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Chapter **One**

What is listening?

At the end of the chapter, you should be able to:

Goals

- ✓ **state** your own definition of listening.
- ✓ **explain** the term *active listening*.
- ✓ **understand** the terms *top-down* and *bottom-up processing*.
- ✓ **identify** the stages of a listening lesson.
- ✓ **identify** types of listening.
- ✓ **understand** principles of assessment.

1. Introduction

The aim of this book is to help you effectively teach listening to students of **English as a Second Language** or **English as a Foreign Language (ESL or EFL)**. We hope to share with you practical information about how ESL and EFL listening works and how you can teach it effectively. In a sense, we'd like to invite you into our own classrooms to see how our students learn, and share the ideas behind what we are doing as teachers. To lay the foundation for that, this chapter will introduce a few key concepts about listening and how to teach it. We will look at several definitions of listening. Next, we will consider approaches to listening, stressing that, although listening is a **receptive skill**, it is also a very active one. We will then consider **direction of processing**—how people try to make sense of what they hear. This is followed by a section on teaching listening which stresses tasks and the types of listening learners need experience with. Finally, we will consider ways to assess learners' listening abilities and progress.

Reflection



What have you listened to today? Write at least nine things. List different types of things you've listened to.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Of course, every day you listen to a variety of different things. How you listen and what you do when you listen depends on your purpose. Throughout this chapter, we'll come back to the list of things you have actually listened to today.

2. What is listening?

Because it is something we do every day, listening seems simple. Yet, when one is listening in a second or foreign language, we can see more easily how complex listening really is. Let's start by looking at some definitions of listening.

- “Listening is an active, purposeful processing of making sense of what we hear” (Helgesen, 2003, p. 24).
- (Listening is the) “mental process of constructing meaning from spoken input” (Rost, 2002, p. 279).
- “Listening comprehension (is) the process of understanding speech in a first or second language. The study of listening comprehension in second language learning focuses on the role of individual linguistic units (e.g., **phonemes**, words, grammatical structures) as well as the role of the listener's expectations, the situation and context, background knowledge and topic” (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, p. 313).
- “[L]istening is conceived of as an active process in which listeners select and interpret information which comes from auditory and visual clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express” (Rubin, 1995, p. 7).

Reflection



1. Look at the definitions of listening above. Which characteristics seem to be in more than one definition?
2. If you had written a definition for listening before you read the definitions above, which characteristics would you have included? How would you revise that definition now?

Notice that the definitions for listening all use words like *active* and *construct*. It is clear that the listener is doing more than simply decoding what is heard. Rubin completes her definition by saying that *active* means listeners get information (from visual and auditory clues) and relate this information to what they already know. *Select* means that in the process of making sense of the **input**, listeners use only part of the incoming information. *Interpret* means that in trying to make sense of the input, listeners use their background knowledge as well as the new information to decipher what is going on and to figure out what speakers intend.

3. Approaches to listening

We listen to many things every day. We hear even more. What's the difference? In this section, we'll start by considering the differences between listening and hearing, an essential concept in teaching listening.

Action



1. Think about the following sentences. What do *listen* and *hear* mean in each?
 - a. Listen to me.
 - b. I like talking to her because she's a great listener.
 - c. A: What was that noise?
B: I didn't hear anything.
 - d. A: I'm tired. Let's take a break.
B: I hear you.
 - e. I need to go upstairs for a minute. Could you listen for the doorbell?
 - f. Radio station testimonial/advertisement: "I hear you guys everywhere, even when I don't listen."
2. How are *listening* and *hearing* different, both in these sentences and your own understanding of the words? Write your answers below.

Characteristics of *listening*: _____

Characteristics of *hearing*: _____

Listening vs. hearing

Most people's answers to the Action box above will include the fact that a listener is an active partner in the listening process. When your alarm clock goes off in the morning, you hear it whether you want to or not. If it's a special day—one where you wake up before your alarm—you may lie in bed, listening for it. Then you get up. Or say you are cooking in the kitchen and the TV is on in the background. Are you listening to it or just hearing it? It depends on how much attention you are paying to it. You may just hear it, but when something important comes on—the weather or news, perhaps—you actually listen. The point is that listening is a very active skill. It requires the active attention—and an active intention—on the part of the hearer.

