

Listening

For Linguaskill and Linguaskill Business



New Linguaskill is a modular online multi-level test of English language proficiency produced by Cambridge. One of the components is a test of Listening. In order to provide evidence of how well Linguaskill measures what it is supposed or intended to measure, our institutional approach when designing the test is to consider how the test tasks relate to language activities in the real world, in terms of how well they replicate those language behaviours (a mix of contextual and cognitive validity¹) how well the tasks replicate scenarios and situations learners may experience (the social aspect of the socio-cognitive model) and how well the tasks relate to concepts of language proficiency as illustrated in the CEFR (criterion related validity). Using Weir's (2005) socio-cognitive framework for language test validation as a guide, we first need to demonstrate which cognitive processes involved in listening are activated by Linguaskill test tasks. Our approach to cognitive ability in listening is summarised in the model put forward by John Field (2013), which is itself based on the socio-cognitive framework.

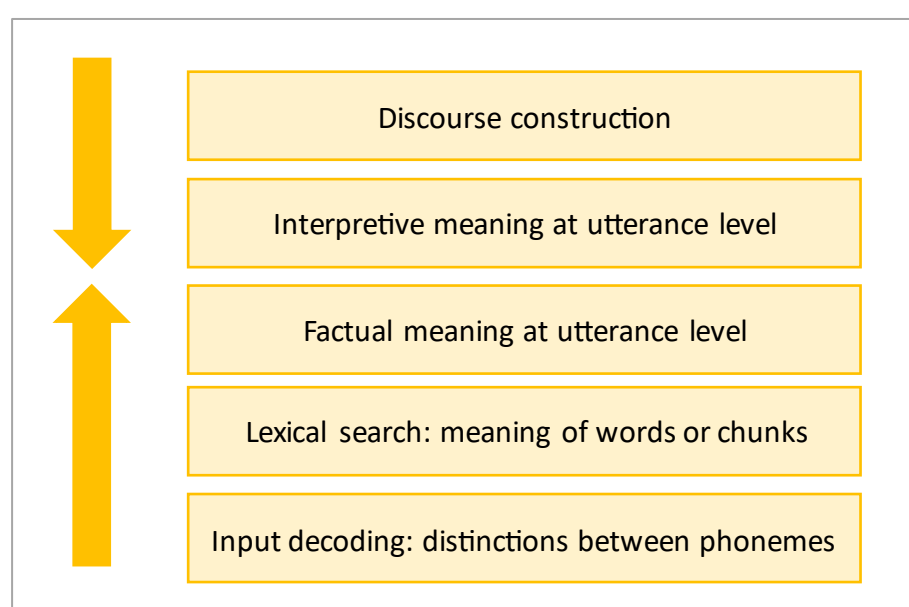


Figure 1 A model of Reading based on Field (2013)

There are five major levels of processing in this model. The first level is decoding, which involves converting the incoming acoustic sounds into phonemes and syllables using one's phonological knowledge of the target language. Decoding includes identifying which syllables carry stress, as this feeds into the next level, lexical search. As listeners decode the input, they begin to search their mental lexicon for the best word match. Listeners also begin to consider what sense or meaning of the words is being used. The next level is parsing, which involves imposing a syntactic structure onto the words to identify the literal meaning of an utterance. These are all bottom-up strategies. At the same time, the listener employs top-down strategies and pragmatic knowledge to identify the intended meaning and purpose of the utterance, and to build a mental model to decide on the overall main message, putting the utterances into a larger discourse structure. This top-down approach supports the other stages of the model².

¹ See *New Linguaskill Overview* document for more information on these terms and Weir's (2005) socio-cognitive framework

² It should be noted that this model recognises that listening is not a linear process. Listeners move between bottom-up and top-down processes as they create hypothesis of what is being said and confirm or replace

The language proficiency level of learners has an impact on the cognitive processing they can carry out effectively. For example, lower-level learners may need to spend more time on decoding sounds and searching at a lexical level. This makes it more difficult for them to activate top-down strategies such as identifying the overall meaning or purpose of what they are listening to. Linguaskill tasks are designed to take the level of the learner into consideration. There are a number of task types in use for Linguaskill Listening, which link to these different cognitive processes (input decoding, lexical search, parsing, meaning construction, discourse construction) listed in the model. The task types in use in Linguaskill Listening are summarised in Table 1.

these in real time. For further reading on our institutional approach to Listening see Geranpayeh & Taylor (2013).

