

## Investigating Problems Encountered By The Test Takers During Taking Toefl Test

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### Abstract

One of standardized test that measure students' proficiency level in English which is called as Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) has been used worldwide by more than 9.000 colleges, universities and agencies in more than hundreds countries in the world. Nowadays, English proficiency test is taken not only on purpose of pursuing study abroad but also as a prerequisite to complete college, especially in institutions. Further, it is also used in the admissions process of applicants to get a job especially in companies where English is used to communicate. However, to pass the TOFL test is not an easy task and even there are many test taker failed the test though they had spent months preparing for the test. There are many problem happened during the test that caused the test taker into failure. This research aimed to investigate problems that occur during the test. This study used descriptive qualitative design and the subjects were ten college students who had taken TOEFL prediction test in the Language Center of Mandalika University of Education (UNDIKMA). The instrument used in this study was an interview which then the result of interview was analyzed in three steps, i.e. data condensation, display, and conclusion. The result of the study showed that most of the test taker failed and made a bad score due to some problems, i.e. less practice, lack of vocabulary, bad time management, feeling nervous, etc. It was noted that those who had minimum problem scored higher than those who had various problem.

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### Abstrak

Salah satu tes standar yang mengukur tingkat kemahiran siswa dalam bahasa Inggris yang disebut sebagai Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) telah digunakan di seluruh dunia oleh lebih dari 9.000 perguruan tinggi, universitas dan lembaga di lebih dari ratusan negara di dunia. Saat ini, tes kecakapan bahasa Inggris dilakukan tidak hanya untuk tujuan melanjutkan studi di luar negeri tetapi juga sebagai prasyarat untuk menyelesaikan kuliah, terutama di institusi. Selanjutnya, juga digunakan dalam proses penerimaan pelamar untuk mendapatkan pekerjaan terutama di perusahaan di mana bahasa Inggris digunakan untuk berkomunikasi. Namun, untuk lulus tes TOFL bukanlah tugas yang mudah dan bahkan banyak peserta tes yang gagal dalam tes meskipun mereka telah menghabiskan waktu berbulan-bulan untuk mempersiapkan tes tersebut. Ada banyak masalah yang terjadi selama tes yang menyebabkan peserta tes gagal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui permasalahan yang terjadi selama pengujian. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dan subjek penelitian adalah sepuluh mahasiswa yang pernah mengikuti tes prediksi TOEFL di Pusat Bahasa Universitas Pendidikan Mandalika (UNDIKMA). Instrumen yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah wawancara yang kemudian hasil wawancara dianalisis dalam tiga langkah, yaitu pemadatan data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar peserta tes gagal dan mendapat nilai buruk karena beberapa masalah, yaitu kurang latihan, kurangnya kosa kata, manajemen waktu yang buruk, merasa gugup, dll. Tercatat bahwa mereka yang memiliki nilai masalah minimal lebih tinggi daripada mereka yang memiliki berbagai masalah..

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English has become one of the important abilities to possess. It is because English is an international language. Further, English is also mentioned as a global language. It is the languages that most widely spoken by people all over the world. In addition, many countries make

English as their second language. However, whatever good you are at speaking English, but when your status is still English as Foreign Language (EFL) learner, your ability or capability in English still needs to be tested with English standardized test which is called Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL). TOEFL is the most well known test used in many countries all over the world. Clark (2014) mentioned that based on ETS (Educational Testing Service), the TOEFL test has been used worldwide by more thousands colleges, universities and agencies in more than hundreds countries in the world. Nowadays, English proficiency test is taken not only on purpose of pursuing study abroad but also as a prerequisite to complete college, especially in institutions. Further, it is also used in the admissions process of applicants to get a job especially in companies where English is used to communicate.

There are three formats of TOEFL test, i.e. Internet-based TOEFL (IBT), Paper-based TOEFL (PBT), and computer-based (CBT) in which the three of them can be used as both a requirement for students' admission to study abroad and as measuring the level of English proficiency. TOEFL is also available in the form of an Institutional Testing Program (ITP) for students with intermediate and advanced levels of English. In Indonesia itself, ITP is the most common used test for college students as the requirement of the graduation. By this fact, it can be assumed that Learning ITP TOEFL is a must for students if they would like to continue their study at a prominent university and if they expect to earn a university degree.

