

6

Listening comprehension tests

6.1 General

An effective way of developing the listening skill is through the provision of carefully selected practice material. Such material is in many ways similar to that used for *testing* listening comprehension. Although the auditory skills are closely linked to the oral skills in normal speech situations, it may sometimes be useful to separate the two skills for teaching and testing, since it is possible to develop listening ability much beyond the range of speaking and writing ability if the practice material is not dependent on spoken responses and written exercises.

An awareness of the ways in which the spoken language differs from the written language is of crucial importance in the testing of the listening skills. For instance, the spoken language is much more complex than the written language in certain ways, as a result of the large element of 'redundancy' that it contains. An example can be seen in the spoken question 'Have you got to go now?', the question being signalled by the rise in pitch on *go now* and by the inversion of the word order (i.e. by both phonological and grammatical features). Thus, if the listener did not hear the question signal *Have you*, the rise in pitch would indicate that a question was being asked. If the speaker slurred over *got to*, the question would still be intelligible. In addition, meaning might also be conveyed, emphasised and 'repeated' by means of gestures, eye movements, and slight changes in breathing. Such features of redundancy as those described make it possible for mutilated messages to be understood, even though the full message is only partially heard. Furthermore, the human brain has a limited capacity for the reception of information and, were there no such features built into the language, it would often be impossible to absorb information at the speed at which it is conveyed through ordinary speech. Such conversational features as repetition, hesitation and grammatical re-patterning are all examples of this type of redundancy, so essential for the understanding of spoken messages.

What is the significance of these features for testing purposes? Firstly, the ability to distinguish between phonemes, however important, does not in itself imply an ability to understand verbal messages. Moreover, occasional confusion over selected pairs of phonemes does not matter too greatly because in real-life situations listeners are able to use contextual clues to interpret what they hear. Although listeners rely on all the phonological clues present, they can often afford to miss some of them.

Secondly, impromptu speech is usually easier to understand than carefully prepared (written) material when the latter is read aloud. Written tests generally omit many of the features of redundancy and impart information at a much higher rate than normal speech does. Consequently, it is essential to make provision for restating important points, rewriting and rephrasing them when writing material for aural tests. The length of the segments in each breath group should be limited during delivery, for the longer the segment the greater the amount of information and the greater the strain on the auditory memory. The pauses at the end of each segment should also be lengthened to compensate for the lack of redundant features.

Although not always possible when listening comprehension tests are conducted on a wide scale, it is helpful if the speaker can be seen by the listeners. However excellent the quality of a tape recorder, a disembodied voice is much more difficult for the foreign learner to follow. In practice, most tape recorders are not of a high quality and are used in rooms where the acoustics are unsatisfactory. If the quality of the reproduction is poor, the test will be unreliable, especially when such discrete features as phoneme discrimination, stress and intonation are being tested.

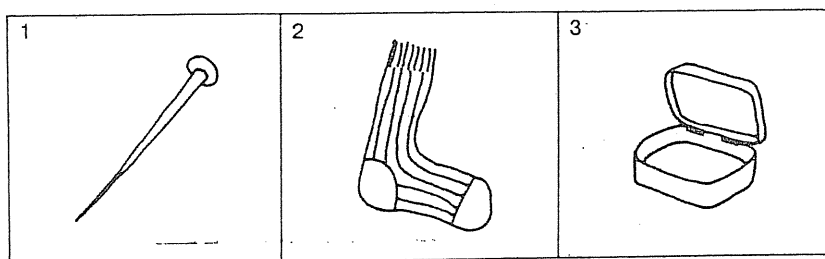
Apart from the use of videotape, however, the tape recorder is the only way of ensuring complete uniformity of presentation and thus a high degree of reliability. It is also possible to use recordings made by native speakers and thus present perfect models of the spoken language – an important advantage in countries where native speakers are not available to administer the test. Moreover, tape recorders are essential for the production and use of authentic material.

