

National & Kapodistrian University of Athens,
Faculty of English Language & Literature
4th Postgraduate Student Conference, 26 June 2014

*Listening comprehension: Why is
it so difficult for L2 test-takers?*

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Setting the context

L2 listening comprehension assessment is one of the least understood and least developed areas of foreign language testing (Alderson & Bachman in Buck, 2001: x).

What has been done?

Studies on listening difficulty:

a) Studies investigating test-takers' scores quantitatively in order to discover variables of task difficulty (Buck & Tatsuoka, 1998; Freedle & Kostin, 1996, 1999; Jensen, Hansen, Green, & Akey, 1997; Nissan, DeVincenzi & Tang, 1996; Rupp, Garcia & Jamieson, 2001; Shohamy & Inbar, 1991).

- Psychometric measurement tools: classical item analysis, rule space methodology, regression analysis.
- Mostly affected by relevant reading comprehension research.

What has been done?

- b) Studies exploring learners' perceptions and attitude towards listening comprehension (Buck, 1991; Lotsfi, 2012; Yi'an, 1998).
 - Research methods: interviews, think aloud protocols or questionnaires
- ❖ Attention mainly directed to the multiple choice item type and to a much less extent to completion test items.

Originality of the Study

- ❖ Focus on choice (MC-T/F/NS) and completion test items (Short answers).
- ❖ Lack of empirical evidence on the difficulty of T/F/NS item type in listening comprehension assessment.
- ❖ A **Blended Research Methodology** combining results derived from analysis of actual listening test data with the L2 listener's perspective.

A Blended Research Methodology

Research aim:

Investigation of L2 listening comprehension test difficulty at B2 level

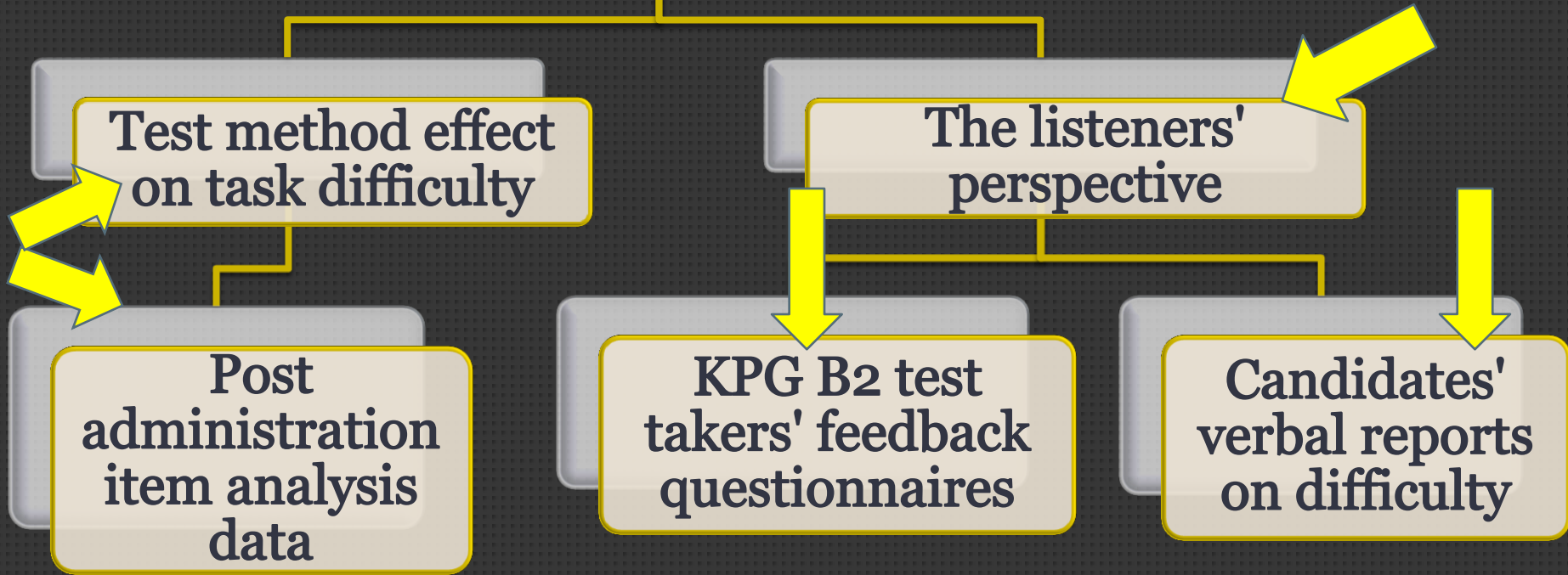
Test method effect on task difficulty

The listeners' perspective

Post administration item analysis data

KPG B2 test takers' feedback questionnaires

Candidates' verbal reports on difficulty



Originality of the study

TRIANGULATION

Method Triangulation

Combination of different research approaches

Data Triangulation

Combination of quantitative and qualitative data

Participant Triangulation

Three groups of EFL users: actual KPG test-takers, university students, B2 learners preparing for an English language exam.

Outcome of the study

Task Difficulty Typology

A. Descriptors of item difficulty

- Item-related variables
- item-by-text interactions

*Within the
choice or
completion
item type*

B. Descriptors of text difficulty

- variables of difficulty relevant to the linguistic and paralinguistic features of the oral texts.

C. Cognitive variables of difficulty

Descriptors of item difficulty

Choice listening comprehension test items

➤ length & syntactic complexity

subordination,
negation, passive structures
comparisons,
compound sentences

➤ lexical difficulty

✓ Use of low-frequency words

➤ T/F/NS items: NS option

✓ increase cognitive load

Ex1. The story of Robinson Crusoe is based on the adventures of Alexander Selkirk, the man you are listening about and who

- A. escaped from the island known as Juan Fernandez.
- B. had decided to spend his life on the desert island.
- C. tried hard to get the attention of passing-by ships.

Ex2. The speakers seem to believe that **apes**

- A. will finally not disappear.
- B. express themselves clearly.
- C. are slowly **vanishing**.

Descriptors of item difficulty

Choice listening comprehension test items

➤ Correct response paraphrase

Ex 3. The speaker, who's the creator of the cartoon Snoopy, had a dog that

- A. didn't look anything like Snoopy.
- B. *inspired him to create Snoopy.*
- C. was called Snoopy.

...And Snoopy was patterned after him in appearance...

Ex4. People in Idaho

- A. speak Polish as a first language.
- B. *speak many more languages besides English.*
- C. can't speak English.

Did you know that people in Idaho speak over three dozen languages other than English?

Descriptors of item difficulty

Choice listening comprehension test items

- **Distractor lexical overlap** (use of same/similar lexis from the text in the distractors)
- **Semantically similar/plausible distractors**

Ex5. The news (reported from Cape Town, South Africa) is about

- A.** *South Africans living in great poverty.*
- B.** immigrants in South Africa.
- C.** poverty in the third world.

Descriptors of item difficulty

Completion listening comprehension test items

- **type & frequency of requested lexis**
 - ✓ phrasal verbs
 - ✓ numbers
 - ✓ proper names
 - ✓ low frequency words
- **number of gaps per item:** more than one gaps in an item increases response difficulty.
- **Short answers & inference:** word production difficulties
- **Short answers & paraphrasing:** increase processing difficulties

Descriptors of text difficulty

- ❖ Joint effect of certain linguistic/paralinguistic text characteristics & comprehension processes
 - Speech rate & information density
 - Speech rate & listening for specific information
 - Information density & text type
 - Information density & listening for details
 - Lexicogrammatical difficulties & text topic

Cognitive variables

➤ **Role of background knowledge**

- facilitate text comprehension
- enable utilization of content & formal schemata

➤ **Role of reading**

- parallel processing of written and oral input
- the more information, written & spoken, to be retained in one's memory, the higher the possibility for information loss resulting in unsuccessful performance.
- jeopardize test validity unless it is controlled by design.

Conclusion

- ❖ A **cognitively demanding activity** resulting from the effect of **item-related** and **text-related** factors and the **cognitive or processing difficulties** related to them.
- ❖ “Listening is a complex, multi-dimensional activity and performance on listening test tasks requires a complex combination of knowledge, linguistic and non-linguistic, processing skills and strategies” (Buck, 2001: 256).

Usefulness of the Typology

In testing & assessment

- ✓ help test developers and item writers weigh the impact of the suggested difficulty variables.
- ✓ contribute to the design of more valid listening comprehension tests or tasks.

In foreign language pedagogy

- ✓ help teachers enhance their students' listening skills.
- ✓ contribute to the improvement of current teaching practices.

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION