



EFL Students' Problems and Strategies in TOEFL Test

Sri Widyarti Ali

Universitas Negeri Gorontalo

widyartiali@ung.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the students' problems and strategies in TOEFL test. The research participants are English Department students who have finished taking the TOEFL test. This research was conducted using qualitative methods, by collecting the data through interviews. The results of this study revealed that in the listening section, participants had difficulty comprehending the words spoken orally by the speakers due to a lack of vocabulary mastery and their inability to comprehend the speakers' pronunciation. They applied several strategies to deal with this listening test, such as attempting to remain focused on listening and capturing as much detailed information as possible during the conversations. The participants also encountered difficulties in the structure and written expression section due to a lack of English grammar mastery, which caused them to answer questions incorrectly, particularly on questions about tenses, parallelism, sentence structure, and word classes. Their general strategy was to practice answering questions on the structure and written expression before taking the actual test. Recognizing the forms and characteristics of TOEFL questions was essential to minimize errors and save time. Meanwhile, in the reading test section, the participants' biggest issue was a lack of vocabulary mastery, which caused them to struggle to comprehend the passages. Thus, their strategy involved employing skimming and scanning techniques while attempting to grasp the text's main idea in order to comprehend the text's content as a whole.

Keywords: TOEFL, Difficulties, Problems, Strategies.

1. Introduction

The Test of English as a Foreign Language, or TOEFL, is a test that has been extensively utilized to measure the English language proficiency of English non-native speakers. Today, people use it for a variety of benefits and purposes, including applying for jobs, studying abroad, and receiving scholarships. This standardized test is even used as part of the graduation requirements at the majority of domestic universities. Since it was established as a requirement for academic demands, TOEFL has become one of the most essential requirements for university students. Universities impose this requirement because they believe TOEFL is able to evaluate students' ability and skills to comprehend academic English. If students can effectively accomplish academic tasks, they will also be able to function successfully in the real world where English is used (Aliponga, 2013). For that reason, being well-prepared in facing the TOEFL becomes one of a university student's obligations, because it will enable them to get high scores as the standard set by each department at the university, and also to fulfill the requirements for the theses examination or graduation.

For students in the English department of Gorontalo state university, the rule that requires a TOEFL certificate as a graduation requirement has been set by the department since the early 2000s. Initially, the standard score required by the department was 450, and now the standard score that must be achieved by the students has been increased to a

minimum of 500. The type of TOEFL test required to be undertaken is a TOEFL prediction, which is a paper-based test that consists of listening, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension sections. Regarding this, in facing the TOEFL test, students are not only required to have good English skills related to the three skills tested in the TOEFL, but they also have to prepare themselves with the knowledge of strategies that can be implemented when taking the TOEFL test. Knowing the strategy for answering questions in the TOEFL can make it easier for students to answer each question, as well as to manage time during the test.

However, in fact, there is a big discrepancy between expectations and reality. The pre-observation revealed that many students of the English department fail to fulfill the standardized score ruled by the department. They generally said that some of the problems that they face are the lack of English language skills, as well as the inadequate knowledge of strategies for managing time during the test. Therefore, conducting research that aims to investigate students' problems and strategies in taking the TOEFL test is considered important as a solution to identify the common problems in TOEFL, and to provide solutions for lecturers to improve the quality of learning in English subjects.

Some previous studies regarding the difficulties and strategies of students in the TOEFL test have been conducted by researchers from various universities. Most of those studies prove that taking the TOEFL test is not easy for EFL students, especially for the students in Indonesia who study English only as a foreign language. The result of study entitled "EFL learners' difficulties in the structure and written expression section of TOEFL test in an Indonesian University" that was conducted by Akmal, et.al (2020) indicated that students encountered difficulties in the structure and written expression section of TOEFL. They got problems mostly when dealing with determiners, conjunctions, adjective clauses, apposition phrases, and reduced clauses in the structure section. Meanwhile, adverb connectors, subject-verb agreement, the clause of concession, relative clause, and quantifier are the difficulties they encountered in the written expression section of the test. Meanwhile, the findings also revealed several factors identified as the reasons behind those difficulties, namely lack of practice, grammar incompetence, vocabulary shortage, time management, and low self-confidence.

