

## **Modes of Input in Assessing Listening Comprehension: The Use of Visuals in L2 Listening Tests**

Over the last couple of decades, there has been an increase in the amount of attention paid to the area of second language listening comprehension and ways of its assessment, which resulted in a number of preliminary research and studies conducted on the subject. Such a sustained interest to the skill, previously neglected in terms of teaching and testing, can be attributed to a recent introduction of multimedia learning into the language classroom as well as an emerging tendency to teach language skills in integration (Hinkel, 2006). Despite the obvious lack of a widely-accepted theory of listening comprehension (e.g., Buck, 1991, 2001), elusive definitions of the underlying processes (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996) and inconclusive results of existing research on the subject, listening has always been a key language skill for second language acquisition (Brett, 1997; Rubin, 1995) and it is only natural for us to expand our understanding about L2 listening ability and the ways to assess it effectively.

Rubin (1995: 151) points out that listening comprehension 'consists of processing information which listeners get from visual and auditory clues in order to define what is going on and what speakers are trying to express'. Such a definition, which emphasizes the role of the two modes of information input – auditory and visual, – gives rise to a number of questions concerning assessment and testing practices of L2 listening ability. Most traditional listening tests appear to lack authenticity and interactiveness as they convey information via verbal input only. Whereas, in the majority of real-life situations a listener is able to 'view' the message and interpret 'a complex interplay of linguistic and extra linguistic, contextual (often visual) information cues' (Mueller, 1980: 335). For this reason, a number of researchers argue that including visuals in L2 listening tasks can help language learners to process and understand verbal input and as a result lead to better L2 listening performance (Gruba, 1997; Wagner, 2007). Wagner (2007: 67) goes on and states that using visual information input together with aural one cannot only result in more authentic L2 listening tasks, but also may 'lead to more construct relevant variance in the assessments, allowing for more valid inferences to be made from the results of those assessments'. Buck (2001: 253) also suggests that 'the common practice of playing a disembodied recording from an audio-player does not create a very realistic listening situation'. According to Buchman & Palmer (1996) when creating a test it is important to ensure that it bears construct validity. They refer to authenticity and interactiveness as the elements that add to the latter. Creating test tasks which are similar to those in the target language use (TLU) domain gives the test its authenticity; and designing test tasks in the way that they help test-takers to integrate their affective schemata with language ability in order to successfully complete these tasks makes them (test tasks) interactive (Wagner, 2002).

In the last two decades, there have been a number of studies investigating the impact of visual elements in terms of their facilitating or distracting effect on L2 test-takers' performance (Coniam, 2001; Ginther, 2002; Gruba, 1993; Ockey, 2007; Jones, 2003). The research on visual support in testing L2 has been focused on comparing audio-only listening tests with image- and video-mediated listening tests. As Buck (2001) suggests the most important question for this research should be whether the use of visual support in L2 listening tests makes a difference to test-takers' listening comprehension. The results of these studies appear to be quite contradictory, inconclusive and fail to present a unanimous viewpoint.

Some researchers believe that increasing use of technology in L2 teaching, advances of computer assisted language learning and development of multi-media learning will promote the use of context and content visuals in L2 listening testing (e.g., Ginther, 2001). The results of their studies have shown that visuals in L2 listening tests can improve test-takers' performance, create a positive backwash effect on further language learning. Others have found no statistically significant evidence to either facilitative or detrimental effect that visuals may have on test-takers' performance (Coniam, 2001; Gruba, 1993; Ockey, 2007). Yet others (e.g., Suvorov, 2011) have revealed detrimental effect the use of visuals (video) had on the performance in L2 listening test. However, even these studies have not provided enough clear results to shed light on the role of using visual support in testing L2 listening ability. For example, Coniam (2001) and Ginther (2002) point out the necessity to investigate what impact the use of different types of visuals – context or content, images or video - may have on test-takers' scores. Wagner (2007) also suggests that if we are to understand the effect of visuals on test-takers' performance in L2 listening test, it is essential to understand to what extent they use the visual information presented in a test. Another direction for research is to

study individual differences among L2 learners and their preferences in using different modes to receive information (Progosh, 1996). Obviously, the effect that visual materials may have on the listening comprehension and, consequently, test performance depends on a number of different factors, such as the types of visual materials used, learners' characteristics (level of language proficiency, cultural background, learning strategies, etc.) , the task type, and the way these factors may interact with each other (Ginther, 2001).

