



AKADEMIN FÖR UTBILDNING OCH EKONOMI  
Avdelningen för humaniora

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# The national text in English

An analysis of the listening comprehension part

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2012

Examensarbete, Nivå, 15 hp  
Engelska med ämnesdidaktisk inriktning  
Engelska 61-90 hp

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to look closer on what kind of knowledge the listening comprehension part of the national test in English, year nine, tests and if it matches the goals and aims in the syllabus. The test material is categorised by the help of three tables; *Techniques for testing knowledge of the sound system*, *Tasks for testing understanding of literal meanings* and *Tasks for going beyond local literal meanings*. The questions used in the test are compared with the tables to find which table the type of question matches. The test material corresponds well to the syllabus as it tests the students' global and general comprehension and as the material is authentic. Some questions are also based on detailed listening where the students' vocabulary is tested.

**Key words:** Listening comprehension, National test, Test construction, Global and detailed listening

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# 1. Introduction

What do listening comprehension tests really test? Is it the students' overall comprehension of the spoken text, specific grammar issues or their ability to concentrate and pay attention to every unit of the text?

The ninth graders had just done the national test in English when I first came to them to have my practice. The impression was that they thought the listening comprehension part of the test was rather difficult which I thought was a bit interesting and the question of what makes the listening comprehension part more difficult than the others came to my mind. I have therefore decided to look closer at what the listening tests really test and to narrow my field of study I have chosen to focus on the national test, as it should work as a measurement for Swedish students' knowledge and acquisition.

According to the booklet where you can find the results of the national tests 2009, the listening test was based on global listening, to test the pupils' general understanding of the spoken texts, but also listen to detailed information and analyse and summarise a longer piece of text (Skolverket, 2010).

## 1.1 Aim and purpose

The aim is to look closer on what the listening comprehension part of the national test in English year nine really tests, if it focuses on linguistic features such as vocabulary etc. or on pupils' general comprehension of what is being said and to what extent the test match the goals and aims in the syllabus.

1. What type of knowledge does the national test inquire?
2. Do the test match the goals and aims in the syllabus?

## 1.2 Background

### 1.2.1 The listening process

What physically happens in our body when we listen to something is that sound waves strike the eardrum and causes it to vibrate and the energy in these waves is transformed and carried to the central nervous system where the actual process of listening comprehension takes place (Bejar, Douglas, Jamieson, Nissan & Turner, 2000). When focusing on listening comprehension, we tend to transform the sounds we hear into meaning, and we will soon be aware of that this process is far more complex than what physically happens in our body.

Bejar et al. (2000) write that listening can simply be described as the process of receiving an acoustic signal which is then structured. The structuring of the acoustic signal in its turn needs linguistic, situational and cognitive interaction and integration and is affected by memory load.

Buck (2001) mentions that both linguistic knowledge and non-linguistic knowledge are involved when it comes to the listening comprehension process whereas Bejar et al. (2000) divide the knowledge up into three different groups; *situational knowledge*, *linguistic knowledge* and *background knowledge*. Situational knowledge refers

to what situation the listener is in, if the listener can see the person he or she is listening to and if it is provided with visual clues about the content and what is said (Bejar et al., 2000). Linguistic knowledge includes vocabulary, phonology, syntax, morphology, pragmatics, and discourse structure, whereas the background knowledge is for example more about what the listener knows about the topic (ibid.). Buck (2001) writes that non-linguistic knowledge is basically knowledge about the topic, the context and general knowledge about the world and how it works, and is basically the same as situational and background knowledge which is being used by Bejar and others (2000).

According to Buck (2001) the listening process is an ongoing process of constructing and modifying an interpretation of what a text is about and it is based on whatever information seems relevant at the time where the listener interprets the incoming data and the acoustic signal using a wide variety of information and knowledge, for a specific communicative purpose (ibid.). The purpose for listening and both expectations and background knowledge are the foundation for the listener's interpretation. A person's memory capacity, background knowledge and purpose are aspects that affect the process of receiving input, creating meaning and comprehending spoken language (Bejar et al. 2000). As a summary Buck (2001) draws the conclusion that listening comprehension is a process of constructing meaning and is done by applying knowledge to the incoming sound. Buck also writes that comprehension of a message is affected by a wide range of variables like the characteristics of the speaker, the situation or the listener.

### **1.2.2 Automatic processing**

Automatic processing refers to the fact that spoken language takes place in real time in the sense that the listener hears the text only once and then it is gone and in normal language use we only get one chance at comprehension (Buck, 2001). Therefore there are consequences and one is the fact that the listener must process the text at a speed determined by the speaker. The other fact is that the listener cannot refer back to the text and that all that remains is now only a memory of what was heard (ibid.). Buck (2001) points out the necessity of automatic processing and concludes that the listening process must be entirely automatic in the sense that we tend to speak three words a second, which gives us very little time to think of the precise meaning of each word or how the clauses are constructed and so on.

Comprehension will suffer for those language learners with less automatic processing because as the speed of speech gets faster they will not have enough time to process everything. They will start paying proportionally more attention to grammatical and lexical processing and less attention to the wider interpretation of the meaning (ibid.) Buck (2001) continues and claims that if the speed of the speech gets even faster the listeners will not have enough time to process even grammatical and lexical information and they will begin to miss parts of the text. At a certain speed the listeners' processing will break down completely with the result of not understanding much at all (ibid.) This causes problem for some second language learners because the target language is only partly known and this in turn means the processing can only be partly automatic and will periodically break down as the listener cannot process the text fast enough (ibid.).

