Assumptions on Plausible Lexical Distractors in the Redesigned TOEIC Question-Response Listening Test

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Abstract

Distractors in tests are included to divert attention away from correct answers choices. Knowing what types of distractors commonly appear in tests will benefit test takers as they can prepare themselves beforehand. Therefore, this qualitative study was aimed at making assumptions on plausible lexical distractors which are expected to appear in the TOEIC Question-Response listening test. The data under analysis were 300 items from the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests published by two internationally well-known publishers. With the aid of thematic analysis, the findings revealed that the three most commonly plausible lexical distractors were repeated words, similar-sounding words, and word associations, followed by homonyms, overlapping words, derivational words, and homophones, respectively. The two least frequently used lexical distractors were synonyms and antonyms. Based on the findings in the present study, the authors suggest integrating both explicit and implicit listening instructions to enhance EFL students'

linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge to avoid being confounded by these lexical distractors in the listening test. Explicit listening instruction can include simple and comprehensible bottom-up activities, such as dictation, macro listening, and narrow listening. In addition, extensive listening through implicit listening instruction can enhance students' listening fluency and familiarity with fluent English speakers' natural speech.

Introduction

The Test of English for International Communication, or TOEIC, is a widely used standardized test to assess test takers' English language use in an international workplace communication setting. TOEIC is intended for test takers from all over the world whose mother tongue is not English (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2021, 2022; Trew, 2013). There are three types of TOEIC, namely TOEIC Listening and Reading Test, TOEIC Speaking and Writing Test, and TOEIC Bridge Test. According to ETS (2021, 2022), the TOEIC Listening and Reading Test is selected as a tool to measure the ability to use English for communication of personnel, staff, and students by various corporations, organizations, and institutions. The test contains listening and reading test sections like other standardized English tests. Test takers of the TOEIC Listening and Reading Test are assessed for how well they can understand spoken English in the listening test section and for their knowledge of written English, grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension skills in the reading test section (Lougheed, 2021; Trew, 2013).

Unavoidably, the TOEIC Listening Test requires test takers to possess competent listening skills to be successful in taking the test. However, this requirement seems difficult to achieve. Listening in a foreign language like English is difficult as the listener must process real-time aural speech using their linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. Moreover, fluent English speakers' fast speech with various connected speech applications and unclear word boundaries tend to cause listeners to struggle, especially those who possess low levels of English language proficiency (Harmer, 2015; Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Listening difficulties also affect test takers attempting to complete listening tests within the limited allotted time. Listening tests like the TOEIC Listening test section, IELTS, and TOEFL are particularly difficult because test takers have only one

chance to hear the audio files. Moreover, in the realm of English for communication, the TOEIC Question-Response listening test appears to be the most challenging part for test takers as the test items and multiple choice options are not printed in the test booklet (Trew, 2007). Therefore, according to Iimura (2018), test takers must rely chiefly on their listening ability to process the real-time aural test prompts to select the correct responses.

Regarding the listening test challenges, Trew (2007) states that test takers of the TOEIC listening test are required to have ample awareness of linguistic features that could distract them from choosing the correct answer for the test prompts. Moreover, he further mentions that test takers need a considerable understanding of different sound alterations, assimilations, and deletions in the listening parts. Hence, it could be assumed that having a large body of phonological-oriented knowledge would lead to success in the TOEIC listening test. In addition to phonological knowledge, test takers with a wide range of vocabulary are at an advantage. Hence, in the listening parts, phonological and morphological knowledge are two inextricable elements that can lead test takers to achieve their preferred goals.

Since they have limited time and only one chance to hear the audio to complete the listening test, it is recommended that test takers be well-prepared in advance. Trew (2013) recommends that test takers familiarize themselves with common lexical-phonological distractors used in the TOEIC listening test. To become familiar with plausible distractors, test takers can pursue the aid of various prevalently available materials, including practice tests provided by different well-known publishers. However, self-directed learning for the TOEIC listening test preparations can be problematic for those with low levels of English language proficiency. As mentioned earlier, the listening test is particularly difficult for individuals whose English language proficiency level is low because they find it hard to process words and sounds while listening to fluent English speakers (Harmer, 2015).

Concerning the burdens of language knowledge and listening skills, an attempt to facilitate the self-preparation of test takers to be ready for the TOEIC listening test, especially the Question-Response part, is necessary. As Trew (2013) suggests, becoming aware of plausible lexical distractors to be present in this listening test section is deemed essential. However, the question that needs to be answered is, "What kind of lexical

distractors do test takers have to make themselves familiar with?" Even though Iimura (2018) has suggested some common plausible distractors of overlap, synonym, derivative, negative, and specific determiner in the general English listening tests, a specific exploration into plausible lexical distractors of the TOEIC Question-Response is worth conducting.

