Task characteristics as predictors of Greek EFL test-takers' listening behaviour

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Tasks Vs Strategy use

- Despite the fact that the relationship between task and strategy use was long ago recognized in the literature, it has not been explored very much (Oxford et al. 2004).
- The present research employs listening test-tasks and their specific characteristics as predictors for specific listening comprehension strategy use.

Language Proficiency Tests

- The focus of the present analysis will be on tests which actually comprise Greek EFL test takers' preparation material for the listening module (i.e. listening tasks) of four popular English language proficiency exams in Greece:

- ECCE (Examination for the Certificate of Competency in English)
- FCE (First Certificate in English)
- KPG B1/B2 Integrated (Greek State Certificate of Language Proficiency)
- PTE General-Level 3 (Pearson Test of English General)

What comprises a task?

- The definition of task adopted in this paper is the one provided by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (2001) "…a combination of rubric, item and response"

  [in Brindley and Slatyer, 2002:375].

- According to the above definition, a test-task consists of the rubric, the text (listening stimulus or input), the questions (or items) and the responses.

Test Tasks

- The rubrics of tasks especially in language tests are usually standardized and remain the same according to task type. What appears to differentiate each time from test to test is the texts, the questions and the relevant expected responses.

Text characteristics

ECCE texts	KPG (B2) texts	FCE texts	PTE texts
○ fully scripted ○ standard American accents ○ no background noise ○ natural native-speaker speed ○ monologues and dialogues ○ **heard once**	○ authentic or simulated ○ common variants of English native speaker accent ○ mild accents ○ no background noise ○ natural native-speaker speed ○ monologues and dialogues ○ heard twice	○ fully scripted ○ standard variants of English ○ mild accents ○ no background noise ○ natural native-speaker speed ○ monologues and dialogues ○ heard twice	○ authentic or simulated ○ common variants of English native speaker accent ○ mild accents ○ no background noise ○ natural native-speaker speed ○ monologues and dialogues ○ texts in Activity 1 are heard once and the rest twice.

Task characteristics

ECCE tasks	KPG (B2) tasks	FCE tasks	PTE tasks
○ three – option multiple choice ○ **no question preview** ○ global and focused listening	○ three – option multiple choice ○ short answers ○ global and focused listening	○ three – option multiple choice ○ short answers ○ **multiple matching** ○ global and focused listening	○ three – option multiple choice ○ short answers ○ **dictation** ○ global and focused listening

Text analysis tools

- The programmes used in the present study for listening text analysis are the following:

- Praat version 5.3.53 (Boersma and Weenink, 2013)
- Web VocabProfile Classic version 4.0 (Cobb, nd)
- Coh-Metrix version 3.0 (McNamara, Louwerse, Cai and Graesser, 2005)
- The sketchengine-British National Corpus

Number of listening texts

Listening test	ECCE	KPG	PTE	FCE	Total
Texts	124	45	65	75	309

Praat variables

	Certification			
	ECCE	FCE	KPG	PTE
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
nsyll	**71.114**	**211.000**	103.200	74.929
npause	**5.764**	**16.427**	7.822	5.057
dur (s)	**19.955**	**57.953**	29.366	30.364
phonationtime (s)	16.046	45.721	22.881	19.615
speechrate (nsyll/dur)	3.276	**3.583**	3.493	**3.035**
articulation rate (nsyll/phonationtime)	4.265	4.589	4.406	3.756
ASD (speakingtime/nsyll)	.237	.219	.229	.270

Vocabprofile Variables

	Certification			
	ECCE	FCE	KPG	PTE
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
Words in text (tokens)	**57.113**	163.867	83.244	62.215
Type-token ratio	**.826**	.663	.778	.798
Lex density (content words/total)	.450	.491	.474	.469
K1 Words (1-1000)	86.575	84.275	86.777	84.206
Function	54.976	50.923	52.603	53.156
Content	31.599	33.353	34.175	31.050
K2 Words (1001-2000)	6.743	5.421	5.616	6.380
1k + 2k	**93.318**	89.697	92.393	90.586
AWL Words (academic)	.574	1.713	1.083	**2.517**
Off-List Words	6.108	**8.589**	6.523	6.898

Coh-Metrix variables

- Referential Cohesion
- Latent semantic analysis
- Text connectives
- Syntactic complexity +density
- Word Information

Referential cohesion

	Certification			
	ECCE	FCE	KPG	PTE
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
'Anaphor overlap, adjacent sentences'	.403	.479	**.505**	.474
'Anaphor overlap, all sentences'	.372	.353	**.421**	.392

