carried out in primary school classrooms in Indonesia. This study also highlights the need for an assessment model that is appropriate to the stage of development, pedagogically realistic, and capable of capturing the English progress made by early-years learners beyond written performance.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the strong predominance of written assessment influences assessment practices in primary school English classes in Indonesia, teachers' focus on young pupils' confidence in speaking, and the presence of formative assessment embedded in day-to-day classroom interactions. The findings indicate that teachers generally rely on worksheets, vocabulary exercises, spelling activities, matching tasks, sentence completion exercises, and written tests, as these forms of assessment are practical, tangible, and easier to document as evidence of learning. However, the predominance of written assessment does not fully reflect the nature of young learners' English language development, particularly their oral participation, pronunciation efforts, willingness to respond, confidence in speaking, and engagement in communicative classroom activities. Although teachers use oral questions, repetition, pronunciation exercises, role-play, short presentations, corrections, praise, and immediate feedback, these practices are generally informal and less systematically documented than written assessments. This indicates a gap between teachers' awareness of the importance of speaking confidence and the assessment tools available to measure it. Therefore, this study argues that assessment in English Language Teaching for Early Years Learners needs to be redesigned into a more balanced, multimodal, and formative process that integrates written evidence with oral performance, learner participation, classroom engagement, and teacher feedback. This study contributes to the field of assessment in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) by demonstrating that the development of young learners' English language skills cannot be adequately understood through written work alone, and offers practical implications for developing simple, developmentally appropriate assessment tools that can help teachers document both learning outcomes and the learning process in primary school English lessons.

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