Besides, the research on TOEFL has also been previously conducted by Antoni (2014) with the title "Analysis On 6th Semester Students Toefl Experience at English Department of Teachers Training and Education Faculty of Sand Pengaraian University". The Findings of his study have shown that most of the students do not have good preparation for completing the TOEFL. It is proven by the evidence that most of the students complete their TOEFL test without having a good strategy and good English skills. In the listening section, the problem faced is that they get difficulties understanding the spoken language because the speaker speaks too fast and the conversations are too difficult to be understood. In the structure and written expression section, the students get difficulties determining the subject and the verb of sentences because of limited knowledge of the strategies and could not differentiate which words function as a subject or a verb of a sentence. While in the reading section, the students get difficulties understanding the meaning of written English text. It happened because they have limited vocabulary and some phrases. Moreover, the time available for the section is limited for them. From the written test, students have difficulties to start writing an essay and hard to develop the topic of the essay. The reason is given because of block-minded and unfamiliar topics. Thus, the students spend a longer time to think what to write and how to. Because of that, they could not write a complete essay. Finally, the effects of the problems on the TOEFL test are that

students always give incorrect answers and they cannot produce a good essay in the written section.

Based on the previous explanations regarding the problems in the TOEFL test faced by English Department students of Gorontalo State University, as well as the results of previous studies, it is deemed necessary to conduct research that examines the problems faced by the English Department students in taking the TOEFL test. In addition, it is also important to investigate the strategies that the students implemented when they faced difficulties in the TOEFL test. The result of this study is expected to provide information and references for students and lecturers regarding the common difficulties in the TOEFL test, as well as the strategies for dealing with those problems. In addition, the results of this research can also be a guide for lecturers to make syllabi for skills subjects. A syllabus that is made based on the learning needs of students will certainly improve the quality of learning outcomes, especially in the skills subjects.

In light of the aforementioned explanations, this study seeks to address the following research questions: 1) What problems do students have when taking the TOEFL, particularly when answering the listening test, structure and written expression test, and reading comprehension test? and 2) What strategies do they employ when encountering the problems?

2. Method

This is a qualitative study that focuses on the investigation of students' problems and strategies in the TOEFL test. This study qualitatively described the phenomenon of the problems encountered by students in the TOEFL test, as well as their strategies for overcoming those problems. This research was located at English Department of Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, and the participants were the English Departments students. The final-year students who were in the process of completing their studies were selected to participate in this research. They have taken the TOEFL test one to nine times, with the most recent TOEFL score ranging from 500 to 637. They were chosen as participants with the expectation that they would be capable of providing as many TOEFL problems and solutions as feasible, considering that they had recently taken the test and had experience taking it several times.

The data were collected by interviewing the participants. The interview questions probed the students' problems and strategies in dealing with the Toefl test, such as what problems they encountered in answering questions in the listening section, Structure and Written Expression section, and reading Comprehension section, as well as the strategies they employed to overcome the problems. The interview was recorded and then transformed into written form to make it easy to observe and find the data of the research.

The data, which were collected, were then analyzed to find the research results. When the data had been collected, then they were analyzed through some steps. The first was identifying and classifying the result of the interview. It aimed to identify the student's problems and strategies in TOEFL test. The next step was analyzing and interpreting the data. The students' answers in the interview sections were then analyzed to get information on their problems dealing with the TOEFL test, as well as the strategies that they implemented when facing the problems.

3. Results

In facing the TOEFL test, students may experience various obstacles and problems. The problems can be external, such as unsupportive environmental factors, or internal, such

as students' lack of English language skills. This research has revealed various problems and strategies of students in facing the TOEFL test which includes listening tests, structure and written expression tests, and reading tests. Through interviews, 16 students as research participants conveyed the problems they encountered in answering the questions in the TOEFL test, as well as revealing the strategies they used in overcoming those problems. The participants have TOEFL scores ranging from 500 to 637 and have taken the test one to nine times. The following is a description of the interview's findings.

3.1. Findings

3.1.1. Students' Problems in Answering Listening Test

Most of the participants revealed that the biggest difficulty they experienced in the listening test was related to the pronunciation of the speakers who spoke too fast. Because of this, they often have difficulty understanding what the speaker is saying, especially in section 3 or in long conversations. One participant even answered that the most difficult obstacle was understanding the pronunciation of the male speaker. According to him, compared to female speakers, male speakers have a pronunciation that is more difficult to catch and understand.

