Listening Problems in The TOEIC Test for English Majors: An Exploratory Case Study in a Thai University

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Abstract

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is a globally recognized standardized test that mainly assesses listening and reading skills necessary for communication in workplace contexts. However, the listening section, which accounts for half of the total score of 990, has been regarded as problematic for some Thai English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. This study, therefore, investigates the listening difficulties of six Thai EFL learners who struggled with the TOEIC test. The participants (fourth-year English majors from a university in Thailand) were asked to complete selected TOEIC listening test items and were interviewed about their listening problems immediately afterwards. The findings provide insights into listening problems in the testing context as task-based and individual-based. We categorized the top three problems as "I answer the choice that has the same or similar words as in the listening text.", "I cannot catch the text immediately while listening.", and "I make wrong inferences due to partial understandings." Based on our findings, we make several pedagogical suggestions for TOEIC teachers and test takers, including

an explicit focus on phonological knowledge, paraphrasing skills, automaticity, established vocabulary lists, and extensive listening practice.

Keywords: TOEIC listening test, TOEIC test preparation, EFL listening, English language testing, English language teaching

The Test of English for International Communication, commonly known as TOEIC, is one of the most popular standardized tests, and it is designed to measure English language proficiency of non-native English speakers worldwide (Booth, 2018). The test is available in the three formats: TOEIC Listening and Reading test, the TOEIC Speaking and Writing test, and the TOEIC Bridge test. More widely used than the other two, the TOEIC Listening and Reading test measures listening and reading skills that are most likely to be used in workplace settings. According to the Educational Testing Service (2023), the producer of the TOEIC test, the highest proportion of people sat the TOEIC Listening and Reading test for assessing their learning, followed by graduation, and then job application purposes. These proportions reflect how TOEIC scores can help people make informed decisions regarding their future English language improvement, university entrance and degree completion, and job acceptance and promotion.

In the TOEIC Listening and Reading test, listening skills account for 495 points or half of the total score of 990. However, listening in English poses some challenges for some English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Renandya and Farrell (2011), for example, explain that speaking rate is one feature which causes listening comprehension problems among low proficiency learners. The faster the speech is, the less people will comprehend interlocutors' messages. Learners' lack of automaticity can also contribute to difficulties (Joaquin, 2018), as some learners put a lot of effort into recognizing and translating each word but fail to gain an overall understanding, which requires spontaneous processing of continuously incoming words. These challenges possibly hinder some test takers in achieving good TOEIC scores.

In the context of scores among Asian EFL test takers, the Educational Testing Service (2023) reports that the mean of TOEIC

listening scores was lower than the average reading scores, with 269 and 331 points, respectively. Consequently, one way to bolster overall scores in Asian contexts is to improve test takers' performance on the listening aspect of the test. Indeed, understanding listening difficulties in the TOEIC test can help teachers design more effective lessons to boost their students' TOEIC scores. For instance, listening strategies or approaches might be integrated into classroom practices to mitigate common problems students could have during the test. Accordingly, this study aims to qualitatively explore the listening problems with cases of English majors in a Thai university, hoping that the context-specific insights can contribute to understandings in similar contexts. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question: What are the most common listening problems in the TOEIC test among Thai English-major students?

Literature Review

Listening in Language Learning

Listening has always been a precursor to effective language communication. Listening requires more than hearing, which is simply the physiological and neurological process of receiving and transducing sound. Rost (2016) defines listening as comprising four overlapping types of processing, namely neurological processing, linguistic processing, semantic processing, and pragmatic processing. Goh (2014, p. 73), meanwhile, views listening as "an active process that may begin even before the first speech signal is recognized, and it may go on long after the input or spoken information has stopped." From both views, the construction of meaning is based on phonological, syntactic, lexical, and discoursal features of text as well as any social context that listeners perceive and interpret.

Despite being a fundamental skill for effective communication, listening has often been the most underrated skill in EFL classrooms when compared to speaking, reading, and writing (Newton & Nation, 2021; White, 2006). Nunan (2002, p. 238) referred to listening as "the Cinderella skill in second language learning . . . overlooked by its elder sister – speaking." Moreover, some people mistakenly believe that EFL listening skills can be acquired naturally like first language

listening skills, and it is viewed as a way to introduce language input, rather than a skill to be developed in and of itself. However, several scholars agree that listening is a difficult skill for EFL learners, especially those with low proficiency levels, and that this receptive skill deserves deliberate teaching in class (Goh, 2014; Harmer, 2015; Nunan, 1997; Renandya & Farrell, 2011; Wilson, 2008).

Listening can be integrated into each of Nation's (2007) Four Strands, a framework which promotes balanced teaching of all language aspects in a well-designed course. The first strand of meaning-focused input provides language for learners to understand meanings mainly through listening and reading, where it is argued that some language forms can be incidentally learned from rich input. In the meaning-focus output strand of learning through speaking and writing, listening can be used to initiate interactions. For instance, when misunderstandings occur, listeners often give corrective feedback to speakers, whereby speakers then notice their errors and convey new meanings through modified outputs. Besides, listening can be used in the language-focused learning strand, for example, such as presenting targeted grammatical structures where learners can notice and learn intentionally. Listening, together with the other skills, is involved in the last strand of fluency development. For instance, narrow listening activities, which require learners to listen repeatedly to the same text or different authentic texts on an interesting single topic (Yen & Waring, 2022), can promote fluency in listening.