Consequently, to address this previously raised question, the present study attempts to draw assumptions on lexical distractors that are expected to appear in the TOEIC Question-Response listening test. The study particularly emphasizes the TOEIC Question-Response listening test owing to its absence of test questions and multiple choice options in the test booklet, which presents the ultimate challenge to test takers (Trew, 2007). Unlike other parts of the TOEIC listening section in which test takers can observe figures, tables, and texts to help them select the correct answers, test takers are required to rely on their listening ability as well as their linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge to do well in the TOEIC Question-Response listening test.

Literature Review

Listening in English as a Foreign Language

According to Richards (2008), listening and listening comprehension usually refer to the same notion in most pedagogical practices. Furthermore, listening is a process that involves the hearing of sounds and sound sequences (Asemota, 2015; Vandergrift, 1999), and it also incorporates other linguistic and contextual elements (Buck, 2001; Vandergrift, 1999). While listening to speech, the listener typically endeavors to comprehend and understand the messages or ideas the speaker is conveying (Richards, 2008). In the process of listening, the listener recognizes and translates heard and known words into meaningful messages (Asemota, 2015). Thus, based on Asemota's statement, it can be assumed that the extent to which the listener is successful in listening and comprehending heard messages tends to depend on their lexical and phonological knowledge.

Listening is a vital and active language process associated with spoken language processing (Rost, 2011; Vandergrift, 1999; Morley, 1999). In second or foreign language learning, listening is considered essential for acquiring other language skills (Morley, 1999; Rintaningrum, 2018). With

a considerable level of good listening ability, learners can master complex productive language patterns that lead to fluency in communication. Besides, listening also offers inputs that facilitate second or foreign language acquisition (Nation & Newton, 2009; Richards, 2008). Adelmann (2012) and Harmer (2015) agree that listening is necessary for various classroom and routine activities, such as following instructions, exchanging conversations, asking and answering questions, and performing classroom interactions. Thus, listening is an interconnected performance that allows learners to develop proficiency in other languages (Rost, 2011). Additionally, the listener must incorporate linguistic knowledge with contextual perceptions to be successful in listening (Tran & Duong, 2020). In this regard, the listener who lacks proficient listening performance may encounter difficulties receiving and responding to verbal communication and interactions.

When the listener focuses on speech, there are always purposes underlying the listening practice. These purposes of listening can be categorized as interactional and transactional purposes (Brown & Yule, 1983). Interactional listening requires the listener to not only listen to the speech but also interact with the speaker, while transactional listening mainly attempts to communicate accurate and relevant information. Based on Brown and Yule's categorization of listening purposes, transactional listening usually involves academic listening when the listener listens to lectures, instructions, and descriptions.

Lexical Knowledge for Successful Listening Performance

Listening is a perplexing process that, as previously mentioned, involves both linguistic (i.e., phonology, lexis, and syntax) and non-linguistic (i.e., context and topic familiarity) knowledge (Asemota, 2015; Buck, 2001; Vandergrift, 1999). Moreover, success in fluent listening also depends upon both top-down and bottom-up processing. During top-down processing, the listener has to involve background knowledge and context to facilitate their listening (Vandergrift, 2004). On the other hand, during the bottom-up processing, the listening ability to automatically recognize words can predict the extent of listening achievements, as suggested by N. Segalowitz and S. Segalowitz (1993). Hence, to achieve listening practice or tasks, the listener requires sufficient fundamental

knowledge of phonology and lexicon, which are part of the bottom-up processing.

Lexical knowledge plays a predominant role in EFL learners' acquisition of language skills. Regarding lexical knowledge, depth, breadth, and fluency need to be explored (Shabani et al., 2018). Vocabulary breadth, as suggested by Nation (2001), Qian (2002), and Staehr (2009), refers to the number of vocabulary words of which the learner knows their meanings. On the other hand, vocabulary depth deals with how well the learner knows about the lexical word and its associated topics, such as pronunciation, morphological recognition, syntactic components, and semantic relationship (Qian, 2002). Moreover, Beck et al. (2002) claimed that knowing various meanings of a particular word is also part of vocabulary depth. Regarding vocabulary fluency, how fluent the learner can use the words to receive and convey messages accurately matters (Shabani et al., 2018).

