Investigating EFL Teachers’ Views on Listening Difficulties Among Their Learners: The Case of Iranian Context

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Abstract
Listening has long been recognized as a challenging skill for teachers, students, and researchers working within the English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Moreover, up until the recent past, it was the least researched of the four language skills in second language acquisition studies. One of the issues regarding the skill that has not been sufficiently investigated is EFL teachers’ views on listening difficulties their students face. This study, therefore, investigates 208 teachers’ views on listening difficulties among Iranian EFL learners. A mixed-methods approach, integrating a questionnaire and an interview, was employed. Results from the questionnaire suggested that the top 10 identified difficulties ranged from practical issues such as poor-quality audio materials to content-based impediments such as unfamiliar topics. Furthermore, analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests revealed that there was no significant relationship between either the teachers’ educational or professional background and the gravity of the difficulties they reported. Among different components of the questionnaire, the input and process components were highly correlated, indicating that learners’ problems with input perception could lead to problems in listening comprehension. Moreover, based on the results of the interviews, it was concluded that the teachers believed that the learners’ listening difficulties belonged to three categories, namely, pronunciation-based, individual characteristics-based, and content-based difficulties. This study suggests that overcoming listening difficulties without listening strategies, though not impossible, seems to be much more time consuming. Therefore, there are many benefits to both students and teachers if some class time is dedicated to acquaint learners with the strategies.

Keywords
listening, difficulties, teachers, EFL learners

Introduction
Listening is a common activity in second language (L2) learners’ daily life. Second language acquisition (SLA) researchers (e.g., Hedge, 2007; Nunan, 1998) believe that L2 learners spend around 45% to 50% of their time on listening when they are engaged in communication in the target language. The crucial role of listening in learning an L2 has also been long recognized (Burns, 2017; Feyten, 1991; Krashen, 1985; Nunan, 2015; Rost, 2015). Krashen (1985) argued that listening is one of the main mediums through which language learners are exposed to an L2 and a key facilitating factor in learning that L2. Nunan (2015) also describes listening as “the gasoline in the engine of second language acquisition” (p. 34). Moreover, listening plays an instrumental role in acquiring other language skills too (Hassan, 2000). Ferris (1998) further highlights the importance of listening by claiming that students’ success in any academic setting seems to be an impossible job without them being equipped with the appropriate listening skills. Finally, Rost (2015) asserts that if learners fail to acquire the listening skills needed to comprehend the input at the right level, they will practically lose the chance to learn the language.

There are, however, many listening difficulties, ranging from speed of delivery, inability to recognize word boundaries, lack of background to poor quality of CD players, that seem to impede L2 learners’ listening comprehension. Over the last two decades, many studies (e.g., Azmi et al., 2014; Goh, 2000; Renandya & Farrell, 2011; Renandya & Hu, 2018; Teng, 2002; S. Wang, 2010; L. Wang & Renandya, 2012) have been conducted to investigate these difficulties. However, most of those studies have been conducted with a...
focus on the learners,’ not the teachers,’ perspectives on the difficulties. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring teachers’ viewpoints on those difficulties in the hope that the collective identification and knowledge of these difficulties would put L2 teachers in a much better position to design more effective instructional procedures to teach the listening skills. This study can also help discover whether and how the listening difficulties identified by L2 learners and teachers differ to overcome the possible mismatches between teachers and learners’ views.

Review of the Literature

Researchers (e.g., Brown, 2015; Goh, 2014; Underwood, 1989; Vandergrift, 1999) have declared listening comprehension as a rather active process calling for complicated interpretive and interactive mental operations. Throughout this process, listeners attempt to concentrate on the speech they hear in the second language (L2); recognize a number of vocabulary, grammar, and structures through which they can construct meaning; make sense of the paralinguistic elements such as stress and intonation to arrive at an interpretation; and keep them in their short memory long enough to integrate them with the information stored in their long-term memory as background knowledge and schema to achieve an overall understanding of the text.

When compared with other language skills, listening has its own distinctive features. For instance, although both reading and listening are receptive skills as opposed to productive skills of writing and speaking, there are important differences between the two. When reading, learners can go over the written text as many times as they wish but they cannot do the same with the oral text as listening happens in real time (Nunan, 2015). Field (2008) also states that word boundaries in a listening text are not as easily distinguishable as in a written text because the spaces between words cannot be seen, thus it is highly challenging for learners, especially beginning learners, to segment the stream of speech into individual words in such a limited time span. He adds that, listening, being transient in nature, makes learners anxious. Lynch and Mendelson (2010) agree with Field and comment the following: (a) listening has usually an ephemeral, one-shot nature; (b) the presence of a rich prosody (stress, intonation, rhythm, loudness, and more), which is absent from the written language; (c) the presence of characteristics of natural fast speech, such as assimilation, making it markedly different from the written language; and (d) the frequent need to process and respond almost immediately.

Walker (2014) also asserts that although nowadays learners can have access to plenty of listening materials with a click of a button, they still find it difficult to improve their listening skills. The problem is that receiving excessive input does not necessarily guarantee learners’ development in listening comprehension. He believes that the key to successful listening is to ameliorate the quality, not the quantity, of listening, by training learners on how to listen effectively. According to him, our concern should be what the listeners do before, during, and after listening, not the amount of input they receive. Different theories on listening comprehension, diverse as they are, all share the common belief that listening comprehension is a complex, dynamic, and integrated activity, which requires the activation of different mental abilities simultaneously. It is no wonder, then, that L2 learners may encounter problems when listening in the target language, an issue that will be dealt with in the next section.

