


Investigating Students' Strategies and Difficulties in Facing TOEFL Reading Section

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v8i2.414>

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ABSTRACT

The TOEFL test has a significant impact on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. It is an examination administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey, to evaluate the English proficiency level of non-native speakers. It is the most widely used test in universities and passing it with a high score is crucial for students. To overcome challenges, various reading strategies are commonly employed to understand the information in the text. Language learners can utilize any strategy to comprehend the text, which is vital for both understanding the content and overcoming reading difficulties. The data in this study is categorized into primary data, obtained from student questionnaires, and secondary data, derived from interview results. The information was collected through questionnaires and interviews conducted with 60 students from different faculties who had taken the TOEFL test at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember. The findings reveal that students utilize strategies such as rereading the text to enhance comprehension, using keywords to identify the main idea, and focusing on the passage's content. Additionally, students encounter challenges in responding to implied questions, primarily due to limited vocabulary and time constraints during the TOEFL reading section.

Keywords: TOEFL Test, Reading

Article History:

Received 18th June 2023

Accepted 21st July 2023

Published 24th July 2023



INTRODUCTION

The TOEFL test holds significant influence over EFL students, assessing their English proficiency as non-native speakers. Administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey, TOEFL is widely recognized and frequently used in universities. Achieving a high score on this test is of utmost importance for students. Originally introduced in 1976, the Paper-based TOEFL (PBT) became the predominant format. It utilizes question and answer sheets, requiring completion with a 2B pencil. The TOEFL PBT assesses students' English skills for academic tasks such as listening, reading, and writing in a university setting. In 1998, the computer-based TOEFL (CBT) was introduced as a more

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Authors' Contribution: a-Study design; b-Data collection; c-Statistical analysis; d-Manuscript preparation; e-Funds collection.

convenient alternative to PBT. It employs interactive software, presenting questions on a computer screen for immediate response. The CBT evaluates listening, structure, reading, and writing skills, with the total score based on a scale of 0-300. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized test that is required not only for admission and recruitment, but also for some other purposes. Furthermore, it is commonly used by some institutions in EFL countries to assess test takers' English proficiency, and it differs from a classroom curriculum (Netta & Trisnawati, 2019). Furthermore, (Pratiwi et al., 2021) stated that the TOEFL is used to assess test takers' English proficiency when their native language is not English. As a result, TOEFL plays an important role in assessing people's English proficiency by serving as one of the standardized tests that should be administered prior to applying for a job or graduating from university. The TOEFL test is used as one of the graduation requirements by some universities in Indonesia (Alek et al., 2019).

In order to understand the information presented in the text, individuals commonly employ reading strategies to overcome challenges. Language learners have the flexibility to utilize various strategies for comprehension. These reading strategies play a crucial role, not only in understanding the text, but also in overcoming any difficulties encountered during the process. Additionally, (Ilmiah & Antoni, 2014) highlighted the significance of having a strategy in successfully passing the test, suggesting that effective strategies hold greater importance than mere skills. The simultaneous evaluation of multiple skills as a factor contributing to students' struggles in the TOEFL test. To address this, developing specific strategies for each skill can prove beneficial.

The Reading Section of the TOEFL Test poses a significant challenge as it requires a substantial amount of time and intense focus. Many students struggle with this section, which consists of lengthy passages that demand thorough comprehension. Moreover, due to the time constraint, students often rush their answers, resulting in careless mistakes. This difficulty in the Reading Section contributes to the challenge of attaining the desired TOEFL score. Numerous factors contribute to students' reading difficulties, as indicated in the literature. One such factor is their inability to comprehend specific texts, often caused by limited vocabulary and unfamiliar phrases, hindering their understanding of English passages (Abdul Samad et al., n.d.-a). This, in turn, affects their ability to answer questions in the TOEFL reading comprehension section (Ilmiah & Antoni, 2014). Additionally, (Abdullah et al., n.d.) conducted a study on foreign students at a Malaysian university, highlighting various challenges faced by these students, including difficulties in paraphrasing, note-taking, supporting ideas, time management during the reading test, and particularly struggles with identifying difficult words, the topic, the main idea of the passage, and a lack of vocabulary.

The performance in the reading section of the TOEFL test significantly impacts the overall TOEFL score. In other words, a strong grasp of reading comprehension skills, as assessed in the reading section, is essential for achieving a favorable TOEFL score. However, many students encounter difficulties with the reading section. Reading is a multifaceted cognitive process that requires time and effort. Reading in a foreign language poses additional challenges due to its intricacies. Reading comprehension is the most crucial component among the three language skills assessed in the TOEFL.

Based on existing literature, many students encounter difficulties in reading comprehension for various reasons, primarily their inability to understand specific texts. Limited vocabulary and unfamiliar phrases hinder their comprehension of English texts (Fitriani, 2015). Consequently, this impacts their ability to answer questions in the TOEFL reading comprehension section (Antoni, 2014). (Abdullah et al., n.d.) conducted a study on

foreign students at a Malaysian university and identified several challenges they face, such as paraphrasing, note-taking, organizing ideas, and managing time during the reading test. The most critical issues identified include recognizing difficult words, understanding the topic, grasping the main idea of the passage, and lacking vocabulary.

The TOEFL test reading section score will influence the overall TOEFL test score. In other words, having good comprehension of reading skills, as tested in the TOEFL reading section, is required in order to achieve a good TOEFL score. However, reading is one of the test problems for students. Reading is a complex process of human functions that takes time. Reading in a foreign language is a difficult activity due to the complexity of the process. Reading comprehension is the most important section of the three language skills tested in the TOEFL.

