

# Assessing Listening Skills

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## **ASSESSING LISTENING SKILLS**

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### **Abstract**

Language learning obviously depends on listening since it provides the aural input that serves as the basis for language acquisition and enables learners to interact in spoken communication. Listening is good for the students' pronunciation in that the more they hear and understand English being spoken, the more they absorb appropriate pitch and intonation, stress and sounds of both individual words and those which blend together in connected speech. Listening texts are good pronunciation models. The more students listen, the better they get, not only at understanding speech, but also speaking themselves. Indeed, it is worth remembering that successful spoken communication depends on not just on our ability to speak, but also on the effectiveness of the way we listen.

For the students who are not native speakers, there are usually intervals between the perceptions of sounds by their ears and understanding the words, phrases and sentences. This kind of intervals often makes students have more troubles in listening comprehension. Thus, it is essential for them to have more chances to contact with different kinds of listening materials and let their ears be familiar with different sounds of English words so as to shorten the intervals.

*Keywords: listening skill, assessment task, aural input.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Acquiring good listening skill has become the main concern of language learners, and today's language teachers need to be well versed in current approaches to the teaching of the aural skill. Listening is good for the students' pronunciation in that the more they hear and understand English being spoken, the more they absorb appropriate pitch and intonation, stress and sounds of both individual words and those which blend together in connected speech. The more students listen, the better they get, not only at understanding speech, but also speaking themselves. Teachers must rely as much as possible on observable performance in their assessments of students. Observable means being able to see or hear the performance of the learners. Therefore, all assessment of listening performance must be made by inference of the four skills.

## **2. BASIC TYPES OF LISTENING**

Students listen in different ways and for different reasons throughout the school day. They listen to directions, they talk with their friends, they listen to stories, they listen to game rules, they listen to announcements, etc. Each of these situations requires a different type and level of listening skills. There are four general types of listening that occur:

### **a. Intensive Listening**

Intensive listening involves more detailed analysis of the language used or listening for specific information. Listening for specific information involves finding the answers to specific questions. “What is the speaker’s favourite Italian dish?” would involve listening for specific information because the students listen for that particular response. Intensive listening is also used to do detailed study of a language point; an example of this is asking students: “what adjectives does the speaker use to describe Italian food?” Asking students to listen and fill in gaps in a text can also be done to study language; this type of task is considered to be intensive listening. Asking students to listen and follow the transcript in order to identify a certain grammar or vocabulary point is a further example of intensive listening, e.g.: perception of the phonemes, intonation, discourse markers, etc.

### **b. Responsive Listening**

Responsive listening implies that one is able to communicate his/her genuine understanding (empathy), acceptance, and concern for the student and, at the same time, increase the understanding of the issue by clarifying the student’s statement. Thus, teachers must be able to communicate to the students their identification and understanding of the primary concern and the underlying feeling, as well as their own caring. For example: response to greetings, questions, commands, etc.

### **c. Selective Listening**

Processing stretches of discourse such as short monologues in order to scan for certain information. The purpose of selective listening is to comprehend designated information in a context of longer stretches of spoken language. Assessment task in selective listening could be listening for names, numbers, directions in a map exercise, or certain facts and events.

#### **d. Extensive Listening: global understanding of spoken language**

In extensive listening, students will have an opportunity to share their ideas and opinions on a wide range of topics through English. Extensive listening is not only more interesting than intensive listening, but also gives students the opportunity to hear so many different voices with so many different styles. It also helps students get used to the natural speed of spoken English. Students will be able to learn the most important words and sentence structures naturally.

### **3. DESIGNING ASSESSMENT TASKS**

#### **3.1 Designing Intensive Listening Assessment Tasks**

Task that range from intensive listening performance, such as minimal phonemic pair recognition, to extensive comprehension of language in communicative context.

##### **a. Recognizing Phonological and Morphological Elements**

In this level, a classic test task gives a spoken stimulus and asks test-takes to identify the stimulus from two or more choices.

The example of phonological elements:

Test-takers hear : *"He's from California"*

Test takers read : a. He's from California      b. She's from California

In the case above, minimal phonemic distinction is the target. We can use the same format for testing recognition of morphology. For example:

Test takers-hear : *"I missed you very much"*

Test takers read : a. I missed you very much      b. I miss you very much

Hearing the past tense morpheme in this sentences challenges even advanced learners especially if no context is provided. Stress and unstressed words may also be tested with the same rubric.

##### **b. Paraphrase Recognition**

<sup>1</sup>  
In this step, frequently assessed by providing a stimulus sentence and asking the test-taker to choose the correct paraphrase from a number of choices.

