

Assessing Foreign Language Proficiency of Undergraduates

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Assessing Foreign Language Listening: Processes, Strategies, and Comprehension

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Does the tree falling in the forest make any noise if no one is present to hear it? Philosophically, the answer is no. To extend the metaphor to all experience, hearing requires two participants: one to send the message, the other to interpret it. Once labeled a “passive activity,” listening is now recognized to be a dynamic process whereby individuals construct meaning from a stream of noise based on their prior experience, perceptual style, and comprehension strategies. But for second language (L2) listeners, the forest is not in their immediate experience; the words, like the trees, may seem thick and impenetrable.

Even within the forest, where not all trees fall with the same resonance, not all listening tasks are equal. Some tasks require local, analytic strategies; others, global, synthetic ones. Some command listeners to extract specific, key information; others expect only that listeners understand the intent of the message. For the L2 curriculum, this diversity mandates including as great a variety of authentic or near-authentic texts and tasks as possible. For learners, the goal is not only to hear the tree fall in the forest but also to know the forest’s location, perhaps the

species of the tree, and most important, whether or not they should move out of the way.

Moving from the forest to the classroom, this paper will discuss three aspects of L2 listening: (1) purposes of listening in general; (2) the process and strategies involved with listening, and (3) activities and tasks for beginning- and intermediate-level L2 classes. The guiding principle throughout this discussion is that students must learn to control their listening process in order to become proficient L2 listeners.

Purposes of Listening and Language Authenticity

Listeners are motivated by one or more of three principles: to understand in order to act, to learn new information, and/or to participate in discourse. First, simple comprehension often satisfies an immediate need for further action. For example, when listeners hear "yes" to the question, "Is dinner ready yet?" they sit down to eat. When they hear the number of their flight announced, they take out their ticket and move toward the gate. These listening tasks often require a physical rather than a verbal response.

Second, listeners may incorporate new information into their knowledge structure. This may include knowledge in the form of discrete facts, such as who won the Rose Bowl, or more complex world knowledge, such as events leading to changes in the political organization of Eastern Europe. In terms of the linguistic system, new knowledge may include formal aspects of language, such as morphological, phonological, prosodic, lexical, or discourse features. Lexical items are probably the most salient because they often have a concrete referent (e.g., car, baseball, hair dryer). They are attended to idiosyncratically, however, because the individual decides whether or not they are important enough to remember.

In the third instance—listening to participate in discourse—nonverbal input is often as important a contributor to understanding the message as is verbal input. Facial expression, for example, may indicate whether or not a response is expected. The stance of the speaker suggests anger, frustration, intimacy, and so forth. The context of the exchange (hotel, train station, restaurant) helps the listener anticipate the message.

In the classroom, the teacher is the primary source of listening input. Breen (1985) suggests, however, that pedagogical language tends to distort reality. L2 classroom listening may in fact contradict real-world listening. When teachers rarely go beyond listening for minimal pairs of phonemes, verb or noun morphology, or even display questions (e.g.,

“What color is your shirt?”), learners will not become proficient listeners. Indeed, providing learners with input that is both authentic¹ and accessible for further processing may be the greatest challenge facing teachers today. The classroom must therefore provide a continuum of simple learning tasks, authentic learning/communication tasks and authentic communication texts. Authentic and near-authentic texts allow listeners direct access to language conventions that permit them to apply prior knowledge of norms of communication (Breen, 1985, p. 69).

Listening Processes

Cognitive psychology identifies three recursive and interrelated stages of comprehension (Anderson, 1985). In the first stage, *perception*, listeners rapidly attend to whether the sound is potentially meaningful (i.e., language) or is simply noise. As soon as the sound is recognized as language, the hearer assumes coherence: the input will be meaningful, not random.² Listeners work to segment the sound into meaningful units by focusing on key words, phrases, intonation, pausing, and so forth, in order to construct underlying propositions. The sounds of an aural text are represented in echoic memory, which, with its extremely limited capacity, replaces old information with new almost immediately.

