



LISTENING COMPREHENSION ASSESSMENT

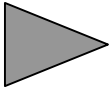


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Abstract

When students take the exam in English, they are asked to answer various questions concerning a text they have heard once or twice. So we should ask ourselves a few questions concerning the problem of listening comprehension assessment.

Keywords: listening comprehension, skills assessment, testing techniques



The importance of listening

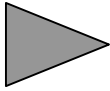
Listening is the most common communicative activity in daily life: "we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write." (Morley 1991: 82)

In our first language, we have all the skills and background knowledge we need to understand what we hear, so we probably are not even aware of how complex a process this is. Here we will briefly describe some of what is involved in learning to understand what we hear in a second language.

Richards (1983, cited in Omaggio, 1986, 126) proposes that the following are the micro-skills involved in understanding what someone says to us. The listener has to:

- retain chunks of language in short-term memory
- discriminate among the distinctive sounds in the new language
- recognize stress and rhythm patterns, tone patterns, intonational contours.
- recognize reduced forms of words
- distinguish word boundaries
- recognize typical word-order patterns
- recognize vocabulary
- detect key words, such as those identifying topics and ideas
- guess meaning from context
- recognize grammatical word classes
- recognize basic syntactic patterns
- recognize cohesive devices
- detect sentence constituents, such as subject, verb, object, prepositions, and the like

Listening is not a passive process. It involves both bottom-up and top-down processes and requires the use of non-linguistic as well as linguistic knowledge.



Listening comprehension skills assessment

Usually the ability to understand spoken language is used in conjunction with other skills: in a normal conversation we use both listening and speaking skills. There are, however, occasions in which we must use primarily listening skills and even in case of multi-mode use of skills, we may wish to test listening comprehension skills separately.

Testing of listening comprehension may seem to amount to no more than an examination of the ability to recognize vocabulary. This is only superficially true. What we really wish to test is the developing ability to recognize key lexical items and to use context to guess at meaning. Such tests are relatively simple to construct using pictures of various people, items and situations. One of the easiest techniques is to present students with various pictures and then describe one of the pictures, asking the students to identify the one being described. In this sort of test, care must be taken so that the description is neither too simple (identification by a single word) nor too complex (identification only possible if the students hear a particular word or morpheme).

Another relatively simple technique is to make statements about pictures, items, or actions and ask the students to judge whether they are true or false. For example, holding up a picture of a man and a woman horseback riding, the teacher might say, *There are three people in this picture. The man is on the right side of the woman. They are both riding the same horse.* Or, using props brought to class, the instructor can perform certain actions and then ask about them: *First, I took the napkin and placed it on the table, and then I laid the spoon on top of it. The ball is in front of the book, but the eraser is behind it.*

As students develop into the single word stage, they can be asked simple questions, again using pictures or some other context: *What color is the little girl's hat? How many people are there in the picture? What do you see behind the tree?* Note that our goal is to test comprehension of the question, not whether the student knows the word to express the answer. Thus, the vocabulary used in the answer should be well known by all the students, and the only issue is whether they understand the question or statement.

As students begin to produce sentences and engage in discourse, more sophisticated tests of listening comprehension are necessary. Let us first consider examples of the sorts of listening activities which might logically form a part of many language courses: (1) listening in on a conversation, (2) participating in a conversation, (3) receiving an oral message (e.g. on the telephone), (4) listening to an extended oral narrative (story, joke, etc.), (5) listening to instructions (how to), (6) listening to radio broadcasts (news, special programs), (7) songs, (8) television shows of all sorts, (9) commercials (radio and TV), (10) a lecture, (11) a movie. This list is, of course, suggestive, not exhaustive.

Skills 1-5 are probably required of all who expect to participate even minimally in another culture. Skills 9-11 are more specialized and many students of a second language never attain this level of comprehension.

Skill 1, listening in on a conversation, is relatively easy to test although there are some difficulties with the format. The teacher, preferably using native speakers, records a dialog in which the situation and topics are relevant to the students' communication goals in the course. The students listen to the dialog one or more times and then answer questions about the content of the dialog. In order to encourage global listening, the questions should be somewhat general, avoiding details.

