

An Analysis of Students' Difficulties in TOEFL Reading: A Case Study

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to determine to examine the challenges Islamic University of Jember students have when taking the TOEFL, particularly with regard to the reading comprehension portion of the exam. It used a qualitative research approach and case study design. In-depth interviews, close observation, and documentation of the teaching and learning process were used for collecting data. The analysis's findings indicate that UIJ students have a number of challenges while trying to comprehend reading texts, such as a restricted vocabulary, trouble with complicated sentence patterns, and lack of reading strategies. This study sheds light on the variables that prevent students from performing as well as they could on the TOEFL exam. The findings are expected to that the results of this study will help shape the TOEFL learning experience at UIJ and offer valuable insights that instructors can utilize to create more impactful lesson plans.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, being able to communicate in English has become one of the most crucial abilities. English is used as a language of instruction in many different industries, including business, technology, and education, in addition to being a useful tool for worldwide communication. English proficiency is now a must for many educational programs in Indonesia, particularly for higher education. TOEFL has been acknowledge as an international standardized test to certify non-native speakers' English language competencies (Wahyuningsih et al., 2024). The TOEFL exam is one measurement instrument that is frequently used to evaluate a person's English competence, particularly in academic settings. This exam is intended to assess non-native speakers' proficiency with the English language in a scholarly setting, and passing it is frequently a prerequisite for admission to international colleges (Wright, 2014). As the graduation requirements, TOEFL is able asses the students' English proficiency to certify their knowledge in English (Aliponga, 2013).

One of the Indonesian universities that requires students to take the TOEFL exam in order to graduate is Universitas Islam Jember (UIJ). This is consistent with national education goals that highlight how boosting English proficiency boosts Indonesian human resources' competitiveness in the international market. Even though the TOEFL is a required course at UIJ, many students find it challenging to complete the test, particularly with the reading comprehension component.

Preliminary observations suggest that UIJ students encounter a number of obstacles that prevent them from scoring well on the TOEFL exam. Problems often faced by students in reading comprehension are vocabulary, unmentioned detail questions, mentioned detail questions, pronoun questions, inference questions, and main idea questions. Students also lack vocabulary, which causes slow reading, and a lack of strategies is a factor that influences students' difficulties. Therefore, TOEFL teachers should spend more time preparing for topics with the highest percentage of errors (Friska,

2022).

Among the issues are a small vocabulary, trouble understanding complex sentence structures, and a lack of effective reading strategies. Sullivan and Brown (2015) assert that sufficient vocabulary development is closely linked to proficient reading abilities. This demonstrates how pupils with limited vocabulary typically struggle to comprehend reading materials that are complicated. There were many difficulties encountered by test-takers in answering TOEFL questions to get minimum score including incompetencies regarding the mastery of four English basic skills, less practice, lack of motivation, and the differences of test-takers social status and age (Mahmud, 2014). Another difficulty faced by students as TOEFL test-takers is difficulties in answering TOEFL questions, which is mostly as they were not introduced to the TOEFL from the beginning. So, many of them felt unfamiliar with TOEFL test (Rahma et al., 2022)

Additionally, lack of engagement during test preparation and motivational variables may also have an impact on students' performance. According to research by Erfani (2012), learning motivation is crucial for pupils' success in the classroom. Consequently, it's critical to comprehend the elements that affect students' challenges on the TOEFL in order to develop their skills and take the necessary action.

Furthermore, found that students frequently struggle with reading comprehension, which is brought on by a lack of drive and effective test-taking techniques (Febriani, 2019). According to this study, students who struggle with reading comprehension issues typically lack effective reading methods. Additionally, Septiana's research from 2021 showed that a lot of students experience pressure due to time constraints during exams, which can impair focus and have an impact on the outcome. Based on the above background, this research focuses on identifying and analyzing the difficulties faced by UIJ students in taking the TOEFL test, especially in the reading comprehension section.