Of note here are the teaching-related perspectives that have influenced listening instruction. One is that listening commonly involves two complementary processes: bottom-up and top-down. In the same vein as reading, bottom-up processing posits that listening comprehension starts from understanding small language units (phonemes or words), progresses to larger ones, and finally moves on to the whole text. Top-down processing, on the other hand, requires broad understandings of the overall message along with contextual and prior knowledge to make sense of what is heard first and then leads to understanding of the details or the smaller parts (Newton & Nation, 2021; Nunan, 2002; Scrivener, 2011). A consensus in the literature indicates that teachers should facilitate learners in maximizing both processes by balancing top-down listening activities (e.g. listening for main ideas) and

bottom-up ones (e.g. lexical segmentation practices (Field, 2003)). Another perspective on teaching listening involves pre-, while, and post-stages, each of which serves a different function. For example, pre-listening activities can be used to prepare vocabulary and background knowledge essential to understanding a text as well as motivate students to learn, while post-listening activities allow them to make use of information from listening as part of interactional activities, such as discussing a topic with classmates after listening.

Overall, effective teaching and learning of listening must be underpinned by some principles of second language acquisition. One such principle is the well-known input (or comprehension) hypothesis first proposed by Krashen (2003). It states that people acquire language when understanding messages that are just above their current level. To achieve this, people need to receive input that is not very easy or difficult for them but slightly beyond their proficiency, which is known as comprehensible (i+1) input. Bearing this in mind, teachers should select listening texts and activities appropriate for students' levels. The active listening hypothesis is another concept that assists teachers in developing learners' listening skills. It posits that the degree of learners' engagement in cognitive and emotional activities by themselves will affect the amount of their uptake from listening (Rost, 2016). It is also associated with the comprehension hypothesis in that listening tasks should be appropriate to learners' language proficiency levels to promote engaged processing. In addition to comprehensible input and the degree of active engagement, sufficient levels of listening exposure is necessary. Ellis's (2005) sixth principle of instructed language learning states that "successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input," which can be maximized both inside and outside class. In terms of listening, for example, Renandya and Farrell (2011) suggest that teachers adopt extensive listening practice, referring to students being exposed to a lot of comprehensible and pleasurable spoken texts to improve their comprehension and processing skills.

Listening Problems for EFL Learners

The past several years has spawned numerous research into listening difficulties among EFL learners. For example, Nowrouzi et al. (2015) studied this phenomenon among 100 first-year students from

three universities in Iran. The results showed that the learners had difficulties at all three cognitive stages of perception, parsing, and utilization, yet they faced more pronounced problems at the perception stage than the other stages. For perception-related problems, learners reported experiencing high levels of not hearing words clearly, fast speech rates, mistaking one word for another, too many unfamiliar words, and missing the subsequent parts of a text because they were thinking about the meanings of earlier parts. In the parsing stage, difficulties included dividing long sentences into several parts, guessing the accurate meaning of words in sentences, and following unfamiliar topics. For the difficulties pertaining to the utilization stage, learners experienced problems of understanding details, supporting ideas, and relationships among ideas, all of which could be categorized as discoursal and pragmatic problems.

In a different study, Cubalit (2016) investigated listening comprehension problems of EFL English majors in a Thai university. The findings indicated listening problems in three areas: text, speaker, and listener. The highest percentage of text-related problems were difficulties with vocabulary and grammatical structures. The most common problem related to the speaker was difficulty in understanding speakers speaking at a normal speed, followed by difficulty in understanding accents from different speakers. Regarding the listener-related problems, the EFL learners acknowledged their biggest challenges were not being able to a generate understandings from the first listening and that poor grammatical knowledge. Interestingly, they felt that listening to recordings was more difficult than listening to a teacher. In another relevant study, Taladngoen et al. (2023) mentioned that learners' inadequate vocabulary knowledge negatively affected their TOEIC scores in both listening and reading sections. A lexical threshold of 3,000 most frequently used word families was assumed to provide enough lexical coverage for understanding of either listening or reading text. However, Sengchuen (2023) found that knowing 3,788 content words yielded adequate comprehension for the TOEIC listening test. Most of these words were in the General Service List (GSL) and were categorized as CEFR-B1 vocabulary. Similarly, Chiang's (2018) study showed a statistically significant effect of receptive vocabulary size on test takers' performance on both TOEIC listening and reading

sections. In other words, the larger amount of vocabulary a learner knows, the higher TOEIC score they will obtain.

Apart from limited word knowledge, Taladngoen et al. (2023) pointed out a further three factors. One is the limited ability to process spoken texts in natural connected speech, which can affect the score in a listening test. Another factor concerns limited grammatical knowledge. Many sentence completion and text completion items test learners' abilities to appropriately use a variety of grammatical structures in specific contexts. Grammatical knowledge is also necessary in some listening test items; as in the Question-Response part of the TOEIC, where test takers must listen to and choose answers that best respond to the questions being read, without the questions given in the test paper. Understanding question-answer forms helps learners to find the correct answers. The last factor is poor time management. Efficient time management leads to less anxiety during the test and thus better scores as a result.

Further studies in a Thai context were carried out by Maliwan (2020) and Wangmanee and Vongtangswad (2022), who studied which types of listening subskills in the TOEIC test were problematic for Thai university students. The former found that the freshmen they sampled lacked both top-down and bottom-up processing skills, scoring less than half in all five TOEIC listening item types: listening for main ideas, listening for specific information, drawing inferences, predicting, and summarizing. The latter found that for their third-year English majors, the items related to predicting skills were the most challenging, followed by those testing listening for specific information, and their average TOEIC listening score was 409.

One intervention study in Thailand is that by Burapharat and Tiansoodeenon (2019), who sought ways to enhance the TOEIC scores of their Aviation Personnel students in Kasem Bundit University, Thailand. They found that the students realized the importance of the TOEIC scores in seeking jobs after graduation. They also reported that students wanted to lengthen the test preparation course time and expected their teachers to design enjoyable lessons with games and test techniques integrated to achieve satisfying scores.

