



Students' Difficulties in Coping with TOEFL Test: A Case Study in a Postgraduate English Program of a State University in Mataram

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Abstract

TOEFL test is one type of English testing system to measure test takers' proficiency in English grammar and structures as well as academic skills such as listening and reading. Within Indonesian higher education context, postgraduate English department students are required to have a minimum TOEFL score of 500 in order to be able to pass the thesis exam or to graduate. As English is a foreign language to students, having a high TOEFL score would be challenging for them. This study aims to identify and describe the difficulties faced by students of a postgraduate English department in a government university in West Nusa Tenggara. This study employed a survey research design. Questionnaires and interviews were used for the data collection. Quantitative and qualitative analysis were used as the basis of data analysis. Sixteen (16) students in their first semester in the academic year 2022/2023 were involved as the participants of the study. The findings revealed that the students have difficulty in all three sections: listening, structure and reading. In listening they found difficulties in several aspects including negative expressions, idiomatic expressions and long conversations. In structure, their problems were in terms of having lack of grammar understanding such as parallel structure, subject-verb agreement, and error recognition. In reading, the students were still struggling with unknown vocabulary, implicit meaning, and time management. This study suggests that students should develop strategies to be successful in The TOEFL test.

Keywords: *TOEFL Test; Difficulties; Postgraduate Students; Strategies*

Introduction

TOEFL is the most widely known and accepted test for non-native English speakers. It examines test participants' English proficiency in three language components. They are listening comprehension, structure and written expressions and reading comprehension. This test is usually given before entering Master studies in certain state universities. The test's results are important because potential students are expected to have language competences to be able to review scientific journal, listen to lecturers' materials and write a research paper.

It is an uneasy task for non-native English students to answer and reach high score for the TOEFL test. It has been proven by Samad *et al* (2017), Rezkiyani (2019), Slamet, J., & Sulistyarningsih (2021) and Romadhon (2022). Most of these research participants were reported to have numerous difficulties in TOEFL Test. For this current study, it is observed that in a State University in West Nusa Tenggara, sixteen out of twenty-one students obtained results less than standardized score—500 of TOEFL score. However, there were only three students who attained more than the required score.

For this reason, this study is conducted to (1) recognize and depict the difficulties encountered by those postgraduate students and (2) their strategies in facing TOEFL test. This study follows required TOEFL skills written in Philips (2003) as the basis in identifying targeted students' difficulties.

Method

A case study is the research design applied in this study that focuses on an individual or a group of people in which a phenomenon is researched (Kumar, 2011). A case study can be defined as a thorough investigation about one issue (Gerring, 2006; Gilbert, 2008; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). The phenomenon in this study is postgraduate students who found difficulties in encountering The TOEFL test.

The data for this study were taken from 16 students. They were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative analysis. Based on Creswell (2012), quantitative analysis comprises of marking the research data, putting them into table, describing the trends, and drawing inferences. While, qualitative analysis consists of transcribing data, describing data, reporting and summarizing finding. Questionnaire and interview were employed in this study as the instruments. The questionnaire containing written statements of required capabilities for the TOEFL test yielded category and numerical data. The interview focusing on questions on difficulty and strategy described participants' difficulties and strategies in facing TOEFL test.

Result and Discussion

Questionnaire Results
Table 1. Difficulties in Listening Comprehension

No	Listening Comprehension	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Identifying the last speaker's intention	0%	6,3%	31,3%	37,5%	25%
2	Identifying specific information in conversation	0%	12,5%	31,3%	43,8%	12,5%
3	Identifying negative expression	0%	25%	43,8%	25%	6,3%
4	Identifying expression of agreement, uncertainty, suggestion and surprise,	0%	12,5%	43,8%	31,3%	12,5%
5	Identifying expressions of wishes and untrue condition.	0%	12,5%	31,3%	50%	6,3%
6	Identifying Idiomatic language	6,3%	18,8%	67,8%	6,3%	0%
7	Identifying details in long conversation	6,3%	12,5%	62,5%	12,5%	6,3%
8	Identifying details in lecture	0%	12,5%	56,3%	31,3%	0%

