Difficulties of Non-English Study Program Students in Carrying Out the Institutional TOEFL Test

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Abstract. *This study aims to provide an analysis of TOEFL results and examine the challenges faced by non-English study program students when tackling TOEFL exam questions. The study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, with a sample size of 30 students selected through purposive sampling from a larger population of 100 students. Data collection involved the administration of TOEFL tests and conducting interviews. The findings indicate that among the different sections of the TOEFL, Listening Comprehension posed the greatest difficulty for the participants, followed by Reading Comprehension and Structure and Written Expression. Based on the conclusions drawn from the data and explanations, it can be inferred that participants encountered the most challenges in the Listening Comprehension section of the TOEFL exam. Specifically, they struggled with long conversations, spoken passages, and short conversations in sequential order. The second most challenging section for students was Structure and Written Expression. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that within the three TOEFL sections, Structure was perceived as more difficult than Written Expression. In contrast, Reading Comprehension appeared to be the easiest section. The findings suggest that identifying difficult words presented the most significant challenge in Reading Comprehension, while identifying topics, explanatory sentences, and references were considered relatively easier. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the specific difficulties faced by non-English study program students when attempting TOEFL exam questions, highlighting the areas that require further attention and support in their language learning journey.*

Keywords: *analysis; difficulty; toefl*

A. INTRODUCTION

English proficiency test (TOEFL) in countries where English as a foreign language is required as a validity test to measure a person's English proficiency. The English proficiency test is taken not only in an effort to pursue studies abroad but also as a requirement for completing studies at a university or other institution. Based on Setiawan (2013) states that TOEFL is used as a criterion to enter a university or to get a scholarship. Several universities in Indonesia require the TOEFL exam as part of their graduation criteria. TOEFL is also one of the standard requirements for entering higher education in Indonesia.

At the University of Semarang (USM), the TOEFL exam is a requirement for graduation, as stated in the Rector's Decree Number 264/SK/USM.H/I/2021, which governs the academic regulations for diploma three and undergraduate programs. The objective behind this requirement is to enhance students' English language proficiency, with the TOEFL serving as an indicator of their language mastery. According to documentation provided by the Bina Bahasa Jaya (BBJ) language training institute at the University of Semarang, many students face difficulties in answering TOEFL questions. The data reveals that out of 20 participants who took the TOEFL Prediction Test conducted by Bina Bahasa Jaya, only around 4 managed to achieve a score of 400 or above.

Ironically, students who took the preparation course also experienced the same thing, they failed to achieve the minimum score (400). Many of them do the TOEFL many times to get graduation. Based on the above problems, the authors are interested in investigating the difficulty factors faced by non-English study program students in answering TOEFL questions.

Building upon previous research, several studies have explored the challenges encountered by TOEFL participants. Mahmud (2014) identified key problems,

including a lack of basic skills, limited practice, low motivation, and individual differences such as age and social status. Halim (2008) highlighted bias in TOEFL questions, incorporating conversational implicatures, idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and devices that pose difficulties for participants. Kurniawati (2015) emphasized factors such as health conditions, difficulty in understanding materials, lack of support, and insufficient training in improving English listening skills as contributors to the challenges faced in the TOEFL listening section. These studies provide valuable insights into the obstacles encountered by TOEFL participants, serving as a foundation for understanding and addressing these difficulties.

In contrast to previous studies that examined the general challenges faced by TOEFL participants, this research focuses specifically on students enrolled in non-English study programs at the University of Semarang. The objective is to investigate the difficulties encountered by these students when answering institutional TOEFL test questions, which serve as a measure of their English proficiency. By identifying and understanding these challenges, the study aims to provide targeted solutions and develop TOEFL course materials that address the specific needs of Semarang University students, thereby facilitating their preparation for the TOEFL exam.

TOEFL definition

TOEFL, known as the Test of English as a Foreign Language, is a widely recognized examination that is widely used in numerous countries worldwide. As Clark (2014) highlights, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) reports that over 27 million individuals from 9,000 colleges, universities, and institutions across more than 130 countries have taken the TOEFL. However, it is important to note that Heni Kartikasari et al. (2014) argue that the TOEFL does not directly correlate with learning outcomes. Similarly, according to Brown's theory (2010), the TOEFL is primarily designed as a proficiency test and does not directly assess learning

outcomes. The examination evaluates English proficiency by assessing skills such as Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension. These skills are typically assessed in the Paper-Based TOEFL (PBT) format.

