TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE #2

Exam preparation and listening skills development using testing materials

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Link with the previous article

This article (as the title suggests) complements my article 'Two Birds with one Stone: Exam preparation and reading skills development using testing materials' (*Current Issues 4&5*).[1] Owing to this, as well as to the fact that listening and reading share much in common in terms of learner problems, exam focus, and teaching procedures, the reader will be referred to the 'Reading' article whenever common-ground features are discussed. The present article will focus on the aspects which differentiate reading from listening in terms of processing and comprehension.[2]

1.2 The exams focused on

As in the previous article, the focus is on the FCE, CAE and CPE exams of UCLES. Particular reference will be made to the **revised FCE** (from Dec. 1996).

2. WHAT LEARNERS ARE EXAMINED IN

Apart from the common areas with reading[3] learners are also examined on their ability to understand the topic of the text or part of the text. This is done both explicitly (i.e learners will be asked directly by the task), and implicitly (i.e. as a prerequisite to successfully complete the task). That is, learners will be asked to identify (some of) the following:

- Who the speaker is
- What the conversation is about
- What (one of) the speaker(s) is talking about
- Who the speaker is talking to
- Who the speaker is referring to
- What the speaker wants from the listener
- What the speaker intends to do
- What the speaker's attitude is

3. LISTENING-RELATED PROBLEMS AND THEIR SOURCES

Apart from the common problems with reading[4] Greek learners of upper-intermediate and advanced levels have some additional problems which are related to the features of spoken language.[5]

3.1 Words: How Many? Which?

They have problems with **identifying words or groups of words** even though they are familiar with them. Furthermore, they may **understand a group of words as one word** (or vice versa).[6] The reason for this is that they try to decode English in terms of their first language.[7] Such a strategy is ineffective because English and Greek differ a lot regarding their phonological properties. We need to pay attention to two closely related features. First, the patterns of *stress* and *rhythm* in English and the way they affect pronunciation. Second, the *interaction of sounds* between endings and beginnings of words in natural speech.[8]

(i) **English** is *stress timed*; that is, stressed syllables are uttered at fairly equal intervals. This means that any unstressed syllables between the stressed ones will be 'squeezed' so as to allow for a fairly constant rhythm. As a result, the vowels in unstressed syllables are not pronounced as clearly as in stressed ones. To be more precise, vowels in unstressed syllables are either pronounced in a rather obscure way (usually, but not always, pronounced as 'schwa'), or are not pronounced at all (e.g. in *'I'd like some tea'* the unstressed *'some'* will sound very much like *'sm'*). As this example shows, the effects of the alteration of stressed and unstressed syllables apply to both isolated words and connected speech. This is of particular interest to learner-listening as the pronunciation (and the learners' understanding) of individual words will be affected by their being stressed or unstressed.

On the other hand, **Greek** is *syllable-timed*. That is, in Greek each syllable whether stressed or unstressed takes (more or less) equal time to utter. This not to say that in Greek all syllables are equally stressed or that all vowels are clearly pronounced (for example, try to say *'τι θα κανεις δηλαδη τωρα;'* at natural speed; the result will sound something like *'τ θα κανεις δλαδη τωρα;'*). The point of interest here is that English and Greek behave differently in terms of rhythm.

Stress in English may pose some problems for learner-listeners, but it also provides **helpful clues**. Speakers stress these words which are important for the message they want to convey.[9] As a result, learners will be able to understand (at least) the main points by concentrating on the stressed words.[10] This makes the learners' task easier in two respects. First, they do not have to pay attention to all the words. Second, the stressed words are more easily identifiable as they are more clearly articulated.

(ii) In natural speech words are not pronounced one-by-one (as in computer-speech), but are connected to one another. Consequently, word-final and word-initial sounds interact with one another resulting in the following changes:

- The final sound of one word may merge with the initial sound of the next word creating a different sound. (e.g. *'Would you'* will sound like *'Wudju'*[11]).
- The initial sound of one word may affect/change the pronunciation of the final sound of the previous word. (e.g. *'Great Britain'* will sound like *'grape Britain'*[12]).
- At word boundaries a sound in the individual words may be 'lost'. (e.g. *'get another'* will sound like *'get nother'*).
- The sequence of two different words may sound very similar. (e.g. *'new display'* and *'nudist play'*[13]).

