

## The TOEFL learning difficulties faced by EFL students of English department

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### Abstract

This study was aimed at finding out the factors that cause the difficulty in TOEFL learning faced by EFL students of English Department of IAIN Palangka Raya. The purposes of the study were (1) to know skills are most answered incorrectly in the TOEFL by English department students; (2) to describe how English department students prepare themselves for TOEFL; (3) to analyze the students' reasons toward their difficulties in the TOEFL. It was used qualitative method. The data was taken from the document records and interview. This study addressed to English Department students who failed in several occasions of the TOEFL PBT. Purposive sample was taken into account, in which all 10 participants were female in their 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> semester study. The finding of this study shows some points as follows: (1) areas of most incorrect answers such as Structure and Written Expression; the problems of subject-verb agreement, tenses, nouns and the use of article, (2) the problems of preparation shortages and incapability of understanding several grammars area were common found, (3) the reasons behind students' difficulties in the TOEFL were underestimate attitude toward the test and their poor English mastery.

**Keywords:** Test of English as foreign language; TOEFL; student's difficulties; EFL students

### INTRODUCTION

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a test administered to measure the English proficiency of non-native speakers of English. As Phillips (2001, p.xiii) declare that "the TOEFL is a test to measure the level of English ability of non-native speakers of English". Likewise, Abboud and Hussein (2011) contend that as a test of English as a foreign language, TOEFL has become a standardized test used throughout the world to measure the English proficiency of non-native English speakers.

In relation to this, Abboud and Hussein (2011, p.111) further say, "more than 5,000 colleges, universities, and licensing agencies in 90 countries accept the TOEFL scores". From the purposes mentioned above, it can be understood that mastery of TOEFL is very important because it enables learners to show that they have a good

proficiency in English and opens a great deal of access to continue study abroad and also to continue studying in Indonesia.

As an English proficiency test with international standard, TOEFL has difficulty level, demands good English mastery and students should apply good strategy in answering the test. In other words, to get high score in TOEFL, the combination of good English mastery and strategy to analyze the questions is a must (I Made Sujana, Edy Syahrial, & Eka Fitriana, 2014, p. 53).

TOEFL has become one of the most popular language proficiency tests that most people use in Indonesia. It can be proved that more institutions such as enterprises use TOEFL as one of the requisites in recruiting their new employees and universities use it as the requisite for graduating. TOEFL at some universities also is used to students who will submit their thesis. For example in IAIN Palangka Raya, is one of the state institutes which highly require the students to achieve the passing grade on TOEFL as the requirement before doing thesis examination.

TOEFL in IAIN Palangka Raya is executed by Language Development Unit, IAIN Palangka Raya uses the previous version of TOEFL called TOEFL PBT (Paper-based Test) evaluates language skills in three separate sections, which are Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension. Many English teachers assume that the higher the TOEFL PBT score is, the more likely the test taker is able to communicate English in academic contexts (Asmani, 2014, p.86).

Rivi antoni (2014, p.9) declared that passing the TOEFL is not as easy as they completed their English subjects. Most of them are failing to fulfill the standardized grade ruled by University. Based on the writer observation mostly English Department students must follow TOEFL 5 till 10 times to pass TOEFL meanwhile they learn about English almost every day. Even to participate TOEFL in IAIN Palangka Raya, English students have to join TOEFL training course during sixteen times meeting and it can be taken when the students in six semester.

Senior students of English Education Program should have no more problems in achieving the 500 minimum of the TOEFL score. It is because they have programmed all of the courses that are related to the materials testing in TOEFL which are both skill courses such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and content courses such as grammar and vocabulary.

However, in fact there are still many English students who fail to achieve the minimum score. The previous study from Sujana, et al. (2005) indicates that on average, the language proficiency level of English students is in the category of Independent User with the average TOEFL score is 459. It means that the senior students' language proficiency is still low if contrasted with what they have learned for three years. The research further describes that they are expected to have language proficiency at least in the competent user category the score is between 493 - 537 in which they can use English effectively and efficiently under any circumstances. This becomes problematic

since the students' score is not in line with the expectation of what they have learned in the class.