### **1.2.3 Theories of second language learning**

There are a lot of theories proposed to explain aspects of language learning. In the following there will be a presentation of *behaviourist* and *innatist* explanations followed by *cognitivist* theories and *sociocultural* theories.

#### **1.2.3.1 Behaviourism**

The main idea in behaviouristic theory is that language development is viewed as the formation of habits and it was assumed that a person learning a second language would start off with the habits formed in the first language. These habits would then interfere with the new ones needed for the second language. In the classroom the activities would focus on mimicry and memorisation and the students would learn dialogues and sentence patterns by heart. The adult second language learners produced sentences that sounded more like a child's and many of their sentences would be ungrammatical if they were translated into the learners' first language. Encouraged by the environment around language learners would make them continue to imitate and practice these sounds and patterns until they formed habits of correct language use. The quality and quantity of the language that is heard and the consistency of the reinforcement offered by others in the environment, would shape the learner's language behaviour. (Lightbown & Spada, 2006)

#### **1.2.3.2 The innatist perspective**

This theory of language learning is based on the idea that all human languages are basically innate and that the same universal principles underline all of them. In this way of thinking it is argued that children are biologically programmed for language and that language develops in the child in the same way as other biological functions do. Every child will learn how to walk if they have reasonable freedom of movement and satisfactory nourishment, for example. So is the case with language learning, as long as the environment make a basic contribution where the availability to have people who speaks to the child, the child or its biological ability will do the rest. (Lightbown & Spada, 2006)

The innatist perspective goes hand in hand with the idea of Universal Grammar. Universal Grammar would prevent the child from pursuing all sorts of wrong hypotheses about how language systems might work. If the children were pre-equipped with Universal Grammar, all they have to learn is the ways the target language makes use of the principles. It is argued that innate knowledge of principles of Universal Grammar permits all children to acquire the language of their environment during a critical period of their development. The critical period is an idea based on animals, including humans, being genetically programmed to acquire certain kinds of knowledge and skill at specific times in life. Beyond these critical periods it is either difficult or impossible to acquire these abilities. (Lightbown & Spada, 2006)

#### **1.2.3.3 The cognitivist perspective**

From a cognitivist perspective of language learning, language acquisition is one example of the human child's amazing ability to learn from experience, and supporters of this view see no need to assume that there are specific brain structures devoted to language learning. What children need to know is essentially available in the language they

are exposed to as they hear it used in thousands of hours of interactions with people and objects around them. Researchers also see language acquisition similar to and influenced by the acquisition of other skills and knowledge, as for example driving a car or bicycling. Because once skills become proceduralised (that happens after practice and you know how to) and automatised, thinking about what you do or why you do it in a certain way when performing the skill actually disturbs the smooth performance of it. In the classroom the students will learn the rules which are then followed by practice and with enough practice the knowledge of how it works will conquer the declarative knowledge (what something is). But when a rule or knowledge once is proceduralised and automatised the declarative knowledge may be forgotten. (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

#### ***1.2.3.4 The sociocultural perspective***

In the sociocultural perspective of learning the acquisition is firstly seen as a social, dynamic and interactive process before it turns over to become internal comprehension (Tornberg, 2006). According to the sociocultural theory are speaking and thinking very closely linked to each other (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). In this view of language acquisition there is a focus on language being developed primarily from social interactions because in supportive interactive environments children are able to advance to a higher level of knowledge and performance, named the *zone of proximal development* by Lev Vygotsky (ibid.). The difference between the sociocultural perspective and that of other researchers who also think interaction is important in second language learning is that sociocultural theorists assume that cognitive processes begin as an external socially mediated activity and eventually become internalised (ibid.).

#### ***1.2.4 Focusing on the syllabus***

According to the syllabus the subject of English should prepare pupils to become international citizens in an expanding English-speaking world. The ability to use English is necessary for studies, travelling in other countries and for social and professional international contacts of different kinds. The subject aims at developing an all-around communicative ability and the language skills necessary for international contacts, and an increasingly internationalised labour market, in order to take advantage of the rapid developments taking place, as a result of information and communications technologies, as well for further studies (Skolverket 2009:11). The main focus seems to be on communication, to be able to understand and to be understood in the English language, which also can be seen when looking at the goals to aim for where focus seems to lie on the ability to use the language in different situations and contexts depending on the situation and audience (Skolverket 2009). The importance of compensating with help of body language, questions, synonyms or reformulating when the pupils' own language abilities are not sufficient is also highlighted (ibid.), which indicates that language education is a very interactive kind of learning.

Since the English language and the English cultures are very accessible in the society of today and pupils are exposed to different varieties of English outside school, the syllabus wants to encourage to take advantage of this richness and variety of English but also examine the contents of what is being conveyed (Skolverket 2009). The syllabus says that the subject of English 'provides both a background to and a wider perspective on the cultural and social expressions surrounding pupils in today's international society' (Skolverket 2009:12). The ability to reflect over

similarities and differences between the pupils' own cultural experiences and cultures in English-speaking countries is consistent through the entire syllabus of the subject of English and the aim is to develop an understanding of the different cultures and give the pupils an inter-cultural competence (ibid.).