3.2 Understanding the words - Missing the meaning

When learners have identified correctly the words in a phrase they think they have also understood its meaning. Unfortunately, they may have misunderstood what the speaker really means. This is because in spoken language more factors than merely the words come into play. Speakers can express different meanings using the same words, by manipulating **stress, loudness, voice quality, intonation** and **pauses**.[14] For example, a speaker may use *'OK'* to express *agreement*, *reluctance*, or even *threat*. Alternatively, speakers can focus listener attention to different words in the *same* unit of speech, and express different nuances of meaning.[15] For example, see how the straightforward disagreement of *'My wife doesn't look like a sack of potatoes'* can be transformed into the ironic *My wife doesn't look like a sack of potatoes'*[16] just by highlighting different words.

3.3 Finding one's way through spoken language

Learners have problems with understanding the meaning of longer stretches of speech (I avoid using the word 'sentences' for reasons which I will outline below). These problems arise from the nature of spoken language.

(a) Syntax

In terms of syntax, speech is structured differently from written language:

(i) Speakers do not necessarily **pause** when a unit of meaning has been completed (what in written language is indicated by the full-stop). It is usual for speakers to pause in 'mid-sentence' (in terms of written language). For example (note that '+' will indicate a pause):
it's quite nice the Grassmarket since + it's always had the antique shops ...[17]

(ii) **Word order** is more flexible. For example where in written language we should write *'Did you let the cats out?'*, spoken language admits structures such as *'the cats + did you let them out'*.[18]

(b) Sequence/organisation of ideas

The sequence/organisation of ideas is less explicitly marked than in written language. That is, the use of 'signposting' words/expressions such as *'nevertheless', 'moreover', 'as a result',* which are found in written language in order to 'guide' the reader through the text, is rather rare. In fact, it is quite common for speakers not to connect their ideas at all explicitly (i.e. by using certain 'signposting' devices), but to expect the listener to understand that two or more phrases are related to each other using combinations of the following clues: the way the speaker says them (tone of voice, stress, intonation), the given context, and the (assumed) shared knowledge between speaker and listener(s).[19]

(c) Shortcomings during speaking

Native speakers frequently encounter shortcomings when speaking spontaneously, due to **time restrictions, memory limitations**, or **processing problems**. More simply put, these are problems associated with the effort of speaking and thinking at the same time. The following are relevant phenomena resulting from these shortcomings.

(i) Speakers may stop before finishing what they wanted to say; for instance, because their initial choice of syntax/ grammar/vocabulary led them to a 'dead end', or because they want to 'improve' their utterance. In such a case they may either start afresh using alternative syntax/vocabulary, or even leave the utterance unfinished. The following two examples illustrate cases of improvement:
All the achievements which Neill made + all the things he did, were to some extent undermined ...
He hadn't + he wasn't able to show ...[20]
This man + this chap she was going out with ...[21]

(ii) Speakers may repeat themselves. This is related to the previous point in that speakers may repeat the same word/phrase or repeat the same idea using alternative ways.

It is clear from the above that some features of the 'sentence' - as it is found in written language (i.e. a neatly-structured and grammatically accurate unit of language, with a clearly defined beginning and end[22]) do not usually apply to spoken language. There are, of course, exceptions such as scripted news broadcasts and speeches; but, in such cases the speaker is reading aloud rather than producing speech spontaneously. Learners who approach a listening text the way they would approach a reading one will encounter the following problems:

- when one 'meaning unit' stops and another begins.
- whether a particular utterance was a rephrasing of the previous one or an addition to it.
- whether a pause marks the end of an utterance, or it indicates hesitation/thinking.
- whether two consecutive utterances are related and how.

3.4 Understanding vs Remembering

Learners sometimes feel that they have to remember what they have listened to in order to complete the exercise successfully. This strategy will only increase their feeling of stress, as it is bound to be ineffective. Research has shown that native listeners retain only the meaning of the input and forget the actual words.[23]

3.5 Lack of confidence

The features/problems presented in 3.1 - 3.4 contribute to a further problem. The indeterminacy of spoken language makes learner-listeners less confident as regards their ability to understand the content of a listening text.[24] This lack of confidence leads them to over-concentrate on identifying the words, and prevents them from (fully) exploiting non-language clues and/or knowledge in order to carry out a listening task successfully.[25]

4. EXAM EXERCISE TYPES

I will outline the different exercise types found in the four exams in focus (FCE, Revised FCE, CAE & CPE) with reference to specific exams. The table at the end of this section provides a guide to exercise types in each exam.

4.1 Multiple Choice (MC)

Learners are given questions and unfinished statements, each followed by 3 or 4 options. They have to choose the appropriate option. Alternatively, they are given 4 pictures, and are asked to choose the one related to the text. (All exams).