For example:

Test-takers hear: *Hello, my name's Keiko. I come from Japan.*

Test-takers read:

- a. Keiko is comfortable in Japan.
- b. Keiko wants to come to Japan.
- c. Keiko is Japanese.
- d. Keiko likes Japan.

Dialogue paraphrase :

Test-takers hear:

*Man : Hi, Maria, my name's George*  
*Woman : Nice to meet you, George. Are you American?*  
*Man : No. I'm Canadian.*

Test-takers read :

- a. George lives in the United States
- b. George is American
- c. George comes from Canada
- d. Maria is Canadian

In the sentence paraphrase above, the idiomatic come from the phrase being tested. To add a little context, a conversation can be stimulus task to which test-takers must respond with the correct paraphrase. Then, in the example of dialogue paraphrase above, the criterion of recognition of the adjectives form used to indicate country of origin: Canadian, Brazilian, etc.

### 3.2 Designing Responsive Listening Assessment Tasks

A question and answer format can provide some interactivity in these lower-end listening tasks. The test-taker's response is the appropriate answer to a question.

Test-taker hear : *How much time did you take to do your homework?*

- Test-taker read :
- a. in about an hour.
  - b. About an hour.
  - c. About \$ 10.
  - d. Yes, I did.

The objective of this item is recognition of the wh-question *how much* and its appropriate response. Destructors are chosen to represent common learner errors: a) responding to *how much* vs. *how much longer*; b). confusing *how much* in reference to time vs. the more frequent reference to money; c). confusing a wh-question with a yes/no question.

### 3.3 Designing Selective Listening Assessment Tasks

One example of selective listening assessment tasks is in the form of listening cloze. Listening cloze tasks require the test-taker to listen to a story, monologue, or conversation and simultaneously read the written text in which selected words or phrases have been deleted. Cloze procedure most commonly associated with reading only. The test consists of a passage in which some words are deleted and the test-taker is asked to supply the appropriate words. Test-takers see a transcript of the passage that they are listening to and fill in the blanks with the words or phrases that they hear. Listening cloze tasks should normally use an exact word method of scoring, in which you accept as a correct response only the actual word or phrase that was spoken and consider other appropriate words as incorrect.

Test-takers hear:

*Ladies and gentleman! Now have some connecting gate information for those of you making connections to others flights out of San Francisco.*

*Flight seven-oh six to Portland will depart from gate seventy-three at nine-thirty P.M.*

*Flight ten-forty-five to Reno will depart at nine-fifty P.M from gate seventeen.*

*Flight four-forty to Monterey will depart at nine-thirty-five P.M from gate sixty.*

*And flight sixteen-oh-three to Sacramento will depart from gate nineteen at ten-fifteen P.M.*

Test-takers write the missing words or phrases in the blanks.

In the example above, such a shortcoming was avoided by focusing only on the criterion of numbers. Test-takers hear an announcement from an airline agent and see the transcript with the underlined words deleted.

### 3.4 Designing Extensive Listening Assessment Task

Extensive listening gives the opportunity to hear so many different voices, so many different styles. It also helps you get used to the natural speed of spoken English. As listen to more and

more videos and songs, we will see that the most important words and sentence structures come up again and again. We will be able to learn them naturally. On the negative side, students who do only "extensive listening" sometimes get lazy when they speak and make too many mistakes. That is why students must do both "intensive listening" and "extensive listening".

<sup>1</sup> An authentic example of extensive listening is found in a popular genre of assessment task in which the test-taker is presented with a stimulus monologue or conversation and then is asked to respond to a set of comprehension questions. The monologue lectures, and brief conversations used in such tasks are sometimes a little contrived, but with some care and creativity, one can create reasonably authentic stimuli, and in some rare cases the response mode <sup>1</sup> actually approaches complete authenticity. Here is a typical example of such a task.

*Test-takers hear* :

Directions : Now you will hear a conversation between Lynn and her doctor. You will hear the conversation two times. After you hear the conversation the second time, choose the correct answer for question 11-15 below. Mark your answer on the answer sheet provided.

Doctor : Good morning, Lynn. What's the problem?

Lynn : Well, you see, I have a terrible headache, my nose is running, and I'm really dizzy.

Doctor : Okay. Anything else ?

Lynn : I've been coughing, I think I have a fever, and my stomach aches.

Doctor : I see. When did this start ?

Lynn : Well, let's see, I went to the lake last weekend, and after I returned home I started sneezing.

Doctor : Hmm. You must have the flu. You should get lots of rest, drink hot beverages, and stay warm. Do you follow me ?

