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### Understanding 'Listening' and Assessing Listening Competence of Entry Level

Undergraduate Students of Eight Degree Colleges Affiliated to Punjabi University, Patiala

#### **Listening as a Skill**

This paper attempts to understand the importance of listening as a macro skill of language learning and to assess the existing level of listening competence of entry level students of eight degree colleges affiliated to Punjabi University, Patiala. Listening is fundamental to the process of communication. It is the most common communicative activity undertaken by human beings in daily life as Morley observes, "We can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write" (82). An average person spends more than 50 percent time during his waking hours on listening as Rankin also observes "... of the time adults spend in communication activities, 45% is devoted to listening, only 30% to speaking, 16 % to reading, and a mere 9 % to writing" (177). It is a common activity in our day-to-day lives, but when it comes to defining listening as a skill, it is not simple. Among the myriad definitions put forward by various linguists and scholars to explain listening as a skill, the most simplified one, as given by Rociocalls it "a skill of understanding spoken language" (10). Often confused with random 'hearing' which is passive in nature, 'listening' is an activity in which a language user decodes auditory input, i.e. speech by employing lexical and grammatical control over the language in which the input is provided. Aruna Koneru defines listening as a process of "hearing with understanding, interpreting and responding" (4). Effective listening is a complex process which requires sustained attention to oral input to understand its meaning which is grasped by employing

one's linguistic competence at phonetic, lexical and syntactic levels in addition to using knowledge about the topic (particularly in an academic setting). A broader definition of listening as a process has been proposed by Rost who calls it a process of receiving what the speaker actually says (receptive orientation); constructing and representing meaning (constructive orientation); negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding (collaborative orientation); and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (transformative orientation) ( 2-4 ). This process may be further divided into sub-processes involving unique non-linguistic influences such as individual pronunciation of the speaker, rise and fall in his pitch, and background of the situation-- noisy or silent. These sub processes make listening a highly complex process, especially for the foreign/second language learners in a non-native classroom setting where they have to find out relevant information or ideas while listening to the spoken text which is generally not repeated. It is only the teacher, not the learner who decides if repetition is required or not; and if required, what should be repeated and when. Speed at which a speaker speaks also affects memory and retention of the listener to a great degree. Besides this, many listeners also encounter phonetic, semantic and syntactic limitations during the process. The nature of spoken material, its organisation, the interest that it holds for the listener, the way it is presented and the emotional/psychological state of the listener also influence the degree to which the process culminates in successful listening. Thus listening, in the context of second/foreign language, has a character which is much more complex than what is generally perceived. For effective listening, a listener must be able to, "discriminate between sounds, and understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance" (Vandergrift 168). A child gets prolonged exposure to listening in his first language and achieves spontaneous competence, not requiring rigorous formal training in vocabulary build up or formation of sentences. He develops the ability to correctly interpret an utterance in the local context. On the other hand, in the case of a second/foreign language, a listener has to be formally acquainted with various conventions and rules of grammar which govern that language. He has to proceed step by step; committing sounds of the target language to memory and learning to manipulate them to make meaningful words, both of which are complex processes. Sounds, to some extent, are fixed parameters, but words formed by combining them are endless. At the stage of formation of words also, a learner faces twofold difficulties. First, he has to deal with pronunciation and secondly, he has to understand the meaning assigned to each word as words symbolize

something concrete or abstract. This exerts on his mind a burden of identifying and committing that particular sound, symbol and meaning to his memory for future use. In addition to difference in the number of sounds, another related factor which determines the competence level of a second language listener is the progression of decoding phonetic sounds which follows different courses in  $L_1$  and  $L_2$ . Carroll also states in this regard that phonetic coding ability is vital in second/foreign language learning because a learner must recognise and remember the phonetic sequences represented by the morphemes, words, and intonation contours of that language after learning the identities of the new phonemes of that language (qtd. in Chan, Skehan and Gong 47). Moreover, the habit of a listener to impose the sound system of his mother tongue while listening in second language also causes ambiguity in communication. A native speaker can easily identify and differentiate between two similar sounds or words which a second language speaker may not be able to do because of his inability to understand subtle differences between the phonetic systems of two languages. The structures of words, or substitution of one sound for another may also cause ambiguity in deriving meaning for a second language listener who may prove successful or unsuccessful, depending upon his ability to memorise. Memory, focus and speed play vital roles in determining one's control over listening in second language. The manner in which these three factors influence listening performance in second language is discussed in brief as under:

#### Memory

Memory plays a vital role in all types of learning including listening. It may be divided into three units: the sensory stores, working memory and long term memory. Colors, tastes, tones, pictures and certain other non-verbal experiences travel into sensory stores. These can be helpful in grasping a spoken text when it deals with vividly descriptive narrative. Working memory analyses the information provided in a text and helps in comparing and contrasting the text in the light of recently acquired data regarding various topics. Long term memory provides the listener with background knowledge that can be retrieved at any time while performing a listening task.

#### Focus

Keen involvement is one of the primary requisites to carry out successful communicative activities including listening. Lack of focus due to any reason such as boredom, mental pre-occupation, or a sense of compulsion (particularly stemming from academic participation) is bound to affect the performance of a second language listener who may fail to successfully perform a listening task after losing his focus once. Focus, however,

is highly subjective as a phenomenon and it is not easy for a listener to become instantly aware of fluctuations in its degree.

### **Speed**

The speed at which a text is delivered also affects the performance of a listener who may miss certain words or even sentences while listening to a quickly delivered text. This leads to a break in interpretation of meaning. This is particularly relevant in the case of listening in second language in which a listener depends heavily on meaning of individual words to understand meanings of sentences and even a complete spoken text. Attributing speed as a major hurdle in effective listening, Underwood states, "Many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with the listening comprehension is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks' (16). Therefore, it is essential to achieve a balance between the pace of the speaker and that of the listener. To achieve this, a listener needs to be trained by exposing him to a variety of speech patterns which may include listening to L<sub>1</sub> speakers (in person) or to audio/video recordings of L<sub>1</sub>.

### **Types of Listening**

Listening is undertaken for a variety of purposes such as for entertainment, information, or inspiration etc. Diversity of purposes and situations in which listening takes place leads to its broad division into the following types as suggested by Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn Coakley:

- (i) **Discriminative Listening:** It refers to the type of listening when the listener is able to distinguish between verbal and non-verbal communication.
- (ii) **Comprehensive Listening:** This type of listening refers to understanding the spirit of the message in addition to acquiring the information contained in it.
- (iii) **Appreciative Listening:** It refers to the type of listening when the listener is able to appreciate or condemn a spoken text.
- (iv) **Empathetic Listening:** This type of listening takes place when the speech arouses the emotion of empathy in the listener.
- (v) **Critical Listening:** It refers to the type of listening when the listener evaluates the content of the text and makes judgment about it. (qtd in Arnold and Coran 8)

Listening and various approaches to English Language Teaching (ELT)

Until the 'reform movement' during early 1900s, listening' was not considered worthy of any special attention as a language skill. It was only during 1930s and 40s that anthropologists started taking interest in spoken languages. In 1942, Leonard Bloomfield