Like other language elements, to be successful in listening tasks, the listener is recommended to have sufficient lexical knowledge of 3,000-word families to comprehend most of the spoken utterances (van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013). Teng (2014) mentioned that vocabulary breadth and depth have a significant correlation with the learner's academic listening performance. He further stated that the learner with limited lexical knowledge would encounter difficulties to master listening effectively and successfully. Moreover, Lange and Matthews (2020) noted that, besides lexical knowledge of high-frequency words, the learner's strong phonological recognition ability also facilitates better listening performance. Therefore, it can be assumed that there is an interplay between lexical and phonological knowledge toward the learner's success in the listening task.

Test of English for International Communication

The Test of English for International Communication, abbreviated as TOEIC, was first established by the Educational Testing Service, abbreviated as ETS, about 40 years ago (Kaplan, 2019). Rather than attempting to assess their English language knowledge, TOEIC aims to evaluate test takers' communicative English as used in an international workplace and a global communication setting. Therefore, test takers of the TOEIC Listening and Reading Test, including those from Thailand with

the highest proportion, choose to take the test as proof of their English communication performance for job application purposes (ETS, 2020).

There are three types of TOEIC, namely TOEIC Listening and Reading Test, TOEIC Speaking and Writing Test, and TOEIC Bridge Test. The most recent TOEIC Listening and Reading Test was redesigned in April 2018 and is currently widely used. The recently redesigned TOEIC Listening and Reading Test contains two sections: Listening and Reading, and each section comprises four and three parts, respectively. Table 1 presents details about the recently redesigned TOEIC Listening and Reading Test (Collins, 2019; ETS, 2022; Kaplan, 2019; Lougheed, 2021).

Table 1

The 2018-Redesigned TOEIC Listening and Reading Test Contents

Sections/Parts	No. of Questions
Section 1 Listening	
- Part 1 Photographs	6
- Part 2 Question-Response	25
- Part 3 Conversations	39
- Part 4 Talks	30
Total 4 Parts	100
Section 2 Reading	
- Part 5 Incomplete Sentences	30
- Part 6 Text Completion	16
- Part 7 Reading Comprehension	25
Total 3 Parts	100
TOTAL: 2 Sections, 7 Parts	200

According to Table 1, the TOEIC Listening and Reading Test is comprised of two main sections with an equal number of test questions in each section. There are a total of 200 test questions, and raw scores are converted to a scale from 10 to 990. The converted TOEIC scores can be interpreted as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Inverted TOEIC Scores and General Description (Waikato Institute of Education, n.d.)

Score Level	Percentage	General Description
905-990	91% - 100%	*International professional proficiency:* Test takers at this level can communicate fluently and proficiently in any situation.
785-900	79% - 90%	*Working proficient plus:* Test takers at this level can communicate with acceptable and effective language in the workplace and satisfy most work requirements.
605-780	61% - 78%	*Limited working proficiency:* Test takers at this level can use language for communication in society, yet their language proficiency is limited for work requirements.
405-600	41% - 60%	*Elementary proficiency plus:* Test takers at this level can master face-to-face conversations under predictable situations, yet they can meet limited social demands.
255-400	26% - 40%	*Elementary proficiency:* Test takers at this level can interact using simple conversations under familiar topics. Although they can functionally communicate, their language ability is quite limited.
10-250	0 - 25%	*Basic proficiency:* Test takers at this level can use the language for communication in everyday survival.

With information about inverted TOEIC scores and the general description in each level, test takers can assume their English language communicative proficiency. Moreover, they will also have firsthand information about what they can do well and what they need to improve for better English communication.

TOEIC Listening Section

The TOEIC Listening Section contains four parts as follows (ETS, 2022; Kaplan, 2019):

Part 1 Photographs: In this part, test takers are provided with six photographs. They have to listen to four statements and then select the statement that best corresponds to the photographs printed in the test

booklet. The four statements are not printed in the test booklet, so test takers have to listen carefully while looking at the photographs.

Part 2 Question-Response: There are 25 items in this part. Test takers listen to a statement or a question with three possible alternatives. The test items and their alternatives are not printed in the test booklet; therefore, test takers must rely on their listening ability in order to choose the response to the question or statement correctly.

Part 3 Conversations: There are 39 questions in this part. Test takers will hear 13 conversations between two or three male and female speakers, and some conversations are also associated with figures and tables. Each of the conversations is followed by three questions with four multiple choice answer options. While listening, test takers have to choose the correct answers based on what they hear and the provided figures and tables (if any).

Part 4 Talks: There are 30 questions in this part. Test takers will listen to ten talks by a single speaker with three questions for each talk. Like questions in Part 3 Conversations, some talks are associated with figures and tables, and each talk is followed by three questions with four multiple choice answer options. While listening, test takers select the correct options according to what they hear from the talks and the provided figures and tables (if any).