In the *parsing* stage, listeners begin to construct meaningful representations, though the verbatim speech is lost after each clause boundary. The size of the “chunk” is a factor of the listener’s language proficiency and background knowledge as these interact with how the information is presented. Listeners tend to focus on semantic, rather than syntactic, information.³

In the final stage, *utilization*, listeners relate the input to background knowledge and schemata.⁴ Faerch and Kasper (1986) would say that comprehension occurs as the interaction between the input and the background knowledge. Since each stage is recursive, however, listeners may then backtrack and revise an earlier hypothesis or inference. Because the working memory can hold only a limited number of chunks, the larger and more complex each chunk (as a factor of background linguistic or world knowledge), the richer the potential for comprehension and learning (Miller, 1956).

Second language Listening Factors

L2 listeners must deal with a variety of factors that may impede comprehension. Although some of these factors are true for L1 listening as well, they tend to be exaggerated in L2 listening.

First, the learners' echoic memory in L2 is even more limited than that for their native language. The principles of primacy and recency may limit them to hearing the beginning or ends of phrases, but not the middle. The limitation of the L2 learner's working-knowledge capacity also confounds the listening process: listeners may believe they have understood something only to immediately forget it, or find they can not relate a detail to the larger idea. They may pause too long on what seems to be a key word and then have difficulty catching up again and reestablishing the context of the passage. This delay may cause them to lose focus. Learners often complain, moreover, that the rate of speech is too fast. This processing shortcoming may lead to an affective response in which the learner feels emotionally unable to hear. When listeners perceive the task as one in which they have little or no control, they work at an emotional disadvantage (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986).

Second, the learner's background knowledge may be culturally quite different from the background knowledge presupposed by the L2. In reading (Bernhardt, 1984) and listening (Markham & Latham, 1987), research has shown that the cultural knowledge of the learner interacts with the text in such a way that learners not only comprehend differently but also infer meaning that is not included explicitly in the text. Novices, especially, tend to apply their own cultural reality to whatever input they hear.

The motivation and attitude of the listener are important listening variables as well. When the listener reacts positively or negatively to the tone of voice, accent, or anticipated content, the level of comprehension and/or interpretation may be affected. Listeners will attend differently to a sports broadcast from the way they do to a movie review depending on their interest in the topic. Individuals listen to details, such as numbers, not only depending on how they perceive that the information will aid their understanding of the message but also depending on their affective response to that kind of information in general.

Linguistic or discourse schemata may transfer from L1 to L2 listening and can work to the learner's benefit. A listener may use knowledge of syntax to anticipate actors and objects, for example. Awareness of discourse, such as the format of a commercial, will help listeners anticipate details that may be included: price, size, color, advantages, and the like. As they listen, they will match their expectations to the information they hear.

External factors, such as the quality and origin of the message, affect comprehension as well. The rate of natural speech differs among native speakers; the rate of classroom speech tends to be artificially reduced, at times even distorted. Some recent research suggests, moreover, that

listeners attend differently to male versus female voices: Markham (1988) hypothesized that male voices are perceived to be more “expert” than female voices, which causes listeners to pay more attention to men than to women. In addition, listeners may feel they lose control when they cannot face the speaker, such as occurs when listening to the radio or a tape or when talking on the telephone.

In summary, listeners not only must deal with comprehending the message but also must interpret, respond, react, learn, or otherwise process it further in order to benefit from it both cognitively and affectively. The listening process is a complex interaction of factors both internal and external to the learner. Instruction and assessment of listening must help coordinate these factors to the benefit of each individual.

Listening Tasks and Strategies

O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p. 1) define learning strategies as conscious or unconscious plans or behaviors for comprehending, learning, or retaining information. Those most obviously involved with listening are metacognitive, cognitive, and (to a lesser degree) social and affective.

Strategies are independent of language ability but must be consonant with an individual's perceptual style. A person who tends to be analytical in style, for example, may have difficulty adopting a set of global strategies.