Listening Difficulties

Researchers have identified many factors that may make listening comprehension difficult for L2 learners and this section introduces some of those factors. Speech rate or speed of delivery of texts is one of the factors consistently mentioned in research findings as a hindrance to listening comprehension (Osuka, 2008; Renandya & Farrell, 2011). The problem has been reported by learners even for texts that are spoken at a normal speed rate and at times even at slow rates. This could be due to the fact that the level beyond which comprehension becomes impossible for L2 learners (i.e., critical level) is rather low (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Lexical coverage is another factor that can affect listening comprehension. Zeeland and Schmitt (2012), however, question the claim that 98 percentage of lexical coverage is essential for listening comprehension, an index that is based on the findings of reading research. They contend that unless nonnative listeners are in need of full comprehension of the spoken text, most of them can achieve adequate comprehension with only 90% lexical coverage and relatively good comprehension with 95% coverage. Limited capacity of short-term memory is another factor affecting listening comprehension. As Call (1985) mentions, short-term memory, which chunks utterances into manageable sizes according to syntactic rules, has a significant role in construing the meaning from the oral input. Different stages of comprehension (perception, parsing, and utilization) can overlap, so although the learners are trying to store what they have perceived, they may have to attend to the incoming input. The short-term memory, therefore, continuously gets cleared for new information and, unless some link with the information in the long-term memory is formed, the new information will be lost forever (Goh, 2000). Phonological features are the other sources of difficulty (Graham, 2006; Hamouda, 2013). It is quite natural for speakers of a language to drop and add sounds in connected speech and, therefore, most of the words are not fully articulated, which makes them sound very different from when they are pronounced in isolation. Also word boundaries can be blurry to the L2 listeners due to processes such as assimilation (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Words in continuous speech are reduced and assimilated both within and across word boundaries and, therefore, noticing the beginning and ending of a given word is not an easy job for a listener. Lack
of prior knowledge is another factor affecting comprehension; if the presumptions made in the text do not match the listeners’ prior knowledge, the listeners may face difficulty in comprehending the text (Carrell, 1983; Chiang & Dunkel, 1992; Connor, 1984). Personal factors such as high levels of anxiety may also lead to difficulties in listening comprehension (Aneiro, 1989; Chang, 2010, 2016; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Kimura, 2011; S. Wang, 2010). Richards (1983) notes clausal basis of speech, reduced forms, ungrammatical forms, pausing and speech errors, rate of speech, rhythm and stress, cohesive devices, and content as factors that have been identified to influence listening comprehension. Hamouda (2013) also names unfamiliar words, the length of the spoken text, speech rate, accent, pronunciation, and lack of concentration as problems that university students faced while listening to an aural text. Finally, Goh (2000) identifies insufficient exposure to the target language, difficulties arising from social and cultural practices, text syntax, structure, and personal factors such as lack of interest and motivation as other barriers to listening comprehension. As is evident from this brief review, there does not seem to be a total agreement on the exact number of factors that influence listening comprehension because different researchers have their own way of classification and theoretical points.

In conclusion, listening comprehension is a complex process, which needs listeners to assume an active role to interpret the message. They are to be equipped with different types of knowledge such as English prosody, culture, vocabulary, and structure. A successful comprehension can easily be impeded by gaps in any of these elements. Although numerous studies have been conducted over the years to investigate these difficulties, most of those studies have been conducted with a focus on the learners,’ not the teachers,’ perspectives on the difficulties. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring teachers’ viewpoints on those difficulties by posing the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** What are Iranian EFL teachers’ views regarding the difficulties their learners encounter during listening comprehension?

**Research Question 2:** Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers’ educational background (i.e., academic degree) and the type of listening comprehension difficulties identified?

**Research Question 3:** Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers’ teaching experience (in terms of years) and the type of listening comprehension difficulties identified?

**Method**

**Research Design**

This two-phase study used a sequential mixed-methods approach consisting of a questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews. In the first phase, the participants filled out a questionnaire that tapped teachers’ views on the difficulties their English as a First Language (EFL) learners encounter during listening comprehension. The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively. In the second phase, a few of the respondents who completed the questionnaire were randomly selected and interviewed with the intention of complementing the results obtained from the questionnaire. The semistructured interview was chosen because it allows more flexibility and provides a way to face unexpected avenues that emerge (Blandford, 2013). The interview questions were drawn up based on what was learned from reviewing the literature and the results of the first phase of the study. The data gathered from the semistructured interview were analyzed qualitatively.

**Participants**

The participants in this study included 88 male and 120 female EFL teachers who were selected through convenience sampling. Although the sampling method has been criticized due to the possibility of sampling error and lack of representation of the target population, factors that affect the generalizability of a research (Saunders et al., 2012), the method was chosen because it allows a speedy, easy, and cost-effective access to subjects. The method was particularly useful in the present study because it enabled the researchers to share online the questionnaire that was designed to survey the participating teachers’ views on the L2 learners’ listening difficulties (described in the “Instruments” section below). The teachers were members of three Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) groups in Telegram. They were mainly MA holders in TEFL who were teaching English at various language institutes across Iran. They all spoke Persian as their first language and taught adult learners of different proficiency levels at the time of the study. Moreover, the researchers invited 18 of the teachers (11 male and seven female) who completed the listening difficulty questionnaire to take part in an interview and further elaborate their views about the listening difficulties that learners grapple with. Eleven of the interviewees had MA, five BA, and two PhD degrees in TEFL. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the characteristics of the participating teachers.

**Instruments**

Two instruments were used to gather the data; the first one was an online questionnaire that obtained teachers’ views on the difficulties their EFL learners encounter in listening comprehension (see Appendix A). The items of the questionnaire were adopted mainly from two published questionnaires (Hamouda, 2013; Lotfi, 2012). The items from those sources needed modifications, because both questionnaires were designed for EFL learners’ self-reports of the difficulties they faced in listening comprehension. Therefore, each individual item was accordingly rephrased to cater for the purpose of
this study, that is, EFL teachers’ views on the learners’ difficulties in listening comprehension. Moreover, the different sections of those questionnaires were not balanced, and to overcome this shortcoming, some items were composed and added to the task section after careful study of the listening tasks in large-scale language tests such as The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

