

A profile of the academic listener

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Background

Cognitive validity

‘To what extent can a test be deemed to elicit the type of process which the a target test taker would employ in a real-world context’?

Weir (2005) suggests there are implications for :

- a) validation of existing tests by matching them against a model of the skill being tested
- b) providing guidelines to future test developers as to how tests can be designed that are more fully representative of the performance they aim to assess.

This is surely nowhere more relevant than in tests which decide academic admission

Procedure (various SiLT volumes)

- Measure the processes elicited by a test against a well-attested cognitive model of how an expert user would employ a skill
- Elicit verbal reports from test takers indicating the processes in which they engaged in a test (ideally using stimulated recall prompted by reviewing their answers)

But a cautionary note:

- Interruption of natural process (therefore post-hoc)
- Decay of memory
- Over reporting
- Lack of metalanguage
- Ability to report metacognitive, rather than cognitive processes

Modifying the notion of the 'expert'

It is evident that a cognitive model based on the behaviour of a general language user needs to be modified in order to take account of:

- a. **the age** of the test taker (Young Learners may not be capable of all the cognitive processes outlined)
- b. **the context** in which the test taker is expected to perform (e.g. academic, professional)

Testing academic skills

If they are to model real-world behaviour, academic tests need to

- Take due account of the **specific circumstances** of EAP skills use
- Engage **processes specific to those circumstances**
- Feature **content** that specifically resembles that of real-world academic events.



The circumstances

Special circs: speaking

Monologue speaking. Short presentations with

- ample time to pre-prepare
- the ability to consult notes
- the ability to use PP slides as prompts

Interactive speaking of two types

- a. cued response. Tutor question eliciting a comment or point of view
- b. intervention in seminar. Putting an additional or alternative point of view

Special circs: writing

Importance placed on discourse structure

- cohesion – within and between paragraphs
- beginning, middle and end
- accurate expression of ideas
- organisation of ideas

Major processing issues in paper-based testing:

- writing is linear, with limited chances to regress and revise
- writing may entail handwriting

These do not represent the types of writing process that students engage in when preparing assignments

Special circs: Reading

Academic reading is often for the purpose of writing an assignment. Hence recent interest in R-into-W tasks. But...

- How to score? Objectively for number of reading points reported? Subjectively by using writing descriptors? By marking the notes taken for accuracy?
- Reading of this kind entails considerable metacognitive control in switching between expeditious and careful reading (Khalifa & Weir, 2009). Is this teachable? Can it be expected in a pre-university reader?

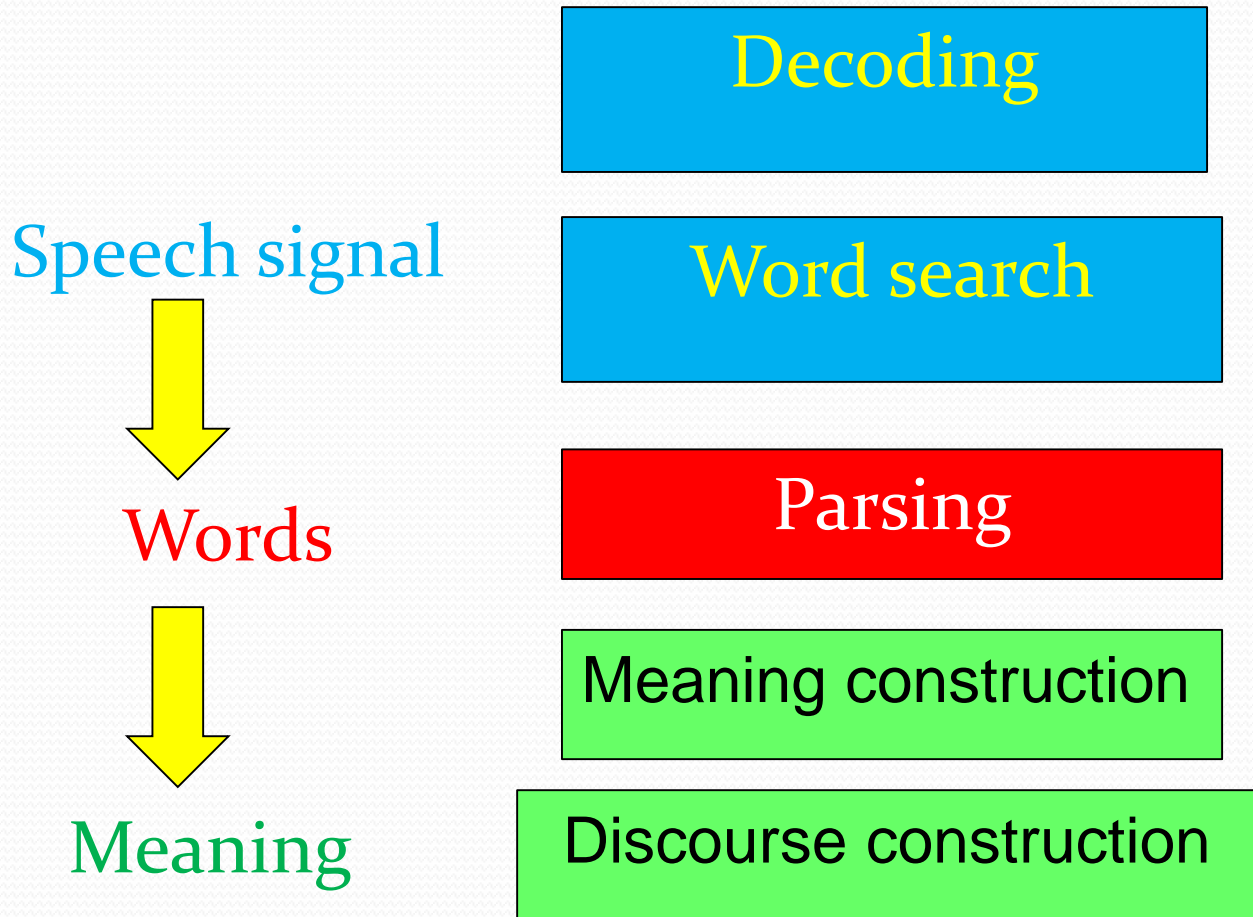
Special circs: listening

Two types of listening

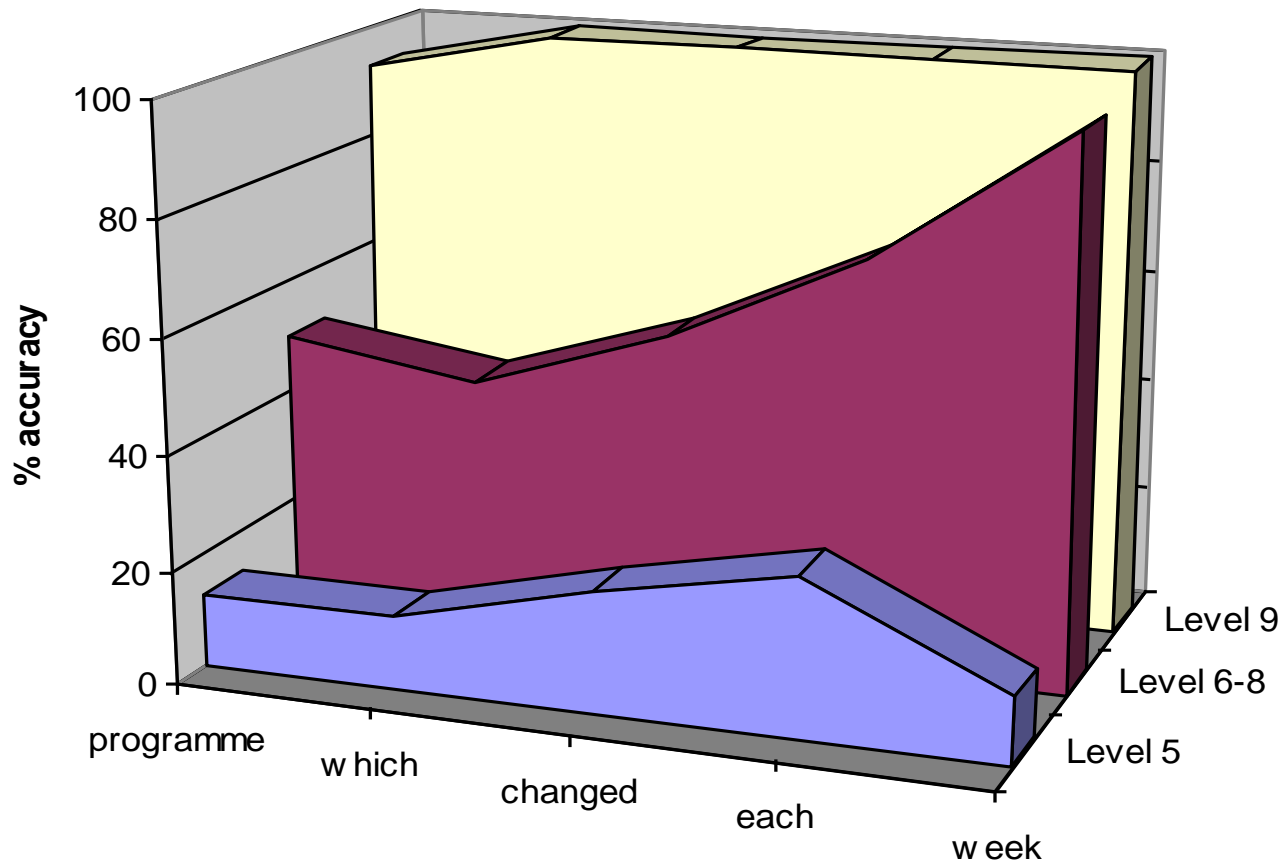
- a. **Lecture.** Extended monologue –with the support of
 - powerpoint slides and handouts
 - repetition, rephrasing, intonational emphasis
- b. **Seminar.** Listen and respond. Recognise point made by fellow student; respond appropriately

