

Assessing Listening

Gary Buck. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2001. Pp. xix + 274.

Over the past two decades, there has been a great deal of attention devoted to the teaching, learning, and testing of second language (L2) listening ability. This increased attention is due (at least in part) to the realization of the importance of listening in language learning (Rubin, 1994). For first language learners, virtually all linguistic input is through the aural mode. While the linguistic input for second language learners is usually not entirely aural, the importance of listening in learning a second language cannot be understated. While there has been an increased research focus on L2 listening, there is still much work that needs to be done. As the editors of the Cambridge Language Assessment Series (Charles Alderson and Lyle Bachman) state in the preface, “The assessment of listening abilities is one of the least understood, least developed and yet one of the most important areas of language testing and assessment” (p. x). Gary Buck has been on the vanguard of this wave of listening research, and this book is an important contribution to our knowledge base.

In fact, the book *Assessing Listening* may be slightly misnamed, because while its main focus is the assessment of listening (the book is the fourth in the series), it covers virtually all aspects of L2 listening research and is aimed not only at language testers, but it is also suitable and accessible for SLA researchers and language instructors as well. The book is divided into nine chapters.

Chapter 1, “An Overview of Listening Comprehension”, begins with a brief discussion of the different types of knowledge used in listening and also describes how listening has traditionally been seen as either a bottom-up or top-down process, when it actually seems much more likely that both of these processes occur at the same time, in an interactive manner. The rest of the chapter is organized into five main sections: the input to the listener, applying knowledge of the language, using world knowledge, the context of communication, and building mental representation of meaning. This overview is thorough yet concise, and will be relevant and informative for language testers, researchers, and teachers.

L2 listening research has traditionally been an offshoot of reading research, according to the belief that since both are receptive skills, the two are very similar and the research on reading would be applicable to listening. In chapter 2, “What Is Unique to Listening,” Buck describes how listening is similar in many ways, but also stresses what is unique to listening, especially how the input differs between the two modalities. Buck stresses how the important characteristics of spoken texts—phonological modification, accent, prosodic features, speech rate, hesitation phenomena, discourse structure, and non-verbal signals—differentiates between the written and the spoken word, and urges that authentic samples of spoken speech be used when testing L2 listening ability. In this chapter, Buck also expounds on the differences between first- and second-language listening, and the various sub-skills of listening. He describes a number of L2 listening taxonomies (Aitken, 1978; Richards, 1983; Weir, 1993) that have been influential in guiding L2 listening research, but also warns that these are only lists of sub-skills that scholars consider important, rather than a comprehensive and empirically-based construct. He also justly criticizes research that seems to treat these sub-skills as statistically identifiable, when they might, in fact, simply be ways of describing language-use activities.

In chapter 3, “Approaches to Assessing Listening,” Buck starts to focus on assessing listening. He reviews how it has been approached in the past, and describes and critiques a number of listening test tasks that have been used. In chapter 4, “Defining the Construct,” perhaps the most important chapter of the book, Buck continues his focus on assessment, and seeks to define the construct of L2 listening ability. Before doing so, he describes a number of practical constraints on construct definition, the foremost constraint being the purpose of the test. He then describes the development of his construct definition of L2 listening ability.

Traditionally, defining a construct involves basing the definition on a competence-based model. Another way of defining a construct, however, is to base it on a task-based model. Buck proposes, however, that the best way to define the construct of listening is to combine these two approaches, and define it based on the interaction between competence and task. In doing so, he creates a “default” listening construct. This default listening construct is 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, and
- To make whatever inferences are unambiguously implicated by the content of the passage.

(p. 114)

This “default listening construct” is useful, in that it is broad enough to apply to most listening situations, yet flexible enough to be tailored by test creators to fit the context of the testing situation. The first point, processing extended samples of realistic spoken language, is part of the task-based model, while the second and third points, understanding explicitly stated information and the ability to make inferences, relate to aspects of a competence-based model. One minor critique of this default listening construct is Buck’s phrasing of the third point, “to make whatever inferences are unambiguously implicated. . . .” It would seem that inferences by their very nature are often ambiguous, and thus to only assess those inferences that are “unambiguous” would preclude many (if not most) inferences that a listener is forced to perform in virtually every listening task. This is an issue that remains unresolved and needs to be addressed. Nevertheless, Buck’s default listening construct is an important contribution.

Chapter 5, “Creating Tasks”, has four main sections: an overview of listening task characteristics; the interaction between the task and the test-taker; the use of comprehension questions; and evaluating and modifying tasks. Buck devotes much of the chapter to the exploration of the use of comprehension questions because the use of comprehension questions is such a common procedure in assessing listening. He presents a number of different possible test tasks using comprehension questions, explains and critiques the various task types, and also explores how to evaluate and modify test tasks. This is perhaps the most practical part of the book, and will be a very valuable reference for language teachers when creating useful listening tasks for the classroom and for tests.

Chapter 6, “Providing Suitable Texts,” addresses a criticism made in chapter 2 regarding the standard technique of using listening texts that are written and read aloud. This is not typical of authentic spoken language, and thus it is often inappropriate for use in assessing a student’s listening ability. Buck focuses on how to provide suitable texts for listening tasks, and presents numerous ideas for accumulating and/or creating suitable listening tasks. While this chapter provides useful information for teachers and testers, one critique must be mentioned. In reviewing the use of video in listening assessments, Buck seems to suggest that it is best to avoid

the use of video, arguing that "...we are usually interested in the test-takers' language ability, rather than the ability to understand subtle visual information" (p. 172). It could also be argued that we are actually interested in communicative language ability, and communication often involves more than purely linguistic components. Non-verbal information is a vital component of communication, and the ability to understand subtle visual information might in fact be a very important part of personal communication. Furthermore, in the vast majority of listening situations (the major exceptions being listening to the radio, talking on the phone, or listening to announcements via loudspeakers) a listener is able to see the speaker, and is able to utilize and exploit the non-verbal information the speaker is projecting. To preclude non-verbal information on listening test tasks could be seen as a threat to the validity of those tasks.

Chapter 7 "Designing and Constructing Complete Assessments" naturally progresses from chapter 6, focusing on the design and construction of complete listening assessments. Chapter 8, "Illustrative Tests of Listening Comprehension," provides illustrative tests of listening comprehension, including the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), both constructed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). Buck is muted in his criticisms of these tests, although one gets the impression that he is more critical than he lets on. His main criticism relates to the texts used for these tests. He critiques the way the texts are carefully scripted, without many authentic oral features. This is exactly the types of texts that Buck cautions against using in both chapters 2 and 6.

Buck wraps up the book with chapter 9, "Summary and Future Developments." He focuses on issues that he thinks need to be addressed in the future in order to create better listening tests. Briefly, these issues include providing suitable texts, the use of visuals, collaborative listening, computer-based testing, the need for an adequate theoretical basis for designing assessments of listening comprehension, and diagnosis of the sub-skills of listening.

Assessing Listening is a thorough, informative, and well-written account of how L2 listening comprehension has been tested, how it is currently tested, and how it should be tested. However, the greatest strength of this book is that it is not written solely for the limited audience of language testers. Instead, it is an accessible, useful, and important work teachers and researchers.

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