The following is an excerpt from a participant's answer in the interview:

"In long conversations, I find it quite difficult to comprehend the pronunciation of the speakers, particularly the male speakers. Perhaps it is because I am not accustomed to listening to spoken English that my weakness is in listening."

Furthermore, some participants responded that the obstacles they faced in the listening test were the words that were not familiar to them, so they had difficulty understanding the information or conversations conveyed by the speakers. Some of the topics in the listening test were difficult for them to understand, which made it difficult for them to focus on listening.

The following answer from one participant reveals this:

"I admit that I still have a limited vocabulary, thus one of the difficulties I had during the listening test was a large number of unfamiliar words. I also had difficulty understanding issues when I was listening."

In addition, two participants answered that one of the biggest obstacles in the TOEFL test was the sounds that came from outside the room. This makes them distracted and not focus on the listening test. The remaining participants stated that the difficulties they encountered during the listening test were related to answering the tricky questions. As a result, they frequently become stuck and incorrectly guess the answer. Finally, they expressed dissatisfaction with the scant time allotted to complete the test.

Here are the responses from the participants:

"When I try to concentrate on listening, my ears are frequently startled by noises from outside the exam room, which distracts my concentration. This disturbs me a lot during the listening test."

"In listening, we are often faced with tricky questions. I frequently give incorrect responses to such questions."

3.1.2. Students' Strategies in Answering Listening Test

In responding to questions about strategies for answering the listening test, participants gave various answers. Most of them gave relatively the same answer, namely to be successful in listening, the test takers must focus and ignore any outside distractions. Some participants suggested that in order to concentrate, the test takers could close their eyes while listening, and listen carefully to each conversation in the test. Others suggest that in short conversations, the test takers should focus on the second speaker, while in

long conversations, they should grab as much detailed information as possible in the conversations. This will really help the test taker in getting the right answers. They also added, that in answering questions, it is better to choose the possible answer that corresponds to the situation of the conversation.

Here are the answers from the participants:

"As I said, one of the big obstacles for me in the listening section is distractions such as noises from outside the exam room, so in the next TOEFL test I took, I tried as much as possible to ignore internal and external disturbances by staying focused on listening. When our concentration is dispersed, then we will definitely find it difficult to catch the main idea of the listening test"

"When trying to concentrate on listening, I close my eyes and listen carefully to each conversation in the test"

"Another strategy that I apply is to focus on the second speaker when facing a test in the form of short conversations. While in long conversations, I try to grab as much detailed information as possible in the conversations".

The rest of the participants answered that the strategy they applied in answering the listening test was to be familiar with the types of questions in the listening test, and to focus more on keywords and conversation main ideas. In addition, they revealed that it is important for the test takers to understand idioms in English, understand the expressions in the conversation, find the implied information in the conversation, and understand well the meaning and content of the conversation before answering the questions.

The answers from the following participants reveal this:

"One strategy that really helped me in listening was to be familiar with the types of questions in the listening test. That means, before taking the test, I first studied the types of instructions and questions in listening, so that when facing the test, I don't spend too much time understanding instructions. Another strategy is while listening, stay focused on keywords and main ideas in conversations."

"Some important materials that test takers must explore are idioms, implied information in conversations, and understand well the meaning and the content of the conversations"

When the interview questions delved deeper into the participants' responses to the strategies they used in answering questions in the form of idioms, they gave a variety of answers. First, participants suggested to test takers prepare themselves by studying idioms and their meanings before taking the test. If there are idioms whose meaning is unknown at the time of the test, they suggest to the test takers to understand the overall context of the conversation or the information conveyed by the speaker, and then match the meaning of the idiom with that context. In addition, another participant added that before matching idioms with context, test takers could try to translate the idiom meaning literally first, then match its meaning with the context of the conversation/information being listened to. Finally, participants suggested choosing the answer that made the most sense.