There is not much specifically written about listening skills when searching through the syllabus but to be able to interact with each other in English the listening part comes in naturally. When looking closer at the goals that pupils should have attained by the end of the ninth year in school there is only one goal that directly refers to the listening skill where pupils should "understand clear speech, even though regional in nature, in instructions, narratives and descriptions concerning familiar conditions and their own areas of interests" (Skolverket 2009:13). The goals about the ability to actively take part in discussions and orally relate and describe something are all integrated somehow with the listening skill even though it is not that explicit. If pupils want higher grades they have to assimilate, summarise and comment the content of clear speech from different regions. To pass with great distinction they have to assimilate, summarise and comment on clear speech both in general and in detail (ibid.). The assessment criteria of the interactive skills like listening and reading are based on the ability to understand spoken and written English and the ability to general understand and understand the context but also to draw conclusions of the text just read or listened to (ibid.). Other parts in the assessment that should be considered concern the extent to which the pupils' interception level and their ability to follow in a native speaking pace and understand the most important regional varieties of English. The pupils' ability to notice differences and nuances when it comes to speech sound, stress and intonation are also aspects that are included in this kind of knowledge (ibid.).

## 1.2.5 Test types

### 1.2.5.1 The discrete-point approach

The discrete-point approach of testing listening comprehension is based on the behaviouristic view of language acquisition. The central part of the testing method is the possibility to identify and isolate the separate elements of language, and then test each one of these separately. The language items that are tested should measure segmental phonemes, stress, intonation, grammatical structure and vocabulary and the tasks should be based on true/false, multiple-choice questions and pictures. Comprehension is seen as understanding language on a local, literal level, and meaning is treated as something that is contained within the text, and the listeners' task is to get it out. For example test takers listen to one word spoken in isolation and they have to identify which word they have heard. That could be words that are very much alike, such as *ship* and *sheep*, *bat* and *but*, or *buff* and *puff*. (Buck, 2001)

In the example below taken from Buck (2001:64) the test takers listen to a statement and then they are to choose the option closest in meaning, and in this case it is the item of idiom *ran into*:

Test takers hear: *John ran into a classmate on his way to the library.*

- They read:
- a, *John exercised with his classmate*
  - b, *John ran to the library*
  - c, *John injured his classmate with his car*
  - d, *John unexpectedly met a classmate*

Example 1.2.4.1

### 1.2.5.2 Integrative testing

Integrative testing differs from discrete-point testing since it puts the weight on assessing the processing of language as opposite to assessing knowledge about the elements of the language. There is also focus on using the language rather than just knowing about it, but there are no statements regarding focus on communication. The idea of the integrative approach is that the language use as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts and it is a restraint to just focus on parts of a language. Listening comprehension should therefore focus on processing texts in real time, to understand the literal, semantic meaning. (Buck, 2001)

Examples of tests in this category are gap-filling tests, where some words are deleted and free to be filled in by the listener, but some researchers claim that it is difficult to prove that these tests provides any evidence of understanding. Items in gap-filling tests can often be completed without processing the meaning of the text and therefore they do not provide explicit proof of comprehension. When using gap-filling tests attention must be paid on what processes are involved and what they should measure. It depends on both the type of the gap-filling task, and the nature of the information that has to be inserted into the gaps. For example in some gap-filling tasks understanding clearly stated information is tested and in others the listeners' word recognition skills are required. Critics claim that these kinds of tests do not test general listening ability but more word recognition skills. (Buck, 2001)

Dictation tests are also a well known integrative test of listening and work in that sense that test takers listen to a text and write down what they have heard and usually they listen to the text twice (Buck, 2001). The first time they just listen to it and try to understand it and the second time the text is broken down in shorter sections, with pauses between each, where the test takers will write down what they have heard (ibid.). Buck (2001:74-75) gives an example of what a dictation test could look like:

First time test takers hear:

*Mary lives with her mother and father in a small town just outside London. Every day from Monday to Friday she works in a large office in the centre of London...*

The second time the test takers hear:

*Mary lives with her mother and father  
In a small town just outside London  
Every day from Monday to Friday  
She works in a large office  
in the centre of London.*

#### Example 1.2.4.2.

The best way to score these sorts of tests is to delete marks; starting counting the number of words of each section and for each mistake a mark is subtracted. Intrusions and errors count as one mistake each. Spelling mistakes and synonyms should not be seen as errors. Critics of this way of testing listening comprehension claim that as long as the sections are short (as the example above) the task look more like a transcription exercise and the skill that is being tested is probably word recognition. If the sections of texts were longer, test takers would have to rely on their short time memory as they have to remember what they have heard. Their comprehension might be good even if they forget the exact words of the text but on the other hand the test takers have to use their linguistic knowledge to reconstruct the words they have forgotten. Those with good language knowledge can fill in the missing words and reconstruct the text better. (Buck, 2001)

Another way of testing listening in the sense of an integrative testing approach is to evaluate the truth of statements or comparing two sentences and say whether they mean the same thing or not and Buck (2001:80) shows an example:

Test takers hear:	a, <i>the snow delayed the flight.</i>
	b, <i>the plane arrived on time despite the snowstorm.</i>

#### Example 1.2.4.3.

The problem Buck (2001) sees with the integrative testing approach is that the tests tend to measure too narrow a range of language skills, since languages extends over much longer pieces of text than sentences, and always takes place in some sort of communicative situation. The listener will grasp the basic of the linguistic information in the message but is not required to relate that to the context (ibid.).