emphasised the importance of listening when he stated that one learns to “understand and speak a language primarily by hearing and imitating the native speaker” (115). In the late 1960s and early 70s, linguists began to recognise it as the primary channel that triggered second language learning. Arguments in support of listening comprehension began to be voiced during 1960s and curriculum designers all over the world started considering its inclusion in language teaching programmes during 1970s. The trend continued gathering pace during 1980s and finally, with the advent of communicative approach to teaching of English as a second language, listening was accorded its most rightful place in English language courses all over the world during 1990s. Tracing the patterns of importance accorded to listening in various approaches to English Language Teaching, Mendelsohn states that there can be observed, "a shift from non-teaching in Audio Lingual period (they'll pick it up by osmosis), to haphazard listening of texts, (many being readings of written languages) followed by comprehension questions to a strategy based approach"(81). Communicative approach to language teaching recommended use of strategies to develop listening as a skill. It was observed by researchers that successful listeners learn to make use of strategies to enhance their listening experience as Vandergrift also says, "Strategy development is important for listening training because strategies are conscious means by which learners can guide and evaluate their own comprehension and responses' (176). Formulated after keen observations, strategies provide help to understand the meaning of a text better. Two prominent strategies which are commonly employed by learners are 'Bottom Up' and 'Top Down'. The former is more text based and grammar oriented, underlining a listener's linguistic competence as the basic need. This strategy is based on the observation that a listener begins from the bottom by deriving meaning from lexical and syntactic units and then interlinks that meaning with the rest of the text. The latter, on the other hand, follows a holistic approach. This strategy is more listener oriented in which he attempts to grasp the gist of the whole spoken communiqué from the text in totality by using his background knowledge of the topic. Competent learners make use of both the strategies simultaneously (consciously or unconsciously) to interpret a spoken text. Oxford classifies listening strategies further into six categories viz a viz Memory Strategies (by creating mental associations and applying images and sounds), Cognitive Strategies (practicing, analyzing, reasoning etc.), Compensation Strategies (using clues and guessing intelligently), Meta-cognitive Strategies (arranging, planning and evaluating learning), Affective Strategies (controlling anxiety, emotions and encouraging yourself) and Social Strategies (co-operating with others) (18-22).

### Assessment of Listening Competence

Assessment refers to the means which teachers adopt to measure if the teaching methods adopted by them during a given time have led to an improvement in the competence level of their students or not. Assessing the performance of learners with regard to listening particularly in a second language classroom setting is a challenging task as it involves use of methods in which a teacher is required to observe and make, "a judgment about the students' demonstration of a skill or competency in creating a product, constructing a response or making a presentation" ( McMillan 198). For this purpose, a variety of activities such as pre-tests, observations, and examinations can be used. In order to lend reliability and validity to pre tests, it is imperative that a number of representative listening tasks of different types which may indicate a test taker's ability to comprehend explicitly stated information and his ability to make meaningful and appropriate inferences be included in them. In other words, the tests should be of the nature which may bring the linguistic and phonetic abilities of the test takers along with their contextual knowledge to fore. McMillan reinforces this aspect as he states that a comprehensive listening test should include, "...the direct examination of a students' ability to use knowledge to perform a task that is like what is encountered in real life or in the real world" (198).

Assessment of a language skill may be undertaken for the following purposes:

1. Diagnostic Assessment: This type of assessment helps in knowing about the existing knowledge of students and their level of skill. It helps in making decisions about teaching materials and methods.
2. Formative Assessment: This type of assessment is periodic in nature and takes place during the process of instruction. This method is used to measure the progress made by the students and effectiveness of teaching methods adopted by the instructor.
3. Summative Assessment: This type of assessment is product oriented and takes place after completion of a course to provide inputs regarding overall result of teaching/learning process. Grades are awarded to indicate whether a certain level of performance has been attained or not.

It must be emphasised here that instead of trying to distinguish between various types of assessments, it is more beneficial to plan assessment strategies to match instructional goals and objectives. Data collected through these tests can be further used for evaluation of overall value of the outcome consequently leading to the stage of decision making about remedial measures. A very important factor which deserves mention here is that expectation of proficiency in second/foreign language listening should be in consideration of the cultural

background and social milieu of the listener. Expecting the learners to mimic the pronunciation and rhythm of native speakers is unreasonable. Such expectations defeat the ultimate aim of developing competence.