This recognition of listening as an **active skill** is relatively new. For years, people thought of listening and reading as **passive skills** while speaking and writing were active skills. Indeed, until the late 1970s, not much attention was paid to ESL and EFL listening at all. Prior to that, if it was thought about at all, listeners were thought of as *human tape recorders*: They took in a bit of

information, held it in a sort of medium-term memory, and used it. We now recognize that listening is much more complex than that. Listeners are actively paying attention and working on understanding and interpreting what they hear.

Instead of thinking of listening as passive, it is useful to understand it, along with reading, as a receptive skill. This is in contrast with speaking and writing, which are **productive skills**. It is an important distinction. As we'll see, we can often understand language we couldn't possibly produce. This will have major implications when we look at teaching listening and the nature of listening tasks. For now, however, it is enough just to note the difference in receptive and productive levels. If you've ever studied a foreign language or traveled abroad, you've probably experienced being able to understand things that you can't actually say. Or, if you've watched a film in a variety of English that you don't speak or haven't studied, you've heard and understood a dialect even though you would find it difficult to say exactly what you heard, using the exact words and expressions. What you are noticing is the difference between receptive and productive language.

Reflection



Go back to the items you listed in the Reflection box on page 2.

1. Which of the items were *listening*? Which were *hearing*?
2. If all the things you listed were *listening*, can you add other things that you heard but didn't have to listen to or for?
3. What, if anything, did you do in response to each item you listed? Which required a productive response from you? Which only required reception (understanding)?

Another way to think about listening is the distinction between **reciprocal listening** and **non-reciprocal listening**. Reciprocal listening is between people. When we have conversations, we listen to each other, add our ideas, and give feedback (like the **back channel** phrases *Uh huh* and *Really?*). Non-reciprocal listening is the kind of listening we're familiar with from language classes. The teacher plays an audio recording and students do a task, or the teacher dictates and students write. A lot of listening in language textbooks is really eavesdropping ("CIA English") where students are overhearing a conversation between other people. Lectures fall somewhere between reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening, though most of the time they are non-reciprocal. Some very active lecturers may have an interactive style and students may be encouraged, or required, to respond with their own ideas, or answer questions.

4. Listening in action

Top-down vs. bottom-up processing

Anything we hear, of course, can be **input**. To go back to our hearing/listening distinction, there's a lot we hear but do not pay attention (listen) to. When we do pay attention, we begin to process the input. To understand listening, we have to consider how people process this input. A useful way of looking at this is by considering **bottom-up** and **top-down processing** (Rumelhart, 1977; Flowerdew and Miller, 2005).

Bottom-up processing is trying to make sense of what we hear by focusing on the different parts: the vocabulary, the grammar or **functional phrases**, sounds, etc. Top-down processing, on the other hand, starts with background knowledge called **schema**. This can be content schema (general knowledge based on life experience and previous learning) or textual schema (knowledge of language and content used in a particular situation: the language you need at a bank is different than what you need when socializing with friends).

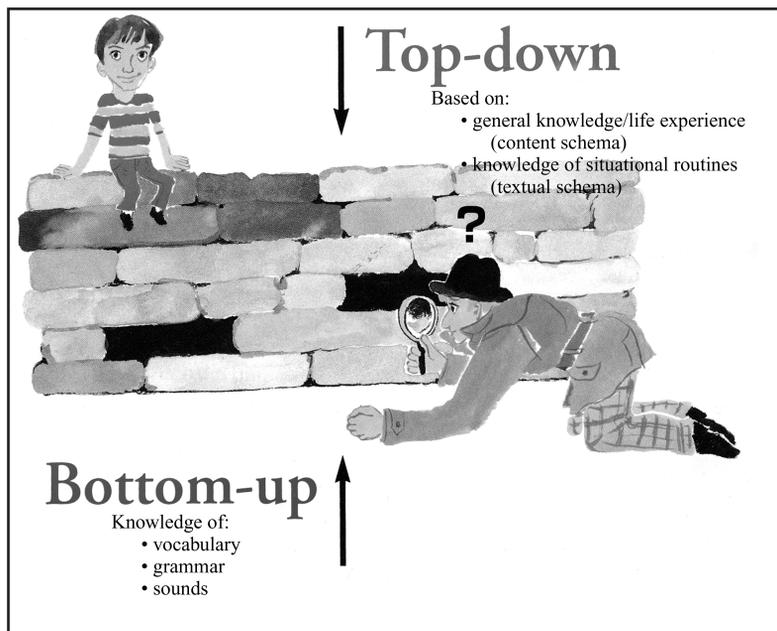


Figure 1: Bottom-up and top-down processing

To understand this more easily, consider the metaphor in Figure 1. Imagine a brick wall. If you are at the bottom of the wall, looking at it brick-by-brick like the detective in the picture, it is easy to see all the