Particularly, listening tests seem challenging to test takers since speech is spoken in real-time and cannot be rewound (Buck, 2001; Harmer, 2015; Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Moreover, among the four parts of the TOEIC Listening Section, Part II Question-Response tends to be challenging for test takers (Trew, 2007) as neither test questions nor the three alternatives are printed in the test booklet. Unlike the test questions in other listening parts in which test takers have a chance to observe questions, figures, tables, and choices while listening, test takers are required to depend solely upon their listening ability. Therefore, test takers' success in the listening section relies on their breadth of lexical and phonological knowledge, as well as their capacity for understanding spoken English.

Lexicon in TOEIC Listening

Although specialized vocabulary is not usually required since TOEIC aims at measuring the ability of English language use in everyday

communication of test takers (Lougheed, 2021; Trew, 2013), a wide range of extensive vocabulary, meanings, and uses in different contexts are necessary. Masaya (2017) claimed that having a minimum knowledge of 95 percent coverage for 3,000-word families is essential to TOEIC reading and listening test success. Furthermore, the ability to recognize both phonological and orthographical forms is vital since knowing only word orthography does not confirm success in TOEIC. Therefore, knowing words' meanings, their pronunciation, and contextual uses is considered necessary.

Listening tests usually contain plausible distractors that seem correct but are actually not. Distractors are usually familiar linguistic units to test takers and, as its name suggests, distract the test takers from choosing the correct answers to the prompts (Zimmaro, 2016). Like other standardized listening tests, the TOEIC Listening Test also employs distractors to challenge test takers on whether they can overcome those distractors and select the correct options for the prompts. Iimura (2018) has described the types of plausible distractors appearing in listening tests, such as EIKEN, a test in practical English proficiency, as well as the TOEIC listening tests, as follows:

Overlap refers to a distractor that contains part of the word used in the prompt or stem. For example, the test-taker might hear the question, *"Where is Sarah's new apartment?"* And the distractor can be the answer, *"I saw her at the department store."* The distractor word *department* contains the element that also appears in the word *apartment* appearing in the stem.

Synonym refers to a distractor sharing the same or similar meaning to the target word that appears in the stem. For instance, the test-taker might hear, *"Where is Sarah's apartment?"* A plausible distractor for this question can be an answer, *"Simon's flat is nearby."* In this example, the word *flat* in the distractor has a similar meaning to the word *apartment* in the stem.

Derivation refers to a distractor word deriving from the target word in the stem. For example, the test-taker might hear, *"Anna is a nice girl, isn't she?"* And the distracting response can be, *"Yes, she always dresses nicely."* The adverb *nicely* is derived from the adjective *nice* plus an adverbial suffix *-ly*, and it potentially distracts the test taker from choosing the correct answer to the stem.

Negative refers to a distractor with negative expressions, such as *no, not, never, none,* and others. An example of this distracting type is that the test taker might hear, *"What are you reading?"* and the distracting answer can be, *"Nothing. I don't need anything."* The negative indefinite pronoun *nothing* can distract the test-taker from selecting the correct response to the previously mentioned interrogative statement.

Similar sounding refers to a distractor having a similar sound or pronunciation to the target word appearing in the stem. For example, the test-taker might hear, *"What are your <u>plans</u> for the weekend?"* and the distracting response can be, *"The <u>plants</u> need watering over the weekend."* Since, in natural speech, the word *plants* can be spoken with the /t/ sound being dropped out, the test-taker can be distracted and mistakenly realize that it has the same sound as the word *plans* in the stem.

Specific determiner refers to a distractor containing a word with a specific determiner, such as *all, only, very,* and others. For instance, the test-taker might hear the question, *"How much time do we have left?"* and the distracting response can be, *"<u>Only</u> a few times."* The question word *how much* signifies that a possible answer can be a quantity of something; therefore, the determiner *only* included in the response can distract the test-taker.

Based on the plausible types of distractors in the listening tests as suggested by Iimura (2018), the present study attempted to investigate further plausible lexical distractors that can be found in the TOEIC Question-Response listening test. The study primarily focused on the TOEIC Question-Response listening test as neither the questions nor the choices are printed in the test booklet, making it the most challenging part for test takers. Therefore, the test taker has to rely on their linguistic and listening performance in order to achieve expected scores. Considering this prevalent challenge, assumptions on these plausible distractors will benefit test takers as they have essential information for self-preparation beforehand.

The Present Study

To the best knowledge of the researchers, there has been only one research study (Iimura, 2018) that tried to investigate plausible distractors in the general multiple-choice listening test. Besides, it seems there has not been a single study in records that explores the lexical distractors to

be found in the TOEIC Question-Response listening test. Therefore, the present study attempted to address the research question, "What are the plausible lexical distractors expected to appear in the TOEIC Question-Response listening test?"