4.2 Multiple Matching (MM)

Learners are given two 'lists' and are asked to match items from them. Usually, the two lists do not have the same number of items. As a result, one or more items from one list will be 'unused'. More specifically:

(i) Learners listen to a number of short texts and are asked to match pieces of specific information with the text in which they are given. (Revised FCE, Part 3: 1 unused item. CAE, Section D: 3 unused items).

(ii) Learners listen to a conversation and are asked to attribute views, attitudes, intentions or actions to the people involved in the conversation. There are no unused items. (Revised FCE only).

(iii) Learners listen to a number of short texts and are asked to decide on the identity of the speaker(s). (Revised FCE & CAE).

4.3 True/False (T/F) or Yes/No (Y/N)

Learners are given a number of statements or pictures and are asked if they represent information given in the text or not. Sometimes there is a third option - *'not mentioned'* in the text. (FCE & CPE).

4.4 Selection

Learners are given a list of statements and are asked to tick the ones mentioned in the text or supported by information given in the text (FCE & CPE). In CAE they are given pictures instead. They may be additionally asked to order the relevant ones according to the sequence of events in the text.

4.5 Sentence Completion

Learners are given a number of unfinished sentences and are asked to complete them using information from the listening text. The sentences are *not the actual ones heard in the text.* (Rev. FCE & CAE)

4.6 Gap Filling

Learners are given a gapped reading text, or a number of gapped sentences providing the same information as the listening text, but *not in the actual words*. They are asked to fill in the gaps using appropriate words from the text (CPE).

4.7 Note-taking

Learners are given questions or a form and are asked to take notes (i.e. write a word, number or short phrase) so as to answer the questions or fill in the form. (All exams).

	R.FCE	FCE	CAE	CPE
MC	+ *3 options*	+	+	+
MM	+ *1 unused item*	--	+ *3 unused items*	+ *No unused items Rare*
T/F	--	+	--	+
Selection	--	+	+	--
Sentence completion	+	--	--	--
Gap-filling	--	--	--	+
Notes	--	+	+	+

5. EXAM-RELATED PROBLEMS [26]

5.1 Multiple Matching [27]

In the listening version of this exercise-type the options are phrased so that they are somehow relevant to unimportant details in other short texts. There is the danger that learners may miss the salient points/clues in the 'correct' text and direct their attention to *distracting details* of a similar nature which are 'planted' by the test designers in some of the other texts.

5.2 Sentence completion, Gap-filling, Note-taking

The potential problems associated with these exercise types are due to two related reasons; time restrictions and a memory characteristic. First, learners may fail to note down the required word/phrase because they were slow at processing the input, or they paid too much attention to one point missing subsequent vital information,[28] or spent too much time writing the answer neatly. Second, they may be so certain that they have understood the correct 'answer' that they avoid noting anything down in order to gain time for the next item (which they expect will be more difficult). The second instance will create problems for the learner as they will probably remember the meaning of what was said, but not the actual words (see 3.4). If the exercise requires learners to note down the exact words they will be unable to do so. This is particularly relevant to Section C of CAE, where learners listen to the text only once.

5.3 Pictures

An additional potential problem with exercises in the Listening Paper is posed by the use of *pictures* as options. Particularly pictures of 'situations' place further processing demands on the learners as they have to be able to interpret all pictures correctly before deciding on the one relevant to the text.

6. CLASS PROCEDURES

In general, the staging of the lesson and the teaching procedures are similar to the ones described in the 'Reading' article.[29] In this section I will focus on teaching procedures particular to listening, in terms of processing/comprehension and exercise-types.

6.1 Before listening

(i) Multiple Choice

Learners are asked to read (or are given) *only* the questions. The teacher may have to turn some unfinished statements into questions.

(ii) Multiple Matching

Do *not* give MM options to learners. Instead, ask them to listen for (some of) the following points: the general situation; the setting; speaker's identity, purpose/aim, attitude/feelings.[30] Teachers should consult the exercise first and choose which aspects they will ask learners to concentrate on.

(iii) True/False, Yes/No

Teachers have two options here. Either turn statements into questions (rephrasing them if necessary), or leave them as they are. The criterion here is whether the transformation into questions removes helpful clues or not.[31] Let us take the following two T/F statements as an example:[32]

(a) *The meeting will decide which team will develop the area*

(b) *The first objector suggests the meeting is a waste of time*

Statement (a) should remain as it is, because its reformulation to a question (*What will the meeting decide?*) will withold two vital clues from learners.

(1) *'develop the area'* = the meeting will decide on the development of an area.

(2) *'which team'* = there are at least two competing teams (probably firms) interested in undertaking the project.