parts. However, it is difficult to get a good, overall view of the wall. And when you get to a missing brick (to take the metaphor a step further—an unknown word or a new piece of grammar), there is nothing to focus on.

If, on the other hand, you are sitting on the top of the wall, you are looking in a different direction. You have a good view of the landscape. You see what is going on. Of course, you miss a lot of details because of the distance, but you generally understand the scene. You don't even notice the bricks in the wall that are supporting you, and your view is very different than that of the person looking at the parts.

It is not surprising that many learners tend to listen to a foreign language “bottom-up.” In school, we often teach based on the “building blocks” of word and structures. Students, who have a less than complete knowledge of the new language, grab for the pieces they understand. Unfortunately, the results can be frustrating.



Read the passage below. Then write a title for it.

Title: _____

Sally first tried setting loose a team of gophers. The plan backfired when a dog chased them away.

She then entertained a group of teenagers and was delighted when they brought their motorcycles.

Unfortunately, she failed to find a Peeping Tom listed in the Yellow Pages.

The crabgrass might have worked, but she didn't have a fan that was sufficiently powerful.

The obscene phone calls gave her hope until the number was changed.

She thought about calling a door-to-door salesman but decided to hang up a clothesline instead.

It was the installation of blinking neon lights across the street that did the trick. She eventually framed the ad from the classified section.

(Stein and Albridge, 1978, cited in Richards, 1990, p. 52)

As you were reading, you likely had a series of unrelated pictures flash through your mind: gophers, motorcyclists, a clothesline, a phone book, etc. But you probably had difficulty coming up with a title because you didn't know—and couldn't figure out—the context. You were reading bottom-up, trying to understand the whole by only looking at the parts. You probably felt the frustration of this one-way type of processing—it was like looking at bricks but not seeing the landscape. If you had known the topic—*Getting rid of a troublesome neighbor*—it would have made sense. As you read that topic a moment ago, everything probably started to make sense. You could imagine that all these things were actions that could be taken to get someone to move

away. Students who are putting too much reliance on figuring out all the pieces of what they hear are likely to experience the same frustration that you felt reading the “Sally” passage. You likely understood all the words. When learners don’t understand, they often figure it is a vocabulary problem. No doubt vocabulary is essential to learning language, but it is not the only issue. With listening, the way they are thinking about what they hear is important.

While over-reliance on “bottom-up” processing can get listeners into trouble, so can the opposite.

Action



Read the passage below. As you do, ask yourself:

- What do I imagine the scene is like?
- What do I think will happen next?

When I first came to Japan, I met a British teacher working at the same school as I. He told me about his first summer in Japan. Japan is really hot. Very hot and humid. One day, he was sitting at home.

- What is the scene like?
- What will happen next?

So, he’s sitting at home and he hears a song coming mechanically from the speakers of a truck. The song was “Camptown Races.” It was kind of like it was played with bells.

“Great,” my friend said.

- What is the scene like?
- What will happen next?

“Great,” my friend said. “An ice cream truck.”

He walked out on the street and sure enough, there was a truck: A garbage truck. He didn’t know that in parts of Japan, garbage trucks play a melody to let people know that they had come, and people could come out and pick up their garbage cans.

As you read, did you make the same assumption as the teacher? If you come from a culture where music from a truck signals ice cream, you might easily have made the same misinterpretation. Or, if mechanical music from the street indicates something else in your culture, you might have made a different assumption. Whatever assumption you made, you based it on your own schema—your knowledge and expectations of a particular situation.

As you can see, putting too much focus on either bottom-up or top-down processing leads to misunderstanding. One of your jobs as a listening teacher is to help your students learn to balance the two kinds of processing.

Reflection



1. Read this true story that happened to me a few years ago. As you do, notice how top-down and bottom-up information mix to help the listener understand what is being asked.