### 1.2.5.3 Communicative testing

The communicative testing approach was born from second language teaching views of language, that language is used for the purpose of communication, in a particular situation and for a particular purpose. The important thing is not what you know about the language, nor how grammatically correct you are but whether you can actually use it to communicate in the real world situation where the language will be used in. Tests should therefore not be concerned with how much test takers know about the language and more about whether they can use it to communicate effectively. The problem, though, in communicative testing is that language varies considerably from one individual to another and one situation to the next and therefore there are practical difficulties in performing it and it is hard to determine what a communicative test is. Successful performance on one complex communicative task does not always indicate ability to perform well on others since there are as many interpretations of a text as there are test takers. Somehow the basic competence in the performance on one task needs to be equal to that required by others. (Buck, 2001)

The main idea of communicative testing is that the testing material should be authentic. Texts should be taken from the target-language use situation or have the characteristics of target-language use text. Authentic texts that should be used in communicative tests are conversations, announcements, service encounters, answering machine messages, directions, lectures, narratives, anecdotes, personal reports, news broadcasts, interviews, advertisements, debates and talkback exchanges. (Buck, 2001)

The testing should also provide a purpose for listening, a communicative purpose as in the example Buck (2001:90) uses:

Your friend is in Scotland on a walking holiday. You want to know what the weather is like there. You listen to the weather forecast on the radio.

1. What's the weather like in Eastern Scotland?  
Tick the correct boxes.

Dry  Rainy  Sunny  Cloudy  Foggy  Thunderly

2. Where in Scotland is the weather best for walking?  
Tick the correct boxes.

Western Scotland  Eastern Scotland  Northern Scotland

Test takers hear:

*And here's the weather forecast from Peter Cockcroft*

*Good morning. A cloudy day for Western Scotland with outbreaks of rain and some of them heavy over the hills. The chance of some hail, perhaps even the odd rumble of thunder. For Northern Scotland a rather cloudy and wet start here but the rain will turn showery during the day. Across in Eastern Scotland rather cloudy here too but at least it will be dry and there will be a bit of brightness now and then. For the rest of the England and Wales....*

Example 1.2.4.4.

This a good example of a communicative testing task, as it has a purpose of listening even though the listeners do not have a friend walking in Scotland and will not check the weather and absolutely not tick any boxes. But the idea is still purpose based as the listeners know what they should be listening for and it allows them to choose the most appropriate listening strategy for the target in the text, which is similar to real-world listening. Another example of a communicative task is when the test takers are given instructions that they, for example, have read an article about something, and then hears an interview or a program about the same thing on the radio. The test takers will check for differences in the written text comparing to the one that they are listening to. The purposes in this task is that the test takers "notice" that there are differences in the two texts and decide to write to the newspaper and complain. The task is therefore more like a realistic situation of real-world language use. (Buck, 2001)

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Material

The focus will be on the listening comprehension part of the national test in English, year nine. The test which will be the primary resource of this essay is the last one that is not classified, which is the test from 2009.

The national test in English is based on the functional, communicative and intercultural language approach of the curriculum. It is a proficiency test which means that the purpose is to test the students' general language skills. The test from 2009 focuses on interactive, productive and receptive skills in English. (Skolverket, 2010)

The listening comprehension test has its focus on the receptive skill but as the students sometimes need to give the answer in English their productive skills are in a sense also tested, as they have to communicate in understandable English. The aim of this part of the test is to let the students show if and how well they understand different kinds of spoken English in different situations. (Skolverket, 2010)

The test is divided up into two parts; *Newsround* and *Circus*. The *Newsround* part is constructed only by multiple-choice questions, and the *Circus* part has a mixture with short-answered questions and multiple-choice questions. Before each part begins the students are to read the questions for each part. The two parts are described more closely below.

#### 2.1.1 Newsround

Newsround is based on short fictive news items which are based on authentic newspapers articles and the items will be played just once. Each news item has multiple-choice questions with four possible descriptions of what the news item is about. The listener will have to choose the correct answer by putting a cross in the accurate box. The students have 30 seconds to read the questions through and 15 seconds to answer them. According to the test constructors the questions were mainly based on a general comprehension of what the news items were about, but in some cases the test takers' ability to notice certain details in the information that was given. (Skolverket, 2010)

#### 2.1.2 Circus

Circus is based on a fictive interview with material from internet-articles and is about a girl from Canada who studies to become a circus artist. The students will answer the questions in different ways. According to the test constructors is there a mixture of open and closed answering alternatives and the test takers have to listen to both detailed information and longer performances where they have to summarise and analyse. (Skolverket, 2010)

The interview is divided into shorter pieces, four to five questions at a time, and before each section of the interview begins the students have 40-50 seconds to read the questions through and 50-60 seconds after to be able to answer the questions. The test takers will also listen to the interview twice, but the second time without any pauses.

