

# An Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Learning TOEFL at Seventh Semester of Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar

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**An Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Learning TOEFL  
at Seventh Semester of Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar**

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#### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the students' difficulties in conducting the TOEFL test in the skill of structure and written expressions. Descriptive qualitative was implemented in this research with students of the seventh semester of English Department of Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar as the data. The result was the most difficult skills faced by the students were skill 25, it was the use parallel structure with paired conjunction, with only 3 students. Some factors causing the skill to be the most difficult was students lost their focus in managing time and they were lack of knowledge and training in practising the section of structure (grammar).

#### Keywords

Difficulty, TOEFL, structure and written expressions, skill

#### Abstrak

Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menyelidiki kesulitan siswa dalam melakukan tes TOEFL dalam keterampilan struktur dan ekspresi tertulis. Kualitatif deskriptif digunakan dalam penelitian ini dimana mahasiswa semester tujuh Prodi Bahasa Inggris Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar sebagai datanya. Hasilnya keterampilan yang paling sulit dihadapi siswa adalah keterampilan 25 yaitu penggunaan struktur paralel dengan konjungsi berpasangan, dengan hanya 3 siswa. Beberapa faktor yang menyebabkan keterampilan menjadi yang paling sulit adalah siswa kehilangan fokus dalam mengatur waktu dan kurangnya pengetahuan dan pelatihan dalam berlatih bagian struktur (tata bahasa).

#### Kata Kunci

Kesulitan, TOEFL, struktur dan ekspresi tertulis, keterampilan

#### Introduction

English is used as a foreign language in Indonesia, but it is not a second language (Yabie et al., 2021). When it comes to usage, second languages (SL) and foreign languages (FL) differ from one another; SL is commonly used by people and coexists with the national tongue, whereas FL is not frequently used among the country's native speakers. In other words, it has never been approved to coexist with the national language as an official language.

**Test of English as a Foreign Language**, or **TOEFL**. Students who are applying to American universities typically take this standardized academic English test. Some universities outside of the United States recognize the TOEFL as evidence of English proficiency. More than 7,000 colleges and institutions are spread across 130 nations, including some of the top universities

in the world like those in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. This test is essential not just to register for classes at the university but also to apply for jobs with government organizations, businesses, and to register for scholarships. According to (Fitria, 2021), the TOEFL was a requirement in many countries for receiving a scholarship or admission to a university. The TOEFL exam is a requirement for graduation at certain Indonesian universities (Soali & Pujiani, 2021).

Additionally, TOEFL is now one of the prerequisites for admission to institutions in Indonesia (Etika, 2020). The TOEFL tests language proficiency in both academic and professional contexts. These fields have been bundled and segmented. The TOEFL exam typically has three portions and 140 questions in each. Three components of the TOEFL test include listening comprehension, written expression and structure, and reading comprehension. The first section of the TOEFL exam is always Listening Comprehension, which is divided into Parts A, B, and C. The next section is Structure and Written Expression, which is divided into Parts A and B. The final section is Reading Comprehension (Sari et al., 2021).

Stirling (2017) adds that this listening portion assesses the ability to comprehend real speech patterns employed in both official and informal settings, including academic ones. Comprehend what you're hearing (50 questions, 30-40 minutes) as per (Fitria & Prastiwi, 2020). This segment puts our ability to listen to English conversations and monologues to the test. Short discussions, lengthy conversations, and speeches all make up these conversations. Structure and written expression (40 questions, 25 minutes).

At various universities in Indonesia, including Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar specifically in the English Education Department, the TOEFL test is currently one of the prerequisites to pass the undergraduate thesis (skripsi) examination. Grammar and Structure Score was the lowest score when TOEFL requirements were implemented in the English Education Department, which presented a challenge for test takers (Fleckenstein et al., 2020); (Hidri & Pileh Roud, 2020). Kim (2017) defined that sentence structure in English grammar refers to how words, phrases, and clauses are arranged (Llosa & Malone, 2017). The subject and the predicate are the two elements that each sentence is built around, even if the sentence structure may ultimately consist of many other pieces. A word or combination of words that serve as a noun serves as the subject. The predicate, on the other hand, must at least be a verb and may also include objects and verbal modifiers (Hampp et al., 2021); (Ling, 2017).

