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## EFL students' challenges in TOEIC® updated test: listening section

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### A B S T R A C T

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The TOEIC® Listening and Reading Test has been updated since 2018 and has been utilized for various purposes. This present study attempts to investigate the challenges faced by EFL students in achieving certain desired scores on the TOEIC® Updated Test, particularly in the listening section. This study employed qualitative methodology and CBT (computer-based test) of TOEIC® updated test was used as the instrument. Data was taken from the test results of 52 participants who joined POLBAN's (Politeknik Negeri Bandung) TOEIC® Preparation and Prediction for IISMA 2024 conducted in January 2024. The results reveal that in solving the listening section in the TOEIC® Updated Test, test takers encounter difficulties in 12 different targeted skills. Some targeted skills are considered more challenging than others, i.e., understanding information questions and tag questions in the listening part II and making inferences as well as understanding graphics in the listening part IV. Surprisingly, understanding graphics is one of the new types of questions in the TOEIC® Updated Test. The fruitful implications of this study, both theoretically and practically, will be further explained in this article.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively in English is increasingly important. The quality of English skills can have a profound impact on various sectors of life, including education, the economy, social interactions, and cultural understanding (Rido, 2020). English proficiency not only opens opportunities for individuals to study or work abroad but also enables them to communicate effectively with people from different cultures and backgrounds. Su et al. (2020) affirmed that the increased use of English is mainly due to the effect of globalization, as well as to the fact that English language ability is deemed indispensable in enhancing competitiveness in the international market. Thus, English proficiency tests have now become a common tool used by universities and organizations to assess an individual's language skills (Prachanant, 2012). Basori et al., (2023) also mentioned that test results assist the institutions in making further decisions related to students' academic matters.

The tests are continuously in high demand as English is still the language required for various international purposes. The tests, one of which is TOEIC® (Test of English for International Communication), provide an objective assessment to evaluate a person's English language abilities in various contexts, including academic settings and professional environments. TOEIC® measures the everyday listening and reading skills of people working in an international workplace environment (Trew, 2007). The score demonstrates how well a person can communicate with others in business, commerce, and industry using English. There are no

additional requirements for vocabulary or specialized knowledge required for the test, beyond what a person who uses English for everyday work activities knows.

The Educational Testing Service (ETS), a nonprofit organization committed to improving equity and quality in education across the globe, is principally responsible for the development and administration of the TOEIC® assessment. In line with the idea of communicative competence, the TOEIC® test is intended to gauge a test taker's proficiency with English in everyday contexts (ETS, 2023). This theoretical paradigm does not focus only on grammatical accuracy; rather, it emphasizes the capacity to perceive and produce language in context. A variety of linguistic abilities are evaluated on the TOEIC® test, such as reading and listening comprehension. These abilities are fundamental to the TOEIC® test's evaluation of English language proficiency since they are seen to be essential to clear communication in the language (Im & Cheng, 2019). The TOEIC exam consists of a variety of task types, such as reading actual documents and listening to conversations, that mirror language use in everyday situations. These task kinds are intended to elicit responses that provide light on a test taker's level of language proficiency; they are informed by theories of language learning and communication (Schmidgall, 2017). The TOEIC exam uses scoring procedures that are grounded in item response theory (IRT) or other psychometric concepts. In addition to counting the number of right answers, these scoring systems additionally account for the difficulty of the questions that must be answered correctly and the overall distribution of test takers' responses.

Previous studies on TOEIC® assessment have been done to see its applications from different perspectives. In relation to career development, it is undeniable that a great TOEIC achievement affects the professional career of the test taker as the higher score is often assumed to their better English proficiency (Prasetya, 2023). It is also agreed that TOEIC® is more appropriate for work and business affairs due to its practicality and contextuality (Gaspar & Hartanto, 2018). Compared to similar tests, such as TOEFL or Duolingo English Test (DET), TOEIC® offers stimulation to test takers to feel their future working task as it is reflected on each question provided (Hou, 2024).

