



Tertiary Students' Strategies and Difficulties in Answering the TOEFL Test

Endah Anisa Rahma¹, Rina Syafitri², Giovanni Oktavinanda³, Refanja Rahmatillah⁴ & Veni Nella Syahputri⁵
^{1,2,3,4,5}Universitas Teuku Umar, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The recent study investigates tertiary students' perspectives on the implementation of the TOEFL benchmark score as a graduation requirement. There were 100 students chosen randomly in this study. Their perspectives were gathered through a questionnaire and an interview to know the students' strategies and difficulties in answering the TOEFL test. The results showed that most students agree with the TOEFL benchmark as a graduation requirement however they face obstacles in answering the test. From the interview, the result showed that they had difficulties in answering the listening and grammar sections. This resulted in unfamiliarity with foreign sounds and a lack of practice. Besides, students felt that the minimum TOEFL score for the graduation requirement was beyond their ability since most students were not introduced to TOEFL from the beginning of their study. Most students used their strategies in learning TOEFL through searching some materials on the internet as well as from the module they got from English courses. Such strategies help them to increase their ability to improve their TOEFL score.

Corresponding Author: Endah Anisa Rahma, Universitas Teuku Umar, Meulaboh, Aceh Barat, Aceh.
23615. Telp +6285260194938. Email : endahanisarahma@utu.ac.id



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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

English is known as the most powerful language in the world and is spoken as a foreign language in some countries (Chen, 2002; Sindkhedkar, 2012). English is studied as a general subject and also as a language proficiency test in higher education in Indonesia. According to Mahmud (2014) Test of English as A Foreign Language (TOEFL) is handled by English Language System (ELS). The University conducts the TOEFL-like or TOEFL equivalent test. This is conducted by the language center or language laboratory in the university for internal purposes, such as thesis defense or students' English proficiency test.

TOEFL is one of the English language tests officially accepted by both universities and formal institutions following American English standards. TOEFL is very important for students because it is often used as one of the requirements for entering a college or company. As stated by (Pyle & Munoz, 1985) TOEFL is usually used to enter colleges and universities in America. TOEFL aims to measure the ability to read and understand English, TOEFL is intended as a measuring tool or evaluation of one's English language ability. According to Komari (2008), there are three types of TOEFL, namely TOEFL International, TOEFL ITP (Institutional Testing Program), and TOEFL Prediction. TOEFL International is often also referred to as the computer based TOEFL (CBT) because the form of the test uses a computer. TOEFL ITP is a written test and is often called a paper based TOEFL (PBT).

Most universities in Indonesia apply the TOEFL policy as a condition for graduation. Each University has a different standard of value as a graduation requirement. As is the case at Teuku Umar University, students who are going to undergraduate trials are required to obtain a minimum TOEFL score of 450 for all majors. This is

stated in the rector's decision number 132/ UN59/ EP/2017 regarding the application of the TOEFL score. The implementation of the minimum TOEFL criteria for graduates of Teuku Umar University is carried out in stages in the following table:

Table 1. *TOEFL Minimum Score for Graduation*

No.	Minimum Score	Academic Year
1.	400	2018-2019
2.	450	2020-2024
3.	475	2025 above

Source: Rector Decision Number 132/UN59/ EP/ 2017

With these graduation requirements, this is the first step for students to master the TOEFL and can be further improved. Research conducted by Rahma, Syafitri, Syahputri, and Parlindungan (2021) on the TOEFL policy analysis at university showed that 58% of students failed to obtain a minimum standard score of TOEFL (< 400). The results of this study prove that students were not ready with the TOEFL policy as a graduation requirement. Questionnaire data showed that most students agree with the implementation of the TOEFL policy as a graduation requirement that has been set since 2018, but they have not been able to meet the minimum score requirements for graduation. Tsai and Tsou (2009) said that setting a graduation benchmark seems to be a good way to monitor students' English learning outcomes or to promote the quality of foreign language education. Thus, this is important to know the quality of learners' English learning capacity. Chen and Lee (2004) also add that students' performances in English at a university should be fully understood in order to determine what can be adopted to assess their English learning outcomes for graduation.

1.2 Research Objective

In accordance with the background of study, the main objective of this current study is to investigate the students' strategies in taking TOEFL test and their difficulties while taking the test.

1.3 Research Question

In accordance with the research objective, the research question of this study is:

- What are the students' strategies and difficulties in taking the TOEFL test?