The questionnaire consisted of seven sections, 38 items in total. In the first section, the respondents were asked to provide their demographic information, namely, their gender, educational and teaching background, and the level of proficiency of their current learners. The other six sections were dedicated to listening difficulties pertinent to the process, input, listener, task, affect, and context. The estimated reliability of the questionnaire, calculated through Cronbach’s alpha, was .92, revealing that this questionnaire enjoyed a high level of consistency among the items. To ensure the content validity of the questionnaire, the first draft of the items was emailed to 15 EFL experts who were requested to comment on the structure, the wording, clarity, length, order, and logical flow of the questions, and most importantly, the relevance of the items. The experts recorded their responses on a 4-point Likert-type scale (i.e., not relevant, somewhat relevant, quite relevant, and highly relevant), and an accompanying box was set for each item in case the respondents felt the need to make a comment or provide the researcher with justification for their responses. The next step after receiving the feedback from the experts was to calculate the content validity index (CVI) for each individual item. First, the frequency of each point of the scale for every item was calculated. Because the number of experts were more than five or six, it was safe to use Lynn’s (1986) formula for estimating the content validity index for items (I-CVI). According to this formula, “for each item, the I-CVI is computed as the number of experts giving a rating of either 4 or 5 divided by the total number of experts” (Polit & Beck, 2006, p. 491). In situations where six or more experts make judgments on the items, as was the case with the present study, Lynn sets the limit at 0.78. Therefore, any item with an I-CVI less than 0.78 was discarded from the list. From the original 57 items, 22 items were deemed invalid by this definition; eventually, the remaining 38 items were incorporated into the questionnaire. Furthermore, because the questionnaire was designed by the researchers, a factor analysis was run to check for the construct validity of the questionnaire (results of the analysis will be presented later in the article).

The second instrument was a semistructured interview that contained a number of questions drawn from what was learned from reviewing the literature and the results of the first phase of the study (i.e., results obtained via the questionnaire). Two EFL experts were asked to examine the theoretical and practical aspects of the questions. Both experts believed that all the questions were quite relevant and in line with the purpose of the study but that the number of questions was unreasonable. The researchers took that suggestion into account and revised the questions by deleting some questions that were implied in other questions (see Appendix B for the interview questions).

Table 1. The Teachers’ Demographic Information (N = 208).

| Variables                  | Number | Percentages |
|----------------------------|--------|-------------|
| Gender                     |        |             |
| Male                       | 88     | 42.5        |
| Female                     | 120    | 57.5        |
| Years of teaching experience |      |             |
| 1–4                        | 71     | 33.8        |
| 5–9                        | 76     | 36.7        |
| 10–14                      | 31     | 15          |
| 15–20                      | 19     | 9.2         |
| 20+                        | 11     | 5.3         |
| Proficiency level taught   |        |             |
| Beginner                   | 49     | 23.7        |
| Preintermediate            | 83     | 40.1        |
| Intermediate               | 99     | 47.8        |
| Upper intermediate         | 71     | 34.3        |
| Advanced                   | 51     | 24.6        |
| Level of education         |        |             |
| Bachelor’s degree          | 38     | 18.4        |
| Master’s degree            | 145    | 69.6        |
| Doctorate degree           | 25     | 12.1        |

Table 2. The Raw Frequencies of the Interviewees and Their Teaching Experience.

| Number | Teaching experience (years) |
|--------|----------------------------|
| 3      | 5                          |
| 1      | 6                          |
| 2      | 7                          |
| 1      | 11                         |
| 4      | 12                         |
| 1      | 13                         |
| 1      | 16                         |
| 1      | 17                         |
| 2      | 18–19                      |

Data Collection Procedure

Eight weeks were required to collect the data through the questionnaire. The questionnaire was shared in three Telegram-based English Language Teaching (ELT) groups; only those EFL teachers who met the requirements of the questionnaire were invited to take part in the survey. The requirements stated that the participants had to be EFL teachers of adult learners with at least 1 year of teaching experience. Participation in the study was voluntary, anonymous, and unpaid; filling in the questionnaire was considered as the
consent to participate. Two hundred eight teachers returned the questionnaires. As for the interview, 18 of the teachers who completed the questionnaire were randomly selected and asked to share their views on their learners’ listening difficulties. To create a relaxed atmosphere and lower their inhibitions, the participants were guaranteed that they would remain anonymous and the information they would provide would remain confidential. Permission for recording the interviews was sought beforehand and the objectives of the study were explained to them. The questions were mainly asked in English but the participants were asked to feel free to switch to their mother tongue in case they had difficulty understanding the questions or conveying their own thoughts. Each interview lasted between 15 and 20 min and all the interactions were tape-recorded for later analysis.

**Results**

To check the normality of the data obtained from the questionnaire, the kurtosis and skewness tests were employed. The values for skewness were between −0.044 and −1.59 and the values for kurtosis were between 0.005 and 1.87. The values were far less than the cutoff values of ±2.0 for skewness and kurtosis, revealing the univariate normality of the responses (Loewen & Plonsky, 2016). To verify the underlying components in the questionnaire of EFL listening difficulties, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. The sample size of 208 proved adequate based on a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) sampling adequacy value of 0.846 and the rule of thumb three to 20 participants or items per variable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Bartlett’s test of sphericity yielded χ²(208) = 527.20, p < .001, revealing that the correlations between items were acceptable for the analysis (see Table 3). Furthermore, multicollinearity is not a problem in the analysis as the determinant of the R-matrix was greater than .0001.

The principal component analysis for factor extraction and Kaiser’s criteria with eigenvalues greater than 1 for retaining factors on the obliquely rotated factor matrix (i.e., direct oblimin) were used. The results, as seen in Table 4, revealed that the underlying construct of the questionnaire can be legitimately represented via one dimension, accounting for 58.4% of the variance. Therefore, the reliability indices mentioned earlier, together with factor-analytic results, warrant that this instrument can serve as a basis for exploring the EFL learners’ difficulties in listening.

In the following sections, the research questions will be explored in detail.

**Research Question 1**

The first research question concerned the instructors’ views regarding the listening difficulties Iranian EFL learners encounter during listening comprehension. The results, as seen in Table 5, show that EFL listeners encountered all the listening problems previously mentioned. The highest mean scores relate to the process component and the lowest to the affect dimension. Rank-ordered frequency of use of the elements is as follows: process > input > task > listener > context > affect. In other words, the teachers believed that the most frequent listening difficulties their learners struggle with relate to the process, the input, task, and the listener components; the least frequent problem belonged to the context and affect components.