For purposes of convenience, auditory tests are divided here into two broad categories: (i) tests of phoneme discrimination and of sensitivity to stress and intonation, and (ii) tests of listening comprehension.

6.2 Phoneme discrimination tests

Type 1

(a) This type of discrimination test consists of a picture, accompanied by three or four words spoken by the examiner in person or on tape.



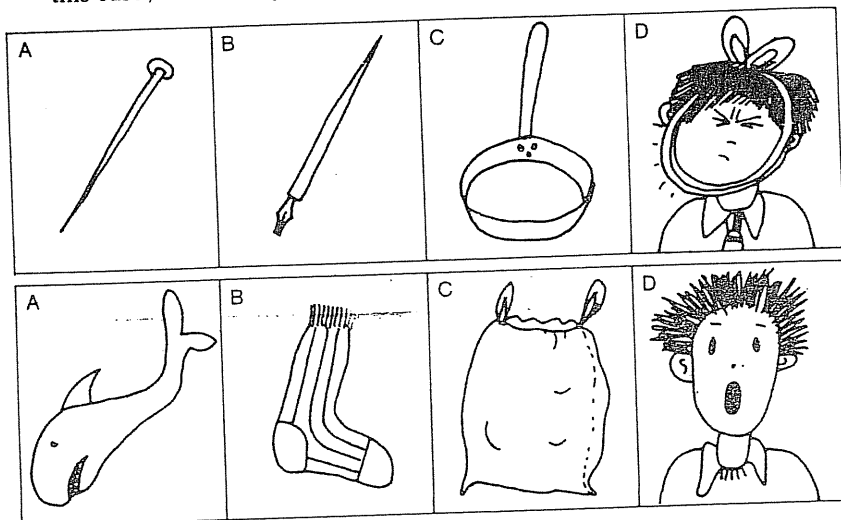
The testees hear:

- | | | | |
|-------------|---------|---------|----------|
| 1. A. pin | B. pen | C. pair | D. pain |
| 2. A. shark | B. sock | C. sack | D. shock |
| 3. A. thin | B. tin | C. fin | D. din |

After each group of four words the testees write the letter of the most appropriate word for that picture. For example:

1. A 2. B 3. B

(b) Conversely, four pictures may be shown and only one word spoken. In this case, it is usually better if the word is spoken twice.



The testees hear:

1. pain – pain (= D)
2. sock – sock (= B)
- (etc.)

Type 2

The testees hear three sentences and have to indicate which sentences are the same and which are different.

1. A. There's a bend in the middle of the road.
B. There's a bend in the middle of the road.
C. There's a band in the middle of the road.
2. A. Is that sheet over there clean?
B. Is that seat over there clean?
C. Is that seat over there clean?
3. A. I've just locked the car in the garage.
B. I've just knocked the car in the garage.
C. I've just locked the car in the garage.
- (etc.)

Type 3

(a) In each of these items one word is given on tape while three or four words are printed in the answer booklet. The testees are required to choose the written word which corresponds to the spoken word.

1. Spoken: den
Written: A. ten B. den C. Ben D. pen
2. Spoken: win
Written: A. when B. one C. wane D. win
3. Spoken: plays
Written: A. plays B. prays C. pays D. brays
- (etc.)

(b) This type of item is similar to the previous one; this time, however, the words spoken by the tester occur in sentences. The four options may then be either written or spoken.

1. *Spoken*: I'll thread it for you.
Written or spoken: A. thread B. tread C. threat D. dread
2. *Spoken*: Did John manage to catch the train?
Written or spoken: A. drain B. chain C. plane D. train
3. *Spoken*: Put the pan in some hot water.
Written or spoken: A. pan B. pen C. pin D. pain

(c) This item type¹ is similar to Type 3(a): one word is spoken by the tester (preferably twice). However, instead of a choice of four words, testees have in front of them a choice of four definitions. They have thus to select the correct definition for the word they hear.