METHOD

This study examines the challenges students have when taking the TOEFL, particularly in the reading comprehension section, employing a qualitative approach through a case study framework. Based on interpretivism, this qualitative case study (Yin, 2018) aimed to explore the difficulties faced by TOEFL test-takers when completing the TOEFL exam, especially in the TOEFL reading section. With an emphasis on eighth semester students who must take the TOEFL exam in order to graduate, the study was carried out at the Islamic University of Jember (UIJ). Seven students were chosen as research subjects using the purposive sample technique, which made sure that the respondents had pertinent experience and knowledge about the study's issue (Sugiyono, 2018). Three primary methods were used to gather data: documentation studies, semi-structured interviews, and observation. While interviews allowed participants to provide detailed accounts on their experiences and opinions, observations were made to obtain a firsthand view of how students behaved during the test. Data for document analysis were gathered from relevant official documents and literature. The steps proposed by Miles and Huberman (2018) data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing were followed in the qualitative data analysis process. While data presentation takes the shape of narratives that aid comprehension, data reduction is choosing and filtering pertinent information for the study objective. Drawing conclusions requires analyzing the provided data, identifying connections between elements, and providing context for the results. By using this approach, the study hopes to offer a thorough understanding of the difficulties students have on the TOEFL exam and formulate suggestions for enhancing their reading comprehension skills.

RESULT

This research aimed to assess students' TOEFL Test problems while answering TOEFL questions in the reading part. Based on the evidence that the researcher obtained from the interview with the participant that reading section of the TOEFL, the participant still had problems. Therefore, those had been stated in excerpts of interview.

Limited Vocabulary Knowledge

This section discusses the challenges participants experience in memorizing English vocabulary. One key concern raised during the interview conducted on 25th May 2024 was the overwhelming number of English words and the complexity of their forms. The participant noted that irregular pronunciations and inconsistent spellings contribute significantly to the difficulty of retaining vocabulary. This perspective highlights how linguistic irregularities in English can hinder vocabulary acquisition, especially for language learners. The following quote illustrates this concern:

"The sheer number of words in a language, especially one as rich and diverse as English, and having many irregular pronunciations and spellings makes it difficult for me to master them all..." (quote of interview, 25th May 2024)

Difficulty with Complex sentence

This section highlights the participant's difficulties in interpreting complex sentences, particularly when dealing with unfamiliar or abstract content. During the interview conducted on 25th May 2024, the participant admitted to facing challenges in understanding sentence context. Despite these difficulties, they noted that their comprehension has gradually improved through continuous exposure to a wide range of texts. This insight underscores the role of ongoing learning and practice in developing the ability to process more complex linguistic structures. The following quote illustrates this experience:

"I do face challenges in understanding sentence context, especially in complex or unfamiliar texts. However, my ability to understand context continues to improve as I continue to learn and be trained with a large amount of text data..." (quote of interview, 25th May 2024)

Problems in Translation

This part of the thesis discusses the difficulties participants faced during the translation process, with particular attention to the importance of context and clarity. One interviewee, in a session held on 25th May 2024, pointed out that successful translation depends not only on language skills but also on how well the context is understood. This suggests that the accuracy of translation can be greatly affected by the extent to which the translator grasps the source text's meaning and situational background. The following quote reflects this viewpoint:

"My ability to translate effectively depends on the clarity and context provided. The more information I have about the context and intended meaning, the better I can translate the sentence accurately. If the context is unclear or lacks details, this can affect the accuracy of the translation ..."
(quote of interview, 25th May 2024)

Test Anxiety and Distraction

This section discusses the factors that trigger anxiety in learners, particularly during test-taking situations. In the interview conducted on 25th May 2024, the participant shared that environmental distractions, such as noise, and the pressure of exams often lead to increased anxiety. This emotional response negatively affects their performance, causing them to feel rushed and make careless mistakes. The quote below captures this personal experience:

“Yes, sometimes I get distracted by noise, I also get very anxious about taking tests, which makes me rush and sloppy in taking test ...” (quote of interview, 25th May 2024)

Based on the results of the interview above, the data showed that the majority of the participants experienced problems in the TOEFL Reading test due to many issues, including; memorizing English vocabulary, complex sentence, difficult translate, trigger anxiety. as also supported by previous studies (Septiana, 2021; Nezami, 2012).

In the following item, the researcher collected data on the participants' strategies for dealing with difficulties on the TOEFL reading section test. The following is a part of the data interview with the participants.

Listening to English Songs and Podcasts

This section explores the strategies employed by learners to overcome language learning challenges. During the interview conducted on 25th May 2024, the participant explained that engaging with authentic materials—such as English songs and podcasts—plays an important role in improving their language skills. Additionally, they mentioned collaborative learning with peers and reinforcing vocabulary related to daily life as part of their approach. The following excerpt illustrates the participant's efforts to enhance language acquisition through informal, yet meaningful, practices:

“My strategy to overcome these difficulties is by listening to English songs and podcast, learning to read with friends and often remembering vocabulary that is relevant to everyday life” (quote of interview, 25th May 2024)