Table 1 Task types in Linguaskill Listening

Task type	Task description	Testing focus	Cognitive processes & CEFR level	CEFR scales B2-C2
5-item comprehension	Five multiple choice questions, each with four written options based on a script read by one, two, or occasionally three actors. The script is between 400 and 750 words depending on the level.	To test ability to understand and extract information from extended monologues, prompted monologues, or dialogues in a range of settings. Items might focus on detail, inference, constructing meaning within longer turns, constructing meaning between turns, feeling, attitude etc.	B1-C2 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction B2-C2 discourse construction	Overall listening comprehension Understanding conversation between other speakers Understanding audio media and recordings
2-item comprehension	Two multiple choice questions, each with three written options based on a script read by one or two actors. The script is between 160 and 300 words depending on the level.	To test ability to understand and extract information from extended monologues, prompted monologues, or dialogues in a range of settings. Items might focus on detail, inference, constructing meaning within longer turns, constructing meaning between turns, feeling, attitude etc. One of the questions will require candidates to construct a 'global' meaning by combining information from non-consecutive parts of the script.	B1-C2 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction B2-C2 discourse construction	Identifying cues and inferring (Note: in cases where no descriptors are available at C2, C1 descriptors are used)
1-item comprehension	One multiple choice question with three written options, or three images, based on a script read by one or two actors. The script is between 120 and 150 words depending on the level.	To test ability to understand and extract information from short monologues, prompted monologues, or dialogues in a range of settings. Items might focus on detail, inference, constructing meaning across longer turns, feeling, attitude etc.	B1-C2 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction B2-C2 discourse construction	
Note completion	A title and five gapped sentences summarising key points from a monologue. The monologue is 300 to 400 words depending on the level.	To test ability to understand and extract specific factual information and stated opinion from a monologue.	B2-C2 input decoding lexical search parsing	Overall oral comprehension

	Each gap can be completed with up to three words heard in the script and be no longer than 24 characters.		meaning construction	Understanding as a member of a live audience Note-taking (lectures, seminars, meetings, etc.)
One question multi-matching	A series of five themed monologues of approximately 30 seconds each. The same question is asked of each monologue and candidates must select the correct answer for each from a list of eight options.	To test ability to understand and extract detail, gist, opinion, purpose etc and differentiate finer points of meaning between speakers.	B1-C2 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction B2-C2 discourse construction	Overall oral comprehension Understanding conversation between other people
Two question multi-matching	A series of three themed monologues of approximately 30 - 40 seconds each (90 to 120 words). The same two questions are asked of each monologue and candidates must select the correct answer for each from a list of five options per question. The order of information is not set and so candidates must hold two listening goals in mind for each speaker.	To test ability to understand and extract detail, gist, opinion, purpose etc and differentiate finer points of meaning between speakers.	B2-C2 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction discourse construction	Understanding as a member of a live audience Identifying cues and inferring

As can be seen in Table 1, tasks cover all the cognitive processes listed in the model, from input decoding up to discourse construction. The majority of test takers are likely to be at B2-C1 level, and so the majority of tasks cover all five cognitive processes in the model. Criterion related validity is addressed through use of the scales listed in the final column of the table. Tasks are also designed to replicate scenarios and situations learners may experience, thus addressing the social aspect of the socio-cognitive model. Further information on the model of listening which the Linguaskill exam is based on, and the updated CEFR descriptors are available as listed below.

Further Reading

Council of Europe. (2020). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing. Retrieved from www.coe.int/lang-cefr

Field, J. (2013). Cognitive validity. Examining listening: Research and practice in assessing second language listening, 35, 77-151.

Geranpayeh, A., & Taylor, L. B. (Eds.). (2013). Examining listening: Research and practice in assessing second language listening, 35.

Weir, C. J. (2005). Language Testing and Validation. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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