As the significant importance of TOEIC® has indeed grown exponentially in today's world, individuals put in considerable effort to attain their desired scores. This is evident in the growing number of test preparation courses, study materials, and online resources available to support individuals in their quest to improve their English language skills (Jeon, 2010). However, Nguyen & Gu (2020), in their study in Vietnam, discovered that the impact of TOEIC® on English teaching in universities as the exit-test policy tends to be negative. Teachers tend to shift away from their methodology to prepare the students for achieving the prerequisite scores. It is in line with Nicholson (2015) who evaluated the practicality, reliability, and validity of TOEIC® in South Korea. He criticized that TOEIC is practical as a test, yet its reliability and validity to indicate the test taker's language ability is still questionable. In a recent study of Indonesian vocational students, most test takers find TOEIC® a challenge as they lack vocabulary in listening and have difficulty understanding the context found in reading sections; yet they attend the preparation course prior to the test (Zahrani et al., 2020). In relation to listening skills, H. T. N. Nguyen et al. (2020) claimed that most students struggle greatly with listening section due to a combination of psychological, pronunciation, and vocabulary issues. Koryati et al., (2021) also argued there is less relationship between the students' listening comprehension strategy and their TOEIC listening score. It implies that learners who use listening strategies more frequently do not always have better listening skills and vice versa.

Several previous studies have explored the assessment of TOEIC® from various perspectives, yet limited attention has been given to the TOEIC® Updated Test. Since 2018, the TOEIC® Listening and Reading Test has been renewed and adjusted to meet the requirements of contemporary English, especially in everyday situations and professional contexts. The adjustments include varying the number of questions in specific segments and changing some format of the questions. ETS claims that the level of difficulty remains the same (Cid et al., 2017). However, a study by Kanzaki (2018) discovered that, despite getting 12 scores higher in this new type of TOEIC®, test takers consider the test to be more difficult than the previous one. This new version of TOEIC® has been used for various purposes, including as one of the admission requirements for the IISMA scholarship 2024. Table 1 presents the comparative aspects between the previous and latest versions of the TOEIC® Listening and Reading Test according to ETS.

**Table 1.** The comparison of TOEIC® structure

Part		Old Format	Updated Format
<b>Listening comprehension – 100 questions, 45 minutes</b>			
I: Photographs	Stand-alone questions	10 questions	6 questions
II: Question-response	Stand-alone questions	30 questions	25 questions
III: Conversations	Set-based questions	30 questions - 10 conversations - 3 questions per conversation	39 questions - 13 conversations - 3 questions per conversation
IV: Short talks	Set-based questions	30 questions - 10 talks - 3 questions per talk	30 questions - 10 talks - 3 questions per talk
<b>Changes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a reduced number of Photograph and Question Response questions</li> <li>• an increased number of Conversation questions</li> <li>• conversations that include shorter turns and more exchanges</li> <li>• more than two speakers in some conversations</li> <li>• conversations that include elisions (going to → gonna) and incomplete sentences/fragments (Yes, in a minute; Down the hall; Could you?)</li> <li>• new question types testing the connection between what is heard in a conversation or talk and what is seen in a graphic.</li> <li>• new question types testing a speaker’s implied meaning in the context of a conversation or a talk</li> </ul>			
<b>Reading comprehension – 100 questions, 75 minutes</b>			
V: Incomplete sentences	Stand-alone questions	40 questions	30 questions
VI: Text completion	Stand-alone questions	12 questions	16 questions
VII	Set-based questions	Single passage: 28 questions - 9 single passages - 2 to 5 questions per passage	Single passage: 29 questions - 10 single passages - 2 to 4 questions per passage
	Set-based questions	Double passage: 20 questions - 4 double passages - 5 questions per set	Multiple passages: 25 questions - 2 set-based double passages - 3 set-based triple passages - 5 questions per set

**Changes:**

- a reduced number of incomplete sentence questions
- two new question-types testing understanding of the overall organization of passages
- text Completion questions that ask test-takers to choose which new sentence fits best in the context of the overall passage
- set-based questions that ask test takers to understand where in the passage a sentence belongs
- text messages, instant messages, or online chat conversations with multiple writers
- questions testing the understanding of three related texts
- a small increase in the number of single and multiple passage questions
- new questions about understanding the writer's words in context

