A proposal for assessing listening comprehension

Abstract
This paper is a proposal for assessing listening comprehension. It is based on Anderson’s (1983, 1985) comprehension theory that views listening comprehension as the construction of meaning on the basis of three interrelated processes: perceptual processing, parsing and utilization. The presenters will provide a practical model of how this theory can be put into practice in listening assessment tasks.

Listening comprehension is one of the skills that learners of a foreign language are intended to develop. In the context of a country like Argentina, where in most provinces, contact with native speakers of English is scarce, learners are exposed to authentic English, generally through just audio tapes and videos. The task the students confront while going through the process of comprehension is many a time a difficult and stressful one. They not only have to construct meaning but also to identify different voices and understand a variety of accents.

Anderson (1983, 1985) has identified three processes necessary for comprehension: perceptual processing, parsing and utilization. He claims that the processes involved in comprehending aural texts are considered similar to those involved in comprehending written texts. Although these two skills can be discussed as a common phenomenon as regards the mental processes involved, this presentation will only focus on the comprehension of aural texts.

Traditionally, listening activities have aimed at assessing comprehension by evaluating the product rather than the process of comprehension. These activities, common in textbooks, generally take the
form of listening and answering questions (very often just referential questions), answering true or false questions, completing sentences and filling in blanks. We believe that tasks that require the triggering of one of the three processes mentioned by Anderson at a time will be beneficial to construct meaning.

This presentation will describe the theoretical framework underlying the mental processes proposed by Anderson (1983, 1985) as necessary for the construction of meanings in aural comprehension. It will also provide sample activities to assess the product resulting from these processes in listening comprehension.

We have selected an upper-intermediate listening text to illustrate how the product of *perceptual processing*, *parsing* and *utilization* can be assessed. It should be remarked however, on the one hand, that these tasks can be adapted for use at all levels of proficiency; on the other, that the three processes in Anderson's theory are recursive. This means that the learner may have to go back to a previous stage when a flaw in comprehension takes place.

The first stage process in Anderson's theory, *perceptual processing*, focuses on parts of the text stored in short-term memory at the time of listening. While the information is in short-term memory, a preliminary analysis of the language code begins, he says. This leads to both the first meaningful representations and the first segmentations of the text on the part of the listener. In order to trigger the learner's perceptual analysis while listening, the teacher should direct the learner's attention towards those aspects of the context necessary for comprehension. This may be achieved by directing selective attention to, for example, pauses and acoustic emphases.

The assessment listening tasks we have designed for this stage are those in which the learner is asked to pay attention to the listening passage as a whole, contextual variables and to those features -such as background noise, pauses, interruptions, voice quality, passage length- that allow the
learner to get an initial mental representation of what the text is about. Activities catering for this level of processing should get the listener to concentrate on the acoustic prominence of the passage, not yet on meaning. In so doing they would enhance comprehension, in the same way as images and gestures would enhance comprehension of a video segment, or paragraph division, pictures and typography would enhance comprehension of a written text.

One of the tasks we suggest to assess the product of perceptual processing is the following:

**Answer the following questions:**

1. How many voices have you heard? Are those female or male voices?
2. What type of text do you think it is? A dialogue?, a narration? a public speech? a sermon?
4. Is the mood you identified in the previous question the same throughout the whole listening passage, or is there any change in mood? Justify your answer.

**Parsing** is the second stage comprehension process identified by Anderson (1983, 1985). At this level of processing, decoding is related to lexical access. The learner first decodes single words stored in short-term memory, and matches them to a mental lexicon stored in long-term memory in order to understand. However, because the basic unit of meaning is not the word, but the proposition\(^1\), the learner does not stop here, but continues the process of segmentation necessary for comprehension. The clue for this process, Anderson claims, is meaning, which is based on the syntactic, semantic and phonological features of the message. It is during this process

\(^1\) Proposition: Meaning representation of the sequence of words stored in long-term memory (Anderson, 1983).
of parsing when contracted forms, sentences and clause boundaries are recognized and decoded.

The tasks we suggest in order to assess the product of parsing are aimed at directing the learner’s attention to the understanding of strings of words heard as a continuum and then find a match with those words or “chunks” in his/her internal mental dictionary.

We are proposing activities catering for parsing at both levels, lexical and propositional. The following is an activity for parsing at lexical level.

