4. Developing Receptive Skills Assessment Tasks

This chapter addresses questions that might arise as you develop a receptive skills assessment task. We begin by suggesting several task types that might be useful in your classroom, before demonstrating how you might use the CLB 2012 document to align your task to the abilities of the learners in your class, and to select your assessment criteria. We end by discussing special concerns related to setting up receptive skills assessment tasks.

How can I Develop Assessment Tasks that Reflect Real-World Concerns?

In order to assess learners' receptive skills, you will need to develop assessment tasks that allow learners to demonstrate real-world listening and reading skills, skills that will be useful in interactions outside of the classroom.

Choosing a Task Type

While we have traditionally assessed listening and reading skills with comprehension questions, they are not the only means of assessing comprehension. After all, outside of the classroom, we seldom listen or read in order to answer a series of questions. We listen and read to do something: to engage socially, to complete tasks, or to find answers to our own questions. These purposes can be adapted when developing assessment tasks, to provide learners with relevant and motivating opportunities to demonstrate comprehension.

Several options are listed below, with corresponding learning and assessment tasks.

PRACTICE-BASED CONCERNS….

"Sometimes learners in my classes can find the basic facts in a reading, but miss a lot of the other information. Are my expectations too high?"

"How do I decide what to base my assessment on when my learners are demonstrating their receptive skills through real-world tasks? Tests are easier."

Task Types for Reading and Listening

TASK TYPE	SAMPLE TASKS WHERE THIS MIGHT BE APPLIED
Think Aloud Commenting as a task is completed.*	▪ **CLB 4**: Read simple advertisements of two products to decide which product to buy. Leave/record a voicemail message for your friend giving your decision and one reason why. ▪ **CLB 7** Listen to complaint from a customer or client. Meet with a manager to discuss the problem and determine the appropriate action.

Text Retelling	▪ **CLB 3:** Read short written instructions about how to reach the public library. Tell your classmate.
Retelling something heard or read.*	▪ **CLB 8:** Listen to detailed instructions on how to register for university. Share this information with your friend.
Summarizing	▪ **CLB 4:** Read a simple description about a company. Complete an audio recording confirming key concrete facts such as when it started, what it does, how many people it employs.
Pulling out key points from a text in order to produce an abbreviated version.	▪ **CLB 6:** Listen to a short community announcement about an upcoming event. Produce a written or spoken summary of the main activities for the class so they can decide whether to attend.
Learning Logs	▪ **CLB 4:** Read a short current news item. Complete a learning log responding to a guided question exploring its impact on your neighborhood.
Completing logs in response to guiding questions.	▪ **CLB 6:** Listen to a presentation on nutrition given by a registered dietician to get information about healthy food choices. Complete a learning log responding to a guiding question about the impact of the information on your personal food choices.
Retrieval Charts	▪ **CLB 1:** Read an invitation to find out the date of a party. Fill it in on a calendar.
Completing charts in which a number of topics or categories are arranged.	▪ **CLB 5:** Listen to an exchange between co-workers talking about their preferences for various work shifts and reasons for their preferences. Fill in a chart/work schedule with preferences and reasons.
Visuals	▪ **CLB 4:** Listen to simple instructions from a doctor to deal with a cold or the flu. Create a poster for your classmates.
Producing posters or drawings in response to a reading or listening activity	▪ **CLB 5:** Read an instructional text on the prevention and treatment of burns. Create a sign/poster with pictures and some text showing key information.
Graphic Organizers	▪ **CLB 4**: Read a simple description of an event or phenomenon and locate a few concrete facts. Use a web showing this information.
Building webs, flowcharts, mind maps, or concept maps.	▪ **CLB 7:** Listen to an informal talk on a general interest topic such as global warming, to learn new ideas and information. Create a concept map identifying causes, or create a web/mind map brainstorming possible solutions.
Physical Action	▪ **CLB 1:** Follow mostly imperative instructions from a teacher. Perform the instructions.
Performing an action to demonstrate comprehension.	▪ **CLB 7** Read and follow instructions on how to remove a computer virus and prevent further virus infection. Perform the instructions on a school computer, or sequence pictures for the instructions.

*Learners could record their work, not using a written script.

Ensuring your Task is Consistent with the CLB

As with all assessments, you can use the CLB 2012 document to check that the listening or reading assessment task and the related assessment criteria align to the CLB level(s) of the learners in your classroom. The steps below outline this process using the example task, *Listen and Respond to a Complaint from a Friend,* applied to a work situation, one of the sample tasks suggested for listening at Benchmark 7.