On the other hand, statement (b) can and should be rephrased as a question: *'What is the first objector's opinion about the meeting'*. Not only are the clues still available to the learners (*'the first objector'* = there are at least two people who express reservations regarding the meeting), but also the omission of *'a waste of time'* prevents learner bias during listening.

(iv) Selection

The list of options includes *distractors*, that is items which the learners are likely to have misunderstood. Their presence in the list will very probably push uncertain learners towards the wrong choices. Teachers are advised not to give learners the list, but to ask a question (or questions) asking for the same information. Questions can be based on the exercise instructions, or even be a reformulation of them. For example, let us adapt the following exercise:[33]

Tick the boxes to show which activities organised at the Community Centre are mentioned by Michaela. If the activity is not mentioned, leave the box blank.

The instruction can be adapted as follows:

Listen and note down the activities organised at the Community Centre mentioned by Michaela.

(v) Sentence completion, Gap-filling, Note-taking

Ask learners to decide what *type of information* they think they will have to provide. This way you help them to restrict the scope of possible answers. For example, in the context of infomation about a language course for Spanish in Britain learners are asked to complete the following sentence:[34] *'Grammar lessons are in ...'*

This sentence can be completed by three types of information: 'language', 'time of day', or 'place'. By eliciting this you direct learners to form helpful *focused expectations* and to avoid providing irrelevant answers. Furthermore, you may also prevent wrong answers due to grammar/vocabulary shortcomings. For instance, suppose the text provides the following information: *'in Spanish'* and *'at 10 o'clock every day'*. Some learners may not pay attention to the wrong collocation and complete the sentence with *'10 o'clock'*. By training learners to consciously pay attention to such matters you help them avoid similar mistakes in the exam.

(vi) Pictures

Although pictures are not exercise types themselves, they may pose additional problems (see 5.3). It is a good idea to train learners in the following techniques/strategies:

- Consciously checking that they understand the situation depicted in each picture

- Identifying key lexis in each picture; that is, lexis which will help them choose the correct option.
- Identifying similarities and differences in the pictures.
- Predicting which elements/clues are the ones which will differentiate the correct from the wrong options.

Please note that *only the salient points* should be dealt with. Avoid asking learners to describe the pictures in detail, as this will distract them. Remember that the aim here is to guide learners to deal successfully with pictures in a *time-effective* way.

(vii) A reminder about context [35]

Guide learners to use questions, statements, pictures as well as instructions in order to establish the context and form focused expectations about the content.[36] Include special slots in lessons focusing on interpreting instructions and extracting clues to context/content.[37] When learners listen in such a focused way they can cope better with shortcomings related to phonological aspects (see 3.1 & 3.3).[38] For example, the content of the listening text will help a listener decide between the similarly sounding 'new display' and 'nudist play' (cited in 3.1 ii.).[39]

6.2 During listening

During the **first listening** learners provide answers to the questions or take notes under the headings given by the teacher. Then they look at the exercise and try to find the closest match to their answers/notes. During the **second listening** they check their choices.

As regards sentence completion, gap-filling and note-taking, train learners to use the following techniques:

- Writing parts of the words only, e.g. *univ* for *university*
- Writing the key words (or part of them); that is, words which will remind them of the rest of the phrase
- Scribbling instead of trying to write neatly

They will have time to complete the words/phrases and to improve their handwriting during and after the second listening. Between the first and second listening they should only concentrate on the *content* of their notes.

6.3 Guidance & Feedback[40]

As a general guideline, do not assume that non-completion of an exercise or wrong answers necessarily equal non-comprehension; or that correct answers are necessarily a sign of comprehension.[41] Always check *how* learners came to a conclusion. Elicit sources for problems of identification or comprehension, and guide learners towards use of helpful clues and effective strategies.[42]

The procedures outlined here focus on familiarising learners with the idiosyncrasies of spoken language and training them to cope successfully with its syntactical, phonological and organisational aspects [see 3]. They aim firstly, at making learners aware of the features of spoken language outlined above [see 3] and of the (un)successful strategies they use, and secondly at guiding learners to use more successful strategies and/or improving their existing ones.[43]

(a) Use of context, content, background knowledge

(i) Stop the tape before the speaker has finished and ask learners to provide a plausible continuation. Learners should be guided to use any clues available to them. Such clues are: the situation, what has been said so far, the stressed words, the speaker's tone of voice [see also 3.2].

(b) Use of phonological clues

(i) Stop the tape and ask learners to repeat the last phrase. There are two steps. First ask for the phrase in 'ideal' form (i.e. learners pronounce it very clearly). Then ask them to repeat the phrase *as it was pronounced by the speaker*.[44] You can also ask them to write what 'happened' to the words. They can show the changes by deleting/changing letters or putting them in parentheses. You may also need to teach some phonemic symbols. It needs to be stressed that during such activities you should play the tape as many times as the learners need.