There are some problems with using recorded dialogs as tests that instructors should be aware of. A recorded dialog and a real conversation can be quite different. The live version will have gestures, facial expressions, and other body language to help comprehension. In addition, recorded, prewritten dialogs are really examples of written language, not spoken language, since many aspects of real speech, which help us comprehend, are missing. These include false starts, pauses, repetitions, asides, explanations (*I mean*), pause holders (*you know*) and so forth. On the other hand, conversation, which includes these traits, if only heard as a recording and not in person, is quite difficult to understand. The optimal solution, where possible, would be to have a real conversation between two or more native speakers in front of the class. A videotape of a real conversation helps alleviate some, if not all, of the problems of a prerecorded dialog.

Care must be taken with the form and placing of the questions. We prefer to give questions to the students first so that they have some idea of the information they are looking for before they hear the dialog. If questions are given after the students hear the dialog, the test may become one of memory, rather than of comprehension.

Skill 2, participating in a conversation, is the goal of most language students and can be tested directly in an interview situation. There are certain pitfalls we would like to avoid with this kind of test. Testers sometimes tend to ask questions with the students always answering. While the ability to understand questions is one we are certainly interested in, in normal conversations there is a wide variety of interactions, which the students must comprehend, such as comments, commands, requests, exclamations, rhetorical questions, and so forth, all of which should be included in a good interview test.

Skills 3-5, listening to messages of various sorts, are easily tested since no interaction between dialog participants is necessary. The simplest technique is for the teacher to narrate a story, or convey information or instructions to the class and subsequently use questions to determine how much they have understood. For the same reasons as mentioned above, we prefer that the students be given the questions before they receive the oral input. If it is desirable to avoid a multi-mode test, the questions can be of the true-false form.

Skills 6-11, listening to the radio, TV, songs, movies, etc. may be tested directly by using the appropriate media and essentially the same techniques mentioned above.

In order to provide the student with a natural, yet complex language, it is necessary to look into authentic texts (Gardner, 1998). Good sources for this are radio programs such as the BBC World Service and the Voice Of America, or when available, television programs such as CNN and Earth News or Sky News. Certain magazine articles read by a native speaker of English or simply films also make good authentic materials. As far as films and television programs go, however, it is sometimes preferable to select something that can be replayed without the image, so as to concentrate on aural comprehension. But the fact is that in an authentic situation, we usually see our interlocutor, and gestures as well as the general environment contribute to the transmission and reception of a given message. For testing purposes, it is best to stick to audio texts only so that the student can write

down the answers without getting the impression that he is missing out on something by not seeing the picture. Whatever materials are used, background noises should be subdued in order to allow any speech to dominate the text; because while in a situation where there is much noise we may ask our interlocutor to repeat, this is not possible during an examination.

Personally I would like to recommend materials available at Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab (www.esl-lab.com). The lab is mainly designed for self-directed study, that is, you choose what topic and level you want to study and then begin. Teachers can also use them as part of their classes. You don't have to log-in, and you do not need to subscribe to use the listening lab. The listening lab is free to use online.

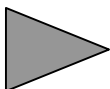
We also would like to comment on certain techniques now common in testing listening comprehension. Most of these techniques are inherited from the audiolingual era. The most common is to present the student with a sentence followed by a series of responses (both stimulus and possible responses are presented orally). The student chooses the correct response.

It's hot today.

- a. *Good, let's go to the beach.*
- b. *I'm studying mathematics.*
- c. *Joan is my sister.*

This particular technique, while easy to administer and to evaluate, is extremely artificial. We normally do not hear language as a series of unrelated and out-of-context statements, followed by even more unrelated responses, the task of the student listener on these exams is much harder than in real life communicative situations. Nor is there any way the student can directly study for such an exam by engaging in oral communication.

Whatever technique is used to evaluate listening comprehension it should meet the requirement that student preparation favors acquisition. If, for example, the students are aware of the fact that an exam will be taken from the TV or the radio, they will spend time listening to radio and watching television in the target language. This, in itself, will help acquisition since it means a more comprehensible input. If, on the other hand, test preparation forces the student away from activities that bring in comprehensible input, the test may be counter-productive.



Final remarks

Because listening involves complex neurological processing, it cannot be tested through simple repetition or discrimination tasks. The Listening Comprehension Test should give the teacher the diagnostic information that reflects this complex process and identifies the students' listening strengths and weaknesses. Testing the ability to comprehend speech is not easy logistically and it demands a greater investment of time and effort.

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Anastasia Romanova is a Lecturer of Business English at the Academy of Economic Studies, Moldova. She is currently working on her PhD thesis on comparative linguistics at the Academy of Science of Russia. Her main scientific interest is connected with the translation of Mircea Eliade's memoirs and the structure of his "Journal", reflected in numerous publications in scientific journals and reports presented at international conferences.