Visiting Rome, I was in the courtyard in front of St. Peter's Basilica. A woman came up and asked me something in Italian, a language I don't know. I looked at her with a puzzled expression. She asked a question again, this time simplifying it to one word, "Cappella?" I didn't know what she meant but repeated, "Cappella?" She asked again, "Cappella Sistina?" Then I understood that she wanted to know if the big church in front of us was the "Sistine Chapel." I replied, "No, San Pietro." (I did know the Italian name of St. Peter's.) I pointed to a building on the right side of the courtyard and said "Sistine." She smiled, said "grazie," and walked off toward the Sistine Chapel.

2. When was I using top-down processing? When was it bottom-up?
3. Have you experienced trying to communicate in another language? What problems did you have? Can you think of ways in which top-down or bottom-up information helped you understand?

What happened in the short interaction described in the Reflection box was a combination of bottom-up and top-down processing. Recognizing the single word "Sistine" told me that "cappella" must mean "chapel." We were standing in front of buildings. She was asking a question about places. My top-down knowledge of what people might talk about—especially to strangers—said that she must be asking for directions. With a friend, you might comment on the size of the buildings or their beauty or something else, but with a stranger, asking for directions or asking someone to take a picture seem the only likely topics. Using both bottom-up data (the word "Sistine") and the top-down data (likely language function), I was able to understand what she wanted.

5. Teaching listening

A listening lesson often has three parts: pre-listening, listening task, and post-listening (optional). In this section, we will examine each part and the reasons they are important.

Pre-listening

A teacher rarely walks into class, puts a CD or DVD in the machine, says “Listen,” and hits the start button. Just as you need to stretch your muscles and warm up before exercising, your students need to warm-up their non-native language skills before doing an exercise. A “pre-listening” warm-up task is more than just an introduction to the topic, although that aspect of it is important. Pre-listening is how we can help learners achieve the balance between top-down and bottom-up processing. In many warm-up activities, learners do tasks to “activate their schemata” (the plural form of schema)—essentially reminding themselves of content related to what they will hear as well as vocabulary and, at times, forms that will carry the content. When learners use both top-down and bottom-up processing, this is called **interactive processing** (Peterson, 2001).

Example 1

5

UNIT

I'm not sure what it's called.

Goals

- Understanding descriptions of everyday objects
- Understanding vague descriptions

1

A Label the pictures with the items below, then write a word to complete each definition.



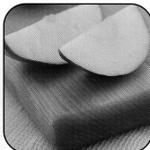














Item	It's used for . . .
frying pan	making _____
corkscrew	opening _____
chopsticks	picking up _____
kettle	boiling _____

Item	It's used for . . .
can opener	opening cans of _____
potholder	holding hot _____
spatula	flipping _____ in a pan.
cutting board	cutting _____

Listen In, Book 3 (Nunan, 2003, p. 28)

Example 1 shows two kinds of schema activation. In the main listening task, students will hear conversations about objects and their uses. They probably don't know the English names for some of the objects. They probably will be able to focus on the uses of the items to understand what is being talked about. In Example 1, students see pictures of eight items. The vocabulary is provided but not defined at the bottom of the page. Students must match the picture and the label. So, now they have the names for the items (word level, bottom-up knowledge). Then students have to finish the definitions with their own examples. These examples, of course, come from their own experience and world knowledge (content and concept level, top-down knowledge). In the process, they generate vocabulary and the grammatical forms that will later carry the information for the main listening task. Notice how clues are embedded. "Spatula" may be an unknown word. The clue "flipping ___ in a pan" can focus the learners' attention on the spatula. If they look at the other pictures, they will notice that most of the items are not used for flipping things.

Listening tasks

Traditional listening materials often had learners listen to a **text**—in teaching listening, any listening passage is referred to as a text. After they listen, the learners answer some comprehension questions. There are a number of problems with this approach. First of all, in real life, we almost always know why we are listening to something. When the comprehension questions follow a listening text, the learner may not know what to listen for. Also, when questions are answered after listening to the text, and learners get the answers wrong, you don't know if it was because they didn't understand, they understood but forgot, they were focusing on something else so understood the wrong part of the text, or if there was some other problem.

Using tasks when teaching listening gets you away from these problems. Tasks imply that one is listening for a purpose. Sometimes we want to catch very specific information. At other times, we are listening in a more general, global way. Still other times, we have to make inferences. That is, we are listening for meaning that is given or implied, but not stated directly.

Look at Example 2 on page 12. As you can see, the text (found on the audio CD or in Appendix 2 on page 162) can be used for several different listening tasks. In Task 1, the learners are listening for the main idea. Although both the doctor and the school are mentioned, the main point of the conversation is school. This type of listening task is called **global listening** or **listening for gist**.



Example 2

CD Track 1

Try it again. Two friends are talking on the telephone.
Each time you listen, think about the information you need.

1 Listening for the main idea

Listen. What is the most important idea?
Check (✓) your answer.



going to the doctor



school

2 Listening for specific information

Listen. Which page numbers should she read?
Write the page numbers.

_____ and _____

**3** Listening “between the lines”

Listen again. Did both students go to school today?
Check (✓) your answer.



Yes

No

You heard the same conversation three times.
Each time, you listened for different reasons.
Always think about why you are listening.

Active Listening 1 (Helgesen and Brown, 1995, p. 5)

In Task 2, the learners need to remember the pages that are the homework. The learners are **listening for specific information**.

In Task 3, the learners are **making inferences**—listening between the lines. They never actually hear that Joan was not at school today, but it can be understood from the situation.

Of course, just having the learners aware of the task before they listen improves comprehension and success—they are aware of their task, so are less likely to engage in random listening.

Action



1. Go back to the Reflection box on page 2.
2. Look at the things you listened to.
When were you listening for specific information? Write “S” next to the line.
When were you listening for gist/general understanding? Write “G”.
Were there cases where you had to infer meaning? Write “I”.
Were there other purposes? How would you identify your purposes? Write a description (examples: enjoyment, entertainment).

Share your answers with a classmate or colleague.

Of course, when we listen, we are usually combining different types of listening. Your global understanding of a situation may help you pick out specific bits of information. Catching specific details may help you follow the gist. **Inferencing** usually happens when you are listening for some other purpose and the content doesn’t state the information explicitly.



To demonstrate how critical the nature of the listening task is in being able to catch necessary information, try this. You will listen to a short text in Korean. Even if you don't understand Korean, you will be able to do the task.

Seoul is now served by Incheon International Airport, one of the most modern in the world. Before this new airport opened, people used Gimpo Airport. Gimpo had three terminals, two international and one domestic. A shuttle bus traveled among the three. Imagine you are on that shuttle bus. You need to find out which terminal the airline you want is in.

You will hear the announcement on the shuttle bus. Before you listen, decide which airline you are looking for.

Check (✓) your choice

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asiana | <input type="checkbox"/> China |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Garuda Indonesia | <input type="checkbox"/> Japan Airlines |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Singapore | <input type="checkbox"/> Swiss |



CD Tracks 2 and 3

Now listen to CD Track 2. The bus is approaching a terminal. Will you get off at this stop? Check your answer.

- Yes No

Now listen to CD Track 3 (English) to check your answer.

Unless you understand Korean, you were experiencing this the way a person who is a complete beginner has to try to listen for specific information. You anticipated the information you needed by choosing the airline. Then you listened, not to understand everything and use what you needed, but rather to pick out the keywords you needed—Asiana, Garuda Indonesia, or Swiss. Going back to our brick wall metaphor, it was as if you ignored most of the bricks and only picked out a few necessary ones.

Notice that the specificity of the task allowed you to do it as you listened. If you had a task that required more production—for example, to write down the names of the airlines you understood—it would have been much more difficult.



Example 3

CD Track 4

2 LISTENING/GLOBAL INTERVIEWS: *Have you ever been abroad?*

A. **FIRST LISTENING.** Where has each person visited? Check (✓) the countries.

	Australia	Brazil	Canada	Chile	China	England	Japan	Korea	Morocco
1. Marco									
2. Minhee									
3. Ana									

B. **SECOND LISTENING.** Match the people with what they did and what they said.

	What did the person do?	What did the person say?
1. Marco 	 took the wrong train	"It was very uncomfortable."
2. Minhee 	 rode a camel	"There wasn't anything I could do, so I just relaxed."
3. Ana 	 skated to university	"It beats the traffic in São Paulo." <div style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 5px; width: fit-content;"> IDIOM It beats . . . = It's better than . . . </div>