The TOEIC Listening Test

As the first section on the TOEIC Listening and Reading test, the listening comprehension section tests an examinee's ability to understand spoken English used in a variety of everyday encounters. It also tests their ability to understand various business topics such as office issues, meeting agendas, travel information, appointments and schedules, and advertisements. Test candidates are asked to answer questions based on statements, questions, conversations, and talks given in the form of audio recordings in English, which are heard only once. The listening test is paper-based and consists of 100 multiple-choice items with test takers given approximately 45 minutes to complete them. The number of correct answers are converted to a score ranging from 5 to 495 in 5-point increments (Collins, 2019; Liu & Costanzo, 2013). The TOEIC listening comprehension section is divided into four parts as follows (Collins, 2019; Lougheed, 2021; Rogers, 2018).

a) Part 1 Photographs (6 items) – In the test book are shown six photographs. Test candidates must listen to four statements for each photo and select one that correctly describes information in it.

b) Part 2 Question–Response (25 items) – In this part, test takers will hear a question or statement followed by three responses, all of which are not printed in the test paper. Then they must select the best response to each question or statement.

c) Part 3 Short Conversations (39 items) – Test takers will hear a short conversation with two or three people involved, and then are asked to answer three multiple-choice questions written in the paper. Most of them are main idea questions, specific information questions, and inference questions. There are 13 conversations in total, few of which include graphics (photos, charts, schedules, etc.). Hence, listeners need to understand spoken text together with graphic content to answer these items correctly.

d) Part 4 Short Talks (30 items) – This part is different from the previous part in that each of the ten short talks is given by a single speaker. However, the similarity to Part 3 is that there are three questions following each talk; graphics are also included in the last few talks.

The test items in all four parts are designed to measure five aspects of listening ability. In other words, test score results can suggest to what extent a test taker is able to (1) infer gist, purposes,

and basic contexts based on information stated clearly in short spoken texts, (2) do so but in extended spoken texts, (3) understand details in short spoken texts, (4) understand details in extended spoken texts, and (5) have pragmatic understanding of a speaker's purpose or implied meaning in a phrase or sentence (Cid et al., 2017; Hsieh, 2023). As demonstrated, the TOEIC listening test is recognized as a valid assessment for gauging test takers' listening abilities in various business settings. Understanding its specifications is indispensable in preparing learners for taking the test and achieving a satisfactory score. After sitting the test, learners' performance feedback is also given in the score report not only via a scaled score but also via score descriptors, so learners can see their can-do language tasks and can identify room for further improvement.

Methodology

Participants

The researchers used the purposive sampling method to select participants for this qualitative case study. When well-conducted, purposive sampling can lead to the selection of the right cases, whose study can yield results as valid as those obtained through other research methods, and it can provide insights of broader relevance to the phenomenon or theoretical background (Dörnyei, 2007; Duff, 2012).

To sample participants relevant to the research question and study design (Schwandt, 2007), EFL students were selected from those enrolling in an English for Standardized Tests course offered by an English program at a Thai university where one of the researchers teaches and the others study. Participants were selected based on following criteria: (1) Being fourth-year English-major students, implying they had considerable experience in learning and using English and likely intended to take the TOEIC test in the future, given their enrollment in this course. (2) Experience in practicing or taking the TOEIC test or other standardized tests with a listening part, ensuring their familiarity with the instructions and administration. Their experience would also enable them to better realize and describe listening difficulties more clearly during data collection. (3) Their CEFR levels ranged from B1 to C2, if learners with different proficiency levels

would encounter varied listening problems, resulting in a richer set of data. Additionally, using the CEFR international standard as a selection criterion might make the findings more generalizable to other EFL students majoring in English. This resulted in six participants being purposively invited to take part in the study.

In this research, pseudonyms were used instead of their real names to maintain their confidentiality. They will hereafter be mentioned as Nathan (C2), Anton (C1), Troy (B2), Mary (B2), Nina (B1), and Pearl (B1). Regarding the CEFR, they knew their levels from the standardized English proficiency test designed by the university, which requires all students to achieve at least a B2 level before graduation. The scores from this test can be mapped onto the CEFR levels and are comparable to other standardized tests such as TOEIC, IELTS, and CU-TEP (Office of International Affairs and ASEAN Network, 2020).

Instruments

The research instruments were a set of TOEIC listening test items and a retrospective interview. For the first instrument, the researchers selected items from the Memmoread application (https://memmoread.website/actual-toeic-listening-test-1/) because it offers TOEIC practice tests that closely resemble actual ones in terms of the format and difficulty level, and it constantly updates new test sets every year. To elicit listening problems on an item-by-item basis during the interview, it was impractical to ask participants to complete the entire 100-item test set. Therefore, 15 multiple-choice items from the listening test Part 3, accompanied by 5 conversations, were carefully selected for conducting research. We chose Part 3 because it was assumed to be reasonably representative of Part 4 as question types (main idea, specific information, inference, etc.) found in both parts are identical. Also, Part 3 is noticeably a difficult section with a high number of incorrect answers reported (Maliwan, 2020; Wangmanee & Vongtangswad, 2022), making it likely to elicit dense data on listening problems.

The other instrument was a retrospective interview. In this study, the retrospective interview sessions were conducted in Thai language, immediately after the participant finished the listening test. This timing ensured that the participant could clearly explain the problems they

encountered during the test while their experience was still fresh. After being given the answer key and listening script and marking their test paper, the participant was firstly asked whether the answer for each item was correct, and then asked to explain the problems they encountered or the reasons for choosing the wrong answer on an item-by-item basis.