### **Present Scenario in Punjab**

The proposed study pertains to teaching and learning of English as a second language in the state of Punjab which has a well-spread network of educational institutions. Schools of the state are affiliated mainly to three boards; i.e. Punjab School Education Board (PSEB) and Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE). There are also a large number of schools which are not affiliated to any board but follow the syllabus prescribed either by PSEB or CBSE. Another category consists of students who do not go to school regularly, take to self study and take exams conducted by the Open Board of School Education which follows the syllabus prescribed by PSEB. Despite gaining recognition from linguists and scholars as an indispensable skill for language learning, listening still attracts little attention in terms of theory and practice in the syllabi of the English courses prescribed by the school boards and universities in the state of Punjab. One of the two central boards of school education, i.e. ICSE is the only board to include listening as a minor component of some of its English courses. Students of the schools affiliated to this board are subjected to some training as well as testing in listening in Grades IX and X. The two other boards (CBSE and PSEB), on the other hand, have failed to recognise its importance and have not made it even a minor component of their syllabi for English courses. Punjab also has 26 universities which impart higher education in Humanities, Languages, Business Studies, Sciences, Medical Science, and Engineering etc. Out of these, three universities; i.e. Punjabi University, Patiala; Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar and Punjab University, Chandigarh provide affiliation to degree colleges which offer undergraduate courses in various streams. The universities also do not make any provision for training or testing of listening skill in undergraduate courses in which a very large number of students are enrolled. The universities while designing syllabi for these courses assume that the students having completed their schooling are well-equipped with this skill. This assumption on part of the universities deprives the learners of an important opportunity to receive training in listening. Majority of students in degree colleges (particularly in rural and semi urban areas) are those who had remained deprived of exposure to the language in their schools as well as in families and social surroundings. Lack of exposure and absence of training have resulted in limited development of communicative

competence among these students, rendering them incapable of putting language to actual use.

In the context of the present study, it was considered mandatory to ascertain the existing level of competence of target learners with regard to four language skills in order to design a useful tool course for them. There are no examination scores available to frame any observations about existing competence level of students regarding their listening competence; leaving the task of assessment entirely to the investigator.

### **Test Administered**

A listening test comprising four different tasks containing a variety of questions to test listening comprehension of target learners was administered to 240 students of undergraduate courses (from different streams) from eight degree colleges affiliated to Punjabi University, Patiala. The colleges were selected from diverse backgrounds (rural, semi-urban, and urban) in order to make the samples representative. Three important elements; the listening stimuli, the questions, and the test environment were carefully considered while designing and administering the test. The audio inputs were recorded in the voice of Indian speakers. Questions 1 to 13(Task-1) were aimed at testing listening for 'details'; 14 to 21(Task-2) for 'attitudes and opinions'; 22 to 41(Task-3) for 'sequence'; and 42 to 45 (Task- 4) for 'vocabulary and main idea'. However, it was expected that a task designed to frame observations about one particular aspect of listening would provide relevant inputs regarding other aspects also. Following is the list of colleges from which learners were selected to take the test by using the random sampling procedure:

1. Akal Degree College, Mastuana Sahib
2. Govt. College, Gobindgarh
3. Govt. College, Mohali
4. Govt. College, Ropar
5. Multani Mal Modi College, Patiala
6. Public College, Samana
7. S.D. KanyaMahavidyalaya, Mansa
8. University Constituent College, Ghanaur

The test was administered with the following objectives:

- i) To make a quantitative assessment of the performance of the test takers from various boards.
- ii) To make a qualitative assessment of the performance of the test takers from various boards.

- iii) To identify specific aspects of listening which the students are most deficient in, so that relevant practice tasks could be designed.

#### Rationale behind the tasks

The rationale behind these tasks which were especially designed and recorded in the voice of Indian speakers was that the test takers would find the experience of doing a listening task interesting and would not be intimidated by the pronunciation and accent of the speakers. Two of the four tasks were in dialogue form which the test takers were expected to find close to life. Another task contained a short text which was quite similar to a story the test takers were expected to be familiar with. Only one task was analytical in nature and contained information which the test takers were expected to be not familiar with. It was easy-to-administer test for the entry level undergraduate students.

Keeping in mind all the variables that determine the listening competence of a non native speaker, as discussed above it was not possible to find a single criterion to assess the existing level of listening competence of test takers. The listening tasks were aimed at testing abilities of the test takers regarding speed, memory, identification of sounds, co-ordination and interpretation of visual information provided in the spoken text and their ability to identify an idea hidden in the given text. 45 questions were put to the test takers and they were awarded one point for each correct answer. On the basis of points which they scored, the test takers were placed in five stages. Those who scored less than 16 points were placed in Stage I; and those who scored between 17 and 25, 26 and 34, 35-40, and 41 to 45 points were put in Stages II, III, IV and V respectively. Following is a tabular representation of the criterion.