TOEFL as an English proficiency test has a very high level of difficulty. It also prosecutes adequate mastery of English and the application of appropriate strategies in answering questions. Based on (Wati & Ridha, 2019) in order to master the skills tested in the TOEFL, sufficient input is needed by the test takers. There are three skills that are measured, i.e. listening, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. To be successful in TOEFL test is not an easy task but it needs a habit and continuous practice. People need to get used to the test. This is because the three skills that are tested in TOEFL test have its own challenge and difficulty. In addition, there are many cases happened where people who have good speaking skill and understand grammar well but when it comes to TOEFL test, not few of them could not made a maximum score or even failed the test. This means to be successful in TOEFL test, it needs more than just a good speaking skills and grammar.

The first part of TOEFL test is listening section. In this part, the test takers are challenged to identify the features of oral texts. Listening questions in TOEFL is divided into three parts, i.e. part A, with short dialogues consisting 30 questions, Part B with longer dialogues consisting of 8 questions, and part C, a lecture with 12 questions. In all parts of these sections, the conversations and dialogues are not played twice. Therefore, in order to able to choose one out of four possible answers the test takers need to listen to the recordings very carefully and attentively. According to Hamouda (2013), listening comprehension is an interactive process in which learners are involved in constructing meaning. Learners who have a good listening comprehension skill will be able to get involved in the communication better compared to those who do not. The statement above is in line with what has been stated by Sa'diyah (2016, 53) that having a bad listening comprehension skill will drive learners to ineffective communication. Based on Sa'diyah (2016, 54), there are at least six strategies that learners need to implement, i.e. memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social.

The second part of TOEFL test is Structure & Written Expression which aims to measure the ability of test participants to understand the structure and expression of Standard English writing (Putra, Lubis & Siregar, 2020). Further, the challenge in this section is that the test taker has to be able to identify the elements of sentences, i.e. subject, predicate, complement. Priyasudiarja (2019) as cited from Fitria (2021) also mentioned that SWE TOEFL aims to test the test takers' knowledge about the use of correct grammar in English.

The last part of TOEFL test is reading which is designed to measure the ability of test takers to understand short readings with topics and language styles. Based on what has been stated by (Brown 2004: 205-206) that the test takers should be able to identify some feature such us main idea, expression or idiom, inference, grammatical features, details, unstated detail, supporting

ideas, etc. In addition, to be able to complete the task above, the test taker also need to have knowledge about reading strategies, models, as well as activities before, during, and after reading. In order to be good and effective readers, readers have to be aware of strategies. Strategic readers actively construct meaning as they read and interact with the text. They set purpose for reading, select methods of realizing these purposes, monitor, and repair their own comprehension as they read, and evaluate the complete task (Gardner, 1983 in Nordin 2013: 470). Strategic reader also creates, examines, and broadens meaning before, during, and after reading for a selection of text. This suggests that one needs to be a strategic reader to be an effective reader (Nordin 2013). On the other hand, poor readers tend to initiate reading without thinking on the process of reading or the subject matter, omit or pay less attention to meanings of unfamiliar but crucial words, and do not incorporate prior knowledge in attempting to understand the text they are reading.

With the standard and level of difficulties put in every single question of TOEFL test, certainly make TOEFL challenging and difficult for the test takers. In order to be ready in taking the test, the test takers have to prepare themselves for months and even to spend their money in order to get special TOEFL training class. However, even after spending much time and money for the preparation, there are still not a few of them failed in the test. There are many problems faced by the test takers during TOEFL test such a like what has been revealed by (Mahmud 2014) that problems often faced during the test are fewer basic skills, less practice, less motivation, and students individual differences. Problems during taking TOEFL test are not only faced by non-English department students but also by students who takes the English major in the collage. It is such an irony when for them to spend four years studying English but they still failed in TOEFL test.

Because the test is measuring many skills of English Language such as listening, reading, grammar, writing, vocabulary and error analysis, it is considered difficult for many students. There are many researches inspired by the phenomena that happened related to the TOEFL test. In 2016, as what have been stated by Halim & Ardiningtiyas in their research in 2018, 35 % of students of English Development Program (EDP) of STKIP-YPUP were informed failed in the TOEFL test. Further, another study also was conducted by Samad & Fitriani (2016), who explored the importance of English proficiency in facing ASEAN Economic Community. The findings of this study were most students at Syiah Kuala University failed to achieve the required score to complete their study. They found that out of thousands TOEFL test takers, only 53 students or 2.77% were able to achieve a TOEFL score of 450 – 497. In short, the result of this study indicated that most students at Syiah Kuala University still have not been able to achieve the TOEFL score that has been set by the authority. This kind of problem also happened with English Department students of Mandalika University of Education, in which it was found that from ten test takers, only one person who succeed to achieve high score 500.