SELECT THE COMPETENCY AREA(S)

The CLB competencies are organized into four **Competency Area(s)** located to the right of the Profile of Ability for each benchmark; for listening and reading these include *Interacting with*

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Others, Comprehending Instructions, Getting Things Done, and *Comprehending Information*. As a first step, select the competency area(s) that most closely reflects the purpose of the task. For example, in the task *Listen and Respond to a Complaint about a Work Situation from a Friend,* the purpose is to build/maintain relationship, so *Interacting with Others* is appropriate.

In cases where a task conceivably draws on more than one Competency Area, you might choose to assess both or only one, based on your judgement of which is the most relevant to the task and to the larger goals guiding the class, as determined in early and ongoing needs assessments.

DETERMINE IF YOUR TASK IS LEVEL APPROPRIATE.

Once you have selected the assessment task, you should confirm that the task (and your expectations) are appropriate for the CLB level of your class. This involves a scan of the Profile of Ability, Some Features of Communication, the appropriate Competency Area(s), and the Knowledge and Strategies page.

1. The **Profile of Ability** is listed on the left of the page for each listening or reading benchmark (and also provided in table form at the beginning of each Stage).

   If your task is at Listening Benchmark 7, for example, the **Profile of Ability** (pictured in partial form here) indicates that learners would be expected to understand most moderately complex informal communication related to life experience. The expectations for the communication indicate that the interaction should be spoken at a normal rate, face-to-face (or on the phone or via digital media), and of moderate length. These considerations would help instructors set up the sample task to allow learners to listen and respond to (or participate in) an exchange spoken at a normal pace that would draw on the listener's life experience.

   The **Profile of Ability** also describes the strengths and limitations of communication demonstrated by learners at this Benchmark. It indicates learners would be expected to understand overall meaning or intent, a range of vocabulary (e.g., concrete and abstract language), an expanding range of register and styles, and an increased range of complex sentences and structures. These descriptions help clarify the complexity of a task at this level.

Profile of Ability

The listener can:

Understand most moderately complex formal and informal communication, including some abstract concepts and ideas related to general knowledge and life experience.

When the communication is:

* Spoken clearly at a normal rate
* Face-to-face, on the phone or via digital media (one-on-one or in small groups)
* Related to relevant topics, general knowledge and life experience
* Moderate in length
* In moderately demanding contexts

Demonstrating these strengths and limitations:

* Understands overall meaning or intent
* Identifies main ideas, supporting details and implied meanings
* Understands language that is concrete or abstract and sometimes specialized, with an expanded range of vocabulary
* Recognizes meaning based on an understanding of an increasing range of complex sentences and structures
* May use contextual clues to enhance comprehension
* Recognizes an expanding range of registers and styles
* Understands an expanding range of common idiomatic language

Profile of Ability for Listening, Benchmark 7(CCLB, 2012a, p. 20)

2. The **Some Features of Communication** table for listening, found at the end of Stage II Listening (with the CLB 7 column presented to the right) expands on characteristics of communication for each Stage II benchmark. At Benchmark 7, the Features of Communication table stipulates several relevant features of communication. For the example task, *Listen and Respond to a Complaint about a Work Situation from a Friend,* the features indicated by the arrows in the chart may be particularly important: speech is clear and at a normal rate, it might include some less-common idiomatic expressions, and the response to the task may require some speaking or writing.

3. As a next step, you might scan the **Competency Statement(s)** and **Sample Indicators of Ability** of the selected **Competency Area(s)** for additional information that confirms the task is level appropriate. The Competency Area *Interacting with Others* states that learners should be able to *"*Understand moderately complex social exchanges (such as expressions of and responses to...complaints...)*"*, an expectation consistent with the task, *Listening to a Complaint from a Friend*.

   The **Sample Indicators of Ability** for listening are listed in blue under each Competency Statement. The box immediately below presents the Competency area *Interacting with Others*. The indicators indicated by arrows would be relevant to the task: identifies implied meanings, understands the intent of the expressions and responses, and identifies emotional state, mood and attitude from tone and intonation.

CLB 7
Adequate Intermediate Ability

• Communication is live, face-to-face, on the phone or via digital media (one-on-one or in small groups).
• Speech is clear and at a normal rate.
• Visual clues and setting may enhance comprehension when the topic is unfamiliar or the situation is not predictable.
• Listening texts can be informal or semi-formal monologues, presentations, dialogues or group interactions.
• Monologues and presentations are up to about 15 minutes.
• Dialogues may include conversations, interviews and discussions in any media (digital/online, television, radio, etc.)
• Instructions are clear and explicit, but not always presented step by step.
• Language is concrete or abstract and sometimes specialized, with an expanded range of vocabulary and some less-common idiomatic expressions.
• Topics are generally familiar, personally relevant, and may be about general knowledge or work-related.
• Context is moderately demanding.
• Response to task may require some speaking or writing.