Listening Comprehension

Listening Comprehension is an integral skill assessed in the TOEFL, which involves participants actively listening to audio conversations. As described by Nadig (2015), Listening Comprehension is the cognitive process of comprehending and understanding spoken language. It encompasses the ability to perceive and interpret speech sounds, comprehend the meaning of individual words, and grasp sentence structures. Non-native English speakers participating in the TOEFL often encounter challenges in this skill, particularly due to the presence of native speakers in the audio recordings. Factors such as vocabulary richness, grammar proficiency, intonation, tone, and rhythm significantly impact participants' performance in this listening skill. This aligns with Hamouda's (2015) assertion that comprehending speech poses considerable difficulties for students, as they encounter various obstacles when listening to a foreign language.

Structure and Written Expression

Structure and Written Expression is the second skill tested on the TOEFL. This skill has two parts, namely Structure and Written Expression. Structure requires participants to master English grammar, where participants must complete 15 imperfect sentences, in other words participants must complete imperfect sentences with correct English grammar. To complete the sentence, the participant chooses one of the options provided. Furthermore, Written Expression requires participants to identify words or groups of words that are not correct. The number of questions in this section is 25 items in which the word or group of words has been underlined.

Generally the sentences used in this section relate to academic articles such as health, education, culture etc. Compound and complex sentences are often used with the aim of testing abilities in academic writing. This is in line with Bachman and Palmer's explanation (1996, 68-75) that students' language skills consist of two parts, namely language knowledge and competence/ metacognitive. That is, students need to know vocabulary, grammar, and be able to understand coherent sentences to achieve communicative goals.

Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension is the final skill assessed on the TOEFL, serving as the third component. This skill evaluates participants' ability to comprehend and extract meaning from written texts, followed by a series of related questions. The questions cover various aspects, including topics, supporting/explanatory sentences, references, and the identification of challenging vocabulary within the text. Proficiency in linguistics, psycholinguistics, social understanding, and pragmatics is essential for this skill. As articulated by Woolley (2016), Reading Comprehension entails a complex process involving linguistic, psycholinguistic, graphic, social, and pragmatic skills, all working together to derive meaning from written materials.

In addition to the aforementioned skills, vocabulary richness also plays a significant role in Reading Comprehension. This correlation has been investigated by Ibrahim et al. (2016) in their study titled "The Relationship between Vocabulary Size and Reading Comprehension of ESL Learners," revealing a noteworthy association between vocabulary size and reading comprehension.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method employed in this study is a mixed-method design, utilizing an embedded approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data. Both types of

data are analyzed, with priority given to quantitative data analysis. This approach is aligned with Creswell's explanation (2012: 544) regarding the collection and analysis of mixed-method data. The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling, with a sample size of 30 individuals selected from a total population of 100 students.

The study focuses on administering descriptive questionnaires (surveys) at the Bina Bahasa Jaya (BBJ) language training institute, Semarang University, as the primary research setting. To gather data, a web-based questionnaire tool, specifically the Google Document questionnaire, was utilized. The choice of the Google Document questionnaire was primarily based on its convenience for both respondents and researchers. Additionally, the Google Form facility within the questionnaire provided analysis in the form of bar graphs or pie charts, facilitating the interpretation of response patterns. The research participants targeted were students taking the TOEFL test at Bina Bahasa Jaya (BBJ) Semarang University.

Data collection involved the administration of the TOEFL test and interviews. The TOEFL test was conducted in a multiple-choice format, comprising three sections: Listening Comprehension (50 items), Structure and Written Expression (40 items), and Reading Comprehension (50 items). The total number of test items administered was 140. The results of the TOEFL test were analyzed to determine the most challenging skills faced by participants when answering TOEFL questions, considering skills with the lowest average scores as the most difficult. In addition, qualitative interviews were conducted to complement the quantitative data, enabling participants to verbally express the skills they found most challenging in completing the TOEFL.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The results of this study were taken from the results of the TOEFL test, and questionnaires and interviews with researchers with TOEFL participants in the period December 2022 to January 2023. Based on the results of the questionnaires and interviews, there were several main factors that caused participants to experience difficulties facing the TOEFL. These factors are related to the time in TOEFL preparation learning and the time in working on the TOEFL, the low ability of students in mastering vocabulary, the difficulty in grasping meaning, especially in listening questions because of differences in the pronunciation of words/phrases in Indonesian.

The skills that are the most difficult for students to complete the TOEFL will be explained in 3 sections which include Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension. The data collected by researchers used two kinds of data, namely quantitative data (diagnostic test) and qualitative data (interviews).