Table 2. Difficulties in Structure and Written Expression

No	Structure and Written Expression	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Identifying all subject-verb agreement and passive rules	0%	12,5%	37,5%	37,5%	12,5%
2	Identifying the position of direct object and indirect object	0%	6,3%	25%	62,5%	6,3%
3	Identifying all clauses connectors	0%	6,3%	50%	37,5%	6,3%
4	Identifying reduced clauses	0%	12,5%	56,3%	31,3%	0%
5	Identifying all inverted subject and verb	0%	12,5%	62,5%	12,5%	12,5%
6	Identifying parallel structure	0%	0%	31,3%	31,3%	37,5%
7	Recognizing comparative and superlative	0%	25%	43,8%	31,3%	0%
8	Recognizing all parts of speech	0%	6,3%	31,3%	50%	12,5%

Table 3. Difficulties in Reading Comprehension

No	Reading Comprehension	Strongly disagree	disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Identifying main idea correctly	0%	12,5%	31,3%	43,8%	12,5%
2	Recognizing coherence of ideas in the text	0%	6,3%	50%	37,5%	6,3%
3	Finding pronoun referents	0%	0%	43,8%	37,5%	18,8%
4	Identifying implicit information correctly	0%	12,5%	68,8%	18,8%	0%
5	Guessing words meaning in context	0%	12,5%	68,8%	18,8%	0%
6	Identifying text's purpose	0%	0%	62,5%	25%	12,5%
7	Identifying explicit information in the text using scanning technique	0%	18,8%	56,3%	18,8%	6,3%

According to TABLE I above, participants admitted that they have problems in identifying negative expressions (25%), idiomatic language (6,3% and 18,8%), and the last speaker's intention (6,3%). While from 31,3% to 67,8% of them were neutral meaning that they were uncertain if they have

the problems or not. Based on TABLE II above, from 6,3% to 25% of the students admitted that they have difficulties in identifying basic grammar pattern: part of speech, subject-verb agreement, passive rule, comparative and superlative. In contrast, from 25% to 62,5% of the students were not sure whether they faced the difficulties or not. From the last table, it can be noticed that participants have difficulty in recognizing coherence of ideas, implicit and explicit information, main idea, and guessing word meaning in context.

Furthermore, based on the interview, contributors have various difficulties in TOEFL Test. For listening section, most of the students have problem with unclear audio from listening device, negative expressions, idiomatic language, rate of delivery, and long conversation section. For structure and written expression part, the targeted students were having troubles in terms of having lack of grammar understanding and confusion in answering error recognition. Moreover, in reading comprehension, those postgraduate students were struggling in finding main idea, synonyms and antonyms, implicit meaning, managing the given time, also lack of practice scanning and skimming technique. And for the strategy, most of the students stated that they needed more practice and understand question type of the TOEFL test.

Through this research, it is possible to comprehend what difficulties students encounter in TOEFL test, then they can do a better preparation and strategy to overcome the obstacles.

Conclusion

The TOEFL examination is a form of English assessment that evaluates individuals' English grammar and academic ability, including listening and reading skills. In the context of higher education in Indonesia, students pursuing a postgraduate English degree must achieve a minimum TOEFL score of 500 in order to successfully complete their thesis examination or graduate. Having a high TOEFL score would be challenging for students to whom English is still a foreign language. This study aims to identify and describe the difficulties faced by students of a postgraduate English department in a government university in West Nusa Tenggara. This present study employed a survey research design. Questionnaires and interviews were used for the data collection. Quantitative and qualitative analysis were used as the basis of data analysis. Sixteen (16) students in their first semester in the academic year 2022/2023 were involved as the participants of the study. The findings revealed that the students have difficulty in all three sections: listening, structure and reading. In listening they found difficulties in several aspects including negative and idiomatic expressions, and long conversations. In structure, their problems were in terms of having lack of grammar understanding such as parallel structure, subject-verb agreement, and error recognition. In reading, the students were still struggling with unknown vocabulary, synonym and antonym, implicit meaning, and time management. This current study advises that students should develop strategies to be successful in The TOEFL test.

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