Based on a phenomena investigated above, it seems that TOEFL test is a serious challenge for EFL learners. Therefore, this research is inspired to investigate more problems during test. It is expected that by revealing more problems, it can give benefits for the test takers and also the trainers. By being aware of the problems the test takers will have more insight in preparing themselves for the test. In addition, by being aware of the problems during TOEFL test, the trainers are also expected to find more innovation in their teaching strategies in order to solve the problems.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODS**

This research was qualitative research using phenomenological research design. Qualitative research means to explore and to understand the meaning of individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell 2009). Phenomenological research is a type of research aims to describe, explain, and interpret a phenomenon, situation or experience by identifying the meaning of these as understood by the participants, often at an individual as well as a group level (Marshal and Rossman, 2016, 16-17). This research was in attempt to investigate problems encountered by the test takers during TOEFL test.

The population of this study was twenty undergraduate students in English Department of Mandalika University of Education (UNDIKMA). Those twenty students had taken TOEFL test in the Language Centre of UNDIKMA as the prerequisite of completing their undergraduate study. The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling technique. The reason on using this sampling technique is because the researcher wanted to find out the knowledge and the experience of the students. Based on (Ball, 1990) cited form cohen, manion and marison (2018), purposive sampling is used to access ‘knowledge people’,i.e. those who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues, maybe by virtue of their professional role, power, access to networks, expertise or experience. Out of twenty students, the researcher was only able to take ten students as the samples of the study. This was because the other ten students were not available to be part of the research.

Instrument used in this research was in the form of interview sheet. The type of interview used was semi structure interview. The reason why researcher used semi structure interview is because researcher wanted to be more flexible in collecting the data. The interview was done twice during the research, first interview aimed to find out information about problem encountered by students and to know their score. The second interview aimed to find out a specific problem, strategy, or way of students during the test in which in the second interview, researcher only focused on two students who got the highest score and the lowest score. During the interview, researcher also used another helper instrument such like audio recorder which was useful for researcher to prevent potential loss of data.

The data obtained from interview was analysed through three steps suggested by Miles, Hubarman, and Saldana (2014) namely data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusion. In the time of condensation, researcher was listening again the data from audio recorder while transforming the data into written-up field notes or transcriptions. After that, researcher proceeded to select the data that was considered deal with the data needed in which it was related to the problem encountered during the test. In the second session of data analysis which was data display, researcher displayed the data in form of table by some classification, i.e. problem faced by high achievement students, and low achievement students. In the last part of data analysis, researcher concluded and categorized the level of the students based on their achievement and their problem during the test.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TOEFL is a standardized test to measure English language capability for foreign students, in which inside of TOEFL test, students are challenged to answer three skills such as listening, structure and reading. The table below shows the students score and problem encountered during the test.

**Table 1. Score & Problem**

No	Students Name	Problem		Score			Score & Category	
		Other Problem	Vocabulary					
1.	Maf	Less practice	✓	32	36	39	323	Fail
2.	Lk	Less practice	✓	48	63	35	486	Pass
3.	Bp	Time management	✓	35	31	30	320	Fail
4.	Osj	Unclear audio	✓	37	29	29	306	Fail
5.	Mh	Hard to understand context	✓	45	40	41	420	Fail
6.	Sw	Lack of strategy Nervous Less practice	✓	45	36	28	490	Fail
7.	Nf	Less practice	✓	35	55	59	390	Pass
8.	Npy	Less practice	✓	50	57	49	520	Pass
9.	Ms	Less practice	✓	31	47	28	353	Fail
10.	J	Less practice	✓	41	42	32	383	Fail

The table shows that in term of vocabulary problem, there were no differences among the students, in which in that case all respondents were confirmed having problem on vocabulary mastery. During the interview, they admitted that they could not understand the listening test maximally because of their limited words. There were some topics of discussion during the listening and they were not having enough views and knowledge about some new words and term. It also happened during answering the other skills such as structure and reading. In addition, because of limited vocabularies, the some of the test takers also admitted that it was even hard for them to understand the questions of the TOEFL test in which this statement was investigated during the interview:

“I think my problem is I don’t have enough vocabularies. It was hard to understand some words and difficult to understand the questions.”