Table. 1 The average score of students' ability in the TOEFL

Skill	*Reading Comprehension*	*Structure and Written Expression*	*Reading Comprehension*
The average score	421	435	440

It can be explained that the average student ability in Listening Comprehension is 421 in the adequate user category. Furthermore, Structure and Written Expression has an average of 435 and Reading Comprehension has an average of 440 in the adequate user category. Based on the average, Listening Comprehension has the lowest score, followed by Structure and Written Expression and Reading Comprehension. Even though the average of the three sections is different, if they are categorized in table 2 above, the three sections have the same category, namely

the adequate user category, which means that language users are only able to communicate very basically, and even then with the help of the interlocutor.

Listening Comprehension

Based on the previous data, it can be seen that Listening Comprehension is the most difficult part because it has the lowest average compared to the other parts. Listening Comprehension consists of 3 skills namely short conversation, long conversation, and talking. Of these three skills, long conversation is the most difficult skill, followed by talking, and short conversation is considered the easiest. This can be seen from the average student answering questions, where short conversations have an average of 480, then talking has an average of 436, while long conversations have an average of 410. This data is not much different from the results of interviews, when the author asked, "Which skill did you find most difficult in the Listening Comprehension section?" Researchers got answers that 73.33% of students answered that long conversation was the most difficult skill in the Listening Comprehension section, 26.67% of students answered that talking was the most difficult skill in the Listening Comprehension section, and 0% of students answered that short conversation was the most difficult skill. For clarity, the data can be described in the following table:

Table. 2 Skill Ratio Table

No.	Skill	Average
1.	*Short Conversation*	480
2.	*Long Conversation*	410
3.	*Talking*	436

Table. 3 The percentage of student answers determines the most difficult skill in the Listening Comprehension section (interview results).

No.	*Skill*	The percentage of Students' Answer
1.	*Short Conversation*	0 %
2.	*Long Conversation*	26,67 %
3.	*Talking*	73,33 %

Based on the results of the TOEFL test and the questionnaires and interviews above, it can be concluded that the two instruments provide answers that are in line. The results of the interviews support the results of the TOEFL test, where talking is the most difficult skill for students to face in the Listening Comprehension section, followed by long conversations, and finally short conversations.

Structure and Written Expressions

The Structure and Written Expression section is the second part that is the most difficult for students to face when facing the TOEFL. Although quantitatively the value of Structure and Written Expression is not much different from Listening Comprehension. The Structure and Written Expression section consists of 2 skills, namely Structure and Written Expression.

From the results of the TOEFL test, data was obtained that Written Expression was more difficult than Structure because the average Written Expression was 453 and the average structure was 436. The results of the TOEFL test were also in line with the results of interviews where 50.5% of students answered that structure was more difficult than written expression, while the remaining 49.5% of students answered that written expression was more difficult than structure. For more details, the results of the two instruments can be seen in the following table.

Table. 4 Skill Ratio Table

No.	*Skill*	Average
1.	*Structure*	450
2.	*Written Expression*	430

Table. 5 The percentage of student answers determines the most difficult skill in the Structure and Written Expression section (results of questionnaires and interviews).

No.	*Skill*	Percentage of student answers
1.	*Structure*	51,5 %
2.	*Written Expression*	48,5 %

Based on the results of the TOEFL test, questionnaire and interview above, it can be concluded that the interview results support the results of the TOEFL test, where written expressions are more difficult than structures when completing the TOEFL.

Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension is the third part of the TOEFL, where this section consists of 4 skills including skills in identifying topics, explanatory sentences, identifying unfamiliar words, and references. This part is the easiest thing for students to feel when facing

TOEFL, this is illustrated by collecting data through diagnostic tests and interviews where this section gets the highest average of the other sections. For more details, see the following table:

Table 6. Skill Ration Table

No.	*Skill*	Average
1.	Identify the main idea	443
2.	Identify explanatory sentences	453
3.	Identify difficult words	415
4.	Reference	460

Table 7. Skill Ratio Table

No.	*Skill*	Average
1.	Identify the main idea	33
2.	Identify explanatory sentences	12
3.	Identify difficult words	56
4.	Reference	0

The results of the data from the TOEFL test and interviews and also questionnaires shows that there is no difference, where identifying difficult words is the most difficult skill. The TOEFL test results show that the average of this skill is 415 and this average is the lowest average when compared to other skills in the reading comprehension section. The TOEFL test results are supported by interview results where 56% of students said that identifying difficult words was the most difficult skill in the reading comprehension section.