2. Literature Review

Data from the researchers (Netta & Trisnawati, 2019; Samad & Fitriani, 2016), most of students get low scores and below the expected scores. This might be caused by a lack of grammar knowledge. The second problem is students were not familiar with the TOEFL test. Consequently, most of the students failed to reach the expected scores because students are not used to answering TOEFL test questions. As mentioned in the statement above, the students must get a minimum score of 450 scores for the academic year 2020-2024. The other problem was the form of questions in the TOEFL test is not the same as the test questions in their English courses.

Some previous studies about the graduation benchmark policy have been conducted by researchers (Chen & Lee, 2004; Tsai & Tsou, 2009; Shih, 2013; Chu & Yeh, 2017; Hsieh, 2017; Netta & Trisnawati, 2019). Their finding confirmed that most university level students got obstacles when taking TOEFL test because of no preparation from beginning, no familiar with English sound and getting nervous while taking test. The previous study from Salam, Fergina, and Suparjan (2012) also investigated the TOEFL policy at university level. They found that students got below standard criteria which means that students had low English proficiency as proven by their TOEFL scores. Based on the result, this happened because there was no linguistics environment to support them to learn English. In addition, the absence of continuing English programs to help the students in improving English proficiency is the problem of this study. The last problem is the absence of learning facilities such as English books provided at the library. It indicates that the students were not ready to face the TOEFL policy at Universitas Tanjungpura.

3. Method

This is descriptive qualitative research. 100 students from six faculties were included in this research. They were in the last semester (eighth semester or above) and were chosen by random sampling. The data were taken from students' questionnaires in May 2021. The students have been given the questionnaires to ask about their strategies and obstacles to the TOEFL test. Questionnaires contain the students' problems in answering the TOEFL test and their efforts in preparing for the test. The participants experienced taking the TOEFL test and they were seniors at the time of completing their undergraduate thesis. The questionnaire was adopted from Zuhrayana (2018). The data from questionnaires were analyzed in three steps; data reduction, data display, and conclusion as stated by Sugiyono (2008). In the first step, the researchers did a reduction from questionnaires

based on the students' efforts or strategies in learning and preparing for the TOEFL test. In the second step, they narrated and simplify the data in form of a pattern such as a table and a percentage. In the last step, the researchers concluded the data based on the strong evidence and the previous theories.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Students' Strategies in Preparing the TOEFL Test

To answer the first research problem, the following table demonstrates the students' preparation for taking the TOEFL test, the following graph explains the percentage of Universitas Teuku Umar students' strategies in answering the test.

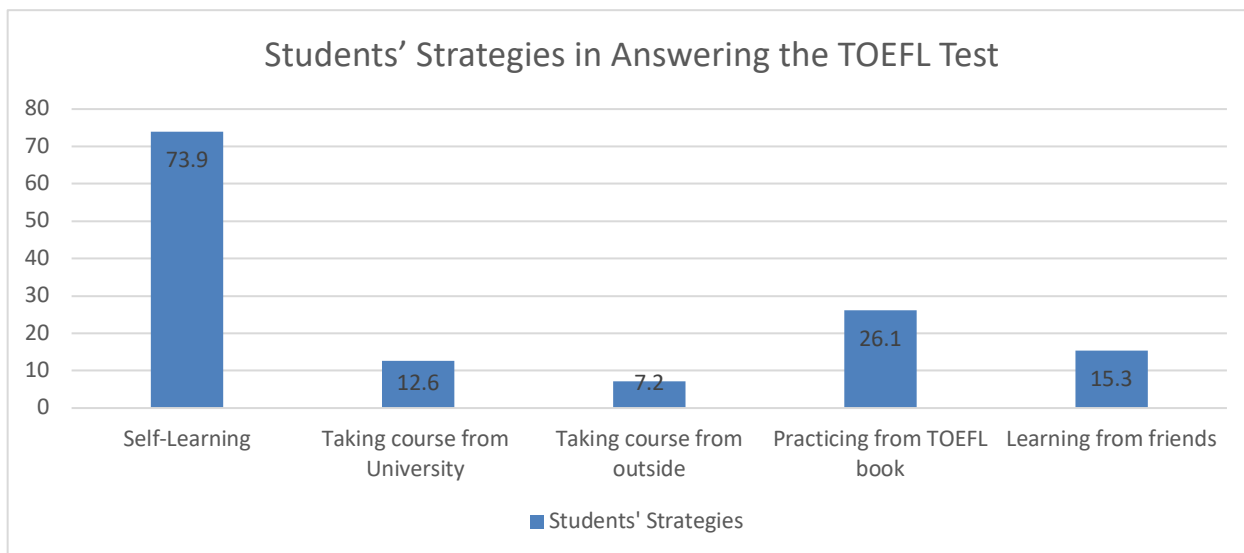


Figure 1. *Students' Strategies in Answering the TOEFL Test.*

The graph shows that most students (73%) learn the TOEFL by themselves. The others are practicing from the TOEFL book (26.1%) and learning from friends (15.3%). Only 12.6 % of them chose to take a course from university and 7.2 % chose to take it from outside. This finding is similar to the study by Netta and Trisnawati (2019). Their finding showed that most of the EFL students preferred self-study to prepare for the TOEFL test. The students got materials by listening to English songs and watching movies. In this study, UTU's students prepared for the TOEFL by themselves which involved listening to music and watching videos on the internet. This study provides information about students' obstacles in taking the TOEFL test and their response to the implementation of the graduation requirement policy. As mentioned by Tsai and Tsou (2009) the graduation benchmark policy promotes the quality of students' foreign language education.

4.2 Students' Difficulties in Answering the TOEFL Test

To answer the students' obstacles in answering the TOEFL test, the following table shows the students' difficulties in answering the listening, structure, and reading section. The data was taken from the questionnaire and analyzed in the following table:

Table 2. *Students' Difficulties in Answering the TOEFL Test.*

Problems	Percentage (%)
Problems in answering the TOEFL test:	
1. Listening	66.1
2. Structure and Written Expression	50
3. Reading	12.5
The most difficult part of listening:	
1. Short Dialogue	39.3
2. Long Conversation	53.6
3. Long talk	37.5
Problems in Answering Listening Part:	
1. Speaker Sound Problems	39.3
2. Lack of Grammar Understanding	26.8
3. Lack of Vocabulary	48.2
4. Lack of Dialect Understanding	25

5. Lack of Idiomatic Understanding	17.9
Problems in Answering Structure & Written Expression Part:	
1. Grammar	48.3
2. Limited Time	28.3
3. Subject and Verb	30
4. Word Form	21.7
5. Tenses	21.7
Problems in Answering Reading Comprehension Part:	
1. Main Idea/ Topic	21.7
2. Vocabulary	20
3. Pronoun Referent	15
4. Unstated Details Questions	30
5. Implied Details Questions	51.7

Based on the table above it can be concluded that most students have difficulty to answer the TOEFL test in the listening part (66.1%) because they mostly had obstacles in longer conversations (53.6%). These are some factors that listening is the most difficult among the other part of the TOEFL test; students chose speaker sound problems (39.3%) and vocabulary problems (48.2%). Meanwhile, the obstacles in answering the grammar section are dominantly caused by a lack of grammar knowledge. The last problem is from the reading comprehension part. The majority of students agreed that the implied details question (51.7%) is the hardest question among the other type of reading questions. The table has clearly stated the English Foreign Language Problems in answering the TOEFL test. The study from Zuhayana (2018) also confirms that listening is the most difficult part for non-English major students because the result from her study state that bad quality of the sound system, lack of grammar understanding, vocabulary, and idiom understanding are the problems in answering the TOEFL test. It is confirmed by a study by Rahma and Setiyana (2020) who seek out the motivation of learning English for tertiary students. They found that university students are affected by an instrumental motivation to learn English including getting a scholarship and studying abroad. Nevertheless, Mahmud (2014) stated that grammar is the most problem for EFL learners when taking the TOEFL test. Based on Mahmud's finding, the students' problems in taking the TOEFL test are they have fewer basic skills in English, less practice, and less motivation

5. Conclusion

Based on the result & discussion of the study, conclusion is formulated as follows:

- 1) Students' strategies in preparing test are mostly from self-study (73%). They got materials by listening to English songs and watching movies. Only 12.6 % of them took a course from university and 7.2 % took it from outside.
- 2) Most students have difficulty to answer the TOEFL test in the listening part (66.1%) because they mostly had obstacles in longer conversations (53.6%).
- 3) The authority should reconsider to decide the minimum TOEFL score for graduation because the majority of students have low proficiency to the use of English.

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