### 2.2 Method of Analysis

As a help when analysing the test construction three different tables made by Valette and

Heaton (Buck, 2001) have been used (see appendix 1). The tables have worked as a help when categorising what kind of test the national test in English, listening comprehension, year nine, 2009 is. The test material has been read through and listened to and each question has been studied and compared with the tables to find which table the type of question matches. Finally the questions could be categorised. According to Buck (2001) the most common tasks used to assess listening are comprehension questions as they can be used with a variety of text types and they can be used to test a wide range of knowledge. Two of the tables used in this study are based on the understanding of literal meanings and beyond local literal meaning whereas the third table is based on linguistic features such as the sound system (see appendix 1). Buck (2001) emphasises the fact that the tasks in the table considering *Tasks for going beyond local literal meanings* (see appendix 1) do not automatically test listening in the wider sense even though they have the potential to do so. It is up to the test constructor to use the tasks to test such skills as understanding gist, implied meanings, contextual implications and so on (ibid.).

The analysis will also involve what kind of comprehension questions that are being used in the test. In *Assessing Listening* (Buck, 2001) Shohamy and Inbar divided the comprehension questions into three types of questions: *global questions*, which require test-takers to synthesize information or draw conclusions, *local questions*, which require test-takers to locate details or understand individual words, and *trivial questions*, which require test-takers to understand precise but irrelevant details not related to the main topic.

The grading material (see appendix 2) that comes together with the test as a help to the teachers to mark the tests correct will also be considered when studying the results. The grading material, the different types of questions and the tables will form the basis of analysis in this study.

### 3. Result

The result of the study will be presented in the following passage where the two parts of the test will be presented separately. Examples from the test are shown in each section and are directly taken from the listening comprehension part of the national test in English from 2009 for pupils in year nine. A description of the result will follow after the chosen examples. To be able to categorise the test and what kind of knowledge that is required by the pupils the test tasks will be compared to Vallete and Heaton's (Buck, 2001) tables of *Tasks for testing understanding of literal meanings*, *Tasks for going beyond local literal meanings* and *Techniques for testing knowledge of the sound system* (see appendix 1). The test tasks will also be compared to Shohamy and Inbar's (Buck, 2001) question types *global*, *local* or *trivial*.

#### 3.1 Newsround

This task is based on short news items with multiple-choice questions. The test takers are to listen to ten short news items and then choose the correct answer alternative and mark it by putting a cross in the correct box. For example (Ämnesprov i engelska, Äp9, 2009:2):

The test takers hear:

*The world is in danger of losing the Sun Crest peach. Extravagantly juicy with nectar that perfectly balances acids and sugars, it boasts a yellow skin with an amber glow. But because it's soft and easily bruised it's unattractive to supermarkets, which prefer hearty produce bred to travel well and languish indefinitely. Grown in California's San Joaquin Valley, the Sun Crest is picked only in midsummer and sold primarily at roadside stands.*

3. What are we told about the Sun Crest peach? It is...

A hard to find in shops

B much too expensive to buy

C not as tasty as it used to be

D very difficult and expensive to grow

Example 3.1

The answer of the question is not spoken out literally so the test takers must understand the content of the specific news item to be able to give a correct answer. It is an example of a typical global question where the pupils must synthesise information or draw conclusions (Buck, 2011). This kind of test type requires understanding beyond literal meanings and the task itself tests the pupils' general passage comprehension.

In the beginning the news items are a bit easier to comprehend as the passages are shorter and there is just one question based on the passage. Closer to the end of the task the difficulty level seems to have increased as the vocabulary has change to become more advanced and the speech rate is a bit faster. For example (Ämnesprov i

engelska, Äp9, 2009:5):

Test takers hear:

*Young dolphins swim alongside their mothers in the open sea for up to three years, but it has always been a mystery how they manage to keep up. It turns out the young dolphins use much the same trick that cyclists use on Tour de France – they exploit their mother’s slipstream to help pull them along. Israeli aerospace engineer, Daniel Weihs, studied dolphins at the US National Marine Fishery and found that you dolphins swim about thirty centimetres away from their mother’s body. As the larger dolphin swims she pushes a wave of water out of the way around her which also flows around the little calf reducing the amount of work it has to do by sixty-five percent. The pressure difference created as the water is deflected around the mother and calf also pushes the two animals tightly together. It’s in fact so strong that some female dolphins have been known to steal other mothers’ calves by swimming past rapidly and sucking them towards themselves!*

10a. What are we told about young dolphins?

- A They can only swim a short distance at first
- B Studies show that they swim faster in the open sea
- C Nobody knows how they learn how to swim
- D They swim more easily close to their mothers

10b. It may happen that they are...

- A separated from their mothers
- B attacked by larger dolphins
- C killed by strong waves
- D pushed away by their own mothers

Example 3.2

The test takers will also in this task show their general comprehension of the passage but also use their background knowledge of what they know about dolphins and even Tour de France cyclists as a help to understand the news item.

### 3.1.1 Assessing Newsround

The test takers get one point for each correct answer.

## 3.2 Circus

The second part of the listening comprehension test has the character of an interview where the test takers are to follow Kenisha who is a Canadian girl studying to become a circus artist.

