

# ASSESSING YOUNG LEARNERS

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Children are very different from adults. They need lots of attention, play and engagement, both at home and at school. So it's a good idea to include these things when we ask them to take a test.

By young learners, we usually mean children between the ages of five and seventeen. It's a very wide age range, so they don't all have the same qualities or behave in exactly the same ways. We can think of young learners in roughly three different age groups, five to eight, nine to twelve and thirteen and above. In each group, their way of thinking and speaking, their attention span and, of course, their behavior can be very different. All of this influences their performance in a language test and the kind of tasks that they like and can do.

Let's take a look at the five to eight year olds. Even in their first language, they are still learning about the world around them and to speak and write and get their grammar right. They're absorbing lots of new words even if they don't yet know how to put them into sentences. And they're a bit like parrots. They repeat everything you say. So, the words that they do know are a very good starting point to show how much they know in English. Just as they learnt these words through repetition, so they can show how much they know through speaking or even just pointing at a picture. For example, getting kids to shout out the word as you slowly reveal a picture can be really fun and they won't even know they are being tested. This is the ideal way to make them comfortable, so you can see how much they know. Apart from getting them to write individual words, it's probably not a good idea to try and test writing skills with this age group.

Between the ages of nine and twelve, a learner's vocabulary is growing quickly and they can understand and explain more complicated thoughts. At the same time, their world knowledge is growing and their attention span is increasing. But they still like to have fun and play games. So we mustn't forget to try and keep tasks fun and not too long. Their friends are becoming more important, so doing speaking activities with a friend can be a good idea. They could also do role plays like going shopping, writing a shopping list first, and then asking for things in a shop. Copying the kinds of games children play everyday for your test, helps you to be sure that they are comfortable doing it, will have fun, and be motivated to do the test.

Teenagers are going through a lot of changes, which we sometimes forget. By now they are getting really interested in the world around them and like to learn about new cultures, new ideas and ways of life in different countries, so this is a good topic for reading or writing tasks. Friends are becoming even more important and sometimes talking to adults is a bit scary. So you might want to have a speaking test where they can talk in pairs or groups, rather than only to one adult. And as language development continues well into our thirties, there will still be lots of words that are unknown or confusing for teenagers. So the words tested at this age shouldn't be the same as those in a test for adults. Although by now they can use a higher level of English, it's still better if the test includes the kind of things they do at school. Also, they don't have as much life experience as adults, and can struggle to keep talking. So they still need more support than an adult to help them get through an activity.

Each age group has different needs and speeds of development. But they all need to have some elements of fun and interest in a language test. Then, you can be sure you are helping them to show their knowledge to the very best of their ability.