Results of the intercorrelation coefficient rendered a clear picture of how the six components of listening difficulty

| Component | Initial eigenvalues | Extraction sums of squared loadings |
|-----------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
|           | Total | % of variance | Cumulative % | Total | % of variance | Cumulative % |
| 1         | 3.50  | 58.43   | 58.43       | 3.50  | 58.43   | 58.43       |
| 2         | 0.87  | 14.56   | 72.99       |       |          |             |
| 3         | 0.52  | 8.76    | 81.75       |       |          |             |
| 4         | 0.43  | 7.30    | 89.06       |       |          |             |
| 5         | 0.35  | 5.86    | 94.92       |       |          |             |
| 6         | 0.30  | 5.07    | 100.00      |       |          |             |
The process and input components were strongly correlated with each other. The significant and moderate correlations indicate that the components are distinct but interwoven (see Table 6).

The process and input components were strongly correlated with each other. The significant correlations reflect the essential role of cognition in the listening skill. This finding suggests that teachers believed that the students who have difficulties in listening processes might also have problems with the input. In addition, the process component was correlated with all other aspects of the listening at a moderate level. Evidently, teachers believed that it is highly possible for learners who find the process of listening challenging to find other aspects of listening difficult as well. Findings also demonstrated that the listener components were more highly correlated with input elements than any other components. This may suggest that the teachers thought those learners who have difficulties related to the listener component are likely to face more problems in handling the input than other components of process, affect, task, and context. A glance at Table 6 reveals that the correlation between the task and context is the lowest of all the components. The correlation between the task and affect is not considerable either. However, the correlation between the task and the three components of process, listener, and input (.51, .47, and .46, respectively) seem to be more significant, suggesting that the teachers were of the opinion that those learners who find it difficult to complete the listening task may as well have difficulties related to the other three components. Also notable are the moderate correlations of the affect dimension with the other dimensions of the questionnaire. This might mean that the teachers found those EFL learners who encounter affective difficulties might also have challenges with the other components.

The high correlation between the context and affect may suggest that the teachers perceived the difficulties related to affect will most probably hinder the comprehension of those learners who do not seem to be able to cope with contextual defects. The strong correlations between input and all the

| Components   | N  | Minimum | Maximum | M    | SD  |
|--------------|----|---------|---------|------|-----|
| Process      | 208| 17.00   | 55.00   | 40.91| 7.37|
| Listener     | 208| 7.00    | 25.00   | 18.60| 3.19|
| Task         | 208| 11.00   | 40.00   | 23.54| 4.86|
| Affect       | 208| 4.00    | 15.00   | 11.85| 2.21|
| Context      | 208| 4.00    | 15.00   | 12.70| 2.20|
| Input        | 208| 10.00   | 35.00   | 27.42| 4.59|
| Valid N (listwise) | 208 |         |         |      |     |

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).**

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Listening Difficulties in Each Individual Component.

Table 6. Correlations Among the Six Components of the Questionnaire.
other elements of the questionnaire also indicate that teachers believed that the students who tend to have difficulties handling the input would also experience difficulty pertaining to other aspects of listening.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question intended to find out whether there is any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers’ academic degree and the type of the listening comprehension difficulties identified. This question and the third research question (i.e., whether there is any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers’ teaching experience and types of the listening comprehension difficulties identified) were formulated based on previous research findings that indicated EFL teachers’ academic degree and years of teaching experience affect their attitudes toward their instructional and assessment practices (e.g., Abdeen, 2017; Akbari & Moradkhani, 2010; Soodmand Afshar & Farahani, 2018). To answer the second research question, we first computed the descriptive statistics. Table 7 shows that the mean scores increased with the educational level, meaning the higher the educational level of the teachers, the more difficulties they reported. However, the differences in mean scores between adjacent groups seem negligible, ranging from about 0.05% between the BA and the MA groups, to 0.03% between the MA and the PhD groups.

The results of the Levene’s test show that the group variances are not significantly different. The value of 0.16 indicates that the assumption for analysis of variance (ANOVA) of homogeneity of variance has been met (see Table 8).

The ANOVA results are presented in Table 9. The $F$ value was 1.82, which was not statistically significant at .05. This means that level of education of the teachers has no effect on their views about the difficulties learners encounter during listening comprehension.

**Research Question 3**

The third research question asked whether there is any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers’ teaching experience and the type of listening comprehension difficulties identified. Table 10 reveals that the mean scores of listening difficulties slightly increased as the instructors’ teaching experience rose. This means that the more experienced the teachers, the higher the difficulties reported. However, the differences in mean scores between adjacent groups seem negligible, ranging from 0.04% between groups with 10 to 14 and 15 to 20 years of experience to 0.06% between groups with 15 to 20 and 20+ years of experience.

The results of the Levene’s test showed that the group variances were not significantly different. The value of 1.31 indicates that the assumption for ANOVA of homogeneity of variance has been met (see Table 11).

The ANOVA results are presented in Table 12. The $F$ value was 1.36, which was not statistically significant at .05.

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**Table 7.** The Correlation Between Teachers' Educational Level and the Reported Listening Problems.

| Degree | N  | M   | SD  | SE  | Lower bound | Upper bound | Minimum | Maximum |
|--------|----|-----|-----|-----|-------------|-------------|---------|---------|
| BA     | 39 | 1.30| 22.11| 3.54| 123.01      | 137.34      | 56.00   | 163.00  |
| MA     | 144| 1.35| 17.01| 1.41| 132.94      | 138.54      | 55.00   | 181.00  |
| PhD    | 25 | 1.38| 24.34| 4.86| 128.62      | 148.73      | 65.00   | 171.00  |
| Total  | 208| 1.35| 19.10| 1.32| 132.44      | 137.66      | 55.00   | 181.00  |

**Table 8.** Test of Homogeneity of Variances.

| Levene statistic | df1 | df2 | Significance |
|------------------|-----|-----|--------------|
| 1.82             | 2   | 206 | .16          |

**Table 9.** Tests of Between-Subjects Effects as the ANOVA Result.

| Sum of squares | df | M square | F     | Significance |
|----------------|----|----------|-------|--------------|
| Between groups | 1,323.74 | 2 | 661.87 | 1.82 | .16 |
| Within groups  | 74,216.67 | 206 | 362.03 |     |     |
| Total          | 75,540.41 | 208 |       |     |     |

*Note. ANOVA = analysis of variance.*
This means that instructors’ level of experience has no effect on difficulties learners encountered during listening classes.