There were some differences between the high achievement students and the low achievement students. It can be seen that mostly the high achievement students faced minimum problem during the test. The high achievement students or the students with pass category, for example “NPY” with 520 score, “NF” with 490 score, and “LK” with 486 score, were confirmed having less problem which were vocabulary mastery and less practice. On the other hand, the low achievement students or students with fail category were confirmed having various problems during the listening test. However, there were also two students who were in fail category admitted that they only have problems with vocabulary mastery and less practice. This finding shows that there was unbalance between score and a number of problems admitted by the students.

From the table above, it also can be seen a significant differences between the high and the low achievement students. “NPY” the student with the highest score was found facing minimum problem during the test. In addition, the type of score made was also quite high in average, 50 for listening section, 57 for structure and written expression, and 49 for reading section. Meanwhile, “OSJ” the student with the lowest score was found in a group of those who faced various problems scored relative low which was 37 for listening section, 29 for structure and written expression, and 29 for reading section.

There are four categories of TOEFL ITP scores based on CEFR level, those are A2 (basic user with score 337), B1 (independent user with score 460), B2 (independent user with score 543), and C1 (proficient user with score 627). In basic user, the test taker should be able to make score 38 in listening comprehension, 31 in structure and written expression, and 32 in reading comprehensions. Meanwhile, in order to be in B1 level, the test taker should be able to make at least 47 scores in listening, 48 in reading comprehension, and 43 in structure and written expression. For B2 level, the test takers should at least make score 54 in listening, 56 in reading comprehension, and 53 in structure and written expression, an in order to be in C1 level, the test takers should be able to make score above 60 for in skills. Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that most of respondents in this research are still in A2 level or basic user.

Due to various problems faced during the test and lack of knowledge of English, ten respondents in this research scored relative low in the test. If we take a look at to the score of those test takers who faced various problems during the test, it indicated that all of them score very low. Based on this finding, researcher claimed that problems affect the result of the test. For examples, in listening section, four students with various problems scored in between 35 to 45 which meant they only could answer 11 to 21 questions correctly, in structure and written expression section, their score was in between 31 to 40 in which that meant they only answered 5 to 16 questions correctly, and in reading section, they only scored in between 29 to 42 in which that meant they were only able to make 10 to 21 correct answers out of 50 questions. By looking at the score distributed on the table, it can be indicated that to reach 500 score is still hard for most of the test takers.

Based on the table, researcher also made some disclaimer as follows; from the three skills being tested, structure and written expression section was the hardest part of TOEFL test, followed by reading section in the second position and listening section as the easiest. Researcher come up with this assumption because of in the structure section, the lowest score was 29 which mean there

were only 5 questions answered correctly by the test taker. Further, in the reading section, it also was 29 score as the lowest which meant there were only 5 questions answered correctly. The last section was listening. In this part, it was 35 as the lowest score which mean only 11 questions were answered correctly. However, another research should be conducted to test this disclaimer. On the other hand, during the interview, most of the test taker revealed mostly their problems was on listening section. By this fact, researcher claim that listening might be not the hardest part of TOEFL but the complex process during listening was the key factor that made it difficult. The complex process that is happening during listening makes it becomes difficult for EFL Learners. During listening, learners have to focus on the oral input form the sound, grammatical structures, stress and intonation, prior knowledge vocabulary, and also to the other use of linguistic, paralinguistic, or even nonlinguistic clues in contextual utterance, Saraswaty (2018, 140). Listening is not only challenging but also takes most part of human communication. A research done by Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) revealed that during communication, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9%.

Some research also revealed that the most difficult part of TOEFL test is Structure and Written Expression. A study conducted by Hambali (2008) revealed that students still have many problems in answering section two of the ITP test. Likewise, the findings by Abboud and Hussein (2011) confirmed that more than fifty percent of students said that the grammar questions were difficult. In addition, Wright and Sukur (2012) also strongly confirm that Structure and Written Expression is one big common problem for students in the TOEFL ITP test. Mahmud (2014) in his study found that most of his respondents encountered serious problems in answering the structure and written expression section. The part two of TOEFL test became so difficult because that is the skills that challenge the test takers to identify many elements of sentences such as identifying verbs, identifying the correct word order of subject and verb in a noun clause, and identifying words with derivation and function (Ananda 2016).

