Testing first language listening comprehension ability

Susan G. Campbell, Meredith M. Hughes, Stephen P. O’Connell, Jacob H. Meyers, Benjamin K. Smith
University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language

Abstract
Aural comprehension of extended discourse, such as lectures or discussions, is a staple of foreign language proficiency assessment. Foreign language aural comprehension tests, however, tend to focus on short-form listening abilities, like the MLAT Phonemic Coding test. We are developing a measure of passage listening for examinees’ first language listening comprehension ability. We do this by adapting as an instrument the feedback feature from spoken passages. First language listening ability may be a component of aptitude because the ability to construct meaning from spoken passages in a foreign language is likely constrained by one’s ability to do so in one’s first language, as demonstrated by Vandergrift (2006), who found that students’ listening proficiency in L2 was predicted both by their overall proficiency in L2 and by their listening performance in L1. Test items taken to several passages (9–10) in their native language, which is English for the present study, and answer four to five multiple choice questions about each passage after it finishes playing. The questions are presented in a written format. Examinees do not have the opportunity to preview the questions and the test is not timed. Simply requiring speakers to recall major details of a passage, the items draw on the examinees’ understanding of rhetorical functions within the passage, speakers’ tones and attitudes, speaker-intended implications, and main ideas in a passage. Currently, the test is only being implemented for English-language listening, but if the concepts are sound, such tests could be implemented in other languages. We plan to validate this test by using it to predict foreign language listening ability as measured by the Minnesota Contextualized Listening Assessment (MLPA, 2000). We present item data from pilot testing and a study design to assess whether the resulting test predicts foreign language listening ability in an American college student population.

Theory
Does L1 comprehension ability predict L2 comprehension ability?
- The Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis (Cziko, 1980) asserts that L2 proficiency is much more dominant in determining L2 skills than any carryover from L1 listening skills.
- The Interlinguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1979) asserts that the abilities and skills that were developed for L1 reading and listening continue to play a role in those processes for the L2.
- Research into this question regarding reading proficiency has generally found that both L2 proficiency and L1 reading ability play a role in L2 reading ability, with L2 proficiency playing a more significant role than L1 reading ability (Alderson, 1984; Bernhardt & Kimball, 1995; Carrell, 1991; Schoonen et al., 1998).
- Research on listening is limited, but Feyten (1991), Vandergrift (2006), and Tafaghodtari and Vandergrift (2008) have found some evidence that L1 listening ability predicts L2 listening comprehension.
- Further investigation of the role that L1 listening comprehension plays in predicting L2 listening comprehension is warranted, ideally with a reliable and validated L1 listening measure.

Specifications
- Administration time: 1 hour max., shorter preferred
- English, long-form audio passages
- Able to be administered by computer
- Able to be converted to computer-adaptive format in future

Development
To inform passage selection and multiple-choice item development, the DLPT 5 Upper Range Multiple Choice test specifications were reviewed.
- 30 authentic passages covering a broad range of topics were selected from a variety of Web sources. Passages or passage excerpts varied by number of speakers and types of accents.
- Items were developed individually in parallel by team members and then reviewed as a group.
- Items targeted understanding of main ideas, details, attitudes, implications, and rhetorical functions from the passage.
- Additional CASL researchers piloted the passages and items. Items were revised based on their feedback.
- 16 passages with 4–5 items each were included in the pilot measure.

Sample item
Audio excerpt
... Let’s consider for a moment this matter of the Communist use of economic methods to achieve conquest and how it’s done. The present masters of the Soviet Union have said to us, “Peaceful coexistence, until we bury you.”

Sample question about speaker’s opinion
Based on the speaker’s comments, which of the following statements would he most likely agree with?
- A. Advances in Soviet technological skill pales in comparison to those in non-communistic countries.
- B. The goal of communist nations is to eliminate non-communistic governments.
- C. Claims about wanting peaceful coexistence from Communist countries should be taken seriously.
- D. Communist countries can be tolerated unless they are in the same hemisphere as the United States.

Method
- Participants listened and responded using a computer with headphones and a mouse. They did not take notes.
- Each participant listened to 14 of the 16 passages, each 2 to 3 minutes long. Four passages were heard by all participants; six were randomly selected.
- Each passage is followed by 4 or 5 multiple-choice items, each with 4 answer choices.
- Participants could not skip items or go back to earlier items. There was no time limit.
- Tested 140 participants, 32.5 per passage ranged from 63 to 140.

Study design
Connecting L1 listening to L2 listening
- Currently conducting a pretest-posttest study using this (shorter) instrument and a measure of L2 proficiency.
  - Pretest session: L1 listening proficiency test.
  - Posttest session: L2 listening proficiency test.
- Participants are advanced university student learners of French and Spanish.
- Target N = 100.
- We will test whether initial L2 listening proficiency and/or gains in L2 listening proficiency during the language course are related to differences in L1 listening comprehension.

Future work
- Developing four parallel forms of the L1 listening comprehension test.
- Examining the passage and item statistics and characteristics, looking for patterns connecting difficulty and discrimination to characteristics like passage length, speed rate, number of speakers, type of speaker accents, information density of passage, and item focus (e.g., main idea, speaker implication)

References
Takhtajan, M. A., & Vandergrift, L. (2006). Second and foreign lan-
guage listening: Conceptualizing the construct. Perspectives in Second Language Acquisition, 10, 29-51.