The Top 10 Listening Difficulties From the Viewpoint of the Teachers

The questionnaire used in this study asked the EFL teachers to indicate their views toward each listening difficulty by checking from five choices: strongly disagree, disagree, no idea, agree, and strongly agree. To gain a better understanding of the results, the top 10 listening difficulties were collected through analyzing the descriptive statistics, namely, the mean scores.

Figure 1 demonstrates that the most common listening difficulties among EFL learners according to teachers are unclear sounds resulting from poor-quality CD player, unfamiliar vocabulary, loss of concentration due to the noises around, unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions, colloquial language (including slang and idioms), loss of the flow of speech when concentrating on single words, high rate of speech, distraction and tiredness when listening to a long text, unfamiliar topics, disappointment upon failure to arrive at a total comprehension, and lack of interest in the topic. We do not have the space to discuss all the difficulties, so we only discuss the first five problems.

The first problem, although a rather obvious one, has been disregarded in many studies, perhaps due to the fact that other aspects of listening comprehension such as process and input have been deemed to be more significant. It can be argued that if this problem is the teachers’ number one concern, then maybe making sure that listening materials are delivered via high-quality broadcasting equipment is of paramount importance. The second most common problem reported by teachers was learners’ difficulty to understand a listening text with too many unfamiliar words. Unfamiliar words can refer to both those words that learners have not acquired fully in written or oral forms and the ones that sound unfamiliar to learners in spoken speech. Although many learners can easily recognize the form and meaning of those so-called unfamiliar words in written form, they seem to be unable to recognize their spoken forms, which may in turn lead to a failure to grasp the meaning of the chunk they are hearing. These words could also easily cause learners to lose the flow of speech.

The third and the fourth difficulties were learners’ difficulty to concentrate with noises around and poor acoustic conditions of the classroom, which would interfere with students’ comprehension of a listening text. Just as it was the case with poor quality of the equipment, the circumstantial conditions in which the listening text is delivered have not received due attention. However, the mean score of these problems may suggest that there are still a good number of teachers who hear complaints regarding the conditions in which learners are supposed to listen to the text, and because

| Table 10. The Relationship Between Teachers’ Experience and the Reported Listening Difficulties. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Years of experience | N | M | SD | SE | Lower bound | Upper bound | Minimum | Maximum |
|---------------------|---|---|----|----|--------------|--------------|---------|---------|
| 1–4                 | 71| 1.31| 21.99| 2.61| 125.89       | 136.30       | 55.00   | 163.00  |
| 5–9                 | 76| 1.36| 17.33| 1.98| 132.93       | 140.85       | 65.00   | 171.00  |
| 10–14               | 32| 1.36| 15.31| 2.70| 131.10       | 142.14       | 101.00  | 181.00  |
| 15–20               | 19| 1.40| 15.63| 3.58| 132.78       | 147.85       | 119.00  | 171.00  |
| 20+                 | 10| 1.34| 24.72| 7.81| 116.41       | 151.78       | 87.00   | 171.00  |
| Total               | 208| 1.35| 19.10| 1.32| 132.44       | 137.66       | 55.00   | 181.00  |

| Table 11. Test of Homogeneity of Variances. |
|-------------------------------------------|
| Levene statistic | df1 | df2 | Significance |
|-----------------|-----|-----|---------------|
| 1.31            | 4   | 204 | .26           |

| Table 12. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects as the ANOVA Result. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sum of squares | df | M square | F | Sig. |
|----------------|----|----------|---|------|
| Between groups  | 1,982.44 | 4 | 495.61 | 1.36 | .24 |
| Within groups   | 73,557.97 | 204 | 362.35 |     |     |
| Total           | 75,540.41 | 208 |     |     |     |

Note. ANOVA = analysis of variance.
learners are not yet proficient listeners, they may not be able to pick up the clues and use the top-down strategies to compensate for the missed parts just as a native speaker would do and, therefore, they can easily lose their concentration. The fifth problem was the difficulty to understand a listening text that contains colloquial language, slang, and idioms. However hard it is for learners to deal with unfamiliar words, it might be twice as hard to figure out the meaning of colloquial idioms because the meaning of a considerable number of idioms cannot be constructed from the constituents. It could be predicted that EFL learners would encounter difficulty comprehending colloquial language and slang because they are more often than not exposed to formal language.

The Interview Analysis

Thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the data collected through the interviews. The analysis began by familiarizing with the data, transcribing each interview, and recording all the details. Then, the data were carefully examined again to come up with the initial codes. The process involved searching for the key words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that could provide a better overview of the participants’ general views about the difficulties their learners faced when engaged in listening tasks.

The Most Significant Listening Difficulties

To identify the most significant listening difficulties among learners, the researchers classified the difficulties that the interviewees mentioned into three main groups. The first group contains pronunciation-based difficulties such as “native accent,” “native rate of speech,” “distinguishing between word boundaries,” “connected speech,” their (the learners’) own mispronunciation, not being familiar with phonological processes such as assimilation, deletion or addition of sounds, not understanding the sounds in combination. As an example, one of the interviewees said, “The most significant listening difficulty is the pronunciation because the students mispronounce the words and they are not familiar with the phonological processes of pronunciation such as flapping of sounds, assimilations, deletion or addition of sounds, liaison, etc.” The second group includes content-based difficulties such as getting the gist when the listening text is lengthy or complex, “undecipherability,” and the density of information in a short amount of time, new/difficult/unknown words. One of the interviewees stated that “Sometimes, they remember the words but they cannot guess the meanings.” The third group relates to students’ individual characteristics–based difficulties such as skills, practice, and experience; teachers believed that the learners’ individual characteristics such as “not being studious,” lack of practice, and “inefficiency of momentary listening comprehension,” among other things, would lead to poor performance on listening tasks. Figure 2 shows that the teachers saw many of the listening problems being pronunciation based, then individual characteristics based and content, respectively.