The point of examining strategies (as well as listening skills) is that doing so focuses the discussion on the *process* of listening rather than simply the product. Often listeners are not aware of which strategies help them and which do not during each stage of listening. Often teachers are unable to help students improve because they do not know how their students listen. Several studies suggest that strategies can be taught; they are most effective when integrated with the class and when taught explicitly (Oxford & Crookall, 1989).

Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies include planning for the task and monitoring comprehension and the effectiveness of strategies. Effective listeners use context, the expectations of the task, and monitoring to their advantage. For example, a traveler enters a bank with the intention of finding out where to change money and what the current rate is. As the individual listens, she checks her comprehension and her plan to judge its effectiveness. In L1, metacognitive strategies are fairly automatic and

unconscious. They may not transfer easily to L2 contexts, however. In fact, research has shown that learners are less aware of using metacognitive than cognitive strategies (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). In-class listening, moreover, may either deprive students of context, or fail to encourage listeners to use metacognitive strategies.

Cognitive Strategies

Listeners use cognitive strategies to manipulate and reorganize the incoming message so as to make it comprehensible. Referring back to the introductory metaphor, not all trees make the same noise when they fall; not all listening tasks are equal. Listeners must learn to recognize the kind of task they are facing in order to know which cognitive strategies to employ. Again, context is essential to help determine what combination of analytical and global strategies is required. Analytical, or local, strategies focus on discrete information in order to deduce meaning. For example:

- 1) A listener in a restaurant in France wishes to order something that she recognizes. Her strategy is to listen for the dishes that match her lexicon. Unless she is feeling courageous, she ignores the ones that do not match.
- 2) At a used-car lot, the buyer arrives with a series of mental questions that she hopes to have answered: price, number of kilometers, name and telephone number of the previous owner.
- 3) When the listener turns on the radio expecting to hear the weather, she listens for the details that will allow her to know what to wear that day.

These are all examples of analytical tasks wherein listeners expect specific information and must respond accordingly.

Global tasks differ from analytical ones in that they require the listener to “get the gist” or to synthesize information. The details are supportive to the entire picture but may not be as important to remember verbatim. Here are situations in which global strategies work well:

In a restaurant, you overhear a heated discussion between the owner and a patron. Depending on who appears to be angrier, you may infer that either the meal was substandard or the patron is unable to pay the tab.

In this example, the listener’s curiosity will influence whether or not she decides to listen for details and confirm an initial hypothesis.

You are talking to a friend at a party. Although the friend’s words are unintelligible, you guess that you are being invited to dance.

In a social context such as a party, the quality of the signal may be distorted, again forcing the listener to try to get the gist or to infer meaning from gestures. The question, "Want to dance?" is understood by the context and a gesture rather than from words.

More complex examples of global listening occur in any number of contexts wherein the listener summarizes and reorganizes information, as in the following instance:

A salesman is describing the advantages of one computer over another. One is more expensive, operates faster, and has more storage space and a higher-resolution monitor.

After the salesman's pitch, most listeners would have to refer to the printed material in order to restate the actual size of the processor, the megabytes on the hard drive, and the number of pixels on the monitor. The detail is reorganized by the listener into larger, more elaborate chunks of information.

Another key cognitive strategy is elaboration, or relating what one hears to what one already knows. Efficient listeners are constantly thinking of ways in which to relate new information to existing knowledge. This elaboration may be visual or linguistic. When listeners hear the word *house*, for example, they first build a mental representation of what the word means to them and then either hypothesize or infer what the passage may be about. Obviously, the mental representation is always affected by the listener's experience. The word *liberal*, for example, may evoke a positive or a negative image depending on the listener's point of view.

Effective listeners therefore combine analytical and global strategies depending on the kind of task that faces them. Moreover, they constantly try to relate what they hear to what they already know.

Social and Affective Strategies

Social strategies, such as appealing for assistance or asking for clarification, are helpful when the listener has an interlocutor. Affective strategies are internal to the listener: a self-assurance that "everything is OK," or that "you can do it." Affective strategies may be especially important before the listening task in order to instill a feeling of calm and purpose.