Data Collection and Analysis

Before collecting the data, the researchers carefully selected 15 TOEIC listening test Part 3 items available on the Memmoread application. After that, the researchers wrote up an interview guideline to accurately inform the participants and run each interview in the same way since it would be held at different times. Next, the researchers conducted a pilot interview with a volunteer. This step was to ensure that the test items were challenging enough to elicit the data on listening problems, and that the interview process was suitable for collecting the data. After fine-tuning the instruments, the researchers sought participants, and six fourth-year English-major students were willing to participate after having been fully informed of the research. Due to time availability of the participants, four interview sessions were arranged beforehand, each with two researchers and one or two participants.

In the interview stage, starting from the researchers explaining the research aims and process and receiving a verbal consent, the participant was then asked to take the 15-item listening test. The test was administered in the same way as Part 3 of the actual TOEIC test. For example, test takers listened to the conversation once and taking notes on the test paper was not allowed. Immediately after finishing the test, the participant was given the audio script and the answer key to check their answers. Then they were interviewed about listening problems encountered during the test. To finish collecting the data, the researchers kept the paper with test results marked. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim later for data analysis.

To answer the research question, the researchers analyzed the data from both the TOEIC test papers and the interview transcriptions. The participants' selected answer choices for the 15 test items were marked, and their total scores were calculated and compared to each other to get a glimpse into their listening performance and difficulties. Salient cases of questions which were incorrectly answered by

most participants could be further selected to investigate what they experienced during the test. To identify listening problems in the TOEIC test, we adopted inductive thematic analysis. Once the researchers had reviewed the literature, the interview transcriptions were carefully read several times to classify the problems that each participant encountered in each test item, without adhering to any framework of previous studies. The test items as well as the listening script and key were examined together to understand the problems in the specific listening context. Subsequently, identification of problems was carried out and negotiated among the researchers to reach mutual agreement. After the researchers finalized the identification, they selected some part of the transcriptions to support the findings. The transcription excerpts were translated from Thai into English language for data presentation.

Results

This section presents the results obtained through the data collection and analysis procedures. The results are structured into two main parts to answer this research question: What are the most common listening problems in the TOEIC test among Thai English-major students?

The TOEIC Listening Test Scores

The first part demonstrates the performance of six participants in listening to five short conversations and answering 15 multiple-choice questions from the TOEIC test part 3. The following table show each participants' responses, results, and the total score. It lists the answers (A, B, C, or D) each participant chose for the 15 questions and uses the symbols (✓ or X) to indicate if each answer was correct or not; the total score is given at the end of the table.

Table 1
TOEIC Listening Test Results

Items	Key	Participants' Answers and Results					
		Nathan (C2)	**Anton (C1)**	**Troy (B2)**	**Mary (B2)**	**Nina (B1)**	**Pearl (B1)**
Item 1	D	A (x)	A (x)	B (x)	A (x)	A (x)	A (x)
Item 2	B	B (√)	B (√)	B (√)	C (x)	D (x)	A (x)
Item 3	C	C (√)	A (x)	A (x)	A (x)	A (x)	C (√)
Item 4	D	D (√)	B (x)	B (x)	B (x)	D (√)	B (x)
Item 5	A	A (√)	C (x)	C (x)	C (x)	D (x)	A (√)
Item 6	B	B (√)	D (x)	D (x)	D (x)	D (x)	C (x)
Item 7	C	C (√)	C (√)	C (√)	C (√)	C (√)	B (x)
Item 8	C	C (√)	C (√)	C (√)	C (√)	A (x)	C (√)
Item 9	D	D (√)	D (√)	A (x)	D (√)	D (√)	D (√)
Item 10	D	D (√)	B (x)	D (√)	C (x)	D (√)	B (x)
Item 11	C	C (√)	B (x)	B (x)	B (x)	A (x)	B (x)
Item 12	D	D (√)	D (√)	D (√)	A (x)	C (x)	A (x)
Item 13	B	B (√)	A (x)	B (√)	B (√)	C (x)	B (√)
Item 14	C	A (x)	A (x)	A (x)	C (√)	C (√)	C (√)
Item 15	B	B (√)	A (x)	A (x)	B (√)	D (x)	A (x)
Total Score		13	5	6	6	5	6

As shown in Table 1, the participants got the total scores of 5, 6, or 13 out of 15. Nathan scored the highest with 13 points, answering only items 1 and 14 incorrectly. He was the only test taker who scored more than half. Noticeably, some of the participants' listening scores seemed lower than expected based on their CEFR levels. This is probably because the researchers selected the challenging items to elicit listening problems. Notably, the scores suggest that all of them faced listening difficulties to varying degrees, which impeded their comprehension and led them to choose incorrect answers.

From the responses, the first question seemed to be the most challenging since all participants answered it wrongly. Moreover, all of them selected choice A, which we considered as a plausible distractor. As a consequence, we analyzed the transcription data looking for further explanations. Apparently, although they shared the same wrong answer,

the participants perceived varied listening problems while they were answering the first question, as identified in the following table. In this study, listening problems are rewritten as problem statements as they reflect the context well and convey information in a more reader-friendly manner.

Table 2
Listening Problems in Answering Question 1

Participants	Problem Statements
Nathan	- I jump to conclusions. - I answer the choice that has the same or similar words as in the listening text.
Anton	- I jump to conclusions. - I make wrong inferences due to partial understanding of the listening text.
Troy	- I do not understand meanings of some words. - I am confused because of words in the answer choices.
Mary	- I answer the choice that has the same or similar words as in the listening text. - I cannot catch the text immediately while listening.
Nina	- I jump to conclusions. - I make wrong inferences due to partial understanding of the listening text. - I do not understand meanings of some words.
Pearl	- I cannot relate the information in the listening text to the question. - I cannot find the gist of the listening text.