The Relationship Between Language Proficiency and Listening Strategies Use

As for the relationship between language proficiency and listening strategies, all the interviewees agreed that there is a significant link between listening difficulties and students’ language proficiency; for instance, one of the interviewees said “Language proficiency plays a major role and makes a noticeable difference because as far as their realm of knowledge is concerned they build up enough confidence to have a good command in listening skill.” Three teachers, however, stated that they experienced cases with low language
proficiency learners who exhibited high-quality performance on listening tasks, probably because of the appropriate use of listening strategies.

**Listening Comprehension and Listening Strategies**

The majority (12) of the interviewees agreed that knowing listening strategies is necessary for a successful listening comprehension. For instance, one of the teachers said “I think listening is a skill which needs to be learned and practiced. Students do need to learn some techniques and strategies to improve their listening skill.” Some teachers stated, however, that although knowing the strategies can improve students’ speed and make the task easier for them, they (the learners) can achieve a high listening comprehension merely by being exposed to a lot of listening materials. For example, one of the teachers said,

I believe that applying strategies help students improve their listening skill; however, I doubt that strategies are everything. After all, we all learned our first language without anybody teaching us these strategies. I believe listening is an innate capability that sooner or later would flourish. Actually, there is another factor which plays almost the same important role and that is the amount of encounter that the student has.

**Good Listener? Weak Listener?**

There was unanimous agreement among the teachers on the following features for a good listener: is aware of the listening strategies and uses them, knows which parts of a listening text to pay attention to and which parts to skip, gets the big picture instead of all the details, tries to guess the meaning of new words, has good knowledge of English, listens attentively and carefully, does not get anxious and afraid, and takes notes. One of the teachers said,

I think a good listener knows what to pay attention to during the listening activity. I mean, he or she has learned some techniques for having a better comprehension. Good listeners know they don’t have to get the meaning of every single word in the extract. They pay attention to the key words and the general message.

Regarding the characteristics of a weak listener, the teachers were in almost total agreement that the weak listeners do not know the strategies or cannot apply them, get frustrated or lose confidence facing new words, lose focus upon hearing something difficult, try to understand everything, are in a hurry, and are not able to answer the questions. To give an example, one of the interviewees said, “A bad listener tries to understand all the details of the listening, and normally gets frustrated when she or he doesn’t. A bad listener also cannot explain about the listening when it’s finished.” Nonetheless, there was one interviewee who refused to see things in black and white, believing that it is the teachers’ instructional techniques that would determine whether learners succeed or fail at a listening task. There was also another interviewee who made a distinction between a weak and a *bad* listener. This teacher maintained that

[a] “bad” listener does the opposite [of what a good one does]. S/he is always in a hurry to get to the point, and finish the task. S/he doesn’t pay attention to the tone of the speaker, the emotions and flow of their speech. S/he tends to lose confidence whenever s/he misses some parts or doesn’t understand the meaning of a few words. Based on this definition, I think a “weak” listener can be placed in some shady border between the two. They apply some strategies and miss some others.

This was an accurate description indicating a built-in flaw in the question that regarded bad and weak as equal.

**Input and the Process of Listening**

Except for three interviewees who believed listening is a skill and has to be learnt and is related to the students’ characteristics and level of proficiency, the other teachers agreed that being able to understand, decode, and analyze the input including new vocabulary, complex structure, connected speech, and intonation are important for listening comprehension. For example, one of the teachers of the first group said that she has “some students who are not so successful in making sentences but they are very good in listening. It depends on their abilities and characteristics.” Or, another teacher from the same group said that he thinks “listening is a skill which needs to be learned and practiced. Students do need to learn some techniques and strategies to improve their listening skill.” For these teachers, the nature of input does not necessarily affect students’ listening comprehension; what really matters is the individual listening skills that the students build up. But the teachers of the other group
disagreed, one of them said, “Certainly yes, for example, when learners don’t know the meaning of some words or they don’t know some structure in the TL [target language] they cannot understand the listening text as well.” And another said,

Input comes in two channels (reading and listening), so they correlate. Take a matching task, for instance, in a reading format. The students who are weak at finding the keywords in order to complete the task fail, yet the more professional ones do it greatly. This is generalized to listening as well, because they hardly ever can follow the listening rather than finding the answer as they are distracted by so many misconceptions caused by input misapprehensions.

Contextual Factors and Their Effect on Listening Comprehension Process

The interviewees unanimously mentioned that they consider contextual factors such as the acoustic quality of the room, background noises, the quality of the audio because they affect the comprehension process and students’ focus, as well as their level of stress and anxiety. Interestingly, two teachers, however, believed that the background noises are constructive, in the sense that, the students learn to use compensatory listening strategies to derive the audio input. One of them, for example, said,

If I find the learners are not so good at listening I try to reduce those noises; but if they are good at listening, the noise is a good opportunity for them to improve. Sometimes they feel relaxed when the room is not noisy, but it’s important to listen in a noisy place.

The teacher also stated that having to listening with the ambient noise is more “representative of the real world listening.”

Task Type and Listening Difficulties

All but one of the interviewees said that the students’ level of proficiency, amount of exposure and experience, and the difficulty of different types of tasks are correlated. To give an example, one of the teachers said, “I believe there is a direct relationship . . . , because it’s obvious that if they don’t understand the listening properly they won’t be able to accomplish these tasks.” She then went on to elaborate that if learners have a problem with a certain vocabulary item and if they do not get a word correctly, they will not be able to fill in the gap appropriately, or “if they don’t get the main idea how can we expect them to summarize it?” Only one interviewee believed that if the tasks are designed in a way that they resemble the real time, or “scientifically” as he put it, their difficulty would ultimately prove useful as they (the tasks) would familiarize the learners with real-life situations.

Affective Problems on Listening

Anxiety, stress, loss or lack of confidence were at the top of almost all the interviewees’ list of affective factors that interfered with the listening comprehension process. The teachers claimed that such affective filters would lead to listening problems as they (i.e., the affective barriers) would not allow learners to stay focused and manage time and thus they get hopeless and unable to hear or comprehend the oral text. The anxiety experienced by learners while listening “often leads to lack of self-confidence which . . . impacts [the learners’] listening comprehension; They don’t believe in themselves to successfully accomplish a task,” a female teacher explained.