Proponents of image- or video-mediated input argue that within the communicative approach to language learning the advantages of using visual support seem particularly significant. Secules, Herron, Tomasello (1992:480) suggest that 'video permits second language learners to witness the dynamics of interaction as they observe native speakers in authentic settings speaking and using different accents, registers, and paralinguistic clues'. In the same way the use of video, for example, creates the situation where listening skill can be tested in a situation close to natural. The rapid introduction of multi-media learning (when new material is presented in several modes (Mayer, 1997)) into the language classroom has also added to the relevance of using various visuals in L2 listening tests design. This makes face validity particularly high as candidates feel less anxious when they take a test in the format they have been exposed to in their classroom. Gruba (1997) outlines the following reasons why employing visual support (video media, in particular) can be useful in the assessment of listening skills:

- Real-life communication involves both verbal and visual stimuli, therefore, the use of video is theory driven
- The use of video in assessing L2 listening skill is pedagogy related as language teachers normally incorporate visual stimuli in their classroom

However, there are certain limitations that visuals can impose on listening comprehension and negatively impact test performance. Critics of video-driven input point out that visual stimuli can distract test-takers from the actual aural input. Participants may misinterpret visual information due to cultural differences (e.g., different perception of facial and body gestures, hand motions, etc.) and fail to correlate the information received through a visual channel to the aural input. Buck (2001) believes that in some cases visual information may add to cognitive load of the test-taker and interfere with the reliability of test results. Moreover, we yet to arrive at more sufficient research results on different models of input in existing listening tests (audio-only, context-only still images, context-only video, content still images and content video). As Ockey (2007) rightly puts it, a model of input can make test-takers perform in every particular test differently, which affects construct validity of a test. In terms of authenticity (seemingly a strong argument in favour of using visual support), there are limitations as well. In some real-life situations non-verbal clues bear little or no significance. For example, during a telephone conversation or even an academic lecture, listeners rely more on what they hear rather what they see. In such situations visual aid (still images or video) may impede listening comprehension in L2. Buck (2001) still proposes that when testing listening ability more emphases should be placed on how L2 listeners processes linguistic information rather than how visual information can be interpreted in the light of topical knowledge, cultural background, etc. He says that adding visual aid is relevant only if it provides better assessment of the listening construct. This directs us back to the problem of defining the concept L2 listening comprehension, which in its turn will affect the definition of listening construct. Buck's (2001:113-114) way to formulate his definition of 'default listening construct' - which includes 'the ability to (a) process extended samples of realistic spoken language, automatically and in real time, (b) understand the linguistic information that is unequivocally included in the text, and (c) make whatever inferences are unambiguously implicated by the content of the passage' - appears quite useful as it can be applied to most listening situations and fit the content of different testing situations (Wagner, 2002).

It is only obvious that visuals can be both facilitative and distracting for L2 listening comprehension and their role in L2 listening skill testing depends on a range of factors. In different contexts listeners may prefer different media to receive information. In my own teaching experience I have quite often encountered the situation when learners benefited more from an audio-only model of listening, be it in a lesson or during a test. I have noticed that in some cases video stimuli succeeded in raising students' motivation and interest to the suggested task. However, their

language (e.g., vocabulary) facilitative effect was considerably low in comparison to the situation when students were exposed to an audio-only model. In most cases visual aids (video) could activate top-down processing only and were of little help in making better inferences which could have been made so, had listeners paid more attention to verbal stimuli in the input. In most cases learners apparently opt for audio mode when taking a listening test though they will enjoy video mode in their regular classroom a lot more. Another observation revealed the tendency when visual support appeared useful only for low level L2 listeners or beginners; while, advanced learners seemed to be less medium dependent. With young learners visual stimuli quite often failed to yield positive result at all and acted more as distracters than facilitators. My assumptions are based solely on my inner feelings, classroom experience, observation and post-lesson feedback. It is obvious that these questions call for further research and data analyses. Undoubtedly, the outlined theoretical and research data coupled with further investigation in the area are bound to shed more light on the processes undergoing in a language classroom.

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