In summary, everyone uses strategies, but to different degrees during any particular task. Often strategies do not effectively transfer from L1 to L2. Unless learners are conscious of how strategies can be used in different tasks and know how to plan, monitor, and evaluate, they may try to apply a uniform strategy across tasks. Listening should include both practicing and evaluating strategies, as well as assessing compre-

hension. The remainder of this paper will focus on strategy development and the evaluation of listening comprehension.

Strategies and Assessment

This section will present a series of activities to encourage awareness and to practice listening strategies. They are presented in English with the understanding that the actual passages would be in the target language. Recommended sources are radio broadcasts or semi-scripted conversations.⁵

1) Developing Metacognitive Awareness

Example: The listening plan

You are about to hear two people talking on the bus. You cannot see them, but they are right in front of you and so you can hear them quite well. What is your plan? Write down on a sheet of paper what you will do.

In this task, the listener has very little information except the context of the bus. The purpose of the writing activity is to have students think about what they may hear and to formulate questions or hypotheses before they begin to listen. Some students will write down specific details, such as where the people are going or what in particular they are talking about. Others may want to know if they are male or female, acquaintances or strangers, making small talk or being serious. Two lists can be compiled on the blackboard, one more global, the other more local. Then students should brainstorm exactly what they should listen for to understand the gist: intonation, level and tone of voice, and key words that will help them hypothesize. For example, if they hear weather or sports terms, they might guess that the two people are making small talk. If they hear political terms, they might guess that the people are talking about current political events.

Example: Did the plan work?

Now listen to the conversation. Afterward, write everything you remember hearing in the conversation.⁶ Give both specific information and guesses about what may be going on. All guesses must be supported by something that you heard.

This activity makes the task explicit and helps listeners evaluate whether or not their listening plan worked for them. For example, one may write that the speakers are close friends because they use first names and a familiar form of address. Another may say that the

speakers' intonation suggests a serious discussion. Perhaps the parents are involved because the student heard the word *father*. Again, a list of ideas can be compiled and the class should arrive at a consensus regarding which of the ideas are feasible. Finally, all students should be asked to think about how their plan worked for this particular activity and how they might refine the plan for subsequent occasions.

Metacognitive awareness is generally taken for granted in L1 because listeners are accustomed to using context to their greatest advantage. In L2 listening, however, the context is usually less clear, either because of cultural differences or because of classroom artificiality. By explicitly practicing metacognitive strategies, students will become more proficient listeners.

2) Listening for the Gist

In almost any listening activity, there is occasion to listen both for the gist and for detail. By separating the two kinds of strategies, however, listeners can discover each one's value and place.

Example: Discourse clues

Listen to the following short radio announcements. Then identify the intent of each. Some possibilities include selling something, reporting a news item or other event, introducing the next segment, or presenting one side of an argument, as in a debate. Now explain the discourse or other clues that helped you arrive at that conclusion.

Example: Prosodic clues

You pick up your telephone and hear two men talking. From their tone of voice, decide which of the following contexts is probable: a father to his adult son; a salesman to a client; a teacher to a child. What intonation or other clues led you to that conclusion?

3) Listening for Detail

When the context makes the task obvious, listeners focus on key information. Often the task requires the listener to attend to numbers as an important element of information.

Example: Matching expectations

You are on your way to the airport when you decide to check the weather forecast. What lets you know whether your flight may be canceled?

In this example, listeners simply match their expectations with what they hear. If they hear "clear skies," they have little reason to process the message further.

Example: Matching expectations

You are in the train station in Madrid. You know your friend is due to arrive from another Spanish city at 5:00 P.M. Which announcement may be for her train?

- a) Train number 5 on track 7 arriving from Paris at 17.00 hours
- b) Train number 15 on track 5 arriving from Sevilla at 16.00 hours
- c) Train number 10 on track 4 arriving from Barcelona at 17.00 hours

In this example, the listener processes only the announcement that matches expectations of time and city.

4) Combining Local and Global Strategies

In extended listening, students must integrate local and global strategies in order to extract both the intent and the important information.