C. **PAIR UP and TALK.** What was your most interesting travel experience?

ICON 1 (Freeman, Graves, and Lee, 2005, p. 63)

Generally, listening tasks are completed as the students listen. Look at and listen to the audio for Example 3. Notice that the tasks are quite simple. The first time the learners listen, they simply check the countries the stu-

dents on the audio program have visited. Then they listen again. This time they match speakers, activities, and comments. Note that the learners never have to spend a lot of time writing long answers. Longer answers have a place at higher levels, but it is important for learners to be able to focus on their listening skills. Also, since we know listening is receptive, the learners' responses should not involve a lot of production.



Example 4

CD Track 5

▶ Good News, Bad News 

1 Listen to the story. Then check (✓) the best summary.

It's about a man who escaped from prison by helicopter.



It's about two men who escaped from prison by helicopter.

It's about a woman who escaped from prison by helicopter.

2 Before you listen again, try to number the pictures in the order the events happened. Then listen and check your work.



A.



B.



C.



D.



E.



F.

Before we discuss Example 4, listen to the audio and do the exercises. Example 4 shows two different types of tasks, both of which are in the general category of global listening. First, students hear a short news story. They identify the correct summary. Then they look at six pictures. Before they listen again, they number the pictures to show the sequence of the story. Then they listen again to confirm their guesses. In the process of guessing before they listen, they have to really look at all six pictures and notice what is happening in each. This allows them to activate their schemata. Some teachers take this a step further by having students do the task in pairs. Students say what they think is happening in each picture. This encourages the activation of vocabulary for the ideas/actions shown in the pictures. Also, since they have made a guess as to what they think happened, most learners are more motivated to really pay attention when they listen again to see if they are right.

Note that the learners hear the same recording twice. In her classic book on teaching listening, *Teaching Listening Comprehension* (1984), Penny Ur points out what she calls “the apparent need of the foreign-language learner to perceive and comprehend everything he hears, even though he would not do so in his native language.” She goes on to suggest that the “learner who tries to understand every single word...will be handicapped both by his failure to do so...and his success” (p. 14). This means if learners don’t catch everything, they are frustrated and if they do, they are listening in a way that doesn’t help since they don’t “ignore or *skim* unimportant items” (p. 15).

Giving learners an additional task allows them to hear something a second time, therefore understanding more of it, but they are listening for a different purpose. Nunan (1999) calls this “progressively structured” listening instruction. It helps to deal with the need Ur mentions while increasing task awareness.

The listening task in Example 3 (page 15) is followed by a cloze (fill-in-the-blanks) activity. This task gives learners a chance to work with listening for specific information. It also makes sure they have had practice with both top-down and bottom-up listening.

Post-listening

The range of post-listening activities is at least as wide as listening tasks themselves. At times, post-listening may be as simple as checking the answers to comprehension questions, either by the teacher telling the learners what the correct answers are, by eliciting answers from the students themselves, or by having students compare their answers in pairs or small groups.

Sometimes, that’s all teachers have time for, or all that the curriculum requires. It is useful to note that, although listening is a separate skill, most skills are not and should not be taught entirely separately. Speaking activities where learners talk to each other require listening as well and, very often, post-listening activities are speaking tasks. Look at Example 3 again (p. 15).

The final step, “Pair up and Talk,” allows learners to personalize the activity. They talk about their own experiences, using the listening text as a model.

After Example 4 (page 16), students do a pair work activity thematically tied to a prison escape (not shown). They draw an escape plan on a map and describe it to a partner who tries to follow the directions.

These kinds of activities not only help students learn by asking them to use and re-use the language they’ve heard, but they are motivating. They make the language real.

6. Assessing listening

Assessment is important both because as teachers we need to give grades and because we want to provide feedback (Brindley, 2003). Assessment is quite complex and means many things to many people. For example, every time learners do a task and successfully complete it, they are getting some feedback on their own. That’s a form of **self-assessment**. We can also provide specific tasks that help learners assess their own learning, and we will discuss some of those later in this book. We can also assess learners through non-traditional means. In this section, we’re going to look at formal assessment, because it’s both very important and often misunderstood. Formal classroom assessment—tests—should be similar to other things the learners have been doing in class. A basic principle of assessment is that it is only fair and useful to test what has been taught, so testing will often not be so different than the rest of a course.