The interview is followed by 19 mixed questions, some are multiple-choice questions and some are short-answer questions. The questions asked in this section are not the same ones that the interviewer asks Kenisha. The pupils will have to answer four to three questions at a time as there will be pauses after about two minutes of the interview and pupils will have a about two minutes to fill in their answers. The pupils will listen to the interview twice whereas the second time the interview is without any pauses. (Ämnesprov i engelska, Äp9, 2009:7)

The multiple-choice questions are of the same sort as the ones in the section of Newsround; they are global questions which ask for general comprehension of the passage heard and therefore the understanding required is beyond local literal meanings according to Valette and Heaton's tables (Buck, 2011, see appendix 1). Below there is an example of a multiple-choice question:

Test takers hear:

**Terry** (the interviewer): *I understand you have to keep in shape. But what about food? Are you constantly aware of what you're eating?*

**Kenisha**: *In fact we all have to be, and that's why I bring my own lunch. Mostly it's leftovers from the previous night's dinner. But I try to avoid starchy carbohydrates like pasta because they make me sluggish in the afternoon.*

**Terry**: *So there are never any juicy burgers for you then?*

**Kenisha**: *Oh, well, no. And you won't find any junk food being sold in the cafeteria in school either. There they only offer hot and cold lunches and healthy, nutritious snacks. But since the prices there are a bit high I normally can't afford any of that.*

13. What does Kenisha normally eat for lunch?

A Healthy snacks	<input type="checkbox"/>
B Spaghetti or lasagne	<input type="checkbox"/>
C Hamburgers	<input type="checkbox"/>
D Homemade food	<input type="checkbox"/>

Example 3.3

Except the multi-choice questions the rest of the questions are short-answer questions (Ämnesprov i engelska, Äp9, 2009:9):

Test takers hear:

**Terry:** *And what **is** that first class?*

**Kenisha:** *The morning classes are kind of basic and they are compulsory. It's clowning and dancing and I totally love them. It's such a good way to begin the day, and I think it's very nice because then you meet everybody*

11. What basic classes must everybody take?

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

Example 3.4

This is an example of a local question as the pupils must locate details and understand individual words. At the same time the task requires comprehension that goes beyond local literal meanings according to Valtette and Heaton's table (see table 2.3 in appendix 1). The pupils will have to pay attention to the exact words that are being said in the interview to be able to answer the question.

The next question asks for comprehension beyond local literal meanings in the sense that the task fits into the table *tasks for going beyond literal local meaning* (see appendix 1, table 2.3). The answer does also require local comprehension as for locating details and grasping individual words.

Test takers hear:

**Terry:** *I see. But isn't it hard sometimes to know what's good for you?*

**Kenisha:** *You're right. I didn't use to think about my diet and I was never really interested in cooking – but that has changed. Since what you eat **is** really important, we even study that as a subject. You know, our curriculum is an equal mix of academic subjects and physical training, and nutrition is one of the academic subjects.*

14. How has Kenisha learnt what to eat as a circus artist?

\_\_\_\_\_

Example 3.5

The passage provides the information to answer the questions twice; “we even study that as a subject” and “nutrition is one of the academic subjects” and the passage also provides the pupils with other expressions and words such as “diet”, “cooking” and “nutrition” than just “food” or “eat”. The pupils must also locate and understand words such as “curriculum”, and “academic subjects” to be able to answer the question.

Looking at the correcting material (see appendix 2, p.11) the pupils score if they write “they study nutrition/it (as a subject in school)” or “It/Nutrition is a subject (in school)”, it is also acceptable to just write “in school” but it is preferable to choose the first two examples.

It is possible to notice an increasing of the level of difficulty in the later part of this section as word recognition when expressions and word use is getting more advanced.

In the example below the test takers have to understand certain words to get the point that Kenisha is making, in this case the words *ancient*.

Test takers hear:

**Terry:** *I'm sure that everything will work out just fine for you then. Let's look ahead a little further now! What kind of future do you imagine for yourself?*

**Kenisha:** *Different things... a travelling show... being a member of a small troupe. You know, part of being a circus artist is that you're able to adapt to changing circumstances and who knows, my job may take me to both Europe and Asia.*

**Terry:** *So... you're planning to leave Canada?*

**Kenisha:** *Well, I don't know about that, but I **do** now that circus has ancient roots all over the world and I think it's so exciting that it's a language that people seem to understand everywhere.*

18. Why is Kenisha fascinated with circus in an international perspective? Give *two* reasons.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Example 3.6

### 3.2.1 Assessing Circus

The test takers get one or two points for each correct answer. One point is given for correct answers considering the multi-choice questions. The short-answered questions give the pupils one or two points for each question depending on how many answers the questions demand. The acceptance is quite high because there are no demands that the answers have to be grammatically correct or written in whole sentences. Though, there will be a reduction of the score if the answers have too bad grammar or just are contradicted or if the spelling mistakes are too fatal. (Ämnesprov i engelska, Äp 9, 2009:10-12)

The example below shows how the correcting material is constructed. The example is taken from a question about what two different things Kenisha does say about the size of the National Circus School:

Exempel (autentiska elevsvar)

2 p

- pretty big but not if you compares with how many students there are
- It's a big school with few pupils
- Spacious + only 100 students so the school is not big
- Large building with a lot of space + few students though
- A small school, not as many students + a lot of space
- There is much space there + it's quite big

1p

- lot of space
- It isn't big if you count with all the students
- It not so big + it's 100 persons who go to the school
- More space + special made for the trainings (andra delen är ej svar på frågan men ej motsägelsefull)
- It bigger and modernized

0p

- (endast) it is not so big
- (endast) It's a big school
- (endast) it's a small school
- Species + not big for so many students (förstörande stavfel + andra delen fel)

Example 3.7

Two points are given if the answer expresses anything about the size of the building and something about the number of students. The material shows that it will not pay too much attention to the test takers' language structure unless it is too disturbing, which shows that the comprehension needed is beyond local literal meanings.