Methodology

The data for analyses were the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests. The stems and alternatives were mock, or practice tests, taken from two commercial TOEIC preparatory books entitled *6 Practice Tests for TOEIC Listening and Reading* published by Kaplan (Kaplan, 2019) and *TOEIC the 9th Edition* published by Barron's (Lougheed, 2021), respectively. A total of 300 question-response test items, 150 items from each publisher, were analyzed for plausible lexical distractors based on Iimura's descriptions (2018). The two commercial TOEIC preparation books were selected based on their prominent pertinence and compatibility with the actual TOEIC administered by ETS. Moreover, they are widely used and available in most libraries, facilitating wider access to potential test takers for test preparation than other options.

Data Analysis Procedures

To analyze plausible lexical distractors in the selected documents, the researchers adopted the thematic analysis procedures of Braun and Clarke (2006) as follows:

Step 1 Becoming familiar with the existing data: The audio scripts for the selected TOEIC listening practice tests were obtained from the two previously mentioned books. Online product registration provided access to the audio script files through the publisher's website. Audio scripts were read and reread during this step, followed by simultaneous reading and listening.

Step 2 Generating initial lexical distractors: While listening to the audio files and reading the scripts simultaneously, focus was given to the stems and the two incorrect choices to find plausible lexical distractors. Researchers made note of the plausible lexical distractors regarding their convenience and reliability.

Step 3 Searching for thematic categories of lexical distractors: Data that shared the same characteristics and belonged to the same categories were grouped together.

Step 4 Reviewing the assigned categories of lexical distractors: The categorized lexical distractors were reviewed and rechecked for accuracy by the researchers. Consultation with an expert in applied linguistics also took place at this stage.

Step 5 Finalized the categories of plausible lexical distractors: The exposed distractors were categorized into lexical distractors of overlap, synonym, antonym, homonym, homophone, derivation, word association, repeated word, and similar sounding. The distractors of negative words and specific determiners were not included in the analysis as they belong to the category of grammatical distractors.

Step 6 Producing the report: The report on the assumptions of plausible lexical distractors that tend to appear in the TOEIC Question-Response Listening Test Part was written up.

Findings

According to the analysis of the TOEIC Question-Response practice tests taken from the two selected TOEIC preparatory books, the three most frequently used lexical distractors were repeated words, similar-sounding words, and word associations, followed by homonymous words, overlapping words, derivational words, and homophones, respectively. The existence of synonyms and antonyms was insignificantly found. The assumptions on plausible lexical distractors that are expected to appear in the actual TOEIC Question-Response listening test are explored in this section.

Assumptions on Plausible Lexical Distractors in the TOEIC Question-Response Listening Tests

Repeated Words

Particular stem-based words, usually content words, are restated in the choices to distract test takers. The repeated words still have the same meaning as used in the stems. However, when they are restated in the options, situational discrepancies make the statements containing the repeated words incorrect or inappropriate responses. Example 1 (Kaplan,

2019) shows how a repeated word can distract test takers in the listening test.

Example 1:
Test takers will hear the question and the three responses as follows:
What are these things on your _desk_?
(A) Oh, just some toys for my kids.*[1]
(B) It's an oak _desk_.
(C) My cousins.

According to Example 1, the word _desk_ included in the stem is restated in choice (B), but choice (B) is not the correct response to the question. The situation that describes the _desk_ as an entity made from oak wood causes option (B) an incorrect response to the stem, in which the _desk_ signifies a place where the focused things are.

Similar-Sounding Words

In the selected TOEIC Question-Response practice tests, similar-sounding distractors contain two identical sounds of the syllable elements for stem-based words. The distractors and the stem-based words usually differ in their initial, vowel, or final sounds, such as _training-raining, fill-full, still-will,_ and _assistant-assistance_. Similar-sounding distractors tend to confuse test takers who cannot discriminate between similar sounds. Example 2 (Lougheed, 2021) illustrates how similar-sounding distractors potentially distract test takers in the listening test.

Example 2:
Test takers will hear the question and three responses as follows:
Would you like to sign up for a _class_?
(A) One _glass_ is enough.
(B) It's a very nice sign.
(C) Yes, I would.*

The word _glass_ in choice (A) is an example of a similar-sounding distractor. It contains the same vowel and final sounds as the stem-based word _class_. However, the initial cluster /gl-/ is contributable to its

distinction from the stem-based word, which contains the cluster /kl-/ at word-initial.

Word Associations

Distractors in the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests can be associated words with particular words included in the stems. Options that contain words associated with content words in the stem are not necessarily the correct response. On the other hand, it aims at causing confusion to test takers, especially those who have low listening competency. Example 3 (Lougheed, 2021) shows a distracting alternative that includes word association.