Furthermore, identifying topics is the second most difficult skill felt by students in the Reading Comprehension section. This is illustrated by the results of the TOEFL test and interview results. From the results of the TOEFL test, the average showed

443 and from the interview results, 33% of students said that identifying topics is the most difficult skill.

In addition to the difficulties faced by students in working on the TOEFL test. Students also faced several difficulties and obstacles during the interview. The other factors faced by students include the following:

Time in TOEFL preparation learning

The first difficulty factor faced by students in solving TOEFL questions is the lack of students' ability to manage time. In other words, students cannot work on the questions optimally with the time allotted. Some of them complained that the time allotted was insufficient, besides that some of them also said that it took quite a long time for training and discussion of the TOEFL test questions before they took the test.

Very less practice on answering exercise

Lack of practice is the second cause why students experience difficulties in completing the TOEFL. About 30% of students expressed this during interviews and questionnaire analysis.

The low ability of students/participants in mastering vocabulary

Lack of vocabulary mastery is the third difficulty factor in dealing with the TOEFL, especially in the reading and listening sections. This has been investigated by several researchers, one of whom is David (2016) with the title "Investigating the Relationship between Vocabulary Knowledge and Academic Reading Performance". This study confirms the importance of the vocabulary / vocabulary factor in dealing with the TOEFL. Based on interviews and questionnaire analysis conducted, vocabulary / vocabulary in knowing the meaning of words is a factor of difficulty in solving TOEFL questions.

Difficulties in capturing meaning, especially in listening questions because of differences in the pronunciation of words/phrases in Indonesian

Pronunciation in English is indeed different from pronunciation in Indonesian so this becomes a particular difficulty for the test takers in answering the TOEFL questions, especially the listening comprehension part. This is illustrated by the answers of the participants who were interviewed.

Discussion

The results of the research above illustrate to us that the main difficulty factor for students majoring in non-English study programs at the same tertiary institution is the main time setting in which students cannot answer the questions optimally due to limited time in answering the questions. This finding is related to the results of research by Lubis, L.R (2019) which said that the lack of time in doing the TOEFL at IPTS (South Tapanuli Educational Institute) was the main difficulty factor.

Furthermore, the second finding is that lack of practice is the second difficulty factor faced by students. This is not different from the results of Halim's research (2014) which says that lack of practice is the second factor for students' difficulties in solving TOEFL questions. The next difficulty factor is the lack of mastery of vocabulary. Vocabulary mastery is absolutely necessary because vocabulary mastery makes a very significant contribution in solving TOEFL questions, especially in terms of reading. This is in line with the results of research by Akbarian and Alavi (2016) from Iran which said that a high level of vocabulary makes a major contribution to the success of answering TOEFL questions.

The next difficulty factor that students face in completing the TOEFL is the pronunciation that is different from Indonesian. This problem is found in the listening comprehension section only, not in the structure and writing expression and reading comprehension sections. To overcome all the difficulty factors above,

the authors suggest TOEFL participants to take a preparation course before taking the TOEFL test. Because the preparation course will train participants in managing time, increasing vocabulary, also train participants to find several strategies to avoid being strong deceivers in solving TOEFL questions. Furthermore, pronunciations that are not the same as Indonesian can be overcome by studying extra independently apart from attending existing training.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the data and explanations provided, it can be concluded that participants in the TOEFL test find Listening Comprehension to be the most challenging section. Within the Listening Comprehension section, the skills of understanding sequentially long conversations, conversations, and short conversations are particularly difficult for students. The second most challenging section for students is Structure and Written Expression. It is evident from the findings that Structure poses a greater difficulty compared to Written Expression. On the other hand, Reading Comprehension emerges as the easiest section among the three. The identification of difficult words is highlighted as the most challenging skill within Reading Comprehension, while identifying topics, explanatory sentences, and references are considered relatively easier.

Suggestions

Based on these findings, several suggestions can be made to help students improve their performance in the TOEFL test. Firstly, it is recommended to provide targeted practice and resources specifically addressing the skills required for Listening Comprehension, such as understanding various conversation types and dealing with longer conversations. Additionally, efforts should be made to enhance students' understanding and mastery of structural aspects of the English language in order to

better tackle the challenges in the Structure and Written Expression section. For Reading Comprehension, focus should be placed on developing strategies for identifying difficult words and improving overall reading comprehension skills. These suggestions can guide the development of effective TOEFL preparation materials and instructional approaches that address the specific difficulties faced by students.

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