Driven by the research gap, this present study attempts to investigate the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in achieving certain desired scores on the TOEIC® Updated Test. Of the two comprehensions assessed in the TOEIC® Updated Test (listening and reading), this present discussion focuses on listening comprehension only. This is due to the fact that most students struggle greatly with the listening section due to a combination of psychological, pronunciation, and vocabulary issues (H. T. N. Nguyen et al., 2020). Also, Koryati et al., (2021) argued there is less relationship between the students' listening comprehension strategy and their TOEIC listening score. It implies that learners who use listening strategies more frequently do not always have better listening skills and vice versa.

The results of this study are expected to offer fruitful implications, both theoretically and practically. Apart from enriching the knowledge of certain aspects of the English language, namely listening comprehension, the findings of this research can be utilized as a pilot to establish more suitable and comprehensive learning materials to help test takers prepare for their TOEIC® exam, particularly the listening problems.

## **2. METHOD**

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach due to the fact that the research aims to describe the phenomenon of EFL students' difficulties in achieving the targeted score of the TOEIC® Updated test, especially in the listening comprehension section. The case study was conducted in January 2024 to 52 respondents who participated in POLBAN's (Politeknik Negeri Bandung) TOEIC Preparation and Prediction for IISMA 2024. It was initiated in an attempt to get POLBAN's students ready for IISMA 2024 scholarship selection as TOEIC® is one of the English Proficiency options to apply for the IISMA program. A minimum TOEIC® score of 605 was required for applicants to be eligible to apply for the program.

This study used Indonesian vocational students as research participants due to three particular reasons. First, Indonesia is one of the countries that use English as a foreign language; thus, achieving targeted English proficiency scores might still be a challenge for most Indonesian test takers. Second, the TOEIC® Updated Test has been utilized as one of the prerequisites to enroll for the IISMA (Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards) 2024 program. This program has gained significant popularity since its first establishment in 2021. The Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2024) noted a fantastic surge in the number of IISMA applicants, from 2,551 in 2021 to 15,211 in 2024. It is supported by the additional quota for vocational high school students in 2022. This quick expansion highlights the attractiveness and relevance of the IISMA program for undergraduate and vocational students. Thus, analyzing students' challenges in solving TOEIC® Updated Test questions, as one of the requirements, will be beneficial to help them be ready to apply for the IISMA program. Third,

students pursuing vocational education are equipped to enter the workforce right after school. English language proficiency, demonstrated by TOEIC scores, is one of the prerequisites to enter the field. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to assist these students in achieving their targeted score for applying for jobs.

The research employed the updated version of TOEIC® test which consists of 100 listening questions and 100 reading questions (the structure is shown in Table 1). Participants were given a brief explanation of this new model prior to taking the test. Next, two Google Forms links acted as the answer sheets (answer keys had been set) were distributed. Participants had approximately 120 minutes to complete the test. The use of Google Forms enabled the researchers to record the most frequently missed questions for each section, and the listening section was chosen for the sake of this study's interest. Missed questions were determined automatically by the system when a certain question was wrongly answered by half or more than half of the respondents. The problems that occurred in those missed questions were then analyzed using the guidance of Collins – Skills for the TOEIC Test: Listening and Reading (Harpercollins, 2012).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Results

This study aims to investigate the challenges faced by EFL students in achieving certain expected scores on the TOEIC® Updated Test, particularly in the listening section. TOEIC® listening section is divided into four parts: Part I – Photographs, Part II – Question Responses, Part III – Conversations, and Part IV – Short Talks, with a total of 100 questions. These questions assess a variety of skills, and participants should finish them in 45 minutes. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

**Table 2.** Listening frequently missed questions

No	Part	Question Number	Number of Missed Questions	Number of Missed Respondents	Tested Skill
	I	-	0	-	-
1	II	7	4	32	Understanding information questions
2		16		32	Understanding tag questions
3		27		30	Understanding information questions
4		30		38	Understanding tag questions
5	III	41	5	32	Detail questions: plan
6		46		30	Inference: what most likely to do next
7		53		27	Topic: activities
8		55		27	Detail questions: problem
9		68		29	Topic: topic
10	IV	73	7	29	Detail questions: suggestion
11		82		35	Making inference
12		83		27	Topic: topic

