Testing Second Language Listening Ability

Elvis Wagner

Overview

In order to test second language listening ability, it is necessary to first define what second language listening ability actually is. Unfortunately, researchers have as yet been unable to formulate an agreed-upon and workable definition of L2 listening ability. This is partly because the processes involved in L2 listening comprehension are so dependent on the context of the listening situation that the establishment of a global, comprehensive definition is probably impossible. However, Buck (2001) has created what he calls a "default listening construct" that seems to be useful, because it is flexible and broad enough to be applied in most listening situations. Buck defines L2 listening ability as the ability:

> To process extended samples of realistic spoken language, automatically and in real time
> To understand the linguistic information that is unequivocally included in the text
> To make whatever inferences are unambiguously implicated by the content of the passage
> (Buck, 2001, p. 114).

Using this definition of L2 listening ability allows teachers and testers to create valid and useful listening tests.

Processing Extended Samples of Realistic Spoken Language, Automatically and In Real Time

In order to assess whether a language learner has the ability to process and comprehend spoken language, it is necessary to provide realistic spoken texts that are representative of real-life language. Providing spoken texts that are representative of the real life language that test takers will encounter adds authenticity to the test, and can contribute to construct validity. But what exactly is "realistic" spoken language? Real life language is rapid and mostly unplanned, and includes false starts, fillers, pauses, and connected speech. Unfortunately, such language has generally **not** been used in L2 listening assessments. The language learner is usually presented with listening texts that have planned, scripted, and polished speech that is read aloud with precise and clear pronunciation on audio tapes specially prepared for foreign language classrooms and tests. This disconnect between the spoken language tested (and taught) in the foreign language classroom, and the spoken language experienced in real life person-to-person encounters is probably the greatest shortcoming of the way L2 listening ability is now tested. How can this shortcoming be addressed? As testers, it is imperative to include representative, authentic spoken speech on tests of L2 listening ability. This might require including a number of different listening tasks, with different types of listening texts of varying lengths and of different genres, that are representative of the types of spoken language the test taker is expected to be able to comprehend.

In addition, L2 listening tests should demonstrate that the test taker has the ability to process language automatically, in real time. Because of limited processing capacity, a less proficient L2 listener will often be overwhelmed by incoming aural input, and a breakdown in comprehension can occur. Thus, there is a need for the listener to automatize the listening

process, and consequently there is a need to assess if the listener can indeed comprehend spoken language automatically in real time. This presents a dilemma for testers, however, in determining the number of times that an audio text should be presented in a testing situation. Ideally, the audio text should be presented one time to the test takers, because this is generally how authentic spoken language is encountered in real life. Traditionally, however, audio texts have often been played two (or sometimes even more) times for listeners on language tests, for some very legitimate reasons. In real life, a listener can ask for clarification, or ask the speaker to repeat what has been said if the listener has not understood. In addition, in a testing situation the listener does not have the breadth of contextual knowledge that he or she would have in a real life situation, and playing the text a second time (after the listener has gained important contextual knowledge from the first listening) allows the listener to overcome this shortcoming. There are also memory issues involved, in that a listening test often requires the listener to remember more things than often required in real life language use, and thus a second playing of the text alleviates some of these memory issues. And finally, testers need to take into account the issue of test takers' feelings and attitudes about different aspects of the listening tests, which can have an impact on their performance on that test. Invariably, test takers report that hearing the text a second time is helpful for them, and they also feel that it is fairer in a testing situation than playing the text only once. There is no easy answer to this issue, although one way around it is to vary the number of times the text is played. Having a number of different listening texts on a test allows the tester to present some of the texts one time, and some of the texts two times.

To Understand the Linguistic Information that Is Unequivocally Included In the Text

This is the least problematic aspect of testing L2 listening ability. Traditionally, tests have included items that assess the test taker's ability to comprehend specifically stated information presented in audio texts. These types of items are usually easy to create, and are generally very reliable and unambiguous. However, some listening tests have included **only** these types of items, which is problematic, and a threat to test validity.

To Make Whatever Inferences Are Unambiguously Implicated By the Content of the Passage

Unlike testing a listener's ability to comprehend explicitly stated information, assessing a listener's ability to make inferences is a much less clear-cut issue. Although some very basic word-, phrase-, and sometimes even sentence-level inferences are basically unambiguous, more global inferences that include pragmatic inferences about the message a speaker is trying to convey are much more problematic. Unfortunately, such inferences are rarely, if ever, totally "unambiguous." Different listeners will make different but still appropriate inferences from the same text. Obviously, this presents serious problems for testers. If there is not one correct answer, how can the ability to make appropriate inferences be tested? This dilemma probably explains why the writers of many listening tests have avoided testing listener's ability to make meaningful inferences. However, the process of listening is dependent on the listener making inferences in order to construct an interpretation of the incoming text. Brown (1995) states that more than 90% of what might be stated in a spoken text need not be stated, but can be assumed to be inferred by the listener. In many ways the process of listening **is** the ability to make correct and appropriate inferences. Therefore, even though it is often quite difficult to create reliable and

unambiguous items that test a listener's ability to make inferences, it is necessary to include these types of items. Although such items often force the tester to rely on expert judgement to score and interpret items, thus reducing the objectivity of the test, these types of items are necessary if one wants to create a valid L2 listening test.

Conclusion

Creating reliable and valid L2 listening tests is not an easy process. But because of the importance of listening in language learning and communication, it is imperative that teachers and testers invest the resources needed to make quality tests. By including a number of representative listening texts of different types and genres, and by including items that indicate the test taker's ability to not only comprehend explicitly stated information, but also the ability to make meaningful and appropriate inferences, testers can create useful L2 listening tests.

REFERENCES

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