Example 3:
Test takers will hear the question followed by three responses as follows:
Has the *meeting* with Mr. Stuartson begun?
(A) Yes, it's on the *agenda*.
(B) Yes, about five minutes ago.*
(C) Yes, I'm still reading it.

As presented in Example 3, choice (A) contains the word *agenda* as a distractor, and it associates with the word *meeting* included in the stem. However, it does not show that choice (A) is the correct response to the question.

Homonyms

Words with identical spelling and pronunciation but different meanings are homonyms (Stringer, 2019). Homonyms can be found as distractors in the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests. Test takers can be confused while listening to the test items owing to the same pronunciation and spelling of homonyms. Thus, test takers have to pay close attention to meanings in order to select the correct response for the prompt. Example 4 (Kaplan, 2019) exemplifies a homonymous distractor in the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice test.

Example 4:
Test takers will hear a question with three responses as follows:
Which do you prefer, computers or _tablets_?
(A) Not sure. I guess I like both.*
(B) Computers are getting cheaper and cheaper.
(C) I'll take an aspirin _tablet_, thanks.

According to Example 4, choice (C) contains the word _tablet_, which is homonymous to the stem-based word _tablets_ which refers to an electronic device. However, the word _tablet_ in choice (C) signifies a type of medicine, and it is not the correct response to the question.

Overlapping Words

Overlapping words used as distractors in the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests usually contain part of particular words in the stem. Since this type of distractor includes part of the stem-based word, its similar pronunciation of the word part can cause listening confusion to test takers. Example 5 (Lougheed, 2021) shows how overlapping words can distract test takers while listening.

Example 5:
Test takers will hear a question and three responses as follows:
Do you remember when the _invoice_ was sent?
(A) Two weeks ago.*
(B) My _voice_ is very soft.
(C) We went in March.

According to Example 5, the word _voice_ which is part of the word _invoice_ appearing in the stem is present in choice (B). The presence of _voice_ and its similar pronunciation to _invoice_ can distract test takers from choosing the correct answer, which is choice (A). Hence, test takers must be aware that even though option (B) contains the overlapping word, it is not the correct response to the stem.

Derivational Words

Distractors in the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests can be words that are derived from words included in the stem. Sometimes, the stem can also contain the derivational words of the lexical item present in the choice. Example 6 (Lougheed, 2021) demonstrates how a derivational word can confuse test takers during the listening practice tests.

Example 6:
Test takers will hear the question and three responses as follows:
Have you *decided* which sofa to buy?
(A) They would like one.
(B) Yes. The leather one.*
(C) That's my *decision*.

According to Example 6, the word *decision* in choice (C) is derived from the verb *decide*. The addition of the suffix –ion changes the verb *to decide* to become a noun *decision.* Since it is a derivational word from the verb *to decide* as used in the stem, the word *decision* in choice (C) can distract test takers from choosing the correct option (B).

Homophones

Distractors of homophones have the same pronunciation as the target word in the stem, but the difference exists in their spelling and meaning. Even though the distractors of homophones seem to be rare in the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests, their existence can also confuse test takers. Example 7 (Kaplan, 2019) demonstrates how a homophone distractor may confuse test takers.

Example 7:
Test takers will hear a question with three responses as follows:
How many bags are we allowed to bring on the *plane*?
(A) The flight is going to be delayed by 30 minutes.
(B) That's just wrong – *plain* and simple.
(C) According to the website, only two.*

The word *plain* that appears in choice (B) acts as a homophone distractor since it has an identical pronunciation to the word *plane* included in the stem. Test takers who lack competent listening ability can be easily distracted when they hear the option containing a word with the same pronunciation as the one in the question.

Synonyms

Even though synonym words seem to be rare in the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice test, it is still worth getting accustomed to how they are used as distractors in the listening test. Example 8 (Kaplan, 2019) presents how a synonym word can distract test takers in the listening test.

Example 8:
Test takers will hear a question with three responses as follows:
Has she been *informed* of this yet?
(A) No, I don't think it's a good idea to lie to him.
(B) Yes, we haven't *mentioned* it to her yet.
(C) No, she's still in the dark*

As shown in Example 8, option (B) contains the past participle *mentioned,* which is a synonymous word to the past participle *informed* appearing in the stem. Although the two verbs are synonyms, choice (B) is not the perfect answer to the question because it includes a grammatical error of using the negative particle *not* with a *yes* answer to respond to a simple yes-no question.