Latent semantic analysis

	Certification			
	ECCE	FCE	KPG	PTE
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
'LSA overlap, adjacent sentences, mean'	.123	.144	.104	.137
'LSA overlap, all sentences in paragraph, mean'	.059	.133	.110	.121
'LSA overlap, adjacent paragraphs, mean'	.165	.064	.038	.094
'LSA given/new, sentences, mean'	.123	.223	.151	.148

Text connectives

	Certification			
	ECCE	FCE	KPG	PTE
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
'All connectives incidence'	75.816	86.010	77.695	84.215
'Causal connectives incidence'	21.016	26.427	28.029	30.274
'Logical connectives incidence'	41.103	38.475	43.170	45.379
'Adversative and contrastive connectives incidence'	17.321	16.867	17.303	16.695
'Temporal connectives incidence'	14.194	17.506	16.686	13.887
'Additive connectives incidence'	42.558	44.999	35.870	39.036
'Positive connectives incidence'	.000	.000	.000	.000
'Negative connectives incidence'	.000	.000	.000	.000

Syntactic complexity

	Certification			
	ECCE	FCE	KPG	PTE
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
'Left embeddedness, words before main verb, mean'	1.553	2.456	2.012	2.515
'Number of modifiers per noun phrase, mean'	.564	.677	.555	.665
'Sentence syntax similarity, adjacent sentences, mean'	.098	.090	.082	.087
'Sentence syntax similarity, all combinations, across paragraphs, mean'	.094	.097	.084	.086

Syntactic density

	Certification			
	ECCE	FCE	KPG	PTE
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
'Noun phrase density, incidence'	341.696	357.674	360.776	349.249
'Verb phrase density, incidence'	247.235	239.756	251.335	248.947
'Adverbial phrase density, incidence'	39.610	39.638	44.687	38.350
'Preposition phrase density, incidence'	74.801	95.289	71.546	91.678
'Agentless passive voice density, incidence'	3.549	4.864	2.622	2.771
'Negation density, incidence'	16.459	12.575	19.746	16.951
'Gerund density, incidence'	17.922	19.452	13.108	22.742
'Infinitive density, incidence'	17.838	24.534	16.178	22.660

Word Information

	Certification			
	ECCE Mean	FCE Mean	KPG Mean	PTE Mean
'Age of acquisition for content words, mean'	**265.635**	320.727	277.864	312.240
'Familiarity for content words, mean'	584.358	**579.540**	584.443	580.883
'Concreteness for content words, mean'	388.252	373.305	364.970	369.872
'Imagability for content words, mean'	419.588	405.878	396.070	401.738
'Polysemy for content words, mean'	4.272	4.073	4.180	**4.321**

Listening text characteristics

Listening texts	ECCE	FCE	KPG	PTE
Characteristics	Rather short, more lexically diverse, more function words (easier to process), more familiar vocabulary (K1+ family)	Rather long, Lexically dense, Greater vocabulary repetition, less familiar vocabulary (more off-list words)	More content words	More academic words

‘Orality’ of listening texts

Listening exams	ECCE	FCE	KPG	PTE
Evidentials and discourse markers	0.35%	0.50%	0.48%	0.28%

Shohamy and Inbar's model of question classification

- Shohamy and Inbar (1991) classified listening comprehension questions into three categories:

- **macro/global** (*synthesizing information, drawing conclusions, and focusing on cause and effect relationships and on inferences*)
- **local** (*locating details, understanding single words which have contextual support, paraphrasing and recognizing facts*)
- **trivial** [*memorizing numerical details (e.g. numbers, dates, percentages) and names (e.g. of people and places*)]

Total number of questions

- The total number of questions that were classified by the researcher as found in the five practice tests for each listening exam was:

-250 for the ECCE tests

-150 for the FCE tests

- 65 for the KPG tests

-105 for the PTE tests

Question classification

- Shohamy and Inbar's (1991) suggested classification model of listening comprehension questions appeared to be incomplete. Maybe, this was due to the fact that the authors were preoccupied with open-ended questions only whereas, in language proficiency tests most of the questions are cloze and demand various types of information processing. Thus, there was an addition of two extra categories
- (a) local and global
- (b) local and trivial

Listening Tests

Question types	Listening tests			
	ECCE	FCE	KPG	PTE
Macro/ Global	15.2 %	8.7 %	**66.2 %**	33.3 %
Local	58 %	**85.3 %**	30.8 %	49.5 %
Trivial	24.8 %	0.7 %	1.5 %	**16.2 %**
Global & Local	0 %	**4.7 %**	1.5 %	0 %
Local & Trivial	**2 %**	0.7 %	0 %	1.0 %

Response classification

- According to Bachman (1990:129), the expected responses in a language test are of two main types: selected and constructed (see also, Popham, 1978). Bachman (1990) suggested that selected responses characterize multiple-choice tasks while constructed responses consist of the production of a language sample in response to the input material.