1. *Spoken*: cot – cot
Written: A. stopped and held
B. a baby's bed
C. pulled by horses
D. a small pet animal covered with fur
2. *Spoken*: threw – threw
Written: A. made something move through the air
B. not false
C. some but not many
D. made a picture or diagram on paper
3. *Spoken*: bud – bud
Written: A. part of a tree or a flower
B. a creature with wings
C. something to sleep on
D. not good

The test items described in this section are all of limited use for diagnostic testing purposes, enabling the teacher to concentrate later on specific pronunciation difficulties. The items are perhaps more useful when testees have the same first language background and when a contrastive analysis of the mother tongue and the target language can be used. Most of the item types described are short, enabling the tester to cover a wide range of sounds.

Type 3(c), however, tests not only the ability to discriminate between the different sounds of a language but also a knowledge of vocabulary. A testee who may be able to discriminate accurately will nevertheless find the test very difficult if he or she cannot understand the definitions in the options. Similarly, Type 3(a) is a test of phoneme discrimination and spelling ability. In Type 3(b) proficiency in grammatical structure will favour the testee. Thus, for example, a testee who cannot discriminate between *thread*, *tread*, *threat* and *dread* may immediately rule out the distractors *threat* and *dread* since they cannot be put in the pattern *I'll it for you*.

Each individual test item in all the types described must be kept fairly simple. Obscure lexical items should be avoided. This may seem to be a simple enough principle to observe, but the avoidance of difficult lexical items frequently makes it impossible to test all the sound contrasts that need to be included in the test. For example, the contrasts *shark*, *sock*,

sack, shock would not be suitable for inclusion in a test intended for elementary learners of English.

Much of the material in such tests is unfortunately very artificial, differing greatly from spontaneous speech. Frequently there is a tendency for the tester to adopt a certain tone-pattern and rhythm which may be a source of irritation to the listeners or affect their concentration. However, if the tester changes pitch (e.g. *live, leave, live*) this will only confuse the listeners. Thus, the tester must attempt to pronounce every syllable using the same stress and pitch patterns.

The ability to discriminate between certain phonemes may sometimes prove very difficult for native speakers. Many English dialects fail to make some of the vowel and consonant contrasts and thus, in addition to all the other variables (e.g. the acoustics of the room, the quality of the tape recorder, etc.), these tests are affected by the pronunciation differences of native speakers.²

6.3 Tests of stress and intonation

Although features of stress, intonation, rhythm and juncture are generally considered more important in oral communication skills than the ability to discriminate between phonemes, tests of stress and intonation are on the whole less satisfactory than the phoneme discrimination tests treated in the previous section. Most tests are impure in so far as they test other skills at the same time; many are also very artificial, testing the rarer (but more 'testable') features.

Type 1 The following item type³ is designed to test the ability to recognise word stress or sentence stress. The testees listen to a sentence (usually spoken on tape) and are required to indicate the syllable which carries the main stress of the whole structure. They show the main stress by putting a cross in the brackets under the appropriate syllable.

Spoken: I've just given THREE books to Bill.

Written: I've just given three books to Bill.

() () () () (X) () () ()

Spoken: My FAther will help you do it.

Written: My father will help you do it.

() (X) () () () () () ()

Unfortunately, this test lacks context and is very artificial. It tests only recognition of stress and is of limited use for ear-training purposes.

Type 2 The examiner makes an utterance and the testees have to select the appropriate description to indicate whether they have understood the original utterance. The utterance is spoken once only, but the test is based on the principle that the same utterance may be spoken in several different tone-patterns indicating a plain statement, a question, sarcasm, surprise, annoyance, etc.

Spoken: Tom's a fine goalkeeper.

Written: Tom's a fine goalkeeper.

The speaker is

- A. making a straightforward statement
- B. being very sarcastic
- C. asking a question