Antonyms

Like the distractors of synonyms, antonyms seem not to frequently appear in the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests. However, the presence of antonym distractors can be found from time to time. Example 9 (Lougheed, 2021) displays how an antonym word works as a distractor in the listening test.

Example 9:
Test takers will hear a statement with three responses as follows:

City Hall is closed over the weekend.
(A) Then let's go on Monday.*
(B) I prefer the *countryside*.
(C) That's where my sister works.

As presented in Example 9, the word *countryside* in option (B) aims at distracting test takers from choosing the correct answer. As clearly known, the word *countryside* has the opposite meaning to the word *city* in general. However, in the stem, the word *City* is compounded with the word *Hall*, which means a place where people work for the government, and it cannot be interpreted alone. For incompetent listeners, the word *countryside* can easily distract them.

To sum up, the plausible lexical distractors found in the TOIEC Question-Response listening practice tests are in line with those distractors described by Iimura (2018). The shared lexical distractors are overlapping words, synonyms, and derivational words. The additional lexical distractors revealed in this study are repeated words, similar-sounding words, word associations, homonyms, homophones, and antonyms.

Discussion and Conclusion

Like other standardized tests, TOEIC includes the listening test section that aims to assess test takers' ability to understand spoken English. However, the listening test section of the TOEIC primarily emphasizes English used in global business and workplace settings. In general, the listening test section tends to be the most challenging part for test takers as the audio files are played only once (Buck, 2001). Besides, the TOEIC Question-Response listening part significantly challenges test takers as the questions and responses are not printed in the test booklet. Therefore, test takers have to chiefly rely on their listening ability as well as their linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge to demonstrate how well they can understand spoken English.

Regarding the challenge of the TOEIC Question-Response listening test, having an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the test format and how distractors are employed in the test can be a major benefit to test takers. According to the analysis of lexical distractors in the present study, which was based on the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests

published by two well-known publishers, it can be assumed that the actual TOEIC Question-Response test inclines to include lexical distractors of repeated words, similar-sounding words, word association, homonymous words, overlapping words, derivational words, and homophones. The two least frequently found distractors are synonyms and antonyms. Therefore, based on the potential use of lexical distractors found in this study, the ability to apply bottom-up listening processing can be a foundation that leads test takers to success in completing the TOEIC Question-Response listening test. Application of the bottom-up listening processing means that the listener can immediately recognize words they hear (N. Segalowitz & S. Segalowitz, 1993). In the same situation, the immediate recognition of words will enhance the level of accuracy and rapidity that the test takers can respond to questions or statements in the listening test.

However, since the use of repeated words, similar-sounding words, and word associations seems to have the highest tendency to appear in the TOEIC Question-Response listening test, using only bottom-up listening processing is probably insufficient for listening test success. Thus, test takers are also recommended to be capable of performing top-down listening processing, too. Involvement of prior knowledge and context, which are parts of the top-down process, would facilitate listening and create a better understanding of the aural texts (Vandergrift, 2004; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Hence, an informed understanding of contexts in which repeated words, similar-sounding words, and word associations are used will help test takers avoid being confused and distracted from choosing the correct answer.

Moreover, predictions of plausible lexical distractors to appear in the TOEIC Question-Response listening test have confirmed that success in listening tests entails both bottom-up and top-down listening operations. Recognizing words immediately as they are spoken is necessary but being aware of the context in which the identical, similar-sounding, and associated words are used is significantly advantageous for test takers. Consequently, automatic recognition of words and contexts are inextricable elements that enhance the listening achievements of test takers. Possessing a wide range of vocabulary knowledge is a primary requirement, but the ability to distinguish the meanings of words in various contexts ultimately strengthens the listening performance of test takers.

Pedagogical Implications

The present study provides an important and intriguing pedagogical implication that EFL teachers are recommended to enhance EFL learners' English listening fluency either explicitly or implicitly. As Carney (2022) mentioned, the goal of second language listening education is to increase students' capacity to understand unscripted aural English. Without listening fluency, language learning and other language-related operations can be negatively affected (Renukadevi, 2014). Therefore, the starting point of preparing students for listening tests should be that teachers allow students to immerse themselves in both direct and indirect listening instruction activities as much as possible.