Some Features of Communication for Listening, Benchmark Level 7 (C*CLB, 2012a, p. 24*)

I. Interacting with Others

• Understand moderately complex social exchanges (such as expressions of and responses to gratitude, hopes, appreciation, complaints, disappointment, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, approval and disapproval).
  – Identifies implied meanings and stated and unspecified details.
  – Identifies language functions.
  – Identifies formal and casual style and register.
  – Understands the intent of the expressions and the responses.
  – Identifies emotional state, mood and attitude from tone and intonation.
  – Interprets feelings such as gratitude, hope and appreciation.
  – Identifies situation and relationship between speakers.
  – Demonstrates strengths and limitations typical of Listening Benchmark 7, as listed in the Profile of Ability.

Indicators of Ability for Listening, Benchmark Level 7 (C*CLB, 2012a, p. 20*)

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4. For additional indicators that may be appropriate to the task and benchmark, you should also review the **Knowledge and Strategies** page for the Stage, reprinted below. In the task *Listen and Respond to a Complaint from a Friend,* you might select the items marked by arrows below.

Knowledge and strategies, Stage II Listening, (C*CLB, 2012a, p. 15*)

SELECT LEVEL-APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR THE TASK

Once you've determined your task is aligned with the CLB, you are ready to select appropriate assessment criteria for the task. Using the indicators you have already noted from the Sample Indicators of Ability, the Demonstrating these Strengths and Limitations section, and the Knowledge and Strategies page, ask yourself, "What is most important for the learner to do to successfully complete this task?"

Note: When selecting indicators, remember that those identified in the CLB document are samples, providing "an overall sense of the types of requirements that may arise from a task… the actual indicators for each authentic language task are determined by the purpose and context of the communication" (CCLB, 2012a, p. XVII).

The following checklist can help you choose the assessment criteria most relevant to your task:

- ✓ **Choose criteria most critical to effective comprehension in this task.** For example, at CLB 7 when reading an article about a current event, it may be important to distinguish fact from opinion and evaluate the ideas to draw conclusions rather than focus on identifying the facts.
- ✓ **Ensure the assessment criteria are tied to the learning goals for this unit of study.**
- ✓ **Ensure the assessment criteria related to classroom teaching and learning.** For example, if the assessment task will require guessing the meaning of words from context clues, strategies for doing so will have been taught (or reviewed) in class.
- ✓ **Choose a manageable number of criteria for learners and for the person giving feedback.**
- ✓ **Adjust the criteria for learners who are working at a higher or lower CLB level.**

For example in the sample task, *Listen and Respond to a Complaint about a Work Situation from a Friend,* you might choose

- Identify (or infer) the cause of the complaint,
- Identify the emotional state and/or attitude of the speaker,
- Use stated and unstated information to predict how the complaint will be resolved,
- Express an opinion appropriate to the situation.

Finally, when developing the task, ensure that what learners are asked to do relates to the assessment criteria that you have selected.

In receptive tasks, unlike productive assessment tasks, instructors generally include assessment criteria and feedback on the task itself, rather than using a separate form to record results. In Classroom 2, Kathy and Carly embed the assessment criteria in the task. On the listening assessment tool, the relevant question numbers are listed after the criteria listed at the top of the page. In the reading task, the criteria are clearly incorporated in the directions for each part of the reading task. As an alternative, for either receptive task, criteria could be indicated in a separate box on the assessment task, as is illustrated by this listening assessment tool contributed by Diana Ishigaki.

Determining What Constitutes Task Success

If the purpose of the task is assessment *of* learning, you will need to decide what constitutes success. One approach would be to highlight which criteria must be met to achieve success. Another would be to assign a numeric score, in which case you will need to indicate the overall score or percentage required for success. You might consider weighting the most important assessment criteria more heavily than other criteria. For example, in a CLB 5 reading task, interpretive and applied questions (as defined below) may receive greater weighting than questions focussed on finding details.

If you are using a numeric score, you will need to decide what score indicates success.

What Special Considerations Arise when Setting Up Receptive Skills Assessments?

In this section, we discuss three issues related to assessing comprehension: distinguishing levels of comprehension, choosing comprehension questions, and selecting level-appropriate texts.

