


## Problems in Reading Comprehension of TOEFL Prediction Test

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\* Yuliana Friska 

Universitas Pamulang

### A B S T R A C T

TOEFL is a standardized test that has been used as requirement to graduate from university. However, students frequently struggle to pass the TOEFL reading test. Therefore, this study was aimed to identify (1) which sub-skills were the most challenging for students in reading comprehension and (2) factors affecting the students' difficulty in answering the reading comprehension section of the TOEFL test. This study used a mixed-methods design in which data were collected using tests and semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed through descriptive statistic, data reduction, data display, and conclusion. The test results showed that the most challenging problems in reading comprehension were vocabulary (25 %), unstated detail question (20%), stated detail question (18%), pronoun referent question (15%), inference question (12%), and main idea question (10%). Moreover, the interview results revealed that lack of vocabulary, slow reading, and lack of strategy were factors affecting students' difficulty. Therefore, TOEFL teachers and trainers are strongly advised to devote more time to prepare for the topics with the highest percentage of errors.

**Keywords:** TOEFL prediction test, reading comprehension, sub-skills

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## INTRODUCTION

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) has been rapidly expanding and widely used in higher education, including the introduction of TOEFL into curricula and the use of TOEFL scores as college admissions or degrees, necessitates further discussion. It is Improving English for Foreigners Learners understand and overcome difficulties in answering tests. "The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)" is a test administered to measure the English proficiency of non-native speakers (Andrade et al., 2014). In addition, Abboud and Hussein report that "more than 5,000 colleges, universities and licensing institutions in 90 countries accept TOEFL scores." The international growth of English and English proficiency exams like the TOEFL have become a part of the globalization phenomena in the context of Asia (Abboud & Hussein, 2011). This has led to English becoming more widely used and seen as an emerging 'Asian language' (Kirkpatrick, 2011). From the illustration above, mastering TOEFL shows learners good knowledge of English and also open a great way for them to study abroad or further study in Indonesia. Each university has its own minimum score to be passed.

A TOEFL test can be used to assess a foreign language learner's capacity for reading comprehension. A standardized test called the TOEFL, or "Test of English as a Foreign Language", is used to assess a non-native speaker's proficiency in the language. To apply for

\*Corresponding Author: Yuliana Friska, e-mail: [dosen01381@unpam.ac.id](mailto:dosen01381@unpam.ac.id)

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scholarships to continue studying in English-speaking nations, TOEFL is now required. To apply for a job opportunity, TOEFL is also required. Since so many domestic universities now employ the TOEFL as a graduation requirement, the use of this standardized test has increased.

Most universities, particularly in Indonesia, use the TOEFL Prediction Test, also known as the TOEFL-Equivalent, which has a format identical to the TOEFL ITP (Mahmud, 2014). Universities provide TOEFL Prediction at a lower cost than TOEFL ITP, and it is solely utilized on campus for things like entrance, scholarships, and graduation. Even though the TOEFL forecast is only used locally, it is nonetheless decisive, and its significance is unquestionable. Students must consequently obtain the minimal test score needed by the university.

There is, nevertheless, a significant gap between expectations and reality. Many EFL students continue to perform poorly on the TOEFL test. The majority of students said that part three of the TOEFL test, reading comprehension, is one of their largest challenges. Before graduating, students at Universitas Pamulang must follow a set of rules. Before beginning the research report session, students must first complete the TOEFL test as part of their study program. If students expect to continue with their research report session, they must achieve at least a 311 score for non-English majors and 475 for English major. That implies students must pass the TOEFL standard score, and if they do not, they must retake the TOEFL until they reach the minimum score. As a result, the students will face a new difficulty.

Much literature has been provided definitions of reading. The interaction between the reader and the text can be characterized as reading (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2011), which contributes to the automation and fluency of reading (Kuhn et al., 2010). In education, reading is crucial because it allows students to gain knowledge (Afflerbach et al., 2013). To acquire knowledge, students need to go through a process of meaning construction (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Understanding is the result of the meaning-making process. Students can only comprehend texts if they comprehend the information contained inside the text (Friska, 2018). As a result, reading comprehension is defined as the ability to understand what is read in written words and texts (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Hesham Suleiman Alyousef, 2006; Hirsch, 2003).