Irham Ali Saifuddin (2012, p. 23) added that many students think that TOEFL is extremely difficult particularly for students who have never done the test before. Students of English Education should answer all TOEFL correctly and must have at least 500 for TOEFL scores to pass the test. English students who follow TOEFL at IAIN Palangka Raya themselves are mostly senior students who have completed various English courses from listening, grammar, structure, writing, also reading. Based on writer observation in IAIN Palangka Raya, somehow English students have difficulties or obstacles to achieve the goal of TOEFL score. Many students fail in attempting the TOEFL even though, prior to this test, the students have studied the strategies in answering TOEFL.

According to background above, the research problems could be stated, “(1) What skills are most answered incorrectly in the TOEFL by English department students? (2) How do English department students prepare themselves for TOEFL? (3) What are the students' reasons toward their difficulties in the TOEFL?”

In general there are many reasons why students felt difficulties in TOEFL learning among others in opinion of in his research Rivi Antoni (2014) declares that there are two students' main problems in completing their TOEFL they are:

### **Limited preparation on TOEFL**

According to Rivi Antoni (2014, p. 10), he found that students have problems in completing their TOEFL. The main problem faced is that the students do not have a good preparation before following a test of English as a foreign language. However, a good preparation needs to be planned and done by the candidate in order to get success on the test. Without a good preparation, the students might face some difficulties.

A good preparation refers to some cases such as what the test is like and what kind of strategies used. The fact shows that some students have limited knowledge about the test. Then, they do not prepare themselves with some strategies how to answer various questions given by the examiners. A preparation before completing TOEFL help students to get success at the test carried out. Missing the preparation causes the students get problems to answer the questions. (Deborah, 2001, p. 70)

### **Poor English Mastery**

Besides having problem with the preparation, students are also poor in English skills. The skills are listening, speaking, reading and writing (Rivi Antoni, 2014, p. 10). Penny (2000, p. 25) states some students are problematic with speaking and listening. It is hard for them to communicate in English whether to listen or to speak. In the other cases, some students are confused with grammar and vocabulary. All those problems also cause the students get low with their English subject.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher concludes that there are two problem faced by the students in completing the TOEFL. First, they do not have a good preparation before the test. And second, they do not master English skills well yet.

## **METHOD**

This study used qualitative approach. It is because by this approach the information could be seen clearly by the explanation of words and the explanation from the informants. According to Herdizansyah (2010, p. 7) qualitative research is multi methods in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

The study took place at the seventh grade in IAIN Palangka Raya which located on G. Obos Islamic center street Palangka Raya, Central Kalimantan. This study was conducted two months, from June 4, 2018 to August 4, 2018.

Subject of this study was an English Students in academic years 2013 and 2014 at IAIN Palangka Raya. Total population 70 students the researcher selected with purposive sampling and chosen to be 10 respondents with some criteria. The writer selected the English students who follow TOEFL but didn't pass the test, follow the test more than 5 times also who has always get score below 400. The respondents consist of 2 from English students in academic year 2013, and also 8 from English students in academic year 2014. In total 10 female respondents from academic years 2013 and 2014.

On this study, it was to collect the data through some techniques, as follows: Documentation can be written and picture by someone that can be used to obtain information. In conducting documentation method, the researcher can provide magazines, books, documents, etc. The function of documentation method is to make the result of observation or interview credible; In interview the data are collected through face-to-face or telephone interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. Thus, in this case, the interviewer has to conduct collecting data with doing interaction or communication directly (Arikunto, 2005:158). Meanwhile, to analyze the data, as Miles & Huberman said in Arikunto (2005), there are some summaries of data analysis. Following that the writer applied it in this study, there are some summaries of data analysis. Following that, the writer applied it in this study: Data reduction, it is the activity of summarizing, selecting, categorizing, and focusing the data gathered; Data display, it is the activity of displaying the data reduced; and Conclusion, it is the summary from the writer in answering the problems of the study.