13		88		41	Detail question: instruction
14		93		39	Making inference
15		96		36	Understanding graphic
16		99		30	Understanding graphic

**Table 3.** Frequently missed skills

No	Part	Frequently Missed Skill	Number Of Occurrences
1	II	Understanding information questions	2
2		Understanding tag questions	2
3	III	Detail questions: plan	1
4		Inference: what most likely do next	1
5		Topic: activities	1
6		Detail questions: problem	1
7		Topic: topic	1
8	IV	Detail questions: suggestion	1
9		Making inference	2
10		Topic: topic	1
11		Detail question: instruction	1
12		Understanding graphic	2

Table 2 and Table 3 show that 16 out of 100 questions in the TOEIC® Updated listening section are considered difficult. More than half of the participants gave incorrect answers to these questions, demonstrating this notion (Table 2). However, Part I – Photographs seems easy as all questions on that part were answered correctly by more than half of the test takers. Part IV, on the other hand, is the hardest as seven difficult questions belonged to this part. Further, the TOEIC® listening section assesses several skills. Table 3 reveals that 12 skills in the listening section are difficult for the test takers. Some of them, e.g., *understanding information questions*, *understanding tag questions*, *making inferences*, and *understanding graphics*, appear to be more challenging than others, proven by their occurrence of more than one time.

### 3.2 Discussions

Next, this part will thoroughly explore the frequently missed skills in the listening section of the TOEIC® Updated Test, and the discussion is presented sequentially.

#### 1. Understanding Information Questions

In TOEIC® Part II, test takers are required to listen to 25 questions and choose one appropriate response for each question. Both questions and responses are not printed on the test book.

*Understanding information questions* is one of the skills tested in this part. *Information questions* start with question words. The common problem with this type of question is that it cannot be answered with simple *yes* or *no* (Harpercollins, 2012). Also, similar-sounding words often cause misunderstanding in solving *information questions* (Harpercollins, 2012).

7. Where has Ms. Garcia gone?

- (A) At three o'clock.
- (B) To see Mr. Jones.
- (C) No, not yet.

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult since it appears twice (questions number 7 and 27), and both are incorrectly answered by half of the respondents (32 and 30 people respectively).

## 2. Understanding Tag Questions

*Understanding tag questions* is another skill tested in TOEIC® Part II. *Tag questions* function similarly to yes-or-no questions, but they have a *yes* or *no* option at the end (Harpercollins, 2012). The end of a statement in a tag question is followed by an auxiliary verb and a pronoun. The tag will be negative if the assertion is affirmative. On the contrary, the tag will be affirmative if the sentence is negative. *Yes*, *no*, or a statement addressing the assertion can be the answer to these.

16. I'll be sharing this office, won't I?

- (A) Their main office is in Hong Kong.
- (B) I've already paid my share.
- (C) Yes, that's your desk, by the window.

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult since it appears twice (questions number 16 and 30), and both are incorrectly answered by half of the respondents (32 and 38 people respectively).

## 3. Detail Questions: Plan

In TOEIC® Part III, test takers are required to listen to ten conversations followed by three questions with four responses for each question. The questions and responses are printed on the test book. *Detail questions: plan* is one of the skills tested in this part. Asking detailed questions requires test takers to pay close attention to the important details in a conversation (Harpercollins, 2012). In understanding detailed questions about the plan, the answers to questions pertaining to particular, not general, information will be required. These kinds of detail questions assess test takers' comprehension of fundamental details that are revealed throughout a discussion. Most importantly, they frequently enquire about the future plans of speakers.

41. What does the man say will happen tomorrow?

- (A) Some invitations will be printed.
- (B) Some supplies will be ordered.
- (C) A regional manager will arrive.
- (D) A sales meeting will be held.

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult as it is incorrectly answered by half of the respondents (32 people).