Table 2 demonstrates listening problems while all participants were dealing with item 1. Overall, eight listening problems could be classified, and two or three problems occurred at the same time. The problem "I jump to conclusions." was the most frequently expressed by three participants, Nathan, Anton, and Nina. Based on the listening script, the correct option D "A store owner" is stated clearly on the third speaking turn. However, they rushed to answer choice A "A newspaper editor" after listening to the first turn only. From the interview excerpt, Nathan said that: "Maybe it was because I heard the

word newspaper, so I answered it right away." It also showed that he "answered the choice that had the same or similar words as in the listening text." This problem was the second most frequent with two participants reporting it.

The problems "I make wrong inferences due to partial understanding of the listening text." and "I do not understand meanings of some words." was also the second most mentioned at two times, and Nina realized both problems. In addition to jumping to conclusions, she gave the incorrect answer since she did not understand some words in the text but understood the part "report an error in your newspaper," so she assumed that the woman might work as a newspaper editor.

This first part offers some insights into a variety of listening obstacles even though the participants coped with the same test item. The plausible distractor appeared to affect the choice selection, but each participant also had their individual problems while listening to the conversation along with answering the multiple-choice question in the TOEIC test. Listening problems in the TOEIC test appears to be both task-based and individual-based.

Listening Problems in the TOEIC Test

This second part is directed to uncover the listening problems that each participant reported while answering each TOEIC listening test item. After the interview data and test papers were analyzed in-depth, three additional problems were identified, bringing the total to 11 listening problems in this study. The problem statements are listed in Table 3 and the participants who experienced each of the problems are marked with circles.

Table 3
Listening Problems in the TOEIC Test

Problem Statements	Participants					
	Nathan	Anton	Troy	Mary	Nina	Pearl
(A) I answer the choice that has the same or similar words as in the listening text.	○	○	○	○	○	○
(B) I cannot catch the text immediately while listening.	○	○	○	○	○	○
(C) I make wrong inferences due to partial understanding of the listening text.		○	○	○	○	○
(D) I jump to conclusions.	○	○			○	
(E) I do not understand meanings of some words.			○		○	
(F) I recognize a word wrongly as another word.						○
(G) I cannot relate the information in the listening text to the question.						○
(H) I cannot find the gist of the listening text.						○
(I) I am confused because of words in the answer choices.			○			
(J) I choose the choice by reading the previous item rather than listening to the text.					○	
(K) I am confused because I receive new information.					○	

As can be seen in Table 3, six participants encountered a total of 11 listening problem types. For each participant, the occurrence of problems ranged from three to seven problems, and either no problem or one, two, or three problems were identified while they were doing each question. Two problems that all of them experienced were referred to as "I answer the choice that has the same or similar words as in the listening text." and "I cannot catch the text immediately while listening." Another problem shared by five out of six participants was "I make wrong inferences due to partial understanding of the listening text.", whereas the problem statements "I jump to conclusions." and "I do not understand meanings of some words." represented the difficulties that three and two of them dealt with respectively. The other six problems were mentioned by one participant.

One problem which all six test-taker participants stated can be best represented as "*I answer the choice that has the same or similar words as in the listening text.*" From the interview data, it was quite surprising that some participants often depended on only one word that they heard to choose the answer that contained such a word. For example, Pearl answered choice B "A room had been booked." for item 11 because she heard the word "room" in the audio. In item 12, she found the answer using the same way, as evidenced in this excerpt: "I got the wrong answer . . . because before the last sentence I heard the word "pamphlet", so I chose choice A." This also questioned to what extent she understood parts where the answers appeared, or if she could not process the parts at all. In other words, individual words, or just the word sounds, were only one source for her to find the answer.

In many cases, recognizing a word in isolation might not contribute to success in a listening test since test takers might need to understand both the captured word and the parts around it. In response to question 6, for example, Mary noted, "I heard in the conversation that he would send an email or something about that. And in the choice there was the word "email" the same, so I answered it. But actually, it meant that the form was sent via email." As stated, she could capture the word "email (v.)" while listening but missed the next part of the sentence (the registration form). Consequently, as she had to rely on a single word for understanding, she wrongly chose answer D instead of B. Nevertheless, the strategy of picking out known words and

inferring the probable context was still a helpful strategy for getting correct answers for some test items. According to Pearl, she answered question 14 correctly as she said: "It seems that I heard, umm, device is, sort of thing. So, I thought this choice [C] is correct."

Another listening problem reported by all participants can be generally stated as "*I cannot catch the text immediately while listening.*" Half of them further commented that the recordings went too fast, as Anton expressed, "For this question [=question 10], the main point was that I could not get a general sense because the audio seemed faster here than at the beginning." For item 15, Nina even said: "I didn't know where the answer was because I couldn't follow it." Both comments indicated that the text spoken by L1 speakers at a normal speed was still perceived as too fast for these EFL learners. In other words, the speed of delivery prevented them from recognizing spoken forms of words and comprehension never occurred as a result. Additionally, the phonological features of spoken text were mentioned by Troy: "I was confused if some words were actually them. The words were spoken together as one string. There were also few pauses in the text. It made me hard to get a general idea which caused me to answer it wrong." Mary added that when she could not follow some parts, she could not paraphrase them to compare with choices. Then she ended up choosing an answer having a similar word that she could caught during listening. The next generalized problem statement we coded was "*I make wrong inferences due to partial understanding of the listening text.*" This represented the challenges experienced by five out of six English-major participants. In contrast to the first problem, which was choosing an answer with the same word as they caught in the listening, with this problem, the participants understood some text parts yet were unable to answer a question because they did not get enough information or that information was not related to what the question asked. Based on the existing information, they had to infer some possibilities to make enough sense for choosing an answer. For example, Anton mistakenly answered choice B "A training workshop" for question 4, which asked the gist of the conversation. To fill in some missing details, he formed an inference based on two words he gained. According to him: "When I heard 'bicycle group', it was the only keyword I picked up. I wasn't sure if the correct answer would be

'training workshop' or 'employee club.' But before that, I heard something about 'department' already."

Furthermore, background knowledge appeared to play a role in inferring some answers. While Mary was doing item 3, for instance, she listened to and understood some parts of the spoken text but not what the question asked. Therefore, she inferred based on her prior knowledge that choice A was correct, but it was actually a distractor. Mary explained: "I heard the story was about a newspaper, then someone said that some details in it was wrong. So, I used my own sense that if there was a mistake, someone might print a new one, sort of it, then I answered, 'Reprint an advertisement' [choice A]."

Another type of listening problem may also be categorized as "*I jump to conclusions.*" It occurred with Nathan, Anton, and Nina, but only once, with each of them reporting it in response to question 1. All of them also selected the same choice A "A newspaper editor" instead of the correct choice D "A store owner". This is probably because choice A sounded very plausible and the location of the answer might be quite far from the start, in fact, on the third speaking turn. Another possibility was that due to it being the first question, they might not have settled into the listening and testing context.

The generalized statement "*I do not understand meanings of some words.*" was expressed by two participants. Nina struggled with three listening problems including the aforementioned problem in question 1 (See Table 2). Meanwhile, Troy confronted two problems during the same question. The other problem was "*I'm confused because of words in the answer choices.*", which were reported solely by him. Troy thought: "The problem was I couldn't translate some words. Sometimes I noticed a lot of same words in the listening and in the answer choices. That's why I was confused and don't get it." This interview excerpt highlights how listening in another language in is a complex and challenging process. For just a few seconds during the short conversation, he had to process English words into his L1, together with associating words in the listening text with ones in the question to understand the message and complete the task. Four choices contained the same words as those in the listening text, which meant that they worked well as a set of plausible distractors that required more processing from test takers.

Three problem statements, namely "*I recognize a word wrongly as another word.*", "*I cannot relate the information in the listening text to the question.*", and "*I cannot find the gist of the listening text.*" reflected Pearl's listening difficulties in the TOEIC test. She occasionally misheard words in the conversation, as illustrated in the interview: "For this question [=question 4], the answer key is 'employee club', but what I heard is the word 'workshop,' ha-ha." However, there were the words "work" and "workout" in the conversation, but not "workshop." The data indicated that she could not recognized word sounds accurately. That resulted in mistakenly assuming she heard other words. The other two problems were mentioned based on her test-taking experience on the first item. As evidenced in the interview, she said, "It sounded like when I was listening to what the speakers said, what I heard and understood were not the same as the question. That is, I heard one thing but the question asked another. So, it was like I can't get the gist, especially if I listened to it only one time. I needed it twice." Listening in the TOEIC test appeared to be difficult for her since listening again to get more understanding was not allowed.

The last two problems "*I choose the choice by reading the previous item rather than listening to the text.*" and "*I am confused because I receive new information*" symbolized what Nina struggled with in the TOEIC test. In item 11, she incorrectly answered choice A, "A trainer was unavailable." When deciding on the choice for item 12, instead of getting the answer from the listening text, she wrongly chose choice C, "Suggest alternative courses" because it related to her previous answer. Nina remarked, "For question 12, because before that I thought that my answer for question 11 was correct, I assumed the answer for question 12 might be about suggesting other courses." In a positive view, she realized that the answers in the set of three questions should be logically connected, but it would have been based on the previous correct information as well as evidence from not only reading but also listening. For the other problem, Nina mentioned that, for item 13, she had chosen the right answer which was choice B, "A repair technician." However, she then changed her decision, choosing the wrong choice C, "A building inspector" after she had heard in the next conversation parts some actions about the building. This suggested that she had to

negotiate her understanding of text based on the details received earlier and the details from the ongoing process in an overlapping way.

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

In some parts of the TOEIC listening test, all participants had the same problem that they answered wrong because they chose the answer containing the same words, or even one word, that they had heard in the conversation. This is similar to Laeha and Laohawiriyanon's (2022) findings that Thai EFL listeners with low proficiency levels caught only certain words during the task. These findings indicate how those who lack automaticity in listening find it difficult to process a stream of naturally paced text (Joaquin, 2018, Taladngoen et al., 2023). Regarding this problem, on the one hand, the participants did not make totally wild guesses but at least relied on, or resorted to, the only source they had. Moreover, captured words could lead them to answer correctly in cases where most vocabulary in the correct option was the same as in the listening part. On the other hand, choices with repeated words from the listening text were a frequent type of plausible distractors (Taladngoen & Esteban, 2022); the correct ones were instead paraphrased from certain text parts using different words.

For pedagogical implications, TOEIC learners should be warned not to select answers based on solely repeated words, but they should attempt to sufficiently understand texts around the repeated words where correct answers were located. Teachers should also discuss the repeated use of words in the choices and the recording as a common type of plausible distractor and point out that words in the conversation might differ from those in the correct answers. Therefore, paraphrasing skills for listening should be emphasized so learners can better match what they hear in a conversation with the correct choice they read in a paper. One suggested activity is having students read the choices of part 3 or part 4 items and try to paraphrase them before listening to recordings. Although the process of paraphrasing from spoken to written text during the test was commented as more challenging than listening in daily life (Aryadoust, 2012), from the researchers' perspective, it makes sense in a testing context since it can efficiently measure a test taker's ability to understand spoken text, and not just measure

their ability to recognize the same forms without understanding actual meanings.

This raises another interesting point: whether the participants, when choosing the wrong choices with repeated words, understood the word meanings or just recognized the word sounds. The problem of inadequate vocabulary knowledge is a consistent finding in previous research (Cubalit, 2016; Laeha & Laohawiriyanon, 2022; Nowrouzi et al., 2015). Nation (2013) proposed that lexical knowledge consists of three dimensions, involving forms, meanings, and uses, and word forms can be divided into spoken forms (word pronunciation) and written forms. Therefore, it is likely that sometimes participants recognized the spoken forms of the words they heard, but they did not know the meanings, or that they knew both, but it was not sufficient to answer correctly since they should have understood other words related to the answer as well.

Concerning lexical aspects for improving listening and test-taking performance, teaching and learning of the three-word dimensions of forms, meanings, and uses should be balanced, and phonological forms of words should be addressed together with orthographic forms. It has consistently been noted that some EFL classrooms in Thailand are still centered on teaching written language and communication, rather than spoken forms and dialogue (Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021). Previous research has also found that learners demonstrated less contextualized word knowledge in the listening mode than the reading mode, as well as poorer lexical inferencing ability, partly due to processing difficulty in listening (van Zeeland, 2013). This means students' lexical knowledge for listening processing might be inferior to the ones used to read, or even to write and speak. In addition, not only depth but also breadth of vocabulary should be enhanced. Learners with higher vocabulary levels have a higher possibility that they will understand most of a listening text because of the larger lexical coverage. Van Zeeland and Schmitt (2013), for example, proposed that 95 percent coverage of the most frequent words in everyday English is sufficient for successful L2 listening comprehension. To achieve this coverage, learners need to equip themselves with the most frequent 2,000 to 3,000-word families. Tailor-made TOEIC word lists, such as Browne and Culligan's (2016) TOEIC Service List, can be deliberately learned to achieve such goals of

vocabulary size and coverage. Furthermore, the researchers recommend that teachers and test takers can use unknown or difficult words found in the TOEIC reading sections for listening test preparation. Both listening and reading texts use similar topics, as both are taken from work-related contexts, so the words seen in the reading texts are likely to appear in the listening texts.

The next problem to discuss was making wrong inferences due to partial understandings of the listening text. When students could not find the answers stated in the listening but could comprehend some text parts, they relied on the existing information they had captured and applied this prior knowledge to help make sense of their chosen answers. Unfortunately, the answers were often wrong. Some previous studies found that lack of background or cultural knowledge resulted in listening comprehension problems (Khamprated, 2012; Nowrouzi et al., 2015). Nevertheless, such a problem was not discovered in this research. This might be because the text genres and content related to everyday interactions and work situations, and the participants had experience in practicing the TOEIC tests. Instead, our research showed that they could apply their background knowledge, but they made incorrect inferences of details and chose wrong choices. However, using background knowledge and inferencing should not be considered as a culprit. Instead, this signifies the learners' attempt to negotiate meanings of text that they had partly understood. If the amount of listening input they understood had increased, they would have applied more appropriate inferencing to better their comprehension. As evidenced by van Zeeland (2013), learners inferred meanings more successfully in a listening text that they had strong background knowledge about.

Regarding teaching applications, top-down processes should be integrated into listening lessons. Learners should practice how to activate their background knowledge, so they are more ready for listening. Prior to listening, teachers can suggest to students that they skim-read written questions and predict possible situations they will soon listen to. Context of situations (e.g., relationship of speakers, places) can be discussed as well. Low-frequency vocabulary important for text comprehensibility could also be selectively taught in advance before listening. These will allow learners to prepare what they have previously known and maximize it to facilitate construction of the text meaning.

In some attempts, it turns out that the test takers' problems were not related to negotiation of meaning based on the input they gained, but it lied in the initial listening phase of perception. In other words, they could not even recognize at the beginning what words or phrases the sounds represented. This study found that all the participants could not catch the text immediately while listening, where the speed and continuous sequence of sounds were the causes reported. This suggests that the L1 speakers' normal speaking rate was still considered too fast for EFL learners, and they seemed unfamiliar with the connected speech features of L1 spoken text. This prevented them from perceiving sounds of words or chunks successfully, which is the initial and essential stage of meaning processing. These findings are consistent with previous results (Cubalit, 2016; Khamprated, 2012; Nowrouzi et al., 2015), particularly Laeha and Laohawiriyanon (2022) and Nushi and Orouji (2020), who both confirmed that EFL learners could not hear some words which they knew in written forms while listening. The latter also discovered that EFL learners markedly lacked phonological knowledge, including distinguishing word boundaries, pronouncing words correctly, and understanding assimilation, deletion, or addition of sounds. Another problem in the perception stage was that words were misheard. One participant mentioned she heard a word, but it was not in the text, turning out to be another word with a similar sound. This problem was also pointed out by Nowrouzi et al. (2015). Interestingly, problems with certain accents were not discovered in this research, in contrast to earlier studies (Cubalit, 2016; Khamprated, 2012; Laeha & Laohawiriyanon, 2022). This might be partly because the TOEIC test includes a few so-called standard English accents, including American, Canadian, British, Australian, and New Zealand accents (Gee, 2015). These accents might not be unfamiliar for the English-major participants who had some test-taking experience. Alternatively, they might not view the accent aspects as difficulties; phonological features of spoken text were seen problematic instead.

To ease sound perception problems, not only top-down but bottom-up processing should be applied. As commented by Cubalit (2016), teaching pronunciation in Thai EFL classroom was sometimes overlooked. However, meaning processing will not be successful if linguistic decoding does not occur. Some language-focused activities,

for example, discriminating words with similar sounds and recognizing specific words or phrases out of a flow of spoken text, are worthwhile teaching activities to boost learners' listening accuracy. Besides, after the TOEIC test practice, supplementing with listening scripts and combining listening to and reading texts together can strengthen the link between spoken and written forms of words.