A study of Samad discovered that many students from Syiah Kuala University did not meet the minimum requirements for graduation. Only 53 students were able to acquire a TOEFL score of 450-497 or 2.77 percent of those who took the 1916 TOEFL test (Samad et al., 2017). These findings suggest that the majority of Syiah Kuala University students are still unable to meet TOEFL criteria. Furthermore, research conducted by (Abboud & Hussein, 2011) revealed that test participants' difficulties in reading comprehension sections of TOEFL was related to their limited time on the exam and a lack of understanding in reading components.

According to Jiang, 50 multiple-choice questions in section three of TOEFL test comprise the reading comprehension component, with 8-11 questions for each paragraph of 200-300 words. The questions range, but they typically concentrate on the main ideas, explicit or implicit information, vocabulary, pronouns, and inference. To avoid revealing bias for certain themes, each passage's topic is composed of a variety of subjects (Jiang, 2012).

### **Main idea**

Since it is the most significant component that expresses the author's aim, the main idea can be separated from all other paragraphs (Elfiondri et al., 2020). Examinees are typically questioned on the "subject," "title," "principal idea," or "main idea" on the PBT TOEFL.

### **Stated Detail**

Instead of having the examinees define every item of information in a paragraph, they are asked to locate a single piece of information. The answers share the same concepts as the

section, even if they may not always use the same words, and the questions are presented in a manner that correlates to how they occur in the text (Phillips, 2003). Test takers can review the questions after reading the passage in order to be able to respond to them (Cohen & Upton, 2007).

#### **Unstated Detail**

The test takers must locate information that the text does not explicitly state. According to the passage, misleading information is the appropriate response for this sort of questions. To properly respond to these questions, careful reading is needed (Phillips, 2003).

#### **Pronoun Referent**

The test takers must identify the specified pronoun of a particular term (Phillips, 2003). The author uses various references to increase diversity in word choice. The pronoun itself may appear in a different sentence, before or after the antecedent is mentioned. In this type of question, transitional and connecting words might be utilized as hints.

#### **Inference**

The examinees are required to infer information from a passage in this type of inquiry. When a question contains the terms "inferred," "implied," "likely," or "probably," it is one of these (Phillips, 2003). Sharp reading comprehension, prior knowledge, and effective remembering skills are required for this question. According to (Singer & Alexander, 2017), the response to this type of question is similar with from the main idea question.

#### **Vocabulary**

About 20% of the TOEFL test's total questions are of this type, indicating the importance of reading comprehension and vocabulary development (Qian & Schedl, 2004). Because vocabulary and comprehension connected each other, vocabulary is a critical part of reading. In tests, uncommon words are frequently utilized. Vocabulary has been identified as a reading issue in prior research (Alqahtani, 2015). ESL students require about 9,000 words to understand a reading book and 7,000 words to understand a conversation (Nation, 2006). The typical EFL student's vocabulary ranges from 1,000 to 4,000 words. The greatest method for remembering new terms is to locate them repeatedly in various books and subject areas. Utilizing "intensive reading" might hence increase vocabulary size (Cobb, 2007).

Numerous previous research focused on TOEFL General test and reading part questions Test. However, this study is focused on identifying the most difficult sub-skills of section 3 TOEFL prediction test. In addition, this study is also focus on the factors affecting the students' difficulty in answering the reading comprehension section of the TOEFL prediction test. This study is expected to bring contributions to English teachers and learners. Specifically, this research is expected to be able to help students to improve their TOEFL scores. Additionally, this study is intended to add to the theory around the difficulties students encounter when taking the TOEFL prediction test reading comprehension section and to serve as a resource for additional study by other researchers. Therefore, this study aimed to answer these research questions: 1. which sub-skills were the most challenging for students in reading comprehension of TOEFL prediction test, 2. factors affecting the students' difficulty in answering the reading comprehension section of the TOEFL test.