#### 4. Inference: Most Likely Do Next

In TOEIC® Part III, test takers are required to listen to ten conversations followed by three questions with four responses for each question. The questions and responses are printed on the test book. *Inference: most likely do next* is one of the skills tested in this part. Test takers must acquire information to draw conclusions from inference questions (Harpercollins, 2012). A particular kind of inference question asks test takers to predict what a person will probably do next. An inference question never has a straight response provided. Based on details discussed in the conversation, test takers must be able to determine the correct answer.

46. What will the woman most likely do next?

- (A) Suggest a room layout
- (B) Make a phone call
- (C) Revise an order
- (D) Leave for the day

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult as it is incorrectly answered by half of the respondents (30 people).

#### 5. Topic: Activities

In TOEIC® Part III, test takers are required to listen to ten conversations followed by three questions with four responses for each question. The questions and responses are printed on the test book. *Topic: activities* is one of the skills tested in this part. To identify the topic that the speakers are discussing, test takers must examine the specifics and the larger context of the questions (Harpercollins, 2012). The primary concept won't be stated out loud. In place of this, the speakers frequently discuss the circumstance or issue using terminology related to a particular setting. To determine what activities are done, test takers must use this knowledge.

53. What work is being done at the library?

- (A) An entry door is being enlarged.
- (B) New bookshelves are being built.
- (C) Some computers are being repaired.
- (D) A security system is being installed.

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult as it is incorrectly answered by half of the respondents (27 people).

#### 6. Detail Questions: Problem

In TOEIC® Part III, test takers are required to listen to ten conversations followed by three questions with four responses for each question. The questions and responses are printed on the test book. *Detail questions: problem* is one of the skills tested in this part. Asking detailed questions requires test takers to pay close attention to the important details in a conversation (Harpercollins, 2012). In detail questions about problems, the answers to questions pertaining to particular, not general, information will be required. These kinds of detail questions assess test takers comprehension of fundamental details that are revealed throughout a discussion. Most importantly, they frequently enquire about the issue that the speakers have.



55. According to the man, what problem has the work created?

- (A) *The noise is disturbing people.*
- (B) *Dust is getting on the books.*
- (C) *Entering the library is more difficult.*
- (D) *The library is open for fewer hours.*

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult as it is incorrectly answered by half of the respondents (27 people).

## 7. Topic: Topic

In TOEIC® Part III, test takers are required to listen to ten conversations followed by three questions with four responses for each question. The questions and responses are printed on the test book. *Topic: topic* is one of the skills tested in this part. To identify the topic that the speakers are discussing, test takers must examine the specifics and the larger context of the questions (Harpercollins, 2012). The primary concept won't be stated out loud. In place of this, the speakers frequently discuss the circumstance or issue using terminology related to a particular setting. To determine the topic of the conversation, test takers must use this knowledge.

68. What is the man looking for?

- (A) *A computer*
- (B) *An adapter*
- (C) *A power cord*
- (D) *A battery*

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult as it is incorrectly answered by half of the respondents (29 people).

## 8. Detail Question: Suggestion

In TOEIC® Part IV, test takers are required to listen to ten talks presented by a single speaker and followed by three questions with four responses for each question. Each talk usually lasts in less than a minute. The questions and responses are printed on the test book. *Detail question: suggestion* is one of the skills tested in this part. Like Part III, asking detailed questions requires test takers to pay close attention to the important details in a talk (Harpercollins, 2012). In detail questions about suggestion, a speaker may offer specific recommendations or requests.

73. Why does the message suggest visiting a website?

- (A) *To place an order*
- (B) *To make an inquiry*
- (C) *To find business locations*
- (D) *To view available products*

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult as it is incorrectly answered by half of the respondents (29 people).

## 9. Inference

In TOEIC® Part IV, test takers are required to listen to ten talks presented by a single speaker and followed by three questions with four responses for each question. Each talk usually lasts in

less than a minute. The questions and responses are printed on the test book. *Inference* is one of the skills tested in this part. Test takers must acquire information to draw conclusions from inference questions (Harpercollins, 2012). A particular kind of inference question asks test takers to predict what a person will probably do next. An inference question never has a straight response provided. Based on details discussed in the talk, test takers must be able to determine the correct answer.