Example: Intonation and detail

You will hear descriptions of two items. First, from the tone of voice, decide whether the person is interested in buying or selling the items. Second, record all the information you can about each item, and then decide which is the better buy. Support your decision with information from the passage.

In this task, the listener must focus both on the intent of the message and on the supporting detail and must then reorganize the message based on background knowledge.

Example: Detail and analysis

You will hear a radio spot describing an event. First decide whether or not the event has already taken place; then record as much information about it as possible. Based on what you hear, give reasons that you would or would not be interested in attending this event.

Here listeners search for key information to judge time: last week, tomorrow, and so on. They formulate hypotheses that can be tested, such as whether the event involves sports, music, or art. Then they reorganize the information to determine whether or not they are interested in attending.

5) Deciding When to Listen to Numbers

Numbers present a complicated task for listeners. Unless the prelistening instructions specifically require listeners to focus on numbers, there will be little uniformity as to whether or not they are heard. Since numbers are used to identify (gate 1, table 3, etc.) and to quantify (100 kilometers, 25° celsius, etc.), listeners must decide immediately whether to listen to them as an exact number, as a

concept, or as a piece of supporting information that does not require further processing.

Example: Numbers as identity

You are in the bus station. When you hear the bus for Mexico City announced, make note of the platform where it will board and the time it will leave.

Example: Numbers as concept

The travel agency will give you minimum and maximum temperatures for three European cities. Which one offers the most temperate climate?

Example: Numbers as supporting information

You will hear a description of a product that will allow you to convert the voltage of appliances. Find out when it would be necessary to have this device.

In the first example, numbers are key to allow the listener to act. In the second example, the concept of temperature being hot, cold, or mild is more important than hearing the exact number of degrees. In the third example, the passage most certainly will include references to 110, 220, and other voltages. The listener does not have to remember which country uses which voltage in order to understand that electric systems are not uniform throughout the world. Since not every listener will attend to numbers in an equal fashion, however, listeners must practice deciding in advance whether or not the numbers are key to comprehension.

In summary, listening strategies can and should be part of listening assessment in foreign language. Simply instructing listeners not to translate or to listen for key words will not suffice. The listeners must also have a plan and must practice evaluating how their plan worked.

Assessing Listening Comprehension in the Classroom

In the purest sense, listening comprehension is assessed without mixing in other receptive or productive skills. Evidence of comprehension is manifested by some sort of physical response (raising a hand, drawing a picture) or by responding or reporting in the listener's native language. In reality, however, listening is often closely connected to other language skills. As stated earlier, listening activities should mirror reality as closely as possible. Since the goal of listening instruction is to lead students to interact with speakers of the target culture, authentic or near-authentic sources should be used as often as is feasible.

The final section of this paper suggests other activities that help promote and assess proficiency in L2 listening. The procedure is to build from pure comprehension to an integration of comprehension and production so as to approach reality as closely as possible within the constraints of the classroom.

Example: Nonverbal response

You are in a physician's office. Nod your head if you hear an activity or symptom that relates to your stomachache.

Assessment

Out of 10 activities and symptoms, 5 relate to the stomach. The remainder relate to other ailments. Eight out of 10 correct responses are required.

Example: Response with L1 reading

Listen to your friend's shopping list. Write the number of the item beside its category in English. For example, if you hear "First, apples," write "1" beside "fruit." You may put more than one number beside a category.

Assessment

Out of 20 items, students must correctly categorize 18.

Example: Response with L1 writing

After you hear the news report, write in English everything that deals with the German-speaking world.

Assessment

Out of news items, students must correctly identify three.

Example: Response with L2 reading

Listen to the telephone instructions on how to walk from the train station to the Hotel de la Place. Trace the route on the map of Paris.

Assessment

Only one correct route.

Example: Response with L2 dictation

Your friend invites you to have coffee this afternoon. Write down the time and directions on how to get to the café.

Assessment

Both time and directions must be exact. No penalty for spelling and grammar errors.