## 4. Discussion

The aim with this study was to try to find out what the listening comprehension part of the national test in English, year nine, 2009 really was testing.

In this section the result will be discussed together with the background and divided by the two parts of the test;

*Newsround* and *The circus*.

### 4.1 Newsround

This part of the test tests the pupils' global and general comprehension of the spoken texts and is a good example of communicative testing, as the testing material is authentic (Buck, 2001). Newsround can also be compared with the example 1.2.4.4 as a good communicative testing task as it has a purpose of listening even though the listeners are not in an English speaking country and listen to the news. The news items are pretty short which seems make it easier for the listeners to follow them without losing concentration and as the answers do not require the test takers to listen to every single word the task is a good choice of testing global comprehension.

In example 3.2 the news reader makes a parallel with Tour de France bikers. The test takers can in this case use their background knowledge such as world knowledge as a help to see what they mean in the news

rapport. As the background knowledge is one of the foundations for a listener's interpretation (Buck, 2011), knowing a bit about the sport and Tour de France may in this case help the listener to the right answer.

Comparing this part of the test with what is written in the syllabus one could clearly see that the task and its purpose corresponds well to the goals in the syllabus as the pupils in year nine should "understand clear speech, even though in regional in nature, in instructions, narratives and descriptions concerning familiar conditions and their own areas of interests" (Skolverket 2009:13). To pass with distinction the pupils will have to assimilate, summarise and comment the content of clear speech from different regions and to pass with great distinction they also need to assimilate, summarise and comment on clear speech both in general and in detail (ibid.). To be able to answer the questions in the test task the pupils need to summarise and understand the news items as the answer alternatives are not spoken out literally in the text.

## 4.2 Circus

This part of the test does also correspond with the idea of communicative testing as the material in this part of the test is based on an interview and therefore is authentic (Buck, 2001). The questions used in this part of the test do also correspond well to the table of *Tasks for going beyond local literal meanings* as the pupils listen to an interview and answer a number of short-answer comprehension questions on it and some multi-choice questions and test the pupils' general passage comprehension. The short-answer questions are mostly based on detailed listening where the pupils' vocabulary is tested whereas the multiple-choice questions give the pupils a possibility to analyse and summarise the spoken text. So far the test fully agrees to what the test constructors sought to test; the pupils' general comprehension and detailed comprehension.

The question is to what extent it is possible to test the pupils' global and detailed comprehension as the interview is fairly long and there are four to three questions on each part of the interview that the pupils have to answer. Buck (2001) writes that the automatic processing must be rather developed as the listener must process the text at a speed determined by the speaker and the fact that we tend to speak three words a second which gives us very little time to think of the precise meaning of each word or how the clauses are constructed and so on. As the automatic process normally takes place in real time and the listener gets only one chance of comprehension, the listener will have to rely on his or her memory of what is heard (ibid.). In one sense the listen comprehension part of the national test tests the pupils' automatic process but in another sense their memory capacity is tested as well. Four questions are to be answered within four minutes where each part of the spoken text is about two minutes long and it is pretty hard to write down the answers at the same time you are listening because then it is possible to miss what comes next in the text. The pupils will have a second chance though in this case to listen to the interview once again and to fill in some missing parts but if you are to save the answering of the questions for the pause you will have to rely on your memory and that is not what the test should test. If the test constructors are aiming to test the pupils' automatic process it might be better to have shorter texts, as the ones in Newsround, but with a variety of a degree of difficulty in speed of speech, vocabulary use and so on.

### *4.3 Comparison of the test and the syllabus*

The assessment criteria of the interactive skills like listening is based on the ability to understand spoken English and the ability to a general understanding of the context but also the ability to draw conclusions of the text just heard (Skolverket, 2009:13). The goal that the pupils should have attained by the end of year ninth year in school consider their understanding of clear speech, even though regional in nature, in instructions, narratives and descriptions (ibid.). If the pupils would like higher grades they also have to assimilate, summarise and comment of the content of clear speech both in general and in detail (ibid.). The listening comprehension part of the national test does assess the pupils' ability to summarise and comment of the content both in general and in detail. On the other hand one of the aims of the English language as a subject in the Swedish school is also to understand and to be understood in the English language which means that you do not have to understand every single word of what is being said to understand the content. Of course it is important to have a good vocabulary as you could always miss important information if you have a less developed vocabulary. Putting this into a real context this type of important information might come along in shorter messages or there will be a possibility to ask someone to repeat the parts that you for some reason did not understand or hear clearly.

The testing material is pretty good as it is with authentic texts, and general passage comprehension questions, but it would be desirable to make the material more authentic or more alike "real life", with shorter messages for example but with a greater variety of the degree of difficulty where the pupils' automatic process, vocabulary and world knowledge etc. can be tested without relying on their memory capacity.