82. What does the speaker imply when he says, “No matter how organized we try to be”?
- (A) He is pleased with the presentations.
  - (B) He would like to reassure the organizers.
  - (C) He is unfamiliar with the building layout.
  - (D) He is frustrated by the number of late changes.

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult since it appears twice (questions number 82 and 93), and both are incorrectly answered by half of the respondents (35 and 41 people respectively).

### 10. Topic: Topic

In TOEIC® Part IV, test takers are required to listen to ten talks presented by a single speaker and followed by three questions with four responses for each question. Each talk usually lasts in less than a minute. The questions and responses are printed on the test book. *Topic: topic* is one of the skills tested in this part. To identify the topic that the speakers are discussing, test takers must examine the specifics and the larger context of the questions (Harpercollins, 2012). The primary concept won't be stated out loud. In place of this, the speaker frequently delivers the circumstance or issue using terminology related to a particular setting. To determine the topic of the talk, test takers must use this knowledge.

83. What special event is being announced?
- (A) A presentation
  - (B) A tour
  - (C) A festival
  - (D) A conference

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult as it is incorrectly answered by almost half of the respondents (27 people).

### 11. Detail Question: Instruction

In TOEIC® Part IV, test takers are required to listen to ten talks presented by a single speaker and followed by three questions with four responses for each question. Each talk usually lasts in less than a minute. The questions and responses are printed on the test book. *Detail question: instruction* is one of the skills tested in this part. Like Part III, asking detailed questions requires test takers to pay close attention to the important details in a talk (Harpercollins, 2012). In detail questions about instruction, a speaker may give instructions or advice on what to do.

88. How are listeners invited to respond to the advertisement?
- (A) By filling out a questionnaire
  - (B) By attending a demonstration
  - (C) By placing a telephone order
  - (D) By requesting a free sample

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult as it is incorrectly answered by more than half of the respondents (41 people).

## 12. Understanding Graphic

In TOEIC® Part IV, test takers are required to listen to ten talks presented by a single speaker and followed by three questions with four responses for each question. Each talk usually lasts in less than a minute. The questions and responses are printed on the test book. *Understanding graphic* is one of the skills tested in this part. It is the new type of question in the updated TOEIC® which asks the connection between what is heard in a conversation and what is seen in a graphic.

96. Look at the graphic. Which song is currently voted number one?

- (A) *Searchlight*
- (B) *Sea Waves*
- (C) *Cherries*
- (D) *Get to it!*

According to the analysis of 52 respondents, this type of question is considered difficult since it appears twice (questions number 96 and 99), and both are incorrectly answered by half of the respondents (36 and 30 people respectively).

## 4. CONCLUSION

As the significant importance of TOEIC® has grown significantly for both academic and professional purposes, it is essential to prepare test takers with sufficient learning materials that will help them achieve their desired TOEIC® scores. This present study identifies the challenges faced by EFL students in achieving such targets, particularly in the TOEIC® listening section. The study reveals that test takers encounter difficulties in 12 different listening-targeted skills. Some targeted skills are considered more challenging than others, i.e., *understanding information questions* and *tag questions* in the listening part II and *making inferences* as well as *understanding graphics* in the listening part IV. This *understanding graphics*, surprisingly, is one of the new types of questions in the TOEIC® Updated Test. The results of this study are beneficial in terms of theoretical and practical. Theoretically, they provide additional knowledge of certain aspects of the English language, namely listening comprehension and grammar. Practically, this analysis can be used by language teachers and TOEIC® preparation instructors as a pilot to establish more suitable and comprehensive learning materials to help test takers prepare for their TOEIC® exam, particularly the listening problems. Despite its significance, however, this study bears some limitations. First, this study used data from Indonesian vocational students. Future studies are suggested to include non-vocational test takers in other countries, where English is the second or foreign language, to broaden the horizon. Second, the discussion is limited to listening comprehension only. Further research can integrate this analysis with other skills assessed in TOEIC®, such as reading, writing, and speaking.

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