

# Language Testing and Program Evaluation

## Chapter 6

- **Assessing Listening** (Brown, 2004) - Part I

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## CHAPTER 6 ASSESSING LISTENING

- In previous chapters, concepts like **practicality, reliability, validity, authenticity, washback, direct and indirect testing**, and **formative** and **summative assessment** were introduced.
- This chapter will focus on classroom assessment of **listening** by providing guidelines and hands-on practice in testing within a curriculum of English as a second or foreign language.

# OBSERVING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE FOUR SKILLS

- Before focusing on listening itself, think about the two interacting concepts of **performance** and **observation**. All language users perform the acts of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They rely on their **underlying competence** in order to accomplish these performances. When you propose to assess someone's ability in one or a combination of the four skills, you assess that person's **competence**, but you observe the person's **performance**.

# OBSERVING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE FOUR SKILLS

- So, one important principle for assessing a learner's competence is to consider the fallibility of the results of a single performance, such as that produced in a test.
- As with any attempt at measurement, it is your obligation as a teacher to **triangulate** your measurements: consider at least two (or more) performances and/or contexts before drawing a conclusion. That could take the form of one or more of the following designs:

# OBSERVING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE FOUR SKILLS

- several tests that are combined to form an assessment
- a single test with multiple test tasks to account for learning styles and per-formance variables
- in-class and extra-class graded work
- alternative forms of assessment (e.g., journal, portfolio, conference, observation, self-assessment, peer-assessment).

# OBSERVING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE FOUR SKILLS

- Multiple measures will always give you a more reliable and valid assessment than a single measure.
- We must rely as much as possible on *observable* performance in our assessments of students. Observable means being able to see or hear the performance of the learner (the senses of touch, taste, and smell don't apply very often to language testing!).

# OBSERVING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE FOUR SKILLS

Table 6.7 Observable performance of the four skills

Can the teacher directly observe ...

	the process?	the product?
Listening	No	No
Speaking	Yes	No*
Reading	No	No
Writing	Yes	Yes

\*Except in the case of an audio or video recording that preserves the output.

# OBSERVING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE FOUR SKILLS

- **The productive skills** of speaking and writing allow us to **hear** and **see the process** as it is performed. Writing gives a permanent product in the form of a written piece. But unless you have recorded speech, there is no *permanent* observable product for speaking performance because all those words you just heard have vanished from your perception and have been **transformed into meaningful intake** somewhere in your brain.



# OBSERVING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE FOUR SKILLS

- **Receptive skills** are clearly the more enigmatic of the **two modes of performance**. You **cannot observe** the actual act of **listening** or **reading**, nor can you see or hear an actual product! You can observe **learners** only *while they are listening or reading*. All assessment of listening and reading must be made, on the basis of observing the test-taker's speaking or writing (or nonverbal response), and not on the listening or reading itself. *So, all assessment of receptive performance must be made by inference!*

# THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

- One reason for the importance of listening is that it is often implied as a component of speaking. How could you speak a language without also listening? In addition, the overtly observable nature of speaking renders it more empirically measurable than listening. But perhaps a deeper cause lies in universal biases toward speaking.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

- A good speaker is often (unwisely) valued more highly than a good listener. To determine if someone is a proficient user of a language, people customarily ask, "Do you speak Spanish?" **People rarely ask**, "Do you *understand* and speak Spanish?"
- We therefore need to pay close attention to **listening** as a **mode of performance** for assessment in the classroom.

# BASIC TYPES OF LISTENING

- As with all effective tests, **designing appropriate assessment tasks in listening begins with the specification of objectives, or criteria.** Those objectives may be classified in terms of several types of listening performance. Think about what you do when you listen. Literally in nanoseconds, the following processes flash through your brain:

# BASIC TYPES OF LISTENING

1. You **recognize speech sounds** and hold a temporary "imprint" of them in short-term memory.
2. You simultaneously **determine the type of speech event** (monologue, interpersonal dialogue, transactional dialogue) that is being processed and attend to its context (who the speaker is, location, purpose) and **the content of the message**.

## BASIC TYPES OF LISTENING

3. You use (**bottom-up**) linguistic decoding skills and/or (**top-down**) background schemata to bring a plausible interpretation to the message, and assign a ***literal*** and ***intended meaning*** to the utterance.
4. In most cases (except for repetition tasks, which involve short-term memory only), **you delete the exact linguistic form in which the message was originally received in favor of conceptually retaining important or relevant information in long-term memory.**

# BASIC TYPES OF LISTENING

- Each of these stages represents a potential assessment objective:
  - comprehending of surface structure elements such as phonemes, words, intonation, or a grammatical category
  - understanding of pragmatic context
  - determining meaning of auditory input
  - developing the gist, a global or comprehensive understanding

# BASIC TYPES OF LISTENING

- From these stages, we can derive four commonly identified types of listening performance.
- 1. ***Intensive***. Listening for perception of the components (phonemes, words, intonation, discourse markers, etc.) of a larger stretch of language.
- 2. ***Responsive***. Listening to a relatively short stretch of language (a greeting, question, command, comprehension check, etc.) in order to make an equally short response.