The Educational Testing Service, which administers the exam, divides it into four sections: Listening, Structure (which gauges a student's proficiency with language and mechanics), Reading, and Writing. The Listening, Structure, Written Expression, and Last Reading sections of the TOEFL are the three sections (Ubaedillah, 2020). There are 50 numbers in listening, 40 numbers in structure and written expression, and 50 numbers in reading. (Slamet & Sulistyaningsih, 2021) explained that a structure begins at number 1 and continues through number 15, while written expressions begin at number 16 and continue through number 40 (Masfufah, 2018). Although there are only 40 numbers in the structure and textual phrases, it should be completed in 25 minutes. Your comprehension and application of formal written English are put to the test in the Structure part. In the TOEFL test's Structure section, you will respond to two different sorts of questions. The first kind of inquiry is an incomplete sentence

with four options for additional words or phrases. In the second kind of question, you must pick out a word or phrase that is used in an untrue sentence. The two types of questions are scattered throughout the Structure part of the computer-based TOEFL test (Destiyanti et al., 2021).

Several TOEFL class participants were interviewed by the researcher in this instance. The first was Selly, who said that assessing written expression errors was difficult in the section on structure and written expression. She was unable to recognize and appropriately evaluate the faults that each sentence on the test contains. The second was Kriswan, who noted that he, too, could not fully grasp how to identify the flaws and choose the appropriate response to satisfy the requirements of each sentence. The TOEFL lecturer was also interviewed by the researcher. Mrs. Yanti Kristina Sinaga, S.Pd., M.Pd., gave the same response. She claimed that the students' writing expression and sentence organization were still weak. To achieve a high score on this second segment, they needed to study more and be aware of the best ways to respond to the questions.

Based on interviews the researcher conducted with a number of TOEFL test takers as well as Mrs. Yanti Kristina Sinaga, S.Pd., M.Pd., a lecturer in the TOEFL class about students' struggles with the structure and written expression section, it can be said that students struggle with the section because they struggle to understand the test's structure and to analyze written expression sentences. Since the students are still struggling with the structure and written expression segment, as evidenced by the interviews the researcher has conducted with them, the researcher is interested in understanding their problems. In conclusion, the TOEFL class students, who are the focus of this research, need to study more about how to use certain tactics to master the questions in the structure and written expression segment.

Some previous studies were conducted related to the analysis of TOEFL test related to the skill of structure and written expressions. One of them was (Slamet & Sulistyaningsih, 2021) in their research entitled: Students' difficulties in answering 'structure and written expression' TOEFL-like at STKIP PGRI Sidoarjo. This study investigated the types of TOEFL-like questions that were challenging, as well as the problems students were having with the "Structure and Written Expression" section. The subjects of this study were the batch 5 Master of English Education (S2 MPBI) students at STKIP PGRI Sidoarjo who took a placement test resembling the TOEFL in order to enroll in the master's program. This study used a descriptive qualitative methodology. Results from an interview and a test similar to the TOEFL served as the instruments. The data were taken from Deborah Phillips' 2003 book Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL. According to the findings, 18 items (or 45%) are classified as "difficult." Meanwhile, 22 items (or 55%) are classified as "very difficult." The outcomes demonstrated that students found it challenging to respond to the placement test's "Structure and Written Expression" question.

From the previous study above, there are some similarities and differences between both studies. The similarities are on the section of TOEFL test, structure and written expressions and also analyse its difficulties. But there are differences to both studies. Previous studies used the data of magister students while this research will use the students of undergraduate program.

Based on the explanations above, the researchers are interested to conduct this research with the aim to do more analysis related to the TOEFL in the section of structure and written expressions

### Method

This research used a qualitative approach and the method of document analysis in order to accomplish its goals. It sought to look into and pinpoint English learners' problems with certain parts of writing expression and structure on the ITP TOEFL test. The materials could be understood and evaluated using a qualitative approach, allowing the results to be verbally presented. Because each participant or informant had a unique experience due to diverse phenomena, this research's findings could not be generalized because this would have altered how the data were interpreted. The study was carried out at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, located on Jl. Sangnauluh No. 4, Pematang Siantar, North Sumatera, Indonesia. The study's participants were English students taking the TOEFL exam during their seventh semester at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar with total 40 students, starting in October 2022 and lasting until December 2022.

The following steps were taken by the researchers as part of their data collection methodology: In order to conduct their research in a TOEFL class, the researchers first sought approval from the chairperson of the English department and the head of LPPM. Second, the researchers got together and asked the TOEFL lecturer to collect the data. Third, the answer sheets were used to compile the data. The data was then copied and submitted to perform the analysis. Last but no least was the data analysis steps which covered:

1. Conducting an analysis of the data after gathering it.
2. Starting the process of data analysis and interpretation.
3. Creating and reviewing all the research-related documents, such as TOEFL test answer sheets and question sheets,
4. Reading every document and comparing the students' responses to the studied items.
5. Creating a few codes for each feature of written language and structure.
6. Clearly describing the characteristics of each evaluated item and outlining the challenges
7. Dividing the total number of questions into categories based on features of written style and structure
8. Drawing the research's findings with extensive description will enable the researcher to make her point to the reader clear.