Distinguishing Levels of Comprehension

Whatever task you use, if you are checking comprehension you will want to review your task/questions to ensure they assess what you intended to assess. As you do this, keep in mind that readers and listeners comprehend texts at three main levels:

- **Literal**: which involves understanding the specific information in the text.
- **Interpretive**: which involves integrating information and making inferences.
- **Applied**: which involves using information from the text to express opinions and form new ideas based on information in the text (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2014, pp. 226-230).

These levels of comprehension are embedded in the CLB, but are not explicitly identified as such. CLB Stage 1 emphasizes the first two levels of comprehension, literal and interpretive, with some easier applied questions later in the stage, at CLB levels 3 and 4. CLB Stage 2 emphasizes interpretive and applied levels.

The table below might help you assess comprehension at appropriate levels for the learners in your classroom, preventing a focus on literal question/task types at higher benchmarks, or the use of overly difficult questions/task types with learners at lower skill levels.

Levels of Comprehension

	POSSIBLE QUESTION STARTERS	DEMONSTRATING COMPREHENSION
Literal Level	Who… What… Where… When…	Thought processes could involve naming, identifying and defining. **Sample CLB Indicators:** ▪ Identify facts, items, details. ▪ Locate/find details, key information ▪ Recognize X ▪ Identify sequence & location signals

Interpretive Level	Why… How… In what way… What is the main idea… Compare… Contrast… What could cause…	Thought processes could involve integrating, inferring, explaining, stating relationships, comparing, contrasting and summarizing. **Sample CLB Indicators:** ▪ Identify or understand purpose, layout, type of text ▪ Get the gist ▪ Compare facts/information/ simple information ▪ Interpret sequence and location signals and implied meaning to infer correct sequence ▪ Locate and integrate relevant information
Applied Level	Predict… Imagine… Based on what you have heard/read, how might… What is your opinion about… What are the possible consequences… Explain/defend…	Thought processes could involve judging, evaluating, defending choices, predicting, hypothesizing and interpreting. **Sample CLB Indicators:** ▪ Use facts to plan or make a decision ▪ Identify information to make a decision, determine appropriate information, evaluate ▪ Evaluate ideas to draw conclusions ▪ Find and integrate information for comprehension and application ▪ Analyze information, supporting details, implied meanings, and writer's/speaker's point of view

(Adapted from Vacca et al., 2014).

Choosing Types of Comprehension Questions

If you use comprehension questions, you have many options. Several are described below, along with their advantages and disadvantages.

> **Short Answer Questions** can be easier to construct than other question types, but responses may be difficult to mark, and several correct answers may be possible. In addition, if the questions aren't worded simply at lower levels (CLB 1 and 2), learners may not comprehend the question, and this will interfere with your ability to assess their text comprehension. Additionally, instructors need to ensure that assessment is based on comprehension of the text, and not writing skills (spelling, grammar, etc.).

> **Multiple Choice Questions** are easy to grade, but difficult to construct. Questions require one correct answer and plausible distractors, all in parallel form. In addition, learners might guess the correct answer; you will not know if they could have answered correctly without the prompt.

> **True/False Questions** can be simple to construct, but learners have a 50% chance of guessing the correct answer. To add challenge, you could require learners to correct the false statements.

Sequencing Activities (unscrambling the order of items or sequencing items with numbers) can be useful at low levels because students are not required to write long responses. However, making a mistake with one item in the sequence may produce a domino effect: one wrong answer can lead to other wrong answers.

Matching Activities can be effective in assessing whether learners have understood the main information, without asking them to write. However, one incorrect answer can also produce a domino effect; to reduce this effect, you could add extra items in the response column.

Choosing Level-Appropriate Reading and Listening Texts

Even the most carefully-chosen comprehension questions and assessment tasks will not give you the information you need, if the listening or reading text is too advanced for learners, overwhelming them with unfamiliar language or cultural references, or too simple, not allowing them to show their full abilities.

DETERMINING TEXT DIFFICULTY

A listening or reading text cannot be assigned a particular benchmark, but texts do exhibit characteristics (in terms of length, complexity of language, formatting, audience) that make them appropriate (or not) for the CLB level of your classroom. A framework developed by Peter Skehan (1998), explored in more detail in *Chapter 5*, *Adapting Assessment for Multilevel Classrooms*, provides a useful approach for understanding text difficulty:

- **Linguistic complexity of the text** — vocabulary, sentence structure and length, and degree of redundancy/density;
- **Cognitive complexity of the text** — familiarity of content/topic, familiarity of the text type, clarity of organization, and complexity of subject matter;
- **Communicative pressures** — length of the text, formatting features (for example, the size of the font, the amount of white space on the page), and visuals.

