

## **Five Common Problems With Listening Test Items** *(and how to fix them)*

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Listening test items can be tricky to write for a number of reasons. Avoiding some of these basic pitfalls can help improve the reliability and validity of listening assessment.

**The issues we'll be looking at today are:**

1. Dictation
2. Open Keys
3. Inappropriate Targets
4. Extra Cognition (e.g. mental maths)
5. Poor Cuing



**How can we “fix” problematic questions? Here are some suggested options:**

- change the script
- re-word the item stem/options
- paraphrase the notes
- choose a different target
- delete the item completely

### **Questions to keep in mind**

What is being tested in this item?  
Is that a valid test of communicative competence?  
Is this item challenging/easy for the wrong reasons?  
Is this item unambiguous to a native speaker?  
Are the borders between items clear?

**\*\*All examples in today's workshop are taken from EAP level materials.\*\***

### Exercise 1

Identify the issue with each question, then look at the tapescript and suggest a fix.

#### **Student Health Centre** **Appointments:**

Call at **1** ..... to get appointments on the same day.

For **2** ..... problems, there is an evening surgery.

A standard consultation is **3** .....

#### *Tapescript:*

*F: Good morning. Can I help you?*

*M: Yes, I'd like some information about the student health centre, please.*

*F: OK – are you a student at the university?*

*M: Yes, and I'd like to register with a doctor here. But can I ask a few questions first?*

*F: Certainly – what would you like to know?*

*M: If you need to see the doctor, is it easy to get an appointment?*

*F: Well, usually, yes. If you call at eight-thirty, then you can usually get an appointment for that same day. But it's first-come first-served, so we soon get fully booked.*

*M: So what happens then? Can you make an appointment for the next day?*

*F: No – you have to call back the following morning. If it's urgent, we have a surgery in the evening at five o'clock. You can't book a time, but if you're on the list and you're prepared to wait, a doctor will see you eventually.*

*M: I see. And how long do you get with the doctor?*

*F: A standard consultation is ten minutes. There are twenty-minute appointments, but the doctor will tell you if you need to ask for one of those. Your first appointment is always a standard one.*

## Exercise 2

*Which of these questions have open keys? Which do you think have inappropriate targets?*

1. Where the trees are found: ..... *in Chile.*
2. Reason why some trees have priority: *they're in areas affected by a ..... project*
3. Height of the majority of surviving Fitzroya trees: *Less than .....*

*Tapescript:*

*A small team of conservationists from Edinburgh, has been involved in a project called Iconic, which aims to save some of the world's most endangered trees from extinction. The trees are conifers and they grow in the wild in Chile in South America, where they once occupied large areas of the country's coastal mountains. Today only tiny fragments of the natural forest remain.*

*Members of the project team have been to South America on a mission to gather seeds from the few trees that survive in the wild. Priority was given to trees that are growing in a valley that will soon be flooded to make way for a hydro-electricity scheme. The project aims to save the trees from extinction and because trees take a long time to grow, it's a very long-term one.*

*The seeds of conifer trees grow in cones. Out in Chile, the team found collecting the cones quite simple. There was no need for climbing because few of the targeted species are high-growing trees with tall canopies. This meant that it was possible to gather the cones by hand. Some of the species, like the one called Fitzroya should be very tall trees, but the remnant populations contain mostly small trees with low branches. Fitzroya can reach about 45 metres, but there are few trees of that size left in Chile, and the team only found a few trees left exceeding 15 metres in height.*

### Exercise 3

*What does this item expect the test-taker to do?*

**1** Among people who recently migrated to Australia, the percentage who settled in Sydney and Melbourne was

**A** 40%.

**B** 50%.

**C** 60%.

*Tapescript:*

*So, we can see that recent migration in Australia has been concentrated in and around coastal cities. While some immigrants – roughly a third – do choose to settle in places like Brisbane, Adelaide and Darwin, for the most part, it's the bigger cities that attract them, with about 26 percent moving to Melbourne and then a whopping 34 percent coming into Sydney every year.*

#### **Exercise 4**

*Listen to how these questions are cued. Is there a clear signal that we've moved to the next question? Do the options all come after the stem in the tapescript?*

*Apart from the cuing, what else is a problem with these multiple choice items?*

1. Your classroom should give the impression that
  - a. students are attracted to working here.
  - b. useful work is done here.
  - c. working here is easy.
  
2. The most important aspect of classroom management is
  - a. how sensitive you are to student needs.
  - b. your relationship with your class.
  - c. remaining calm and patient.
  
3. The purpose of giving praise and reward is
  - a. to avoid punishment.
  - b. to encourage learning.
  - c. to reinforce positive behaviour.

*Tapescript:*

*First of all, you can make your classroom as attractive and as stimulating as possible. It should look orderly and purposeful, and create the expectation that people do useful work here. It should also be a place that makes your work as easy as possible. How you relate to your class is also of utmost importance. Teaching is a professional activity, requiring human warmth, tact, sensitivity, resolve, and professional detachment. The management of pupils needs to be calm patient and measured, and your comments should be as positive as possible. And think about your own behaviour and whether you're encouraging learning. We should give more praise than censure, more reward than punishment. We should try to reinforce the behaviour we want more than we complain about the behaviour we don't want.*