## **FINDINGS**

This research documentation was conducted on 04<sup>th</sup> July and 26<sup>th</sup> July and by using documentation the writer found if many English students have not passed the TOEFL and English students must follows TOEFL five times above to passed the

TOEFL. The TOEFL scores were taken from Language Development Unit in IAIN Palangka Raya as follows.

Table 1. The purposive sampling TOEFL scoring

| No | Name | TOEFL Scoring |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
|----|------|---------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
|    |      | Test 1        | Test 2 | Test 3 | Test 4 | Test 5 | Test 6 | Test 7 | Test 8 | Test 9 |
| 1  | DB   | 323           | 377    | 377    | 383    | 383    | 367    | 360    | 353    | 360    |
| 2  | HW   | 327           | 370    | 390    | 390    | 377    | 397    | 403    |        |        |
| 3  | AS   | 383           | 340    | 357    | 350    | 357    |        |        |        |        |
| 4  | ML   | 370           | 390    | 350    | 367    | 357    | 363    | 373    |        |        |
| 5  | MT   | 377           | 373    | 360    | 340    | 303    | 343    | 377    |        |        |
| 6  | NR   | 393           | 390    | 373    | 357    | 367    | 340    |        |        |        |
| 7  | NH   | 333           | 367    | 323    | 333    | 340    | 420    |        |        |        |
| 8  | NL   | 353           | 350    | 387    | 363    | 380    | 363    |        |        |        |
| 9  | TR   | 360           | 330    | 372    | 340    | 320    | 377    | 370    |        |        |
| 10 | YR   | 340           | 367    | 307    | 320    | 350    | 400    |        |        |        |

The table illustrates the TOEFL scores of 10 (ten) participants who took five to nine times of the test in the period year of 2016, 2017, and 2018. At first the writer wanted to use sample of English students from 2014 generation above, but because it is constrained the existing data and the complete data was only for English students in academic years 2014 and 2013, the writer finally decided to choose the English students in academic years 2014 and 2013 as the respondents. The results of the purposive sample show those English students who have not passed the TOEFL five times and more also always get score below 400 there are 10 people, two from the 2013 class and eight from the 2014.

By using unstructured interview that conducted on 14<sup>th</sup> July until 22<sup>th</sup> July 2018 the writer knew which skills are most answered incorrectly in the TOEFL also found how English students prepare themselves and the students' reasons toward their difficulties in faced the TOEFL. Interviews were carried out using purposive techniques 10 key informants' conducted.

The data the writer got from interview of ten participants which cover their age, the long time spent learning English, learning passions, the preparation before faced the test, the method of the preparation or the way of participant learn TOEFL, the difficulties and factor participants faced in TOEFL, and how participant answered when faced the difficulties. Looking at the age of EFL they are all above 20 years old and the age of L2 learning all 7 out of 10 were learn English ten years above some even learn for 16 years. The participant has various levels like low, medium and high of passions. Also the day of their preparation was mostly one day before the test. Some of the participants also have various method of study to face the TOEFL. Most of the participant has difficulties in Structure and Written Expressions skill with different factor but they all has same way to answers the question if find difficulties the participant will answers with instinct and feeling.

## **DISCUSSION**

This research was conducted to find what skills are answered incorrectly in the TOEFL by English department students, how English department students prepare themselves for TOEFL and what are the students' reasons toward their difficulties in the TOEFL. Most the English students felt had difficulties structure and written expressions and listening skill also in data documentation it is prove with respondent answers sheet and among ten respondent there were seven respondents had answered incorrectly in structure and written expression skill. In related with in Mahmud (2014) stated in his study found that the most of his respondents encountered serious problem in answering TOEFL is the structure and written expression section.

