
Developing diagnostic tools to identify L2 English listening difficulties: the example of an aural grammaticality judgment test

Marie-Pierre Jouannaud*¹

¹Centre de recherche en linguistique appliquée – Université Lumière - Lyon 2 – France

Résumé

Many French students enter higher education with insufficient English listening skills to comprehend English medium academic courses there. In order to identify where they need the most help, diagnostic tests can be used and the results acted upon by providing targeted help. These tests can give general diagnostic information, or more specific information that might be easier to act upon. In this study, we explore the use of an aural grammaticality judgment test as a diagnostic test of listening comprehension difficulties.

Although the importance of lexical knowledge in listening is well documented (e.g. Milton 2013), the role of morphosyntactic knowledge is less clear. The main models of listening comprehension assume a level of processing devoted to syntactic parsing, separate from decoding/segmentation on the one hand (recognizing words in the stream of speech), and from integration into discourse (building a situation model) on the other. Most studies, however, have found that although syntactic knowledge is correlated with listening proficiency, it explains no further variance once lexical knowledge is taken into account (e.g. Meccarty 2000). One hypothesis for this absence of demonstrated role is that the instruments used to measure grammatical knowledge have often been written tests (Cai 2020), hence the need for tests using oral stimuli.

We will present the main stages of the design and validation process of an aural grammaticality judgment test administered online, made up of 22 correct and 23 incorrect sentences. It is important for testing instruments to demonstrate both validity (to make sure they actually measure what they are supposed to be testing) and reliability (to make sure they always give the same or very similar results in the same situation). In order to ensure content validity (making sure the construct is adequately covered), the sentences used cover all traditional domains of English grammar (use of determiners, tense, aspect, negation, voice, etc), and contain grammatical structures that characterize CEFR levels ranging from A1 to C1 (either because they are typically taught at these levels, cf North et al 2011, or because they are criterial features of these levels, according to Salamoura & Saville 2010). Our results (with 184 subjects) show that the test is reliable (Cronbach's alpha = 0.8), that the items discriminate well between high and low performing students (although the relationship between hypothesized CEFR levels and observed item difficulty is hard to interpret), and that the results are highly correlated (0,76) with a listening test administered to the same students.

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*Intervenant

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