Bailey (2005) identifies four key concepts in testing: **validity**, **reliability**, **practicality**, and **washback**.

Validity means that we are actually measuring what we are trying to measure. If, for example, we are doing a listening test that requires writing long answers, we may be testing writing rather than listening. If we test in a computer lab and some learners don’t know how to use computers, we could be testing their technical ability rather than their listening. Tests should test what has actually been taught.

Reliability means that test results are consistent. A person being evaluated at different times or by different people would get a similar score. If, for example, you are doing an interview test and, after a long day, tend to give lower or higher scores, that test is not reliable.

Practicality means that the demands of giving the test are reasonable. If you are interested in CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) but end up teaching in an undeveloped country without technology, computer-based tests wouldn’t be practical. If you are in a secondary school or university and have hundreds of students—not at all unusual in some countries—an interview test would probably not be practical.

Washback is the effect that the test has on what is taught and how it is taught. This can happen either by course content being included or excluded. If we emphasize listening in a course but only give a “paper and pencil” test that doesn’t involve listening, we devalue listening as an important part of the course. As Rost (2002, p. 173) points out, “If teaching is not consistent with testing, or if instruction provided doesn’t help them with test performance, students are dissatisfied. As a result, teachers begin ‘teaching for the test’ (even if they believe the test itself is invalid).”

Reflection



1. What is your experience with taking tests in foreign or second language classes? What different types of tests were used? Did they reflect what you had studied?
2. How did you prepare for the tests?
3. If you have visited a culture where a language you have studied is used, did the testing reflect the kind of language you would actually need to use?

Testing techniques

Throughout this book we’ll consider different testing techniques. As a preview, consider this list from Rost (2002). It outlines the major types of tests.

1. Discrete-item tests

- Multiple-choice questions following a listening text (responses scored right or wrong)
- Open questions following presentation of a listening text (questions scored on a scale of correctness and completeness)
- Standardized test scores (e.g., TOEFL® or TOEIC®)

2. Integrative tests

- Open summarizing of a listening text (scored on scales of accuracy and inclusion of facts and ideas)
- Cloze summarizing of a text (scored on correct completions of blanks)
- Dictation, complete or partial (score based on supplying the correct missing words)

3. Communicative tests

- Written communicative tasks involving listening (scored on the basis of successful completion of a task, such as writing a complaint letter after hearing a description of a problem)

4. Interview tests

- Face-to-face performances with the teacher or another student (scored based on a checklist of items, such as appropriate response to questions, appropriate use of clarification questions)
- Extended oral interview (scoring is keyed to a scale of native-like behaviors, such as the Foreign Service Institute scale)

5. Self-assessment

- Learner rates self on given criteria, via questionnaire
- Learner provides holistic assessment of own abilities via oral or written journal entries

6. Portfolio assessment

- Learner is observed and evaluated periodically throughout the course on behavior in tasks and other class activities: observations may be audio or videotaped
- Portfolio may include any or all of the above types of objective and subjective measures

One very important distinction in testing is the difference between **normative testing** and **criterion-referenced testing**. Norm-referenced tests (Figure 2) compare students to each other. Criterion-referenced tests (Figure 3, page 21) compare students to what they should have learned/achieved.

Some teachers mistakenly believe that grades for a course should form a bell curve: Most students, these teachers say, are average, so perhaps half ought to get Cs. Another 15% should be on each side of the peak, so they get Bs and Ds respectively. And only about 10% should get the top level As (and of course, their 10% counterparts at the other end of the spectrum fail).

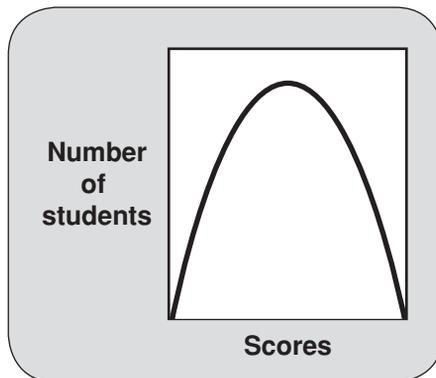


Figure 2: Norm-referenced tests