The preparation of respondent mostly done by two weeks, one weeks, three days or one day before the test and those not full in 24 hours the longest in one day is just two hours or three hours. Also respondents preparation usually only read the TOEFL collection question got from the pre-test and post-test training for respondent book mostly of them were used TOEFL Longman book because it is easier to them comprehend that book compare with Barron book. The way all respondent learn for their preparation divided into two ways first one is by self-study and second is group study. And most of them were done with self-study some of the respondent said if self-study is more comfortable and easy to concrete but if does not understand the material about TOEFL the respondent will stuck and still does not understand. If it is group study the respondent with this method usually from academic years 2013, the respondents feel easy to understand if they make study group because they can share and make the learning more fun.

Rivi Antoni (2014) cited in Deborah (2001) stated that a good preparation refers to some cases such as what the test is like and what kind of strategies used. The fact shows that some students have limited knowledge about the test. Then, they do not prepare themselves with some strategies how to answer various questions given by the examiners. A preparation before completing TOEFL help students to get success at the test carried out. Missing the preparation causes the students get problems to answer the questions. (Deborah, 2001, p. 70) The respondent had minimum preparation but hope

got the maximum scores. The most respondents really have minimum time and does not maximally learn and prepare themselves for faced TOEFL this is one of the reason why many English student difficulties to pass the test it is relevant with Rivi Antoni (2014, p. 10), states that students have problems in completing their TOEFL. The main problem faced is that the students do not have a good preparation before following a test of English as a foreign language.

The respondent states that they were had difficulties in structure and written expression skills. Most of them felt difficult in part B that looked for the wrong word from sentences and the problem were all of the respondents were lack of grammar and bad in tenses so in that case most of them felt that every single word in sentences were already true it is related with study of Rizki Ananda (2016, p. 40) declares that students learning difficulties of Structure and Written Expression Section in TOEFL are encountered serious problems in answering (1) inversion, (2) subject-verb agreement, (3) adverb clause connectors, (4) passive, (5) reduced adjective clause, parallel structure, and use of verbs. Inversion came as the first topic with the highest percentage of errors, followed by subject-verb agreement, adverb clause connectors, and passive.

However, the other topics of reduced adjective clause, parallel structure, and use of verb each had little respectfully. Furthermore, it is quite pivotal for students to understand that learning the TOEFL is not only to fulfill a requirement for academic purposes or the likes, but also to be regarded as self-improvement (Hambali, 2008). In addition, students also have to raise awareness toward the importance of budgeting much time to increase their TOEFL score, especially in part B.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concerned about the English students' difficulties in faced the TOEFL. The result of this study showed that the problematic section was Structure and Written Expression skill. The students have difficult in grammar especially about tenses, subject-verb agreement, the uses of article, and nouns. Data documentation shows that most students were low in Structure and Written Expression. Moreover other section such us listening and reading were relatively low in scores also which proved that students overall performances were below standard.

The results show that prior to the TOEFL, most students usually prepare themselves one week or even one day ahead. They admitted that the TOEFL training helped them to prepare themselves better. In conclusion, the reasons behind students' difficulties in the TOEFL were lack of preparations and poor English mastery.

Following the conclusion, some recommendation would be addressed. First, it is suggested to the students to study and prepare well when faced TOEFL. Read and learn the example questions in TOEFL from book either internet. Also ask your friend to make groups so you can share anything about your difficulties in TOEFL, solves the problem and difficulties together. When want to faced TOEFL prepare your-self as good as possible. Second, for the lecturer could help to decreases the students difficulties in grammar especially tenses. Also Language Development Unit could help

the students to identify first which skill the students most has difficulties, after found the skill make students as a group in accordance with the skills they need to train so that students could be better to understand the skills they feel difficulties and can improve their skills in the TOEFL. Next for English Education Study Program could help students to introduce TOEFL early semester so the students to know more about TOEFL and not feel strange anymore, also make students know how importance TOEFL since early. Finally, to next researcher find out the students difficulties of male students in the TOEFL and the researcher hopes the next research can be better than this research, and this research becomes a reference for the next researcher who takes this term.

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