

ASSESSING LISTENING



Assessing Listening

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Many people are confused about the difference between ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’. Hearing is one of the traditional five senses and simply involves the ability to hear sounds through the ear. It doesn’t matter whether we understand the sounds or not. But listening, on the other hand, is all about making sense of what we’ve heard, and our brains carry out a whole range of activities in order to do this

Firstly, our brains decide whether the sounds reaching our ears are the sounds of language. We do this by trying to match the sounds we’re hearing with words we already know. Then we group them together into phrases, which helps us to clarify in our minds what the topic is that we’re hearing about. Finally, we make connections between what we think we’ve just heard with our pre-existing knowledge of the topic, based on our knowledge of the world. This way, we develop an understanding of the overall message.

So there’s a lot going on in our brains when we listen to something and although listening is often called a receptive skill, it’s certainly not a passive one.

A good listening assessment should try to copy the real-life use of the language as closely as possible. For example, there’d be little point in trying to assess someone’s ability to extract factual information from an announcement at a train station if the listening task itself didn’t resemble train station announcements.

Lots of different tasks are used in listening tests. Sometimes test-takers are asked to pick out a word from several that sound alike or to recognise the correct grammatical tense or words connecting sentences like ‘however’ or ‘consequently’. Often, the meaning of unknown words has to be deduced from context. They might be asked to listen to something and identify the main ideas to get a general understanding of what it’s about, which might lead to being asked to summarize the whole topic either in writing or speech. They can also be asked to listen for specific information. Sometimes the task means they have to make more subtle choices and work out what the speaker’s attitude is to the topic by inferring or deducing what the speaker really means when it isn’t clearly stated.

All these tasks can be done in different ways. For example, test-takers might listen to someone reading something aloud ‘live’, or they might listen to an audio-recording playing through speakers or headphones. Another option is to listen to a simulated ‘live’ discussion, or talk either on video or via a computer.

Test-takers might be asked to answer questions either by choosing the best response from a number of responses, as in multiple-choice tests, or in writing, either with a single word or short answer, or by writing a longer response.

Of course, in the end, all these tasks have to be given marks or scores. So it's important to decide beforehand how questions are going to be marked and to make sure the test-takers understand how their tests will be scored.

One of the things that has to be decided in advance is whether each response should be given a single mark or if some should be given more than one mark because the answer is more difficult – this is called 'weighting'. Another important decision is whether some marks should be given if an answer is partly correct but not totally – this is called giving 'partial credit'.

If the listening tasks require written responses, we have to decide if grammar, spelling and punctuation mistakes should be penalised. We also have to make sure that the number of possible correct answers to open-ended questions is limited so that marking is easy and fair to all test-takers.

So to create a useful listening test, we need to think about all these things while at the same time making sure that the test-taker's listening ability is being assessed in a meaningful way. Getting all this right isn't easy, and that's why listening is often said to be the most difficult skill to test. But it's also the most widely used skill, since we can't have any communication without understanding, so it's certainly a very important skill to test.