Table 1

Criterion for Division of Performance of Test Takers into Five Stages

Stage	Percentage Level	Points
Stage-1	< 35%	0-16
Stage-2	36%-55%	17-25
Stage-3	56%-75%	26-34
Stage-4	76%-90%	35-40
Stage-5	>90%	41-45

The above table represents five stages in which the test takers were placed on the basis of points/percentage which they scored in the test.

Following table shows the placement of the test takers from various school boards in different stages on the basis of their performance in the test

Table 2

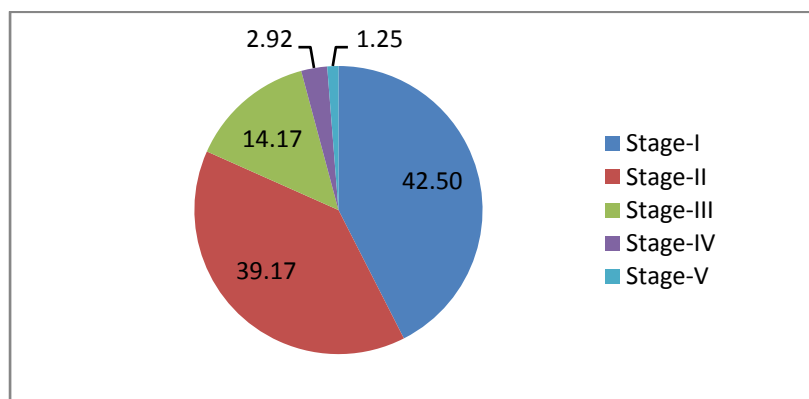
Placement of Test Takers from Different Boards in Five Stages

Stages	I	II	III	IV	V
Name of the Board	(102)	(94)	(34)	(07)	(03)
PSEB (173)	88	66	19	00	00
CBSE (61)	12	25	14	07	03
Other Boards (06)	02	03	01	00	00

The above table shows the placement of test takers in different stages on the basis of points scored by them in the test.

The results shown in the table may also be represented with the help of a pie chart

Chart 1 Performance of Test Takers represented in percentile form



The above pie-chart shows the performance of test takers (from all boards) in percentile form

### Discussion of Results

As is evident from the above table and the pie chart, a large number of test takers could only manage to reach Stages I and II representing the two lowest levels of competence. They were able to correctly answer most of the questions that elicited responses either in numerical forms or in monosyllables. For example, in Task-I, majority of students successfully answered questions 2-8 in which they were required to fill in information gaps with a number, monosyllabic word or commonly used words such as 'car', 'snacks' (wrongly spelt by a number of students) etc. Most students were unable to correctly grasp the pronunciation of certain words. Following examples from the responses of the students corroborate the above observations:

1. The word 'Farmington' in question (1) was understood as 'Formatting', 'Formation', 'Fortunate', 'Formality', 'For meeting', 'Ferment', 'Formunted', 'Forget' etc.
2. The word 'Teddy' in question (9) was understood as 'Daddy'. Some of the test takers spelt 'Teddy' as 'Tedi', 'Tedy', 'Taddi', indicating their inability to correctly spell even common words
3. The word 'coffee' was understood as 'copy', or 'Toffi' (written as 'Tofi').
4. The word 'Trekking' was understood as 'Treating', 'Tracing' etc.
5. The word 'snack' was understood by many as 'snake', 'snail', 'snaps' etc.
6. A few students in Stage I failed to correctly understand even common words such as 'car', filling in 'cards', 'cart' and 'can' etc.

The students in these two stages were also found to be at loss while answering 'yes-no type' questions 11-13. Many students opted not to answer these questions and several others were observed answering them randomly at the end of the test. In Task-2 which was aimed at assessing their interpretive skills and overall listening comprehension, these tests takers could only answer questions which were to be answered in numbers. One question which was to be answered in a familiar phrase 'better job' was answered correctly, whereas another question which was to be answered in a phrase 'the tax payer' confused some of the test takers who spelt the phrase such as 'text pair' or 'text pare'. They appeared to be unfamiliar with the phrase, but familiar with the two individual words in the phrase 'tax and 'payer'. The two similar sounding words created confusion while spelling them, but it is very likely that the spellings they wrote; i.e. 'pair' and 'pare' meant 'two' and not 'the one who pays'. Task-3 also was in the form of a dialogue, putting the memory, speed, existing knowledge of the test takers and their ability to phonetically decode to test. In this task also, the test takers performed better while answering questions in numbers, monosyllables or in words which they were familiar with. For example, they could correctly write the model number of an appliance, address, phone number and email address, but when the answers contained words such as 'warranty' and 'Bekalite', or phrases such as 'fan speed', 'heating position' and 'disconnect the wire', the students could only manage responses such as following:

1. The word 'warranty' was understood as 'worried', 'poverty', 'vanity', and 'vurnty'.
2. The word 'Bekalite' was not understood by majority of test takers who attempted the 'fill- in- the- gap' questions by writing inappropriate words such as 'back build', 'backlight' and 'backlide'.
3. In the phrase 'heating position', they replaced the word 'heating' with 'meeting' or 'eating'.

4. The word 'Thermostat' was understood as 'thermostand', 'thermometer', 'conversat' or 'colstamate' etc.
5. The phrase 'swing stand' was understood as 'swing stone' and 'semi stand'.

Besides such phonetic problems which the test takers faced, the researcher could also observe the anxiety among the respondents who appeared to know the words quite closely but could not spell them correctly. The ability to memorise and cope up with the speed of the speaker proved to be another weak aspect of their skill as they could hardly respond to the questions, the answers to which contained common words such as 'curtains', 'furniture' and 'inflammable objects' in a quick sequence. In such situations, they could write only the first or the first two words; completely missing out on the third and fourth words. In Task-4, the test takers were required to answer certain questions after listening to a short spoken text; putting the memory, speed and overall comprehension of the respondents to test. Majority of the test takers failed to answer questions 42-45 satisfactorily; either forgetting the information contained in the text or failing to compose the answers effectively. The results of these two stages have been discussed together as the responses of the test takers indicated them as possessing almost similar skills, though to somewhat varied degrees.

The students in the Stages III and IV appeared to possess listening competence which can be taken to a level of near perfection if they are imparted training and provided practice to cope up with the pace of the speaker and build memory. These test takers nearly successfully answered the questions contained in Tasks 1 and 2 which were designed to find out their ability to understand details and to interpret the visual information. This group could only not correctly respond to those questions in Task-3, the answers to which appeared in the text that was spoken at a very quick pace; e.g. questions 29, 34, 35, and 36. In Task-4 also, these test takers exhibited lack of focus and capacity to retain as they could not recall information to answer questions 44 and 45 despite the piece of text being similar to a very popular short story.

The test takers placed in Stage V performed to near perfection, hardly missing out on one or two questions, the type of which is difficult to specify. The occasional errors committed by them appeared to be random in nature. These test takers appeared to possess knowledge of semantics, syntax, as well as phonetic coding ability. They also seem to have mastered the sub skills of listening such as memory, focus, and speed, etc.

## **Conclusion**

As mentioned earlier, the assessment of a language competence test must determine whether the scores attained by the students indicate the extent to which the goals of a curriculum have been achieved or not. In the present case, however, the tasks which were administered were not part of any prescribed course with specific instructional plans as developing listening as a skill has been completely ignored by curriculum designers at school and university level. It can be clearly observed from the tasks and from the type of questions that pin pointing the aspects of listening which the learners are most deficient in, is nearly impossible. To derive such information, periodic formative assessment done over a period of time to precisely diagnose whether a learner needs to improve his phonetic ability, memory, speed, interpretive skills or some other aspect is required. As all the aspects of listening are intricately related to each other, it was considered pertinent to assess their overall performance in order to develop the proposed tool course. The learners from the two central boards appear to benefit to some extent because of use of English as medium of instruction for other subjects. Moreover, the overall environment of these schools where the learners are encouraged to use English as the medium of communication also goes to their advantage. In comparison, the students from the state-run board neither get instruction for other subjects in English, nor do they get any opportunity to communicate in English with teachers or peers, or in their social surroundings. The situation worsens for them since after their schooling, the universities also completely ignore the development of this skill.

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