(ii) Play a short phrase and ask learners to say how many words they have heard.[45] Elicit and discuss any phonological features which caused problems or provided helpful clues.

(iii) After listening, give learners a short extract from the transcript and ask them to listen and

- *Underline* the stressed syllables
- Put unstressed vowels into *brackets*
- *Cross out* vowels/consonants which were not pronounced
- *Circle* vowels/consonants which have 'interacted' and produced a 'new' sound

Alternatively, you can give them the transcript *before listening* and ask them to identify any of the above; then learners listen to check and modify.[46]

6.4 Teacher preparation

In order to be in a position to help learners effectively teachers need to prepare before the listening lesson (or any lesson for that matter). In our case teachers are advised to:

(i) Read transcripts and exercises carefully before the lesson in order to identify pitfalls/potential problems in terms of organisation and content.

(ii) Listen to the tape while reading the transcript in order to identify potential problems related to phonological features.

NOTES

1. This article was originally planned as part of a longer article dealing with both the `Reading` and `Listening` components of the UCLES EFL exams. Due to length restrictions, the `Listening` component had to be reserved for a separate article. Before reading on the reader is directed to sections 1.1 and 1.4 of the 'Reading' article.
2. For a brief outline of similarities see Anderson & Lynch (1988: 18-20). For a brief outline of similarities & differences see Rost (1990: 8-10).
3. See section 2 points c & e-h of the 'Reading' article.
4. See section 3 points a-b & d-k of the 'Reading' article.
5. Sources: Brown & Yule (1983a: 15-19); Brown & Yule (1983b: 4-5), Bygate (1988: 3-4, 11 & 15-20).
6. See also Brown (1990: 150).
7. See Brown (1975: 98).
8. Sources: *Connected speech*: Brown (1990, Chapter 4), Gimson (1989: 297-306). *Stress & Rhythm*: Brown (1974: 45-47), Brown (1990, Chapter 3), Giegerich (1992: 258-260 & 284-285), Gimson (1989: 263- 269), Taylor (1981).
9. Brown (1974: 46-47).
10. Brown (1990: 151).
11. Example from Gimson (1989: 299).
12. Example from Brown (1990: 63).
13. Example from Dalton & Seidlhofer (1994: 31).
14. See Dalton & Seidlhofer (1994: 81-82).
15. See Brown (1990, Chapter 6).
16. Example from Ponsonby (1987) in Dalton & Seidlhofer (1994: 81).
17. Example from Brown & Yule (1983b: 16).
18. Example from Brown & Yule (1983b: 17).
19. For a brief discussion of similarities between written and spoken language in that respect see McCarthy (1991: 149-152)
20. Examples from Owen (1976: 86).
21. Example from Brown & Yule (1983a: 17).
22. For a discussion on features of the sentence see Brown & Miller (1991, Chapter 10) and Huddleston (1984: 18-21).
23. See Clark & Clark (1977: 48-49), Garrod (1986: 228), Rost (1990: 19).
24. See Brown (1990: 59-60).
25. For a simple outline of types of non-language clues/knowledge see section 3 d & e of the 'Reading' article. See also Ur (1984: 14-15).
26. For problems related to MC exercises see Section 5.1 of the 'Reading' article.
27. See also section 5.2 of the 'Reading' article.
28. See Brown (1986: 288).
29. Before reading this section see the following two sections of the 'Reading' article. For *'staging'* see section 6 (i, ii & iv); for *'teaching procedures'* see section 7.
30. Good sources of *listening texts* suited for training learners to identify these aspects are Maley & Duff (1978) and Mortimer (1980).
31. See section 6 (i) of the 'Reading' article.
32. Examples from UCLES (1993: 43).
33. Test item from UCLES (1991: 22).
34. Test item from UCLES (1995: 58).
35. See also 3.1 d & e, and 6.i in the 'Reading' article.
36. See 7.1 (i) in 'Reading' article, and Rost (1990: 71-74).

37. See also Brown (1986: 288), Rost (1990: 33-34 & 47-51).
38. See Brown (1990: 149-155).
39. See also Rost (1990: 33-34 & 45-57).
40. Before reading this section see 7.5 in the 'Reading' article.
41. Rost (1990: 168-169).
42. For similar procedures in SLA research see O'Malley et. al. (1989:146-156).
43. See Brown (1975: 111-112), Rost (1990: 154-155).
44. Adapted from Ur (1984: 42).
45. From Ur (1984: 43).
46. Adapted from Ur (1984: 43).

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