From the result also could be determined that the most influence problem on every skill tested in TOEFL was vocabulary. What lead researcher into this assumption were because of all respondents admitted that they were lack of vocabulary. Vocabulary is an essential basic skill in learning English. The role of vocabulary in language learning is very important. Wahyuni, Asrori, and Purwantoro (2017, 2) that says vocabulary is a key aspect of language learning and will obstruct students' chances to speak, listen, read, and write. It meant that having wide range of vocabulary gave big contribution to the success of the test takers. However, memorizing vocabularies could not help the test takers maximally but the test takers also have to know how the words are pronounced and also aware of the class of words, whether it is noun, verbs, adjective, adverb, etc. Finally, by memorizing many words and being aware of how they are pronounced, learners will be able to catch the oral input during listening and by having many vocabularies, learners will be able to speak on variety of topic, learner will be able to understand different kinds of reading objects, and able to minimize the wrong spelling. Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that without adequate vocabulary, it will be hard for the test taker to score maximal in the test.

In this research there were 7 problems investigated, those are time management, unclear audio, hard to understand context, lack of strategy, feeling nervous, less practice, and vocabulary mastery. A research conducted by Mahmud (2014) revealed four problems encountered by students during taking TOEFL test, i.e. fewer basic skills, less practice, less motivation, and students individual differences such as age and social-status. Meanwhile, Hardin (2014) on his research concluded some common problems in the reading section of TOEFL test, i.e. time management, missing keyword, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Based on the two previous researches above, it can be seen that one problem investigated in this research such as less practice had been mentioned by Mahmud (2014) and the other two problems such as time management and unfamiliar vocabulary also had been mentioned by Hardin (2014).

Problems occurred during the test is not only because of the internal factors such as the low knowledge about English but also the external factors such as technics and the facility of the test.

As what have been stated by the respondents the audio was not clear. In listening for example, a research done by Fitria (2021) stated that there are two factors that can affect listening ability, i.e. external & internal factors. External factor are accent, speed, intonation, pause in pronunciation, diction, sentence structure, and audio interruption. Meanwhile, internal factors are having previous experience, lack of practice, and limited time. Therefore, the test takers need to be well prepared before taking the test.

Having a good knowledge of English is not enough to make the test takers successful in the TOEFL test. In order to pass the test, the test takers also need to know about test taking strategies. By being aware of test taking strategies, the test takers will have more confidence on working on the test (green, 2007). It is because every single question of TOEFL has its own goal and target in terms of measuring the language proficiency of the people. In addition, the test takers need to have strategies in answering every section of the TOEFL questions. Strategy is one of factors that can help a test taker successful during the test. The more strategies used the bigger possibility for a test taker to success in TOEFL test. Nurhayatai & Nehe (2016, 11) stated that in order to make a good score of TOEFL, a test taker needs extra knowledge of English and proper strategies in taking the test.

Feeling nervous during taking TOEFL test is also a big factor that can influence the result of the test. This kind of problem can be categorized as anxiety cases. Baidah (2019) stated that there are two types of anxiety, i.e. tension worry over English listening and lack of confidence which is usually occur when people are facing an important event, such a like an exam, job interview, or when they notice some risk or danger. In this case, students were feeling nervous because they were lack of confidence in listening. TOEFL test as what have been explained earlier has an international standard and certain rules to follow in its process. During the test, the instructor usually play strict role in order to make sure all the test taker work based on the instruction. Those who did not obey the rules and instruction during the test would be disqualified. This situation might cause the test takers nervous during the test. Further, during the interview, all respondents admitted that they were lack of practice and not well prepared. In this situation, researcher claimed that the raise of anxiety such as feeling nervous during the test might be caused by the bad habit of the test takers who come to the test without well preparation and practice.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

TOEFL test is still challenging for EFL learners. In order to make a good TOEFL score, the test taker must have extra knowledge of English and being aware of many strategies in answering the questions. Moreover, TOEFL test is a kind of test that cannot be prepared only in short time but it needs continuous process. In order to pass the TOEFL test, the test takers need to have enough practice, to be well prepared, to enrich their vocabulary, to learn how to manage their time well, to try to get used to the test. By being used to the test and by being aware of what skills are being tested, the test taker will be able to score higher. The challenges in TOEFL are not only from the skills being tasted but also some rules that has to be followed by the test takers. This is why the anxiety cases rose during the test. Based on the result and discussion, it can be concluded that there are many problems encountered during the test caused the majority of the test takers failed, in which those problems occurred because of they were lack of practice and not well prepared. In this study, the researcher noticed that the score made by the test takers seemed to be in line with the number of problem faced by each of the test taker. Those who made a better score were confirmed faced less problem, meanwhile those with low score were confirmed having various problem. By this fact, researcher adjusted that the score is in line with the score made and problems is in line with the strategies used during the test.

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