When students learn something explicitly, it means they pay a considerable amount of attention to that thing. As Sonbul and Schmitt (2010) mention, direct teaching of language contents is obviously contributable to an accumulation of language learning. Thus, listening activities in an English classroom should be introduced explicitly, constructively, and regularly to prepare students for the TOEIC listening test and other standardized English tests. According to Alford (2020), teaching listening explicitly includes teaching students how to listen, assigning tasks related to the listening activities, assessing students' listening ability, and providing feedback. While listening instruction is delivered, the bottom-up process should be emphasized. When the class includes low listening proficiency students, bottom-up processing will facilitate students' ability to grasp heard words to understand the whole message (Harmer, 2015). For students at lower levels, listening is problematic because utterances of proficient and fluent English speakers typically contain features of connected speech, such as an ellipsis, juncture, and assimilation (Harmer, 2015; Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Besides, these speakers usually speak with their natural and fast speech rate and unclear word boundaries (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Therefore, the direct implementation of bottom-up listening activities will improve these students' familiarity and recognition of different sounds, words, and the use of connected speech. Some simple bottom-up listening classroom activities, as suggested by Harmer (2015, p. 339), are dictation, macro listening, audio concordances, narrow listening, and transcript reading while listening.

Bottom-up processing is a primary and advantageous contributor to listening performance enhancement of low listening proficiency students; however, it is not the only approach that ameliorates EFL students' listening improvement. Top-down processing also plays a comparable role in strengthening these students' listening ability. Top-down processing involves making an overall understanding of the heard text (Harmer, 2015). The factors that facilitate top-down listening processing are the listener's background knowledge about what is being listened to and the context (Buck, 2001). Krashen (1996, as cited in Ivone & Renandya, 2022, p. 159) argued that a sudden switch from one topic to another while doing a listening activity is particularly inappropriate for low-level students. He further comments that these students require more time to apply their background knowledge to catch the ideas of the listening text. Therefore, it can be concluded that when students approach listening practice activities, they should be given an appropriate amount of time to re-listen to the text and understand the key takeaways.

In addition to explicit instruction, listening improvement can also immensely benefit from implicit or indirect instruction (Harmer, 2015). Language learning does not always or solely occur explicitly. Alternatively, it can be unconscious or incidental. Like other standardized listening tests, the TOEIC listening test requires test takers to be familiar with fluent English speakers' natural speech at a somewhat fast rate (Trew, 2007). Thus, EFL teachers should attempt to encourage students to get exposure to an English-speaking environment to allow them to continuously and frequently practice listening. However, if an opportunity to involve EFL students in an English-speaking environment is scarce, another approach is through the implementation of extensive listening. Extensive listening refers to all forms of listening activities that allow listeners, in this case, EFL students, to receive, enjoy, and comprehend listening inputs with little effort (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Renandya and Farrell (2011) further suggest that extensive listening activities can be simple and enjoyable for students, and they can be either teacher-directed or student-oriented activities. The most important key concept is that students have ample opportunities to practice listening constructively and meaningfully (p. 56). Renandya et al. (2018) mentioned in their study that several teachers accept that students who read extensively appear to be fluent in a language in all aspects. Moreover, these students seem to demonstrate better and higher achievements in many standardized tests. In the same

case, implementing extensive listening should also allow students to improve their listening fluency, which can, in turn, result in better listening test performance. More importantly, like extensive reading, the listening practice should allow the students to listen to listening inputs that match their levels of language proficiency. Listening to comprehensible texts in their language knowledge range will also decrease the students' anxiety and increase their confidence at the same time (Ivone & Renandya, 2022).

Besides an implication in teaching listening in the classroom setting, the findings in the present study are also beneficial for designing a training course for TOEIC listening preparation. Most undergraduates and other workers who seek opportunities to enter the international workforce, where English functions as the means of communication, are generally required to prove their command of English for communication. One widely accepted standard of capacity to use English in a globalized communicative setting is the TOEIC Listening-Reading test report (ETS, 2022). Consequently, designing a listening training course for TOEIC preparation that helps students avoid being tricked or distracted by the lexical distractors, as found in the present study, will boost the students' TOEIC listening scores, especially in the Question-Response listening part. An appropriately designed listening training course will help students increase their overall TOEIC test scores to meet the minimum requirement as specified by prospective employers.

Limitations of the Study

The limitation of the present study was that the data for analysis were taken from TOEIC practice tests published by two well-known international publishers in TOEIC preparatory books. Therefore, the revealed and summarized lexical distractors could be considered assumptions made on mock listening tests of the TOEIC Question-Response part. However, even though the assumptions on lexical distractors made in the present study were based on the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests, they could be fundamental and essential information that benefits students, teachers, TOEIC preparation course designers, and individuals who intend to prepare themselves for the actual TOEIC test. Another limitation was that the current study primarily focused on extracting plausible lexical distractors in the TOEIC Question-Response listening practice tests. This section of the TOEIC listening practice test

received particular attention due to the challenge it presents as the test items and choices are not printed in the test booklet. However, the obtained plausible lexical distractors may apply to other parts of the TOEIC listening test.

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Endnote

[1] The option with an asterisk at the end is the correct response to the stem.

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