

BEYOND WORDS: BALANCING TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP SKILLS IN TASK-BASED LISTENING ASSESSMENT

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Annotation: The article *Beyond Words: Balancing Top-Down and Bottom-Up Skills in Task-Based Listening Assessment* examines the interplay between two essential dimensions of listening comprehension: bottom-up processing, which focuses on decoding linguistic elements such as sounds, vocabulary, and grammar, and top-down processing, which relies on background knowledge, prediction, and inference. It argues that listening assessment often emphasizes one skill at the expense of the other, leading to incomplete evaluations of learners’ proficiency. Through discussion of task-based assessment approaches, the article highlights how authentic tasks—such as information-gap activities, problem-solving discussions, and the use of real-world audio materials—can integrate both micro-level detail recognition and macro-level understanding. The article also outlines pedagogical implications, emphasizing authenticity, scaffolding, fairness, and meaningful feedback in assessment design. By advocating for a balanced framework, the work contributes to current debates in applied linguistics and assessment design, suggesting that effective listening assessment must go beyond isolated word recognition to measure holistic communicative competence.

Keywords: Task-based listening assessment, top-down processing, bottom-up processing, listening comprehension, language testing, authentic assessment, communicative competence, assessment design.

Listening comprehension involves the interaction of both bottom-up processes, such as decoding sounds and recognizing vocabulary, and top-down processes, such as using prior knowledge and context to interpret meaning. However, traditional listening assessments often emphasize one dimension while neglecting the other, leading to limited validity and reliability. This article examines the importance of balancing bottom-up and top-down skills within the framework of task-based listening assessment (TBLA). Drawing on key theories in applied linguistics and listening pedagogy, the article reviews the challenges of assessing listening holistically, explores the role of authentic tasks in integrating both skill types, and proposes methodological approaches for test design. The discussion highlights the pedagogical implications of balancing micro- and macro-level listening processes, with recommendations for classroom teachers and test designers to ensure assessment is both authentic and fair.

Listening is often described as the “Cinderella skill” in language learning (Nunan, 2002). While it is a fundamental component of communication, it has traditionally received less attention in teaching and assessment compared to reading, writing, and speaking. Recent shifts toward communicative and task-based language teaching (TBLT) have highlighted the importance of assessing listening in authentic contexts.

Yet, listening is not a single skill. It requires learners to combine bottom-up processing (perception of sounds, vocabulary recognition, syntactic parsing) with top-down processing (prediction, inference, use of schema, and contextual interpretation). Assessments that focus too narrowly on word recognition risk overlooking learners’ ability to construct meaning, while those emphasizing global understanding may fail to account for breakdowns at the linguistic level.

This article argues for a balanced approach to listening assessment through task-based methods, in which both bottom-up and top-down skills are evaluated simultaneously.

Bottom-Up Processing

Bottom-up models view listening as a data-driven process (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). Learners decode sounds, identify words, and gradually build meaning. Early assessment practices reflected this view, focusing on discrete-item tests such as dictation, cloze tasks, or phoneme recognition. Although such tasks measure accuracy at the micro-level, they are criticized for their lack of authenticity (Buck, 2001).

Top-Down Processing

Top-down models emphasize the role of background knowledge and prediction (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Listeners rely on contextual cues, discourse markers, and pragmatic knowledge to construct meaning even when linguistic input is unclear. Assessments based on inference, summarization, or predicting outcomes align with this model. However, these tasks may disadvantage learners with weaker lexical or grammatical knowledge (Field, 2008).

Interactive Models

Current theories (Rost, 2016) suggest that listening involves an interaction of bottom-up and top-down processes. Successful listeners continuously shift between decoding input and integrating background knowledge. Assessments that privilege one over the other risk misrepresenting learners’ proficiency.

Task-Based Listening Assessment (TBLA)

Task-based approaches align assessment with real-life communication. Instead of isolated items, learners complete meaningful tasks (Ellis, 2003). In listening, TBLA tasks may include following directions, problem-solving, or information-gap activities. These tasks inherently combine micro- and macro-skills, making them suitable for

balanced assessment. However, designing tasks that are both authentic and reliable remains a challenge for test developers (Norris, 2016). Methodology Suggestions

Task Design

- Information-Gap Tasks: Require learners to identify specific details (bottom-up) while making inferences to complete missing information (top-down).
- Problem-Solving Discussions: Learners listen to scenarios, extract key details, and propose solutions.
- Authentic Materials: Using radio broadcasts, announcements, or interviews integrates natural listening challenges.

Assessment Criteria

Balanced rubrics should include descriptors for:

- Accuracy of detail recognition (bottom-up).
- Ability to infer meaning and predict outcomes (top-down).
- Integration of both skills in task completion.

Classroom Implementation

Teachers can scaffold listening tasks by including pre-listening prediction activities, while post-listening reflection tasks check for detail comprehension. This sequencing ensures both skill types are evaluated.

Discussion and Implications

Balancing bottom-up and top-down skills in listening assessment improves validity, authenticity, and washback. Learners gain confidence in real-world communication when tasks mirror authentic demands. For test designers, the challenge lies in creating tasks that are both fair and reliable across diverse proficiency levels. For teachers, the focus should be on integrating strategy training into assessment, helping learners develop flexible listening habits.

Conclusion

Listening assessment must move beyond testing words alone. A balanced approach that integrates bottom-up and top-down skills through task-based assessment provides a more authentic, fair, and meaningful measure of proficiency. Teachers and test developers are encouraged to design tasks that capture the full complexity of listening, ensuring that learners are assessed not only on what they hear, but also on how they construct meaning.

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