Here is one participant's answer:

"When I find an idiom that I don't know the meaning of, I try first to understand the content of the information conveyed by the speaker, and then match the idiom with the context of the information"

"If you are confused about which answer to choose, choose the one that makes the most sense to you"

The last question given to the participants was regarding the strategies they implemented in answering the unknown words, phrases and clauses. Most of the

participants answered that the first strategy that could be applied was to understand the context of the utterance or sentence by reading carefully and thoroughly the entire contents of the sentence. By reading and understanding the sentences before and after the unknown words, phrases, or clauses, it will be easier for the test takers to guess the answers to the questions. In addition, other participants suggested that this type of question can be answered by finding and understanding the main idea of sentences/utterances.

The following table summarizes the findings of interviews regarding students' problems and strategies on the listening test.

Table 1. Students' Problems and Strategies in Listening Test

The Problems in the Listening Test	The strategies implemented
Difficulty in understanding the speaker's pronunciation	Be familiar with listening test questions.
Lack of vocabulary mastery	Comprehend English idioms, the conversation's phrases, the inferred information, and the conversation's meaning and content.
Difficulty in answering the tricky questions	
Distracted listening due to a lack of concentration	Pick an answer that matches the conversation.
Insufficient time to complete the test	Focus on keywords and the conversation's main ideas
	In short conversations, focus on the second speaker; in long conversations, get as much detailed information as possible.
	Focus and ignore outside distractions.
	Practice time management

3.1.3. Students' Problems in Answering Structure and Written Expression Test

The next session of the interview collects information from participants regarding their problems in answering the questions in the structure and written expression section. In responding to this question, participants gave various answers. Some participants answered that due to lack of practice on the TOEFL test, they did not recognize the characteristics of the written and expression test, so they had difficulty answering the questions. They often forget the rules or structure of sentences or lack knowledge of grammar, coupled with limited time to do the test. Some aspects of structure and written expression that they think as the most difficult ones are tenses, parallelism, sentence structure, and word classes. Another participant answered that he often had difficulty

answering questions regarding incorrect forms of grammar so that in answering that question he only guessed which answer was the most appropriate using his instinct. In the end, the participants revealed that the difficulties they faced in dealing with the structure and written expression tests were due to a lack of practice and a lack of effort to study English grammar intensively and sustainably.

Here are some of the participants' answers:

"One of my biggest problems in the structure and written expression section is my lack of knowledge about English grammar. Even though I have finished enrolling English grammar subjects, during tests I still often forget the rules or sentence structure"

"For me, the most difficult things in this section are questions about tenses, parallelism, sentence structure, and word classes"

"I had difficulty answering questions regarding incorrect form of grammar, so that in answering that question I only guessed which answer was the most appropriate using my instinct. The very limited time also made it difficult for me to answer questions"

3.1.4. Students' Strategies in Answering Structure and Written expression Test

There were several answers given by participants to respond to questions about the strategies they applied in answering the structure and written expression sections. First, most of the participants answered that to be able to complete the test well, of course, test takers must prepare themselves by learning grammar, doing exercises to answer questions about the structure and written expression frequently and consistently, and recognizing well the forms and characteristics of questions in structure and written expression test. According to them, there are many media that can be used to practice the TOEFL test, such as youtube and sample questions that are widely available on the internet. They also maximize this effort by simulating the TOEFL test with a time limit as in the real TOEFL test. In addition, another participant stated that he prepared himself for the third test section by reading a lot, practicing, and remembering the rules of the English structure. According to him, this really helped him in completing the test.

The following are participant statements:

"One strategy that really helps me in dealing with structure and written expressions is to prepare well before the test, learn English grammar, sentence structure, elements in sentences. In addition, it is also important to recognize the forms and characteristics of questions in structure and written expression test"

"There are many media that can be used to study TOEFL, such as youtube and others. We can practice answering TOEFL test questions before taking the real test"

Furthermore, several participants revealed that in answering the questions in this section, they focused on the sentence structure or the pattern of sentence elements, such as subject+predicate+object, etc., either in affirmative sentences, negative sentences, or interrogative sentences. In addition, according to them, it is also important for test takers to pay attention to the subject-verb agreement, parallelism in sentences, the use of tenses, word classes, and phrase structure rules; because these kinds of questions often appear in the structure and written expression tests.

The following is an excerpt from one participant's statement:

"In this section, I focused on the sentence structure or the pattern of sentence elements, such as subject+predicate+object, etc., either in affirmative sentences, negative sentences, or interrogative sentences, because these types of questions often appear in this section".