## Results and Discussion

### Results

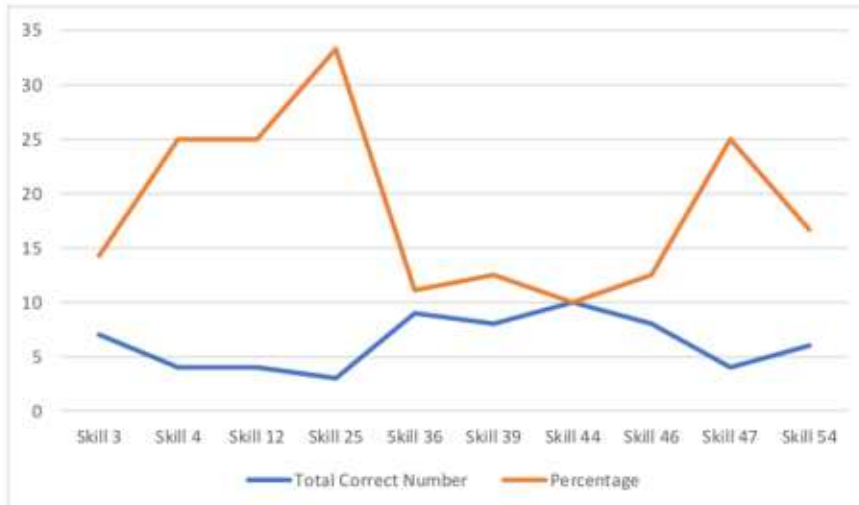


Figure 1. The Most Difficult Skills in Structure and Written Expressions

From the figure above, the researchers claimed that the most difficult skills faced by the students were Skill 25 (use parallel structure with paired conjunction) with only 3 students; followed by 3 skills with only 4 students able to answer, namely skill 4 (be careful of present participle), skill 12 (use adjective clause connector/subject correctly) and skill 47 (use adjectives after linking verbs); skill 54 (Make articles agree with noun) with only 6 students; Skill 3 (be careful with appositives) with only 7 students; 2 skills with only 8 students are able to answer them well, they are skill 39 (use the correct singular or plural noun) and skill 46 (use basic adjectives and adverbs correctly). Next, skill 36 with only 9 students able to answer it about (use the correct tense with will and would), and last is skill 44 about distinguish possessive adjectives and pronoun with 10 students who are able to answer it well.

### Discussion

Referred to the research findings above, the researchers would like to discuss some of analysis on the findings. From the data above, skills about conjunction is discussed in this research regarded as the most difficult skills faced by the students in the TOEFL ITP test. Participants made errors despite the fact that conjunctions are frequently thought of as one of the simpler grammar topics. Some participants admitted they were unaware that the questions involved conjunctions. Despite the fact that this study did not specifically examine the details of the participants' conjunction errors. Here, the researchers found some factors that causing the skills to be the most difficult.

#### *Losing Focus to Manage Time*

Participants admitted that they ran out of time before they could respond to those questions. They admitted that the time allotted for them to select the answers to 40 questions in 25 minutes was extremely constrained. They should therefore practice time management skills before the

test. Due to the participants having just finished the first section test on Listening Comprehension, it is therefore difficult to effectively manage the time. It's possible that some of them were still attempting to finish and respond to the remaining questions in the first section, using the time for structure and written expression.

#### ***Lack of Knowledge and Training to Practice The Grammar***

Participants (students) admitted that when they wanted to take the TOEFL test, they did not practice learning TOEFL well. They didn't study or practice before taking the test. It takes practice for students to become familiar with the questions so they can properly get ready for the test. As a result, every participant admitted that they lacked the necessary grammar knowledge and skills. They also claimed that although they were familiar with the theory of grammar, they were unable to solve TOEFL questions when they were given them.

#### **Conclusion**

Several conclusions can be made after analyzing the data in the findings section above. The results of this study suggested that English Education students urgently need to practice more for the TOEFL test's structure and written expression sections. They will learn time management skills in addition to grammar by repeatedly practicing. Although the English Department's curriculum includes a subject about the TOEFL, researchers believe it falls short and that the campus should offer a course to better prepare students since the TOEFL is a crucial requirement for them to graduate. This is done to improve their comprehension of the TOEFL, especially the written and structure sections.

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