## **METHOD**

This study used a mixed-methods design in which data were collected using tests and semi-structured interviews (Teng et al., 2020). The quantitative part of this study used a simple statistical form to analyze TOEFL test scores and can be classified as a descriptive statistical design (Brown & Bailey, 2008; Larson-Hall & Plonsky, 2015; Roever & Phakiti, 2017). Tests given to 32 participants were used in this study to find the most difficult topics in reading comprehension section. All participants were from different majors in Universitas Pamulang which are randomly-chosen. The minimum TOEFL score was 311 for university

graduation requirements in non-English major students. The test consisted of 50 questions with 55 minutes time. Counting the percentage of errors of each sub-skill by using formula:

$$P = \frac{f}{N} \times 100\%$$

“In which:

P = percentage of errors in each topic

f = the number of wrong answers in each topic

N = total number of all wrong answers”

Since interviews are used in most qualitative research, it does not matter which qualitative strategy is used (Wohlrapp, 2014). (Thornberg et al., 2015) sees interviews as personal conversations aimed at finding and creating meaningful data that need to be collected and analysed. Semi-structured interview was used in this study in order to find out factors affecting the students' difficulty and it was given to 5 students with the lowest scores in reading comprehension section. Semi-structured interviews allowed informants to express opinions in their own words and can provide reliable and comparable qualitative data (Grinsted, 2005). The data were analysed through three stages, data reduction, data display, and conclusion.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

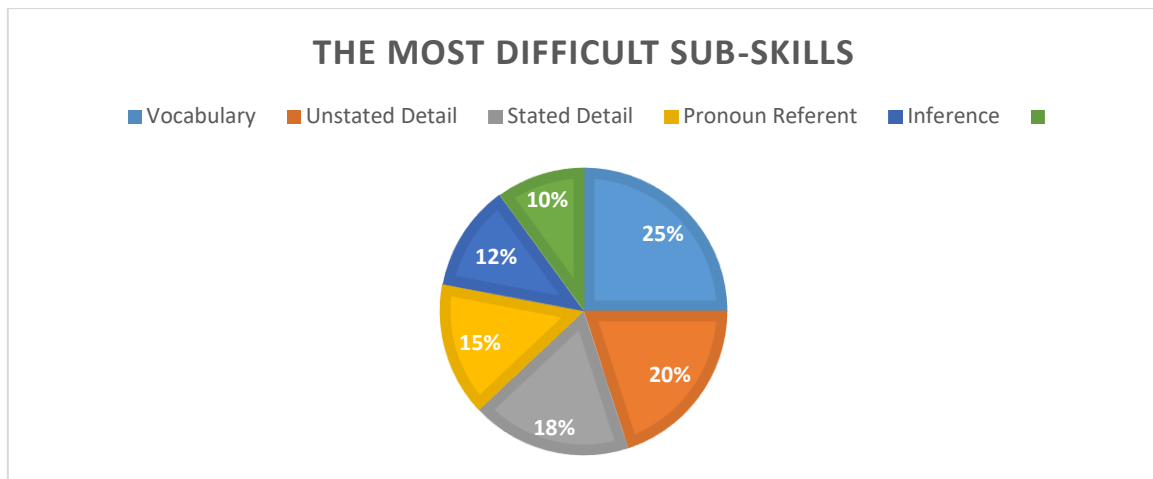
### The most difficult sub-skills

The test results showed there were six sub-skills that students consider the most difficult in TOEFL part 3, the reading comprehension section, namely vocabulary, unstated detail question, stated detail question, pronoun referent question, inference question, and main idea question. The test results are presented below.

**Table 1. Sub-skills with high percentage of errors**

No	No Soal	Topic / Materi	Nilai
1	Q. 20/ 1.00	Main Idea	0.10
2	Q. 26/ 1.00	Inference	0.12
3	Q. 27/ 1.00	Pronoun Referent	0.15
4	Q. 6 / 1.00	Stated Detail Question	0.18
5	Q. 19/ 1.00	Unstated Detail Question	0.20
6	Q. 21/ 1.00	Vocabulary	0.25

The six sub-skills with the highest percentage of errors are illustrated in table 1 and figure 1. The higher the percentage of errors that a sub-skill has, the harder it is for students. The sub skills with the highest percentage of errors sequentially were “vocabulary” (25%), followed by “unstated detail” (20%), “stated detail” (18%), “pronoun referent” (15%), “inference” (12%), and “main idea” (10%).



**Figure 1: Sub-skills with the highest percentage of errors**

Based on the statistical data above, it was obtained that there are several topics that the students find most difficult. The most difficult topics are vocabulary, unstated detail question, stated detail question, pronoun referent, inference, and main idea. A study conducted by (Oktarina, 2018) shows some similarities that the most critical problems were in finding “main idea, implied detail question, unstated detail, stated detail question and vocabulary question”. These problems make students difficult to comprehend the text. In line with study by Oktarina, a study conducted by (Fitrawati, 2019) also shows some similarities in which students in Universitas Negeri Padang are experiencing difficulties in “main idea questions, stated detail questions, transition questions, context to determine meaning of simple words, and determine the tone of the passage”. Vocabulary, which has been described as the foundation of comprehension, is the most challenging subskill that needs more teaching, according to the research findings and their interpretation.