ECCE listeners' perceived difficulties before and after strategy instruction

Before instruction	After instruction	
57%	57%	of the listeners had come across unknown vocabulary in the aural message
29%	**14%**	of the listeners found unknown words in test questions
71%	**14%**	of the listeners found unknown words in the suggested responses
86%	**29%**	of the listeners found speech rate 'fast'
60%	**0%**	of the listeners admitted facing difficulty in the second part of the test (which involved long aural segments with no question preview + local and trivial comprehension)

ECCE listeners' observed difficulty

- Lexical diversity
- Lack of repetition
- Items requiring local and trivial comprehension

PTE listeners' perceived difficulties before and after strategy instruction

Before instruction	After instruction	
87.5%	75%	of the listeners had come across unknown vocabulary in the aural message
75%	62.5%	of the listeners found unknown words in the suggested responses
98%	70%	of the listeners found the dictation task difficult
40%	30%	of the listeners found the third activity (including two sentence completion tasks) difficult
100%	100%	of the listeners found speech rate 'fast'

PTE listeners' observed difficulty

- High syntactic complexity of texts
- High content word polysemy
- Least 'listenable'
- Dictation task (local and trivial comprehension)

KPG listener's perceived difficulties before and after strategy instruction

Before instruction	After instruction	
√	√	had come across unknown vocabulary in the aural message
√	√	found speech rate 'faster' in the fourth activity

KPG listener's observed difficulty

- High percentage of content words
- High lexical density
- Items requiring local comprehension

FCE listener's perceived difficulties before and after strategy instruction

Before instruction	After instruction	
√		Found unknown vocabulary in the suggested responses
√		Found activities 2 and 3 (sentence completion and multiple matching, respectively) a little difficult

Summary of task characteristics imposing difficulty on listeners

- Lexical diversity of texts
- Lack of repetition of texts
- High percentage of content words of texts
- High lexical density of texts
- High syntactic complexity of texts
- High content word polysemy of texts
- Low ‘orality’ of texts
- Items requiring local and trivial comprehension

FCE task specific strategies

- 1. Relying on information from previous responses to answer the following.
- 2. Focusing on the grammatical and syntactic structures of the suggested responses to understand the type (i.e. word class) of the information missing.
- 3. Translating what is heard in order to understand the information missing and attribute meaning to unknown vocabulary.
- 4. Predicting questions from the relevant suggested responses.
- 5. Reading the questions and the suggested responses before the aural message starts in order to get an idea of what will be heard.

KPG task specific strategies

- 1. Focusing on the general instructions of the activity to get an idea about the topic of the message.
- 2. Focusing on the pictures of the activities to get an idea of what the message will be about.
- 3. Reading the questions and the suggested responses before the aural message starts in order to get an idea of what will be heard.
- 4. Responding to most of the questions during the first hearing in order to have time to revise during the second.

PTE task specific strategies

- 1. Focusing on the general instructions of the activity to get an idea about the topic of the message.
- 2. Focusing on the grammatical and syntactic structures of the suggested responses to understand the type (i.e. word class) of the information missing.
- 3. Translating what is heard in order to understand the information missing and attribute meaning to unknown vocabulary.
- 4. Reading the questions and the suggested responses before the aural message starts in order to get an idea of what will be heard.
- 5. Underlining key lexical items in the questions to understand what they require while reading them.
- 6. Rejecting a suggested response including unknown words and opting for one of the other options.
- 7. Responding to most of the questions during the first hearing in order to have time to revise during the second.

ECCE task specific strategies

- 1. Relying on information from previous responses to answer the following.
- 2. Focusing on the pictures of the activities to get an idea of what the message will be about.
- 3. Predicting questions from the relevant suggested responses.
- 4. Writing down brief notes while listening relating incoming information with suggested responses.
- 5. Reading (the questions and) the suggested responses before the aural message starts in order to get an idea of what will be heard.

Conclusions

- Different task characteristics appeared to affect the quality and the quantity of the strategies employed by the different groups of listeners and were also found to affect to a great extent their difficulties.
- Strategy instruction appeared to affect positively listeners' overall behaviour.

Thank you!

- Supervising committee:

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