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## Appendix 1

*Table 2.1 Techniques for testing knowledge of the sound system*

### **Minimal pairs with decontextualised words**

- Test-takers listen to two (or three) words and indicate whether they are the same or different.
- Test-takers listen to two (or three) words and indicate whether they rhyme.
- Test-takers listen to one word first, followed by a number of other words, and indicate which of these is the same as the first word.
- Test-takers listen to a number of words, some in the target language and some not, and indicate how many words there are in the target language.
- Test-takers listen to two (or three) words and indicate which has the meaning expressed in a picture

### **Minimal pairs with words in an utterance**

- Test-takers listen to a sentence and choose which of two (or three) pictures indicates a word in the sentence.
- Test-takers listen to a statement, followed by two possible responses (which differ in only one word), and choose which response is appropriate.

### **Recognising grammatical structures**

- Test-takers listen to a sentence and indicate whether the verb (or noun) was singular or plural.
- Test-takers listen to a sentence and indicate whether a particular word was masculine, feminine or neuter.
- Test-takers listen to sentence and indicate whether the verb was in the past, present or future tense.

### **Recognising intonation patterns**

- Test-takers listen to an utterance and choose one or three curved lines to indicate the intonation curve of the utterance

### **Recognising stress**

- Test-takers listen to an utterance, and then read three transcriptions of it in which capital letters indicate heavy stress; they choose the one which indicates the stress of the utterance they listen to.

## Appendix 2

Table 2.2 Tasks for testing understanding of literal meanings

### Body movement tasks

- Test-takers are given commands to move various body parts (raise your right hand, go to the door etc.)
- Simon says: test-takers are given commands to move various body parts (e.g. raise your right hand, go to the door etc.) and only do so if the command is preceded by 'Simon says'.
- Test-takers are told to draw a certain object (e.g. draw a rose, draw a circle of you are a girl etc.)

### Retention tasks

- Test-takers listen to two utterances and indicate whether they were the same or different.
- Test-takers listen to an utterance and write it down.

### Picture tasks

- Test-takers listen to a statement, and then look at a number of pictures and indicate which represents the statement
- Test-takers look at a picture and listen to a number of statements, and then choose which is relevant to the picture.
- Test-takers are given a pile of about ten pictures and listen to a series of utterances; they have to choose a picture of the object mentioned in each utterance.
- Test-takers are shown a complex picture with many things happening in it, they hear a series of statements about the picture and indicate whether these are true or false.
- Test-takers look at four pictures labelled A, B, C and D, and listen to a series of utterances (e.g. it is raining, the man is wearing a suite) and indicate which picture each utterance applies to.
- Test-takers look at five small pictures, listen to four short utterances, and select the picture being described in each utterance.
- Test-takers see a series of simple diagrams (e.g. lines, squares, rectangles, circles etc. arranged in a variety of patterns), listen to statements describing these, and indicate which diagram is being described.

### Conversation tasks

- Test-takers listen to a statement followed by a response, and indicate A if the response was appropriate, and B if it was not.
- Test-takers listen to a question followed by three possible responses, and indicate which was the most appropriate.
- Test-takers listen to a statement followed by three possible continuations, and select the one that would continue the conversation best.
- Test-takers listen to a short dialogue (usually persons A, B and A again), and then listen to a short question about it, to which they choose one of three (or four) options (usually written in a booklet).

### Self-evident comprehension tasks

- Test-takers are given a series of statements and asked to indicate whether they are true or false (e.g. the snow is white, Paris is in Spain).
- Test-takers listen to statements made about some sort of visual (or object), and

indicate whether they are true or false.

- Test-takers are given arithmetic calculations and indicate whether they are right or wrong (e.g. three plus three is seven).

## Appendix 3

*Table 2.3 Tasks for going beyond local literal meanings*

### **Understanding gist**

- Test-takers listen to recordings from the radio, and indicate what type of programme they are listening to (e.g. news, sports, weather, fashion etc.).
- Test-takers listen to a description of a person, place or thing they are all familiar with, and write down its name, or what it is (perhaps in their native language).

### **General passage comprehension**

- Test-takers listen to a monologue or dialogue, and then answer a number of multiple-choice questions (either spoken or written questions).
- Test-takers listen to a monologue or dialogue, and then answer a number of short-answer comprehension questions on it.
- Test-takers listen to a short talk or lecture, read a number of statements and select which are correct given the talk.
- Test-takers listen to a short talk or lecture and answer comprehension questions on it.
- Test-takers listen to a short talk or lecture, and then read a short summary of it in which some words or phrases have been deleted and replaced with blanks; they will fill in the blanks with content appropriate to the talk.

### **Information transfer tasks**

- Test-takers are given a map and a starting point, they follow directions in the map, and then indicate the destination (the instructions can be extremely complex and as an example it is recommended listening to a description of a robbery and then following the police chase, periodically indicating where the robbers are).
- Test-takers listen to an announcement of some information (e.g. a timetable or result of a completion) and fill in the information in a grid.
- Test-takers are given a goal (e.g. arrive in Paris before midnight, solve a problem), they listen to an announcement or explanation, find the information necessary to complete their goal, and then do the task.
- Test-takers listen to a person on the telephone and take a message according to the speaker's instructions.
- Test-takers look at a picture (e.g. a street scene, a room) and draw in objects or other details according to instructions (draw a table and two chairs in front of the café; draw a vase of flowers on top of the table); this can be expanded into a narrative (or dialogue).
- Test-takers see a series of pictures and listen to a talk or discussion and then classify the pictures based on that (e.g. a set of children's drawings representing different developmental stages, which need to be put in order based on a talk about child development).