Conclusion

Vandergrift (1999) asserts that four types of advantages can be achieved by giving prominence to listening comprehension. First is the cognitive advantage, which is related to the fact that by exposing learners to abundant input before encouraging them to produce output, we can provide them with a reliable fundament for speaking. Efficiency is the second advantage, which refers to the positive effects of providing learners with error-free sources of input such as native models rather than exposing them to the so-called faulty speech of their classmates. The third advantage, utility, as the name suggests, refers to the usefulness of this skill. Research findings suggest that learners get engaged in listening around twice as much as they speak, 4 times as much as they read, and 5 times as much as they write (Rivers, as cited in Baleghizadeh, 2016). Last but not least, the affective advantage deals with those embarrassing early moments in learning process when the learners are not yet ready to produce the language. The underlying assumption here is to foster confidence in learners by emphasizing the receptive skill of listening instead of forcing them to produce output. Those reasons justify why listening comprehension has attracted much attention in recent years. Researchers have come to believe that this skill assumes an important role in learners’ educational life, and any obstacles that impede learners’ comprehension of the input should be investigated and tackled strategically. The large number of studies conducted on listening difficulties over the last couple of decades supports this claim (e.g., Anderson, 1995; Goh, 2000; Vandergrift, 2011).

In the interviews, the participants were encouraged to enumerate the listening difficulties that the students seem to deal with while listening to aural input. Many factors were identified by teachers; those factors were then classified by the researcher into three categories of pronunciation-based difficulties, content-based difficulties, and individual characteristics-based difficulties. The difficulties pinpointed by the teachers related to pronunciation-based difficulties, then individual characteristics-based difficulties, and
content-based difficulties, respectively. This is, however, not in line with the results of the questionnaire of this study because most of the difficulties in the top 10 list seem to relate to individual characteristics–based and content-based categories.

Fifteen of the teachers interviewed agreed that there is a significant relationship between level of proficiency and listening strategy use, although three less experienced ones (with less than 5 years of teaching experience) believed that there are still students who demonstrate good listening skills even at low proficiency levels due to individual characteristics. All but one of the teachers believed that a good listener is capable of employing listening strategies as opposed to a weak listener. The one teacher (holding a doctoral degree in TEFL) who objected to this classification proposed that it is the teacher’s responsibility to guide the students into what to look for in a listening text. Whereas more than half of the teachers affirmed the role of listening strategies in achieving better listening comprehension, two teachers with an MA degree and three with a BA degree confined the role of listening strategies to a catalyst without which reaching good listening skills would still be possible.

The results from the questionnaire also showed that there is a high positive correlation between input and the process of listening. In other words, listeners who have difficulty understanding the input tend to have difficulty in the process of listening as well. This finding was corroborated by the interviews because many teachers seemed to believe that new terminology and complex structure in the input complicate the process of listening for learners. Most of the teachers also stated that contextual factors affect learners’ comprehension negatively. This is again in line with the moderate correlation previously achieved between contextual factors and listening process in the questionnaire. However, two interviewees proclaimed contextual factors constructive because they prepare learners for authentic listening situations. All but two interviewees believed that specific task types can be a source of listening difficulty and tasks should be selected according to learners’ level of proficiency and experience. One of the teachers who had a different view (a PhD holder with more than 8 years of teaching experience) stated that listening is a receptive skill and learners are often better in their listening ability than “what might appear on the surface”; so there is no need to establish a one-to-one match between the listening tasks and learners’ language proficiency level or experience, if indeed that is possible at all in a multilevel classroom. This was also among the findings of the questionnaire. The second teacher believed that it is beneficial for learners to get familiarized with different task types because they can resemble real-life situations. This may suggest that teachers should pay attention to learners’ level of proficiency when choosing a task; however, they can occasionally vary the task type to get learners acquainted with what they should expect in real-life situations.

All the interviewees also cited anxiety, stress, and lack of confidence as affective filters that could hinder comprehension and consequently create listening difficulties. They believed that these barriers directly affect the process of listening comprehension because learners who are under the influence of these factors tend to lose concentration and fail to budget the time, which then result in unsatisfactory comprehension of the text. This finding might highlight the role of a teacher as a counselor who should guide the learners through the garden path.

The findings of this study have clear implications for teachers. All the teachers in this study stated, either explicitly or implicitly, the important role of listening strategies in improving learners’ listening skills. Although a few believed that achieving good listening skills could not be impossible without learning appropriate listening strategies, the majority of the interviewees believed that employing listening strategies will most definitely accelerate the process. In other words, learners should not be considered as autonomous listeners who are responsible for their own progress. Although providing learners with extensive listening practice is obviously beneficial (Metruk, 2018; Renandya & Jacobs, 2016), by expecting learners to improve their listening skills all on their own, we risk neglecting the significant role of teachers in scaffolding learners to achieve much more than they can achieve on their own. Therefore, dedicating some of the class time to inform learners about these strategies and guiding them on how to listen to a text has to be advantageous. The findings also help novice EFL teachers get familiar with the viewpoints of more experienced EFL teachers on the listening difficulties that EFL learners encounter.

Because speaker characteristics was one of the sources of listening difficulties identified in this study, presenting materials with a variety of native and nonnative accents from time to time can prepare learners to face real-life situations. According to the findings, lack of phonological knowledge such as assimilation, elision, and so forth, seems to be one of the reasons that learners face difficulty. Therefore, it seems essential that teachers get learners acquainted with the principles of continuous speech. That is also the case with the prosody of language, namely, pitch, intonation, rhythm, and stress. The findings also suggest that it is very critical that curriculum designers take into consideration listening skills while setting the educational objectives of the English curriculum by including various listening exercises.

Almost every type of research suffers a number of shortcomings, and this study is no exception. All the participants were Iranian teachers because the researchers did not have access to teachers from other nationalities. Moreover, the teachers who contributed to this study were nonnative EFL teachers and the researchers did not have the opportunity to explore native EFL teachers’ viewpoints on listening difficulties. Furthermore, the learners’ level of proficiency was a factor that could not be controlled because the teachers were teaching learners with a variety of levels at the time of the
study and, therefore, listening difficulties exclusive to each level could not be investigated separately.