In the CLB document, the **Some Features of Communication** tables at the end of each Stage provide descriptors of communication that should be used to assess the appropriateness of your text. These descriptors align easily with Skehan's framework, as is evident in a close reading of the table to the right, taken from the Features of Communication table at the end of Stage II Listening. Each of the features indicated by arrows in the table, for example, can be linked to an element in Skehan's framework:

- Language should be concrete, an aspect of Linguistic Complexity;
- Monologues and presentations should be up to about 10 minutes, a component of Communicative Pressures;
- Topics should be generally familiar, an aspect of Cognitive Complexity.

In addition, the *CLB Support Kit* (CCLB, 2012b) provides exemplars with corresponding (benchmarked) tasks that provide a general indication of what a person might be able to do at a certain CLB level in reading or listening.

CLB 5 Initial Intermediate Ability	CLB 6 Developing Intermediate Ability
• Communication is live, face-to-face, on the phone or via digital media (one-on-one or in small groups).	• Communication is live, face-to-face, on the phone or via digital media (one-on-one or in small groups).
• Speech is clear and at a slow to normal rate.	• Speech is clear and at a slow to normal rate.
• Visual clues and setting support the meaning when the topic is unfamiliar or the situation is not predictable.	• Visual clues and setting support the meaning when the topic is unfamiliar or the situation is not predictable.
• Listening texts can be short informal monologues, presentations, dialogues or small group interactions.	• Listening texts can be informal monologues, presentations, dialogues or small group interactions.
• Monologues and presentations are up to about 5 minutes.	• Monologues and presentations are up to about 10 minutes.
• Dialogues may include conversations, interviews and discussions in any media (digital/online, television, radio, etc.).	• Dialogues may include conversations, interviews and discussions in any media (digital/online, television, radio, etc.).
• Instructions are clear, explicit and presented step by step.	• Instructions are clear and explicit, but not always presented step by step.
• Language is concrete and includes mostly common vocabulary and a limited number of idioms.	• Language is generally concrete with some abstract elements, and contains a range of common vocabulary and idioms.
• Topics are generally familiar, related to everyday situations and of personal relevance.	• Topics are generally familiar and personally relevant.
• Context is moderately demanding.	• Context is moderately demanding.
• Response to task may require some speaking or writing.	• Response to task may require some speaking or writing.

Some Features of Communication Across Stage I Listening *(CCLBa, 2012b, p.12)*

ADAPTING TEXTS AND TASKS FOR USE WITH YOUR LEARNERS

In some cases, the text you've chosen will need to be either adapted or supported if it is to fit seamlessly into the assessment task. When this is the case, you might adjust either the text or the task:

> **Adjusting the Text:** To adapt the text, you could consider adjusting the text itself, or the support you provide for it. To simplify a reading text, for example, you could delete complex sections; in a listening task, you might have learners listen to the text in sections, pausing for interpretation or support. Alternatively, you could adjust the support / scaffolding that you provide: supplying visuals, pre-teaching vocabulary, or providing a glossary.

> **Adjusting the Task:** You could also make changes to your assessment task, either in terms of process, or in terms of your expectations for learner responses. To simplify the task process when using a challenging text, you might restrict what learners are expected to comprehend, perhaps asking only literal or interpretive questions. You

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could also adjust what you ask learners to do, perhaps using simple response formats (like red light / green light cards, true/false questions) rather than more complex written short or long answer response formats (adapted from Light, 2012).

These adjustments are similar to those described in more detail in the context of assessing skills in multi-level classrooms, presented in *Chapter 5, Adapting Assessment for Multi-level Classrooms*.

Reflections on Your Practice

1. With a colleague, choose a set of comprehension questions for a reading/listening text and decide which level of comprehension and which CLB criteria each question addresses.
2. Consider one of the listening or reading texts you have used recently as part of a learning or assessment task. With a colleague, brainstorm how you could adapt the text for lower level learners by 1) simplifying it, or 2) providing scaffolding for it.

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Appendix

Sample Listening Assessment Tool, not embedded in task

<table>
<tr>
<td colspan="4" style="background-color:green">

CLB 6: Summer Activities Listening Assessment: Leaving a Message
Competency: Interacting with Others

</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In this task you will listen to a message left on an answering machine to identify the following:</td>
<td>**Question Number**</td>
<td>**Your score**</td>
<td>**Possible score**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identify specific details in the message</td>
<td>3, 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identify implied meanings in the message</td>
<td>1, 4, 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identify the style of the message</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identify some feelings</td>
<td>9, 10</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identify openings, closings and pre-closings</td>
<td>6, 8</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success on this Task = 7/10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>/10</td>
</tr>
</table>

Designed by Diana Ishigaki