Lastly, participants suggested to test takers to practice time management in doing the TOEFL test, and to keep practicing the English grammar. If the test takers are confused

about answering a question, they can try by reading and understanding the context of the sentence first before answering the question, guessing the most reasonable answer, and always using logical thinking in guessing the answer.

The following table displays the results of interviews with students about their problems and strategies on the test of structure and written expression.

Table 2. Students' Problems and Strategies in Structure and Written expression test

The Problems in Structure and Written Expression Test	The strategies implemented
Unfamiliar with the characteristics of the written and expression test	Practice answering questions on structure and written expression regularly
Inadequate knowledge of English grammar and/or sentence structure	Recognize the structure and written expression test question types and characteristics.
Inadequate practice of the grammar test	
Insufficient time to complete the test	Read, practice, and learn English structure. Practice time management Read and understand the sentence context before answering the question Find the most reasonable answer and use logical thinking to guess the answer.

3.1.5. Students' Problems in Answering Reading Comprehension Test

In answering questions about the problems in completing the reading test in the TOEFL, most of the participants answered that the biggest problem they faced was the lack of vocabulary. Moreover, the vocabulary used in reading texts on the TOEFL test is scientific words and usually refers to a particular field of study. Participants who do not master a lot of vocabulary will certainly find it difficult to understand reading texts and answer questions related to the text. As stated by one participant that the text in the TOEFL that he often encounters is mostly about natural sciences, so he often has difficulty understanding the contents of the text. There was a lot of vocabulary that he didn't understand the meaning of, which then made it difficult for him to answer the questions.

The following is an excerpt from one participant's statement:

"One of my big obstacles in the reading section is the lack of vocabulary mastery. Moreover, the reading section in the TOEFL test usually covers topics in certain fields of science, such as the natural sciences. Because many scientific words are used, I often have difficulty understanding the contents of the reading text."

In addition, other participants answered that the difficulty they often experienced was answering questions whose answers were not written directly in the text, but only implied. Limited time makes them have to understand the content of the text as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, the questions with such implied answers take longer for them to understand the context of the text. As a result, they are often wrong in guessing the answer. Here is one of the participant's statements:

"In the reading section, usually there are questions whose answers are implied and not stated directly in the text. I often have trouble dealing with questions like this, and often answer wrongly."

Another answer from the participants revealed that the difficulties they faced were due to the lack of practice in reading English texts and understanding deeply the meaning conveyed through the text. They are also less accustomed to dealing with academic texts. As a result, they lack academic vocabulary and are less able to read while comprehending an English text.

3.1.6. Students' Strategies in Answering Reading Comprehension Test

In responding to the question about the strategy used in answering the reading comprehension test in the TOEFL test, most of the students answered that the technique they applied was reading by scanning and skimming. Skimming and scanning are two reading strategies that utilize rapid eye movement and keywords to move quickly through text, but for significantly different reasons. Skimming is the act of reading quickly to obtain a general idea of the material, while scanning is reading quickly to find certain information. According to them, these two methods are effective in making it easier to answer the test and save time. In addition, participants also answered that one effective way is before taking the TOEFL test, it is better for the test takers to study and memorize the question types. Being familiar with the reading instructions before taking the TOEFL test will assist test-takers to save time and figure out what to do or how to begin the reading section.

The following participants' answers reveal this:

"Skimming and scanning techniques really helped me in understanding the content of the text in the reading test. This technique is effective to be applied to find answers in the reading test and also saves time"

"Like other tests, in dealing with the reading section, test takers should first study the instructions in the reading test, because it can save time and the test takers can figure out what to do or how to begin the reading section".

Some participants recommended reading the first line of each paragraph to determine the passage's purpose and main idea. Write down two to three key terms for each paragraph so that they can develop a mind map for the content. These notes help them from having to read the passage repeatedly. In addition, they state that it is essential to pay attention to the supporting elements. Understanding both the main idea and supporting ideas helps them to understand the structure. They also suggest not to focus entirely on little details. Other participants answered that to make it easier and save time, they first read and understood the content of the questions and then immediately looked for the answers in the text.