Furthermore, unfamiliarity with speed and phonological features of L1 spoken text could be lessened by extensive listening or its related approach narrow listening. These approaches align with Ellis's (2005) proposition of extensive L2 input as an indicator for successful language learning, and both create opportunities for understanding meaning through listening and developing fluency through comprehensible texts of interest, addressing two of the Four Strands proposed by Nation (2007). Despite the similar benefits, extensive listening emphasizes breadth and variety of input, whereas narrow listening better reinforces learning of recurring language forms, as learners listen to several texts on the same topic multiple times. Indeed, Kampiranon and Chusanachoti (2023) found that extensive listening instruction could improve Thai EFL students' ability to recognize information, connect information, make inference, and find key information. Similarly, Yen and Waring (2022) discovered that after 3 months of narrow listening, EFL adult learners demonstrated better listening comprehension for not only practiced but also unpracticed topics.

Regarding test preparation, narrow listening seems quite beneficial for the TOEIC course. For example, students could be provided with a set of authentic listening texts on a single topic found in the TOEIC test, such as event announcements, for out-of-class practice over time. Following this, a new set of recordings on a different topic can be given. Repeated exposure to vocabulary and text genres could increase their listening comprehension and fluency. However, teachers should carefully choose or design the text to ensure the benefits. For extensive listening, drama series or movies involving work situations can be recommended to students for enjoyable listening practice.

Additionally, answering questions wrongly could result from jumping to conclusions or hurrying to choose answers. For example, the answer for the first question was located almost at the middle of the conversation. As a result, some participants selected the choice

containing some information similar to what they had heard at the beginning, where first answers are commonly found. Apart from developing their linguistic knowledge and listening comprehension, learners should be trained to monitor their understanding and verifying their answers too, as Goh (2018) recommends, teachers should foster learners' use of metacognition in listening. In this study, students' application of metacognitive skills was also discovered, yet they still failed to choose correct answers. In one attempt, for example, one participant firstly chose the correct answer but then became confused and changed to the wrong one due to newly received information which contradicted her understanding of the earlier information. On the one hand, metacognitive knowledge and strategies can be seamlessly integrated into listening lessons. In the pre-listening stage, teachers can encourage students to predict text genres (e.g. problem-solution discussions, meeting agendas, telephone messages) and possible details they will soon hear by previewing questions and using their prior knowledge. Alternatively, in the post-listening stage, teachers can encourage students to evaluate themselves on their listening and test-taking performance, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and plan to perform better in the next practice. On the other hand, metacognitive knowledge and strategies might not be applied effectively if EFL learners still lack language knowledge and listening skills. These should become the priority in teaching and designing listening lessons.

This study illustrated additional challenges of listening in the TOEIC testing context. To comprehend the text and select the right answer, one participant narrated that he had to translate the ongoing spoken text into his L1 and attempt to capture words in the audio and associate with ones in that written question at the same time. Finally, he ended up being confused and gave the wrong answer. This indicates that listening in the test is a complicated and demanding task that requires learners to conduct both listening and reading processing rapidly and simultaneously. In addition, the rule of prohibiting notetaking during the listening partly contributed to the participant's information processing overload. In fact, note-taking should be allowed as it reflects a common authentic practice and would make the TOEIC test less

stressful. Moreover, it would provide a more accurate measure of test takers' listening performance, not memory capacity.

Another example showing the challenging nature of test-based listening was mentioned by one participant, who noted that she could not get the gist and needed to listen more than only one time. The interview results also suggested that listening in the test must be more challenging than authentic listening. In real life, when an interlocutor does not understand what is being heard, they can interact with the other, asking for repetition or clarification to continue a conversation. In contrast, test takers are not allowed to do so during the test. To overcome these challenges, test takers should familiarize themselves with test requirements and specifications. Moreover, extensive practice can assist them in regulating their cognitive processing in a more effective and timely manner.

Conclusion

This qualitative research has illuminated challenges of listening in the TOEIC test experienced by a group of EFL Thai fourth-year university students majoring in English. Data elicited from the TOEIC listening simulation test and retrospective interviews, once analyzed, uncovered listening in the testing context as a complex and demanding task. A total of 11 listening problem types were classified with a range of zero to three problems occurring while answering each test item. Our discussion highlighted the most frequently shared problems among the participants, for example, “I answer the choice that has the same or similar words as in the listening text.” and “I cannot catch the text immediately while listening.” Moreover, based on our findings, we made practical suggestions for TOEIC test takers, TOEIC teachers, and teachers in general, including an explicit focus on phonological knowledge, paraphrasing skills for listening, integration of top-down and bottom-up processing, extensive listening practice, and vocabulary development for listening. These suggestions were proposed to minimize listening problems and improve listening comprehension of EFL learners.

We acknowledge some limitations in this study. One was the small sample size. Participants were recruited on voluntary basis and shared some characteristics under the specific context, resulting in the data on listening problems that were task-specific and individual.

This limitation should be considered when interpreting and applying the findings to other contexts. Another limitation concerns the research instrument. Despite its potential to provide rich descriptions, retrospective interviews might allow participants to express self-reporting bias by verbalizing their thoughts during the interview but not when doing the test. For future research studies, researchers can investigate listening problems in the TOEIC test by conducting mixed methods research. A self-reporting survey can be used to achieve general findings that well represent the population, then a few interesting cases can be selected to gain in-depth data to strengthen quantitative results.

Overall, despite our study's limitations, we believe that our findings, and the discussions arising from them, can offer useful insights to EFL teachers and learners in similar contexts. Indeed, by continuing to raise awareness of the difficulties we have outlined, we hope that other practitioners and students can continue to adapt their teaching and learning, respectively.

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