# BASIC TYPES OF LISTENING

**3. *Selective*.** Processing stretches of discourse such as short monologues for several minutes in order to "scan" for certain information. The purpose of such performance is not necessarily to look for global or general meanings, but to be able to comprehend designated information in a context of longer stretches of spoken language (such as classroom directions from a teacher, TV or radio news items, or stories).

**Assessment tasks in selective listening** could ask students, for example, to listen for names, numbers, a grammatical category; directions (in a map exercise), or certain facts and events.

# BASIC TYPES OF LISTENING

**4. *Extensive*.** Listening to develop a top-down, global understanding of spoken language. Extensive performance ranges from listening to lengthy lectures to listening to a conversation and deriving a comprehensive message or purpose. Listening for the gist, for the main idea, and making inferences are all part of extensive listening.

# BASIC TYPES OF LISTENING

- For full comprehension, **test-takers may at the extensive level need to invoke interactive skills** (perhaps note-taking, questioning, discussion): listening that includes all four of the above types as test-takers actively participate in discussions, debates, conversations, role plays, and pair and group work. **Their listening performance must be intricately integrated with speaking (and perhaps other skills) in the authentic give-and-take of communicative interchange.**

## MICRO- AND MACROSKILLS OF LISTENING

- A useful way of synthesizing the above two lists is to consider a finite number of **microskills** (attending to the **smaller bits and chunks of language**, in more of a **bottom-up process**) and **macroskills** (focusing on the **larger elements involved in a top-down approach** to a listening task) implied in the performance of listening comprehension. Richards' (1983) **list of microskills** has proven **useful in the domain of specifying objectives for learning**. The following list of micro- and macroskills provide **17 different objectives** to assess in listening.

# **MICRO- AND MACROSKILLS OF LISTENING**

## **Microskills**

1. Discriminate among the distinctive sounds of English.
2. Retain chunks of language of different lengths in short-term memory.
3. Recognize English stress patterns, words in stressed and unstressed positions, rhythmic structure, intonation contours, and their role in signaling information.
4. Recognize reduced forms of words.
5. Distinguish word boundaries, recognize a core of words, and interpret word order patterns and their significance.
6. Process speech at different rates of delivery.

# **MICRO- AND MACROSKILLS OF LISTENING**

## **Microskills**

7. Process speech containing pauses, errors, corrections, and other performance variables.
8. Recognize grammatical word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.), systems (e.g., tense, agreement, pluralization), patterns, rules, and elliptical forms.
9. Detect sentence constituents and distinguish between major and minor constituents.
10. Recognize that a particular meaning may be expressed in different grammatical forms.
11. Recognize cohesive devices in spoken discourse.

# **MICRO- AND MACROSKILLS OF LISTENING**

## **Macroskills**

12. Recognize the communicative functions of utterances, according to situations, participants, goals.
13. Infer situations, participants, goals using real-world knowledge.
14. From events, ideas, and so on, described, predict outcomes, infer links and connections between events, deduce causes and effects, and detect such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification.

# **MICRO- AND MACROSKILLS OF LISTENING**

## **Macroskills**

- 15. Distinguish between literal and implied meanings.
- 16. Use facial, kinesics, body language, and other non-verbal clues to decipher meanings.
- 17. Develop and use a battery of listening strategies, such as detecting key words, guessing the meaning of words from context, appealing for help, and signaling comprehension or lack thereof.



## MICRO- AND MACROSKILLS OF LISTENING

- Implied in the taxonomy above is a notion of what makes many aspects of listening difficult, or why listening is not simply a linear process of recording strings of language as they are transmitted into our brains. Consider the following list of **what makes listening difficult** (adapted from Richards, 1983; Ur, 1984; Dunkel, 1991):

## **MICRO- AND MACROSKILLS OF LISTENING**

- 1. Clustering:** attending to appropriate "chunks" of language-phrases, clauses, constituents
- 2. Redundancy:** recognizing the kinds of repetitions, rephrasing, elaborations, and insertions that unrehearsed spoken language often contains, and benefiting from that recognition

## **MICRO- AND MACROSKILLS OF LISTENING**

- 3. Reduced forms:** understanding the reduced forms that may not have been a part of an English learner's past learning experiences in classes where only formal "textbook" language has been presented
- 4. Performance variables:** being able to "weed out" hesitations, false starts, pauses, and corrections in natural speech

## MICRO- AND MACROSKILLS OF LISTENING

5. **Colloquial language:** comprehending idioms, slang, reduced forms, shared cultural knowledge
6. **Rate of delivery:** keeping up with the speed of delivery, processing automatically as the speaker continues
7. **Stress, rhythm, and intonation:** correctly understanding prosodic elements of spoken language, which is almost always much more difficult than understanding the smaller phonological bits and pieces
8. **Interaction:** managing the interactive flow of language from listening to speaking to listening, etc.



**THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!**

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