#### **Factors affecting the students' difficulty in answering the reading comprehension section of the TOEFL test.**

The following was the result of interviews with five participants. The participants were selected based on the lowest scores on the test. It was used to explore why they have difficulty answering the reading comprehension section of the TOEFL. The interview results showed that there were several factors that influence the difficulty English learners have in answering section 3 of the TOEFL test, reading comprehension.

#### **Lack of Vocabulary**

All of participants, five out of five students, stated they had lack of vocabularies so that it was difficult for them to understand the text given. They also considered that the vocabulary appearing on the TOEFL test was more difficult than that which appeared on reading questions in general. Here are the comments:

*In my opinion, the reading section is the most difficult on the TOEFL because I only have a limited vocabulary. So that, I can't understand the text well. (S1)*

*The difficulty I faced in answering questions on reading comprehension was that I did not understand the text. The vocabulary was unfamiliar and something I had never seen before. Maybe I have to memorize a lot of vocabulary appearing on the TOEFL. (S2)*

*I have lack of vocabulary so it's difficult to understand the text, besides that the text is also very long. (S3)*

*My difficulty is in my poor vocabulary. Also, the texts are long so I'm short on time. (S4)*

*I think why my score is low on reading because I have difficulty understanding the reading. Maybe because the vocabulary that I know is very limited. (S5)*

### **Reading speed**

Most participants stated that they have slow reading speed. They also revealed that 55 minutes to answer 50 questions was not enough. Because most of them have not finished working on it when the time is over. The following is the response from one of the students.

*In my opinion, besides lack of vocabularies, I have problem with time management. To me, slow reading person, 55 minutes for 50 question was not enough. So that, I can not finish all the questions. (S2)*

In line with the statement another student also revealed similar issue.

*My reading ability in Bahasa Indonesia is still slow. In English, I need 2 to 3 times longer to read text in English. (S3)*

### **Lack of Strategy**

Based on the interview results, it was known that besides vocabulary and reading, students considered lack of strategy was also the factor affecting their difficulty in answering reading comprehension questions. Majority participants stated they read the reading first and looked at the question and back to the text to find the answer. It caused the students spent more time so that they could not finish all the numbers when the time is up. One student said:

*I found it difficult to manage the time because the text is long and the average time is only 1 minute average whereas I have to read the text, read the questions and return to the text to find the answer. Moreover, the vocabulary is also difficult. So that, I could not finish it. (S1)*

Another student stated that lack of knowledge on how to answer the reading comprehension section caused she could not manage the time with long passage and unfamiliar vocabularies.

*In my opinion, why reading section is the most difficult for me due to lack of strategy to answer the questions with long passage and limited time. Besides, unfamiliar vocabularies made me slow in reading the text. (S4)*

The findings of this study are line with previous study conducted by (Nanda & Azmy, 2020), in their study, shows that students' lack of strategies and vocabulary hinder the students from being able to comprehend a text and reducing students' achievement. The findings of Samad's study in 2017 show that students struggle in the reading part to comprehend the meaning of the passage and they are unable to fully comprehend all of its contents (Samad et al., 2017). They claim that the issues appear because of their limited vocabulary, strategy used, and amount of time allotted for the part.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Having analysed data from the test and interview results, the conclusion can be described. Based on the test results obtained through descriptive statistical analysis, the most difficult sub-skill for students was vocabulary, followed by unstated detail, stated detail

question, pronoun referent, and inference, while the least difficult sub-skill was main idea. In addition, the interview results showed that several factors affecting the students' difficulties were lack of vocabulary, slow reading, and lack of strategy. The results indicated that the participants are beginner test-takers who needs to practice a lot in reading comprehension. By practicing, they will get used to sort of questions. In addition, they will be able to manage the time with number questions should be done, strategy that they should use and they also will be familiar with vocabularies. Therefore, TOEFL teachers and trainers are strongly advised to devote more time to prepare for the topics with the highest percentage of errors.

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