**Appendix A**

*The Listening Difficulty Questionnaire*

Exploring Iranian EFL learners’ listening difficulties from the viewpoint of teachers

Dear Respondent,

We truly appreciate your taking the time to evaluate this questionnaire designed to investigate teachers’ views on listening difficulties of Iranian EFL learners. The information you share here is intended for research purposes only and will not be disclosed to any third parties. In the first section of the questionnaire, you are required to provide us with information about your educational and teaching background; the second section (comprised of 38 items) will ask your opinion as a teacher about listening difficulties related to process, input, listener, task, affect, and context that students deal with during listening.

**Section A: Demographic information**

1. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female

2. How many years have you been teaching English?
   - 1–4
   - 5–9
   - 10–14
   - 15–20
   - 20+

3. How do you describe the level of proficiency of your current students?
   - Beginner
   - Preintermediate
   - Intermediate
   - Upper intermediate
   - Advanced

4. What is the level of your education?
   - Bachelor’s degree
   - Master’s degree
   - Doctorate degree

**Section B: Please indicate your (dis)agreement by checking the appropriate box**

| Process                                                                 | Strongly disagree | Disagree | No idea | Agree | Strongly agree |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| 1. It is difficult for learners to relate what they hear with earlier parts of the listening text. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 2. Learners have difficulty making meaningful personal association with the new information in a listening text. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 3. Learners have difficulty deciding whether they have correctly understood the meaning of the whole chunks of a listening text. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 4. Students have difficulty finding out the details that support the main idea of a listening text. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 5. Learners find it difficult to stay focused on a listening text when they have problems understanding it. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 6. Learners find it difficult to understand a listening text when the topic is unfamiliar. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 7. Learners find it difficult to identify word boundaries in a listening text. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 8. Learners find it difficult to recognize the signals that indicate that the speaker is moving from one point to another. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 9. Learners find it difficult to guess the meaning of unknown words by linking them to known words. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 10. Learners find it difficult to make a mental summary of information drawn from the listening text. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 11. Learners find it difficult to use the context to guess those parts of the listening text they cannot hear clearly. |                   |          |         |       |                |
| 12. Learners find it difficult to evaluate the overall accuracy of their comprehension of a listening text. |                   |          |         |       |                |

(continued)
| Input | Strongly disagree | Disagree | No idea | Agree | Strongly agree |
|-------|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| 13    | Learners find it difficult to understand a listening text with too many unfamiliar words. |
| 14    | Learners find it difficult to understand the meaning of words that are not enunciated properly. |
| 15    | Learners find it difficult to understand a listening text with complex grammatical structures. |
| 16    | Learners find it difficult to comprehend a listening text with high rate of speech. |
| 17    | Learners' unfamiliarity with stress and intonation patterns of English interfere with their comprehension of a listening text. |
| 18    | Learners' unfamiliarity with different accents interfere with their comprehension of a listening text. |
| 19    | Learners find it difficult to understand a listening text that contains colloquial language, slang, and idioms. |

| Listener | Strongly disagree | Disagree | No idea | Agree | Strongly agree |
|----------|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| 20       | When focusing on the meaning of unfamiliar word, learners neglect the next part of a listening text. |
| 21       | Learners forget the content of the previous parts upon hearing new words. |
| 22       | Learners lose the flow of speech when they concentrate very hard on understanding every single word or phrase they hear. |
| 23       | It is difficult for learners to remember the meaning of a long listening text. |
| 24       | Learners have difficulty comprehending a listening text because they fail to use the appropriate strategy. |

| Task | Strongly disagree | Disagree | No idea | Agree | Strongly agree |
|------|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| 25   | Learners find it difficult to do listening tasks that require them to combine information to make generalization while listening to the text. |
| 26   | Learners find it difficult to concentrate when they have to listen to the text and look for answers at the same time. |
| 27   | Learners find answering multiple questions difficult. |
| 28   | Learners find answering short answer questions difficult. |
| 29   | Learners find answering sentence completion questions difficult. |
| 30   | Learners find answering Wh-questions difficult. |
| 31   | Learners find notes/tables/forms/summaries/charts/diagram completion questions difficult. |
| 32   | Learners find classification questions (i.e., matching some statements with a list of options) difficult. |

| Affect | Strongly disagree | Disagree | No idea | Agree | Strongly agree |
|--------|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| 33     | Learners feel disappointed when they cannot arrive at a total comprehension of a listening text. |
| 34     | Learners find it difficult to understand a listening text that is not in their interest area. |
| 35     | Learners find listening to a long listening text tiring and distracting. |

| Context | Strongly disagree | Disagree | No idea | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---------|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| 36      | Unclear sounds resulting from a poor-quality CD player interfere with learners' comprehension of a listening text. |
| 37      | Unclear sounds resulting from poor acoustic conditions of the classroom interfere with students' comprehension of a listening text. |
| 38      | Learners find it difficult to concentrate with noises around. |
Appendix B

The Interview Questions

1. How many years have you been teaching English?
2. Which levels do you teach?
3. What is the most significant listening difficulty your students face? Do you think listening difficulties vary based on students’ language proficiency?
4. How do you define a good listener? A bad/weak one? Talk about their characteristics.
5. Do you believe that learners can succeed in the process of listening without knowing how to listen? In other words, without knowing the listening strategies? Can you explain with an example?
6. Do you believe that learners who have difficulty in handling the input (new vocabulary, complex structure, connected speech, intonation) will face difficulty in the process of listening as well? Can you give example? Can you elaborate on a specific case?
7. Do you take contextual factors (such as the acoustic quality of the room) into account when administering a listening task? How do you think these factors affect listening comprehension process? Do you think those factors create affective barriers?
8. How do you see the relationship between tasks (e.g., short answer, multiple questions, filling the blanks, and writing summary) and students’ listening difficulties? Can you give an example?
9. More on the affective side of listening, what affective problems (if any) do you see in your students when you give them a listening task? How you alleviate those problems. Please give examples if you have any.

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