Lynn : Well, uh, yeah, but ..... shouldn't I take some medicine ?

Doctor : Sleep and rest are as good as medicine when you have the flu.

Lynn : okay, thanks. Dr. Brown.

*Test-takers read* :

11. What is Lynn's problem ?
  - a) She feels horrible
  - b) She ran too fast at the lake
  - c) She's been drinking too many hot beverages
12. When did Lynn's problem start ?
  - a) When she saw her doctor
  - b) before she went to the lake
  - c) After she come home from the lake
13. The doctor said that Lynn .....

- a) Flew to the lake last weekend
  - b) must not get the flu
  - c) Probably has the flu
14. The doctor told Lynn .....
- a) To rest
  - b) To follow him
  - c) to take some medicine
15. According to Dr. Brown, sleep and rest are ..... medicine when you have the flu.
- a) More effective than
  - b) As effective as
  - c) Less effective than.

It is plausible to assert that any task of this kind following a one-way listening to an conversation is artificial : we simply don't often encounter little quizzes about conversation we've heard. The question posed above, with the possible exception of #14, are unlikely to appear in a lifetime of doctor visits. Yet the ability to respond correctly to such items can be construct validated as an appropriate measure of field-independent listening skills: the ability to remember certain details from a conversations.

#### **4. LISTENING LESSON SEQUENCES**

Most listening sequences involve a mixture of language skills though, in particular, is often the main focus of the sequence. Frequently students listen for gist on first hearing before moving on to different task skills; at other times they may listen to specific information straight away.

In the following example the listening is specified. The skills which are involved are detailed, and the way the listening text can be used within a lesson is explained.

Example 1: Telephone messages  
Activity: taking messages  
Skills: predicting, listening for specific information  
Level: elementary

The sequence starts when the teacher asks students the kind of short messages people might leave for their family members if and when they take phone calls while they were out. Next, students are told that they are going to hear a phone conversation in



which the caller leave a message for someone who is not in. What the students have to do is to write the message that the caller leaves. This is what the students hear:

Mrs. Smith : Hello.  
Adam : Hello. Is Lyn there?  
Mrs. Smith : No, she's out at the moment. Who's that?  
Adam : This is Adam. Do you know when she'll get back?  
Mrs. Smith : About ten, I think. Can I give her a message?  
Adam : No ... er yes. Can you tell her Adam rang?  
Mrs. Smith : Sure, Adam.  
Adam : Thanks. Bye.

When the students have written the message, they compare their versions with each other to see if they have written the same thing. They listen to the tape again to clear up any problems they might have had. Message taking from phone calls is a genuinely communicative act. This sequence naturally lends itself to a progression where students work in pairs to role play calls.

The following is another example of how work on one skill (listening) leads naturally into work on another (speaking). This exercise allows the students to predict what they will hear and involves both general and detailed comprehension work.

Example 2: Daily routines  
Activity: describing daily schedule  
Skills: predicting, listening for detailed information  
Level: elementary

This listening sequence involves completing a chart about daily schedules of people. The sequence starts when the teachers give lead-in by asking questions like: *What do you do on weekends? What time do you ... ?, etc.*

Then the students are told to complete the chart based on the recording.

|        | Job | Gets up at ... | Gets home at ... | Goes to bed at... |
|--------|-----|----------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Rodney | ... | ...            | ...              | ...               |
| Tina   | ... | ...            | ...              | ...               |

This is what the students hear:

Tina : What do you do, Rodney? And what are your work hours like?

Rodney : I'm a chef. I work in the afternoons and evenings. I get up around nine a.m. and I work from eleven a.m. until ten p.m. and I usually in bed by one in the morning. And what do you do, Tina?

Tina : Well, I'm an office manager. It's a regular nine-to-five office job, so I get up at seven a.m. and get home around six p.m. I go to bed around midnight on weekdays.

When the students have finished completing the chart, the teacher discusses the answer with the class. As the post-listening activity, students may be asked to describe their own daily schedules. This task enables the students to practice the new phrases they learnt from the listening lesson.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

When teaching listening, it is important to remind students that in most listening situations the aim is *not* to remember the specific words or phrases used but to extract the main ideas or information. To help students do this, the listening exercises usually contain a task that enables students to identify a purpose for listening which, in turn, encourages them to ignore language that is not related to that purpose. When presenting an exercise, it is also important to prepare students for the task through pre-listening activities. These include asking questions about the topic, asking students to make predictions, and making use of the context provided by the pictures and the situation. If the students understand the purpose of the listening, they will have a better chance of knowing how well they have achieved the listening task.

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