Example: Response with L2 reading and cloze

You are helping an elderly person fill out his insurance form. In the spaces provided on the form, write the information he gives you.

Assessment

Nine out of 10 responses, including correct spelling, required.

Example: Response with L2 written summary

You will hear a radio report about a natural disaster. Summarize what you hear for a local newspaper.

Assessment

Five out of seven required. Students may use other resources to correct spelling and grammar.

Example: Response with L2 written opinion

You will hear two sides of an issue. Take one side and support your opinion with details that you hear presented. State also why the other side is unfounded.

Assessment

Opinion must be supported by two out of three stated reasons. The other side must be rejected for one reason. Students may use other resources to correct spelling and grammar.

Example: Response oral L2, short answers

Respond to a survey about members of your class (how many students there are, etc.)

Assessment

Five out of five questions must be answered in a logical way. Responses may be a word or a phrase.

Example: Response Oral L2, Supported Answers

Respond to the credit manager's questions about your financial history. You must convince him that you can pay back the loan you have applied for.

Assessment

Students must respond with correct grammar to four out of five questions. They must also supply two coherent reasons for the loan application. The reasons must be intelligible, although they may not be entirely correct grammatically.

These examples progress from pure reception to written and oral production based on comprehension. As listeners improve their proficiency in the L2, they will use less energy comprehending the message and more processing it further. When they pass the comprehension threshold and move into the realm of utilization, they will be able to focus more attention on salient lexical and other linguistic features of the input.

Just as listening tasks should mirror reality, so should assessment. Although the best overall measure of comprehension of extended discourse is to have listeners restate everything they remember in English,

a good argument can be made to have students combine listening with the appropriate logical oral and written tasks. When the task requires use of the L2, assessment should place much more emphasis on correct spelling for an insurance document than a telephone message. When extended L2 writing is part of the assessment, students may be allowed time to think about and revise their work using other sources. Other messages should be summarized and restated orally. In other words, both the task and its assessment should be potentially authentic.

Summary and Conclusions

The discussion opened with the metaphor of a noiseless tree in an unoccupied forest: all listening involves both a sender and a receiver of the message. The interpretation of the message depends on the interaction between the listener and the sender whereby the listener builds a message rather than simply receives it.

Listening strategies do not necessarily transfer from L1 to L2 tasks. To be most effective, practice in strategy awareness and evaluation should be incorporated as part of regular listening activities and assessment. Listeners should begin every task with a plan based on the expectations of the task. They should evaluate and revise their plan in the same manner as they are expected to revise a written assignment. The listener is always the one in control. Thus, the focus is on the process of comprehension as much as it is on the product of comprehension.

Finally, both the listening task and its assessment must be coherent and reasonable. Some tasks require an exact, convergent response; others require a main idea. In the forest, after all, knowing the genus and species of the tree falling in your direction is not necessary in order for you to jump out of the way.

Notes

1. In its purest form, the term *authentic* refers to written or oral text that is produced by and intended for a native speaker of the target language. In listening, this would include radio, television, and other broadcast, recorded, or live sources.
2. Lee (1990) has made the same observation regarding reading.
3. VanPatten (1989) has shown in L2 listening studies that learners can focus on form only at the expense of understanding meaning. Yet in a survey of 980 university students of Spanish, Bacon and Finnemann (1990) found that 47% of the respondents agreed that it was very important to hear verb endings when they listen; 30% stated that they would very likely to listen for verb endings if a native speaker spoke to them. This propensity for hearing verb morphology suggests that the students' previous classroom experience with listening emphasized formal aspects of language over meaning.

4. Each listener brings to the text expectations of what it will contain. These schemata are abstract representations of a generic concept, such as car, football game, or school. When the schemata represent a series of concepts, they are called scripts. "Going shopping" or "getting up in the morning" would bring to mind a typical chain of events that can be associated with the action. See Omaggio (1986) for a more detailed discussion.
5. See Bacon (1989) for sample activities in Spanish.
6. The writing activity may be in L1 or in L2. For purposes of pure comprehension, students should not feel impeded by having to use one or the other.

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