Using Dictionaries

This part of the discussion focuses on the participant's approach to expanding vocabulary and improving contextual understanding, especially in preparation for standardized tests like the TOEFL. In the interview conducted on 25th May 2024, the participant shared that studying academic vocabulary commonly found in the TOEFL, along with the use of dictionaries and language learning applications, contributed significantly to their language development. These tools enabled them to enhance their comprehension and better grasp word meanings within various contexts. The following quote highlights this learning strategy:

“I studied the common academic language used in TOEFL, focusing on words related to topics that frequently appear in the test, The use of dictionaries, and language learning apps helped me broaden my knowledge horizons and improve my ability to understand the meaning of words in context ...” (quote of interview, 25th May 2024)

Studying TOEFL Format and Question Types

This section highlights the participant's effort to enhance their reading comprehension and

translation accuracy by familiarizing themselves with the structure of the TOEFL Reading Section. During the interview conducted on 25th May 2024, the participant explained that learning about specific question types—such as Main Idea, Detail, Vocabulary, and Inference—enabled them to better anticipate what each question required. This knowledge also informed how they approached translating texts more effectively. The following excerpt illustrates this strategy:

I studied the format and types of TOEFL Reading Section questions, including question types such as Main Idea, Detail, Vocabulary, and Inference. This understanding helped me identify the type of information sought in each question and adjust my translation strategy accordingly ...” (quote of interview, 25th May 2024)

Regular Practice and Time Management

This section discusses the participant’s test-taking strategies, particularly in terms of preparation and time management. During the interview conducted on 25th May 2024, the participant emphasized the importance of regular practice before taking a test and maintaining effective time management during the test itself. These strategies were seen as essential for maintaining concentration and improving performance under pressure. The following quote illustrates this approach:

“I usually practice before taking the test, I also try to manage my time as well as possible when taking the test so that I can focus my mind on the test ...” (quote of interview, 25th May 2024)

The interview data above revealed what techniques the participants utilized when facing challenges in answering the TOEFL reading part. Through the interview that had been conducted by researcher, showed that the participants more used listening English songs, use of dictionary, use language learning application, study the format and types of TOEFL reading section, practice the test and manage the time in solving their difficulties. It showed that the strategy to be able to answer the difficult questions needed for the TOEFL test. The strategy is like what tips that can be used by the participants to answer difficult questions efficiently. As stated by previous study ((Septiana, 2021); Nezami, 2012).

DISCUSSION

The current study investigated the student's difficulty in taking the TOEFL test. In this section, the researcher discussed the research results. The researcher had collected data utilizing interviews as an instrument to answer the research topic. The findings of this study are discussed in the section that follows, which is based on the outcome that was found after the data was analyzed. Based on the study that was provided based on the findings of participant interviews. It was found that the TOEFL Test still experienced problems when working on the TOEFL question in the reading section, including difficulties in understanding the reading section, limited vocabulary knowledge, difficulty with complex sentence, problems in translation, test anxiety and distraction. These findings were supported Sullivan dan brown (2015), who emphasized that vocabulary size significantly influences reading comprehension success, also consistent with previous research by Septiana (2021), which emphasized that time pressure is one of the most common stressors in reading comprehension exams. Students who do not allocate their time well often fail to complete all questions or rush through them, which negatively impacts performance. In contrast, the participant's approach in this study highlights the value of deliberate practice and strategic planning to improve test-taking efficiency.

Despite these challenges, the participants also demonstrated a range of strategies to cope with the demands of the TOEFL reading section. These strategies reflect their attempts to take control of their learning and improve their test performance. The first is listening to English songs and podcast, one participant mentioned using English songs and podcast, the second strategy is using dictionaries, this align with Nezami (2012), who found that learners benefit significantly from digital tools that support vocabulary acquisition. The third is studying TOEFL format and question types, and the fourth is regular practice and time management

CONCLUSION

This research used qualitative study method (Yin, 2018), that carried out by analyzing the participants' difficulties in questions of TOEFL reading section in a detailed and structured manner. In accordance with the research data obtained from the participant, it can be concluded there are some factors that are internal factors and external strategies. Internal factors are limited vocabulary, anxiety, translation difficulty. External strategies are use of media, digital tools, and test familiarization. By identifying these problems and the corresponding coping strategies, this study contributes to a better understanding of how EFL students engage with TOEFL reading tasks. These findings also carry important implications for teaching practices: educators are encouraged to include vocabulary enrichment activities, exposure to real-world reading materials, test practice sessions, and strategies to manage student anxiety in order to enhance performance on standardized reading tests.

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