Creating Academic Lectures to Assess Listening
by Sharon Tjaden-Glass

Assessing listening can be difficult, especially when the assessment materials that accompany your textbook present their own challenges:

- The assessment items aren't rigorous enough.
- The assessments don't measure target learning outcomes.
- The listening prompt is too short or too scripted.
- The listening prompt is accessible to students outside of the testing situation.
- Transcripts of the listening prompt are included in the student's textbook.

Some teachers turn to videos on the Internet. However, locating appropriate videos can be time-consuming, and the search may yield videos whose pace is too fast or whose vocabulary is too complex.

Two Approaches to Listening Assessment

There are many approaches to assessing listening, but two are of interest here:

1. The Comprehension Approach

In listening classrooms that rely on a comprehension approach to assess listening, the availability of the listening prompt and the script outside of the testing situation pose significant challenges because students' access to these materials can invalidate the assessment. According to Field (2008), the comprehension approach to teaching listening focuses on assessing whether students have understood what they heard, either the main idea or important details about the prompt. This approach enables teachers to create listening assessments that can be used to determine whether students have achieved learning outcomes.

2. The Process Approach

Other approaches to teaching listening nurture student autonomy and motivation, such as the process approach (Field, 2008). This approach uses repeated exposures to a listening prompt to help learners develop familiarity with aspects of connected speech. Using transcripts and making listening prompts available to learners supports a process approach to teaching listening.

However, this approach doesn't answer a key dilemma for listening teachers: How do I know if this student has achieved the learning outcomes for listening?

In order to meet the need for additional listening prompts that would support my comprehension-based listening classroom, I decided to write and perform my own academic lectures.

Creating Your Own Assessments

In this article, I focus on creating listening assessments for language learners in the CEFR B1 level of proficiency:

> **CEFR Level B1**
>
> Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. (Council of Europe, 2019a)

Transitioning from B1 to B2 requires that learners develop their ability to speak and understand unfamiliar and abstract concepts (Council of Europe, 2019b), which are often the focus of university lectures. CEFR B1 is also the level in which many learners begin to experience plateaus in their language learning and may especially benefit from activities and assessments that build their confidence.

Here are some key points for helping you develop your own academic lectures.

1. Determine the Topic and Scope

At this stage, review the topics of your course textbook and the majors of your students and brainstorm particularly engaging content. Some topics that my previous students enjoyed included

- the effects of smartphones,
- gender income inequality,
- cloning and "designer babies,"
- the placebo effect,
- art restitution,
- video games and violence, and
- the effects of artificial intelligence on employment.

If you will also be assessing speaking in your class, controversial topics like these also lend themselves well to debate and discussion, which deepens students' understanding of the content and familiarity with the new vocabulary.

It's also critical at this stage to decide the scope of your lectures. Here are some questions to consider:

- Will you create a stand-alone lecture, a set of lectures, or a multipart series?
- What content will you address in each lecture? How much content will each lecture include?
- How long will each video be?

For B1 learners, I usually aim to create lectures that are between 8 and 12 minutes long, since most listening assessments that accompany my textbooks are only 4–6 minutes long. Using a pace of about 125 words per minute, an 8–12-minute lecture falls between the range of 1,000–1,500 written words.

2. Organize the Lecture

For B1 learners, providing a clear organizational structure for the lecture can reduce the cognitive load of listening and help build learner confidence. I often use the following organizational patterns for listening assessments:

- Listing
- Problem: Three Possible Solutions
- Compare-Contrast
- Cause: Three Effects
- Effect: Three Possible Causes

Create a skeletal outline with the key points and sources that you want to mention (See the Appendix for two examples).

3. Select Appropriate Lecture Language, Vocabulary, and Examples of Suprasegmentals

Lecture Language

Teaching your students to recognize lecture language can be useful in helping students manage incoming listening input. Lecture language signals to the listener that important information is about to be said and the listener should prepare to write. Examples of lecture language include *for instance, for example, what we're going to talk about today, now that we've talked about X, let's move on to Y,* and so on. This is also a perfect opportunity to demonstrate how to use language for attribution as you mention your sources, which further supports the importance of citing sources beyond the written essay. As you write your script, consider which lecture language you want to focus on and plan to include an important idea after the lecture language. It can be particularly encouraging to students to include specific questions on the listening assessment that pertain to the information immediately after lecture language is used.

Vocabulary

In terms of how much new vocabulary to use in your lectures, Webb & Nation (2017) report that it can take learners as many as eight to 12 exposures to an unknown word in a listening prompt before a student learns the word (pp. 65–66). Field (2008) supports their finding that B1 learners are not typically successful at using context to determine the meaning of an unknown spoken word. Therefore, for B1 learners, a brand-new listening prompt is probably not a suitable situation for learners to acquire vocabulary. Instead, focus on using previously taught vocabulary, limit the amount of completely new words, and consider providing a list or interactive flashcards (e.g., through Quizlet) for words that you want your students to be prepared to hear during the listening prompt in the testing situation.

Suprasegmentals

Another aspect to consider is whether you want to assess your students' understanding of the way that suprasegmentals (intonation, sentence stress, and word stress) can influence the meaning of a sentence. For example, I include different types of questions to assess my students' understanding of the meaning of rising and falling intonation on Wh– questions, yes/no questions, and tag questions. I might also include questions that assess my students' abilities to recognize sentence stress when it conveys a different meaning than a typical declarative sentence.

On your skeletal outline, add notes about where you want to add these features.

4. Draft a Script

Use your annotated outline to draft a script. Prepare your script to your level of comfort. You can write out everything that you want to say or you can just speak from your outline. I've found that speaking from a written script helps me stay on topic and ensures that I don't forget anything that I want to say. In addition, I can use the transcript to remind me of the lecture's content and to help grade tests if I use the lecture again months later.

5. Select Visuals and Create Slides

Visuals, animations, models, and other graphics not only enhance your content, they also provide learners another point of engagement with the content. In his Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, Mayer (2005) points out that learning involves processing input through visual and auditory channels. Furthermore, each channel is limited in its capacity to process input. The learner's task is to effectively coordinate and interpret the input coming through each channel. When the auditory channel is overwhelmed, learners can look to visual input for clues. When the visual input is perplexing, the learner can switch to the auditory channel. Effectively managing this coordination is foundational to active learning. Consequently, well designed and illustrated presentations are likely to increase student understanding and retention of knowledge.

6. Record Your Lecture

As much as possible, I try to keep my recorded voice natural. I allow myself to have some hesitations and false starts, but I also keep to the script. For B1 learners, I want to provide a structured lecture that includes some authentic aspects of connected speech but that is also predictable so that B1 learners don't become overwhelmed with the process of parsing and comprehending a stream of speech. For a specific tutorial on how to record your lecture, please view my recorded presentation of "Creating Bottom-Up and Top-Down Academic Listening Materials."

Closing Thoughts: An Enduring Resource for Assessment

Of course, creating in-house academic lectures was time-consuming, but the result produced tailored listening prompts to which our program controlled access. Over a 4-year period, we created a bank of 70 videos from which we have been able to draw over the years. Typically, we created a set of videos on a topic, playing the first video in class and allowing students the opportunity to discuss, while the second video would be reserved and played live during formal testing. In this way, we were able to assess students' abilities to collaborate, share notes, and study from their notes while also assessing their ability to listen to a new prompt and demonstrate their individual listening comprehension.

Despite the time requirements, creating your own academic lectures for listening assessments can be an effective investment of time and resources in the long run.

References

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