Listening: the process

A model of listening (Field, 2008, Cutler, 2012)



How much does an L2 listener extract?



Expertise

- Using a language skill proficiently has come to be viewed as a form of *expertise*, like playing chess or driving. A novice in any type of expertise has to lend a great deal of attention to low-level aspects of the skill.
- Lower proficiency L2 listeners have to focus a great deal of attention on identifying words in connected speech. Human powers of attention are limited so this prevents attention being given to other aspects – and they **do not have attention to spare for more complex operations like meaning or discourse representation**

Automaticity

As a result of practising a skill extensively, two main changes take place:

- a. what were originally several small steps become **combined into larger steps** [listeners begin to recognise chunks of language, enabling them to identify less prominent words more accurately]
- b. the more basic operations become automatic. As a result, **they no longer demand attention and decision-making**

This frees up attention for more complex processes.

Processes targeted in an EAP test of listening

- In order to extract relevant information from lecture-style material, L2 listeners need to have achieved a degree of automaticity in perceptual processes (input decoding, lexical search and parsing). They are likely to be processing speech more rapidly and accurately by recognising familiar chunks
- Arguably, a good EAP listening test should contain a few factually-based items to ensure that this basic level of proficiency has been achieved. But the majority need to focus on the higher level processes if they are to assess readiness for study in a second language.

Limited perceptual issues

- Processing at perceptual levels is a necessary basis for all type of listening rather than specific to the academic listener. A few areas might impose heavy demands in a lecture listening context:
- *In lexical search*: more low-frequency words with precise senses.
- *In parsing*: more complex syntactic structures (reflecting the pre-planned and discursive nature of a lecture and likely references to written-style PP slides)

Meaning construction

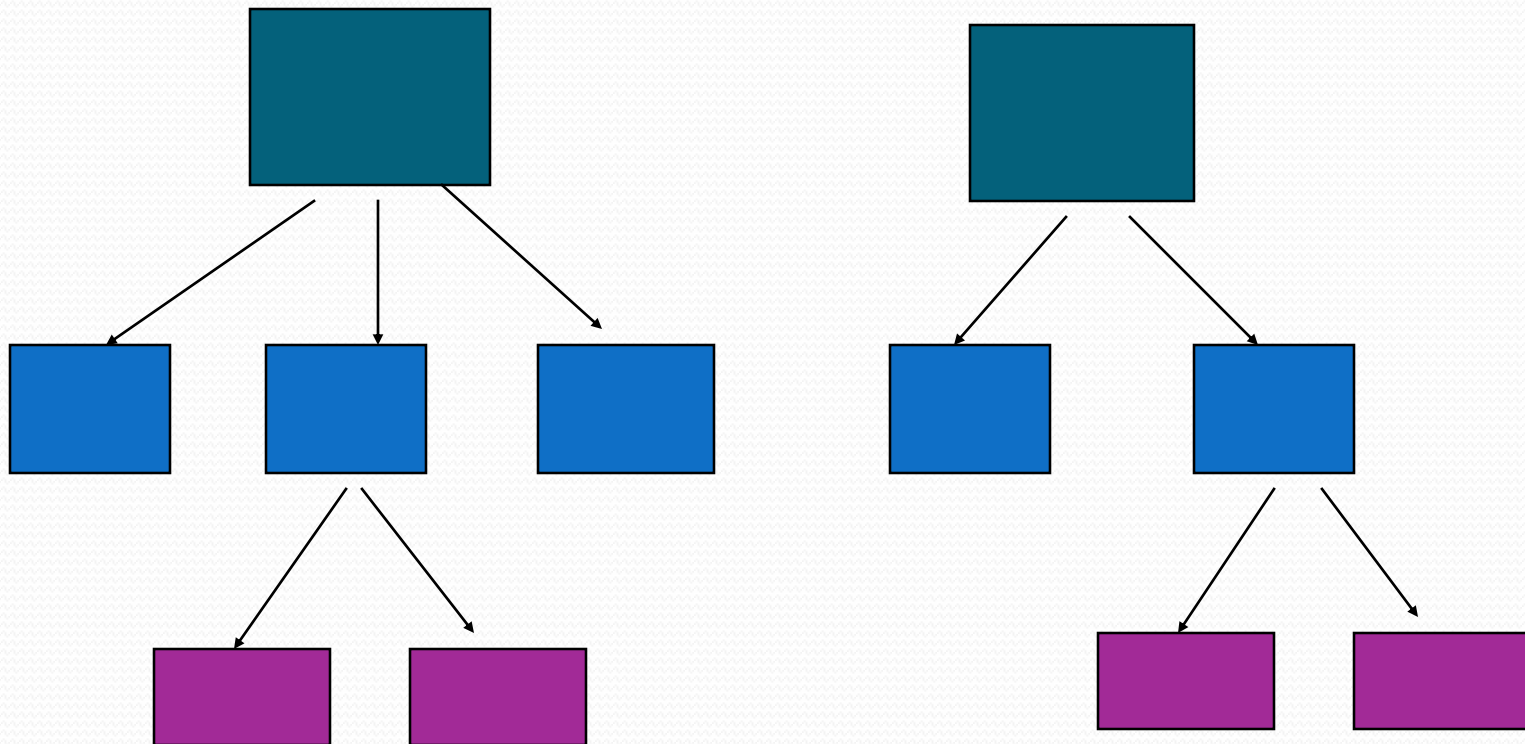
- Use world knowledge or topic knowledge to make sense of a new piece of information
- Relate a new piece of information to what went before; infer connections that are not explicitly made by the speaker
- Interpret anaphors such as pronouns by linking them to their referents
- Interpret speaker intentions and attitudes (including pragmatics)
- **IMPORTANT AREAS TO TEST IN EAP**

Discourse construction

- Select information that appears to be relevant
- Monitor incoming information to ensure it is consistent with what went before
- Integrate information into a developing discourse representation
- Build an information hierarchy based on macro- and micro- propositions
- Recognise an emerging line of argument
- **IMPORTANT TO EAP TESTING**

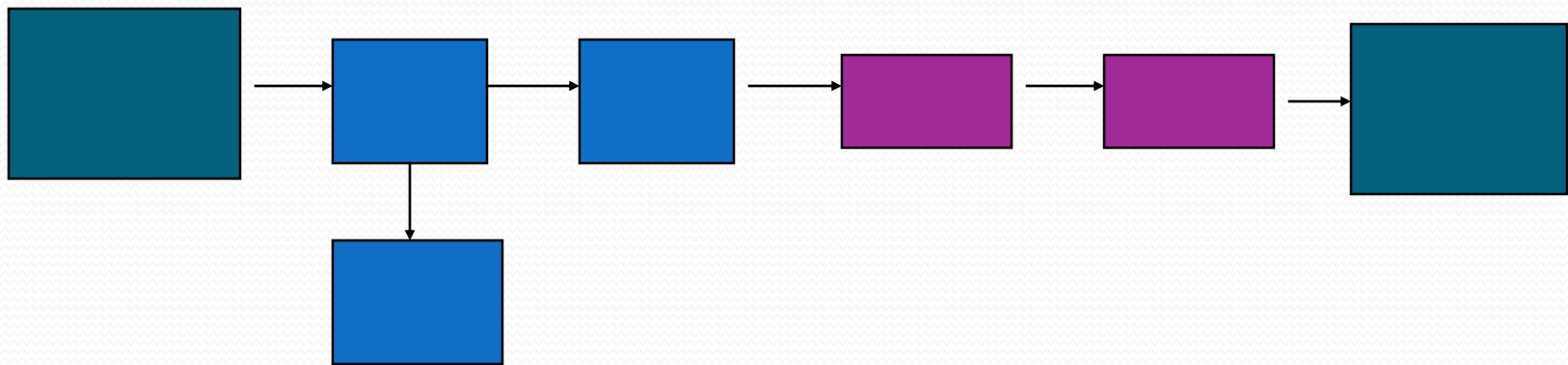
Structure building (Gernsbacher, 1990)

- Skilled listeners construct a hierarchical representation of a recording



Structure building (Gernsbacher, 1990)

- Unskilled listeners focus their attention at local level.



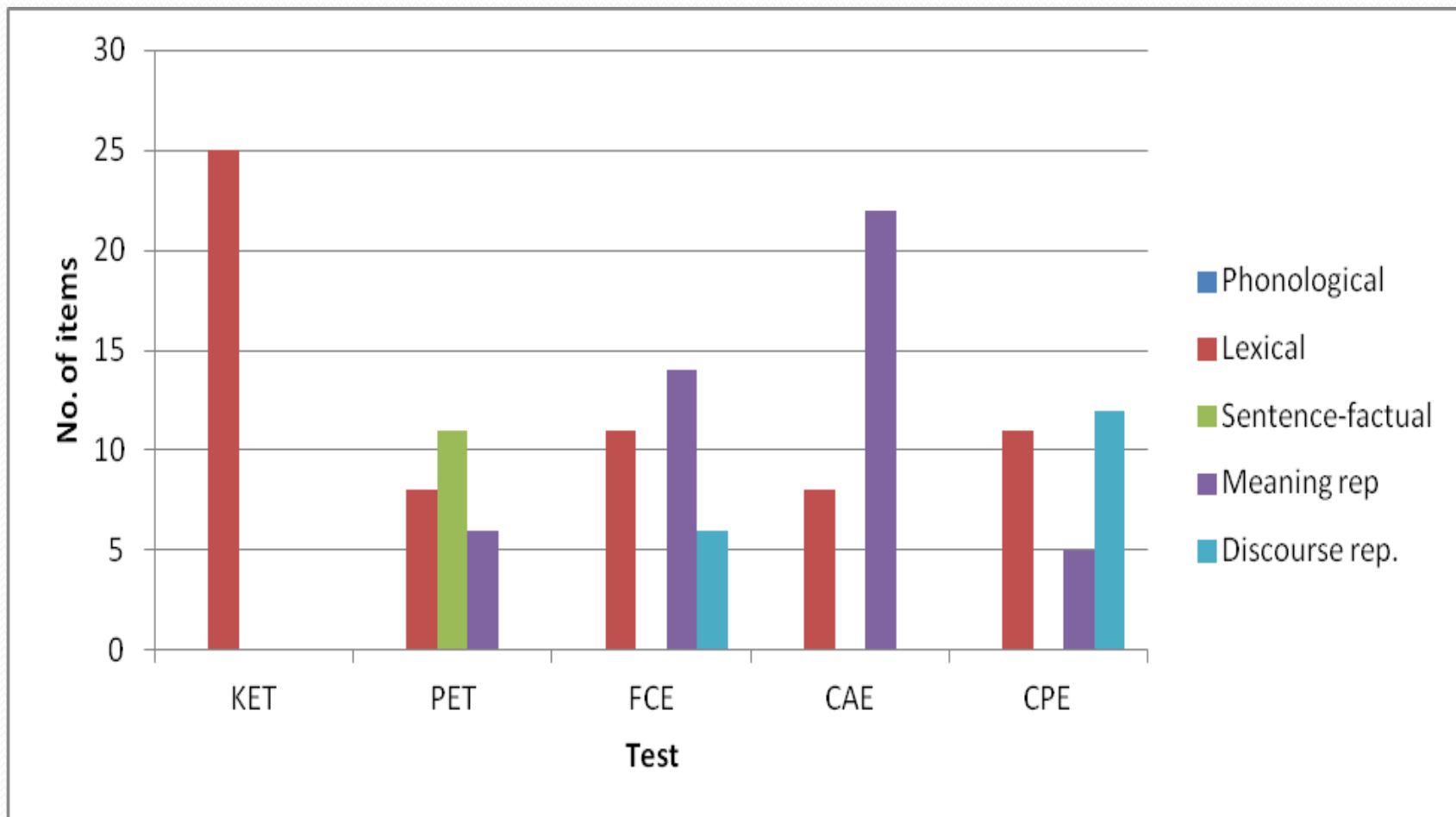
- They build a linear structure.

Question focus

Test formats often focus narrowly on **one level of listening**.

- Gap-filling items tend to focus on **word recognition**
- Items in other task types tend to focus on **facts**.
- At higher levels of L2 knowledge, questions rarely tap into **more complex levels of listening**:
 - What are the speaker's intentions or attitude?
 - What is the overall main point or points?
 - What is the line of argument that links the facts?
 - What can we infer that the speaker did not say?
 - What will the speaker go on to say?

Information focus (idea units, Chafe 1979)



Review of sample L2 listening tests

- A high proportion of items at all proficiency levels targeted cues at **lexical** level. This partly reflects the extensive use of gap filling formats, which encourage this type of focus.
- At CAE level, there was a major increase in items targeting cues that involved **meaning building**.
- But the only tests that targeted **discourse** building (to a limited degree) were FCE and CPE. There were no items of this type in the sample CAE test analysed.
- For tests such as TOEFL or IELTS to measure EAP listening validly, they need to focus a substantial proportion of items on meaning and discourse representation.

Normal meaning building processes

Under an approach based narrowly on factual comprehension questions, a listener escapes having to perform many of the processes which occur in real-life meaning building:

- Distinguish **main points** from **subsidiary** ones
- Distinguish **new points of information** from lecture-style rephrasing
- Recognise **argument structures** that link points of information
- Integrate incoming information into an **overall discourse representation**

The inflexibility of high stakes tests

Large scale high-stakes tests have major constraints which prevent them from testing listening in a way that fully represents the skill.

- Reliability and ease of marking
- Highly controlled test methods, using traditional formats that the candidate knows
- Little attention possible to individual variation or alternative answers

Solutions for local testers

Ask questions at discourse level:

- What is the main point of the recording? / Give three main points.
- What is the connection between Point A and Point B?
- Complete a skeleton summary of the text with main points and sub-points

Ask learners to compare two recordings for similarities and differences

Ask learners to summarise a recording orally or in the form of notes (in L1 or L2)

Exercise on structure building

- Listen to the recording. Write the two main points as headings.
- Listen again. Now write the sub-headings
- 1
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- 2.
 - a.
 - b.

Testing academic listening: the content

Text type

- Monologue / dialogue
- Discourse type:
 - Expository
 - Discursive
 - Argumentative
 - Analytical / interpretive
 - Process-descriptive
- Informationally relatively dense
- Visual support (PP slides) where possible
- Authentic where possible

Text as recording

- Speech rate: lecture pace, emphatic intonation patterns
- Speaker voice: allow for normalisation
- Accent: standard international versions. Avoid regional and L2 varieties

Presentation and formats

- Double play?
- Avoid pre-set questions where possible. Maybe set questions between two plays?
- Gap-filling best avoided?

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Thanks for listening!

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