Identify the actual phrases or words uttered by the speakers on tape. Tick the correct answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lucky escape</th>
<th>Lucky escape</th>
<th>Landscape</th>
<th>Landscape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a drink</td>
<td>a drink</td>
<td>a shrink</td>
<td>a shrink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>having a flight</td>
<td>having a flight</td>
<td>having a flight</td>
<td>having a flight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blokes and I tried</td>
<td>blokes and I tried</td>
<td>blokes in white ties</td>
<td>blokes in white ties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swing round</td>
<td>swing round</td>
<td>sing around</td>
<td>sing around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black eye</td>
<td>black eye</td>
<td>black art</td>
<td>black art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arrested them</td>
<td>arrested them</td>
<td>arrested them</td>
<td>raised them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the one</td>
<td>the one</td>
<td>the police</td>
<td>the police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was lucky</td>
<td>I was lucky</td>
<td>I was lacking</td>
<td>I was lacking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>damage</td>
<td>damage</td>
<td>Dammit</td>
<td>Dammit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>furious</td>
<td>furious</td>
<td>few riots</td>
<td>few riots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the police just</td>
<td>the police just</td>
<td>the police judged</td>
<td>the police judged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>charge them</td>
<td>charge them</td>
<td>judge them</td>
<td>judge them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>should have locked</td>
<td>should have locked</td>
<td>should have locked</td>
<td>should have locked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to the police</td>
<td>to the police</td>
<td>to please</td>
<td>to please</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this activity, the learner is asked to identify the exact words or phrases uttered by the speaker on tape. For this, the student is provided with pairs of phrases from which he/she has to identify the ones actually said (for example, “to the police” vs. “to please”). For a successful decoding of the utterance “I’m going down to the police station”, the learner will first need to identify word boundaries and then realize that the words “the police” were the
ones spoken on tape (against the option given in the task “to please”). To achieve this goal, the student must segment the stream of sound into words. In spoken language this is difficult to accomplish because “of the phenomenon whereby, in connected speech, one sound runs into the next” (Mc Donough and Shaw, 1996, p. 133). During the process of word segmentation or after it, and aided by the semantic information processed so far, the learner will have to decide in favor of one option only, in our example “to the police”.

As mentioned above, parsing should also be assessed at the level of propositional decoding. To accomplish this aim, we suggest the following:

- Say whether the following statements are true or false according to the information you have heard on tape.

1. The speaker started a fight at a local pub.
2. The speaker was with two youths at the pub.
3. The speaker did not get hurt.
4. Only the two youths were arrested by the police.
5. The speaker might have been seriously wounded.
6. The two youths were under age.
7. The speaker was angry with the police.

As the learner listens to the passage, he/she will start making meaningful representations of what is being said: “...”[these representations are] then integrated with the meaning of other propositions to form a more comprehensive understanding of the text” (Gagné, 1985, in O´Malley and Chamot, 1990, p. 35). In order to complete the task above, the learner should segment both the lexical items and the propositions heard, construct his or her own representations of the meaningful sequence, and check those representations against the written statements provided in the task.

The third mental process identified by Anderson (1983, 1985) for comprehending aural texts is utilization. This process is key to comprehension. At this processing level the learner relates “a mental
representation of the text meaning to declarative knowledge in long-term memory... in terms of either propositions or schemata” (Anderson, 1985). In order to construct meaning, the learner will resort to two types of declarative knowledge: real world knowledge and linguistic knowledge (Richards 1983), that is knowledge about the world, facts and experiences, and knowledge of word meanings and syntactic rules, respectively. In the process of utilization, “nodes in long-term memory that have a meaningful connection with the new information that has been parsed” are activated (Anderson, 1985).

An activity we suggest to assess the product of the mental process called utilization is the following:

Listen to the tape and answer the following questions:
1. What is the text about?
2. How many people were involved in the conflict?
3. What role did the police play?
4. Was the speaker satisfied with the action taken by the police a few days later? Why or why not?
5. Why did the speaker consider he had a lucky escape?

In order to answer these questions, the learner should be able to match the mental representations he/she has been elaborating so far, to his/her mental schemata. At this stage, the mental processes involved are those requiring the use of higher-level skills, such as inferencing, hypothesizing, analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and so forth.

It is not just by pen and pencil tasks that all the three processes can be assessed, quite on the contrary. Both practice and assessment tasks should preferably take different formats: oral meaningful and/or communicative activities and hands-on activities like drawing pictures, playing games, performing physical actions, etc.

To conclude, in order to assess listening comprehension in a more effective way, we have suggested the implementation of listening tasks based on the three mental processes identified by Anderson (1985). If the construction of meaning is the aim sought, then evaluation tasks triggering
comprehension processes that progress through these three stages, we believe, will provide a better picture of where learners’ strengths and weaknesses lie. It should also be pointed out that the assessment methodology here proposed should also be used as a teaching methodology. Teachers using these tasks for assessing should get the students familiar with this methodology through systematic practice in class.

References

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