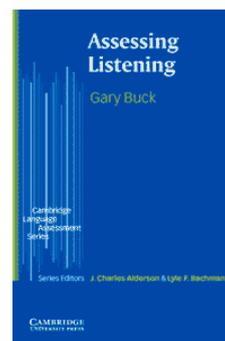


## Book Review

### Assessing Listening

by Gary Buck (2001)

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (274 pages)



Despite the fact that many EFL classes taught by native speakers of English concentrate exclusively on speaking and listening skills, it is surprising that students' in those classes are still likely to be assessed through reading comprehension or written tasks. That the situation is not unique to teachers in Japan is clear in Buck's interesting discussion of why listening needs to be assessed in this book, which offers a general overview of theory, research and practice in language learning (both mother and second language).

*Assessing Listening* is geared towards practitioners rather than researchers. In a nutshell, it provides a general introduction to the research and theory on listening assessment, practical advice about what to look for in listening performance, as well as a list of useful activities and text-types for doing such. Buck's text is hands-on and though theoretical at times, its major strength lies in its clear and straightforward discussions of how to incorporate listening assessment into language classrooms. Buck skillfully presents information to help teachers gain a better understanding of what listening skills are, how they might be well assessed, and where research and practice tends to be going.

The book's initial three chapters explain issues pertaining to second language listening. Much of the first chapter describes what listening is and should be. As one might expect, Buck outlines main areas of listening research: top down/bottom up approaches, speech/writing contrasts, speech rates, and the linguistics features of spoken texts. Chapter 2 offers a dry discussion of what is unique to listening. In brief, it is a fairly in-depth discussion of whether listening skills can be broken down into sub-skills and characteristics of spoken texts such as stress and intonation, and several lists of listening sub-skills. Chapter 3 contrasts various listening assessment approaches: discrete point testing, integrative listening, and interpretive approaches. Included are examples of common techniques used in both in high and low stakes tests. Particularly interesting is Buck's critique of communicative language testing. Strictly speaking, he claims '... there is no such thing as a communicative language test' (p. 92).

The next four chapters are the most practical and likely to be of most interest and use to English teachers. Put simply, the main idea of Chapter 4 is that:

... it is important to get the construct right, both theoretically and operationally, because this construct is what our test is measuring, and this determines what our scores mean. This in turn determines whether the decisions we make based on those test scores will be valid and fair. (p. 95)

Buck basically proposes that teachers be aware of their purposes and procedures for testing particular skills. Also, it is good that Buck compares competence and task-based tests – a distinction which is often unclear to many teachers. While identifying a test purpose is relatively easy, putting ideas into practice is

much more difficult. Chapter 5 is especially helpful because it discusses real life problems in designing tests, tasks and questions.

While it is inherently difficult to present such an ambitious overview of research on listening assessment in one volume, there are some areas on listening assessment I would have liked to have read about, and that which I feel would have been helpful to many teachers.

I have found that problems in designing listening tests seem to stem from finding texts suitable for different classes, Buck's main suggestion in Chapter 6 is that teachers keep a record of live recordings and this seems like a good idea. However, owing to copyright restrictions and time pressures, it is very difficult for many English language programs to develop a sufficiently large body of materials. Instead, most language centers use pre-recorded, commercially produced materials which may or may not be relevant to a particular class. Though Buck addresses some of these issues, I felt that he could and should have spent more time on how to manipulate existing materials. Alternatively, he might have introduced a number of Listening texts from the Internet such as those available from the *TESOL Internet Journal's* listening webpage. In Chapter 9, he mentions how computer based testing will be used more frequently in classrooms, but with very little in depth discussion of what techniques are already available.

It would have also been extremely helpful for Buck to devote time to explaining ways to deliver results. It is unusual that Buck does not address issues in giving feedback, as the book focuses mainly on designing formative assessment. Additionally, he does little in explaining scoring and marking codes, For example, Buck does not discuss major listening tests such as IELTS, TOEIC and TOEFL and the how they evaluate the level of listeners. Such a discussion might have revealed what experts in test design have in mind when they are writing large-scale tests, and therefore helped teachers preparing smaller-scale tasks and tests to use some of these insights into improving listening lessons in their own language classes.

A further, minor criticism concerns how Buck references texts. There is an excellent reference list at the end of the book; however, it would be more helpful to list different resources at the end of each chapter so that readers might pursue their own study of the topic rather than be bewildered by searching for them at the end of the book.

Despite these criticisms, Buck's *Assessing Listening* has countless strong points. The book is a clear and straightforward discussion on the major issues in listening assessment. The author's knowledge of the subject is apparent in his ability to summarize and synthesize a vast amount of research into a highly manageable and readable text. His explanations on different test constructs and formats are invaluable and readers might have a difficult time elsewhere finding one volume that contains such a well-written, condensed and accessible amount of information in preparing small-scale tests for English classes.

In conclusion, I recommend this text. Though many teachers might already be familiar with the majority of the information presented; for those seeking a deeper understanding of listening assessment, a general introduction into the field, or a solid reference for devising research, this is a good resource.

- Reviewed by Brendan Moloney