These are the participants' answers:

"To find out and determine the purpose and main idea in the passage, I usually read the first sentence in each paragraph, Write down two to three key terms for each paragraph so that I can develop a mind map for the content"

"Another strategy I employ is to directly read the question, and find the answer in the text. I think if I read the text first and then read the question, a lot of time will be wasted"

Some other strategies from the participants are trying to understand the intent of the questions by looking at the possible answers A B C D. If necessary, they read again and again until the point gets remarked. According to them, it is also important to find specific information by reading carefully the contents of the passage and the main ideas contained therein. Finally, the most important thing for them is to prepare well before taking the test, do a lot of reading practice, improve vocabulary mastery, and practice answering TOEFL questions.

In short, the students' problems and strategies in the reading test are portrayed in the following table.

Table 3. Students' Problems and Strategies in Reading Test

The Problems in Reading Comprehension Test	The strategies implemented
Lack of vocabulary	Apply scanning and skimming techniques in reading text
Difficulty in answering questions containing implied answers	Learn Toefl reading instructions before taking the test
Lack of English reading practice	Read the first line of each paragraph to determine the text's main idea
Unfamiliar with academic text	Write down two to three key terms from each paragraph to develop a mind map for the content
	Pay attention to the supporting elements of each paragraph
	Read and comprehend the questions first, then find the answers in the text.
	Prepare well before taking the test, do a lot of reading practice, improve vocabulary mastery, and practice answering TOEFL questions

3.2. Discussion

This research has revealed the students' problems in facing the TOEFL test in the listening section, structure and written expression section, and reading section. The results obtained indicate that most of the students experience relatively the same problems in answering the questions in the TOEFL test. The problem most often faced by them in the listening test is the difficulty in understanding the words spoken orally by the speakers, which according to them is caused by several obstacles such as lack of vocabulary mastery and their inability to catch the pronunciation of the speakers. This result is in line with the findings of Antoni (2014), who discovered that in the listening section, students have difficulty

comprehending the spoken language because the speaker speaks too fast and the conversations are too difficult to understand. In addition, sounds from outside the exam room can also affect their concentration in answering the test. In dealing with this listening test, they apply several strategies such as trying to stay focused on listening and grab as much detailed information as possible in the conversations.

In the structure and written expression section, the obstacles experienced by most participants were their lack of mastery of English grammar which caused them to answer questions incorrectly, especially on questions related to tenses, parallelism, sentence structure, and word classes. In general, the strategy suggested by participants is to practice answering questions on the TOEFL test before facing the real test. For them, recognizing well the forms and characteristics of questions in structure and written expression test is very important to minimize errors in answering questions and save time. The strategy recommended by the participants is consistent with the findings of Akmal, et.al (2020) in their research which revealed one of the reasons behind the problems faced by students in the structure and written expression section is a lack of practice in doing grammar tests. Hence, one of the most efficient ways for test takers to anticipate this problem is to practice more on the grammar test.

Meanwhile, in the reading test section, the biggest issue for the participants was the lack of vocabulary mastery which caused them to have difficulty understanding the passages. Similar finding was reached in the prior study. Antoni's (2014) research proves that students have difficulty grasping the meaning of written English text. That occurred because of their limited vocabulary. Therefore, the strategy that the students applied was to try to grasp and comprehend the text's main idea first before moving on to understanding the text's content as a whole. In addition, applying reading techniques such as skimming and scanning is also important to help the test takers understand the content of the text and save time.

4. Conclusion

This study discloses some facts regarding the TOEFL test taken by EFL students, in which the majority of students still encounter problems and obstacles when taking the test despite having studied English in high school and college. The current problems are not only caused by the students' inadequate English proficiency but also by their inability to employ the techniques and strategies necessary to succeed on the TOEFL test. All these facts were highlighted in this study. Therefore, this study recommends students as test takers prepare for the TOEFL through a number of key things, such as improving their English language skills and abilities, practicing answering TOEFL questions, practicing time management, understanding and knowing the characteristics of the questions in each section of the TOEFL, and preparing strategies as solutions to anticipate every problem that may arise on the test. The findings of this study will also give lecturers knowledge and resources on typical TOEFL test issues, which they can utilize to enhance the course materials for English skills subjects. The curriculum that is developed based on the outcomes of students' problem identification will undoubtedly meet students' educational needs.

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