According to the literature, numerous students encounter challenges in reading comprehension, and various factors contribute to this difficulty. In order to overcome these challenges and succeed in the reading section, several recommendations have been proposed. One such recommendation, as suggested by (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), is the implementation of the skimming strategy, which involves quickly reviewing a passage to grasp its main ideas. Skimming is essential for comprehending the overall meaning of a passage, understanding its structure, and discerning the writer's intentions. It is important to note that merely locating information is insufficient; the reader must also organize and retain some of the gathered information.

Another approach available to TOEFL test-takers is the utilization of scanning. Great (181, pp. 50-59) explains that scanning is a reading technique enabling readers to locate particular information without reading the entire text, accomplished by examining the title, table of contents, and other elements. He asserts that scanning constitutes a reading strategy employed specifically for finding specific information. Additionally, (Yuan et al., n.d.), cited in (Abdul Samad et al., n.d.-a) proposes four strategies to address vocabulary questions, including deducing meanings from structural clues, identifying word components, and inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words from context. Moreover, strategies such as searching for specific information, drawing upon prior knowledge, and determining the tone or purpose of the text can aid in reviewing questions within the reading section.

(Hamzeh Dodeen, 2015) introduces an additional approach known as the "test-taking strategy" as a complement to the aforementioned reading strategies. According to Dooden (2015, p. 108), test-taking strategies involve cognitive abilities that enable individuals to navigate testing situations appropriately and understand what actions to take during tests. The author further discusses specific test-taking strategies, including effective time management, initial review of all questions, prioritizing easy questions, and eliminating incorrect options. These reading strategies serve as processes that test takers can employ to overcome comprehension difficulties. Moreover, possessing test-taking strategies holds equal significance to possessing the foundational knowledge and information required to answer test questions.

By examining reading strategies, researchers can gain insights into how readers engage with the text and how their choice of strategies impacts their comprehension. Analyzing reading strategies allows for an understanding of how effectively readers grasp the purpose of the text, approach comprehension, and handle challenges encountered while reading. The reader's level of proficiency significantly influences their use and effectiveness of strategies. (Yuan et al., n.d.) emphasized the significance of vocabulary knowledge when dealing with second-language (L2) text and the challenges nonnative readers may face in guessing words from context, particularly when the context offers limited assistance.

Meanwhile, (Philips, 2003, p.250) claims that there are five TOEFL reading comprehension strategies:

1. Skim the reading passage to determine the main idea and how the ideas are organized in the passage. To correctly answer the questions, you do not need to understand every detail in each passage. Reading the passage with the intention of understanding every single detail before attempting to answer the questions is thus a waste of time.
2. Look ahead at the questions to see what kinds of questions you'll have to answer. Each type of question is addressed differently.
3. Locate the section of the passage that addresses each question. The question type indicates where in the passage to look for correct answers.
 - a. Look at the first line of each paragraph for main idea questions.
 - b. For directly and indirectly answered detail questions, choose a key word in the question and skim the passage in order for that key word (or a related idea).
 - c. In the case of vocabulary questions, the question will tell you where the word is in the passage.
 - d. The answers to overall review questions can be found anywhere in the passage.
4. Read the section of the passage containing the answer carefully. The answer will most likely be in the same sentence as the key word or idea (or one sentence before or after).
5. Choose the best answer from the four options listed in your test book for each question. You can select the best answer based on what is given in the relevant section of the passage, eliminate obviously incorrect answers, and mark your best guess on the answer sheet.

Hidayati (2018) observed that students faced difficulties in answering questions related to identifying the main idea (74%), making inferences (56%), and locating references (71%). Consequently, reading for the main idea proved to be the most challenging aspect for first-grade students, leading to a majority of them struggling to achieve satisfactory grades in reading comprehension tests. The TOEFL test, being an English proficiency assessment, is known for its difficulty level. As noted by Sujana (2015), the TOEFL test comprises three sections: Listening Comprehension, Structure & Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension. Each item in the Listening Comprehension section typically allows around 0.7 minutes for students to listen to a conversation, read the response, analyze it, and select the appropriate answer. In the Structure & Written Expression section, the time allotted for each item is only 0.06 minutes. However, in the reading section, test-takers are given a mere 1 minute per item, despite the fact that reading is a complex process. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the TOEFL reading section poses considerable difficulty due to the limited time available and the numerous passages and associated questions that test-takers must tackle.

According to (Ni et al., n.d.), the most difficult section of the PBT TOEFL is reading comprehension. The test consists of 50 multiple-choice questions that must be answered in 55 minutes. The data showed that vocabulary was the most difficult subskill, with 50% of the answers correct, and inference was the second most difficult subskill, with 52% of the answers correct. Then there was subs-skill stated details with a presentation of 60% correct answers and subs-skill unstated details with a presentation of 62% correct answers. And main ideas with 65% correct answers, and subs-skill reference with 80% correct answers. According to this study, the most difficult subskills were vocabulary and inference. The purpose of this research is to know what strategies dan students difficulties in facing TOEFL reading section.

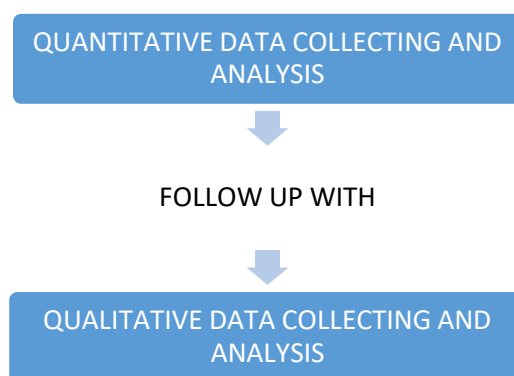
A total of nine concerns that commonly arise in the TOEFL reading section. These issues include: previewing, reading for main ideas, utilizing context to understand vocabulary, scanning for specific details, drawing conclusions, identifying exceptions, locating references, and improving reading speed. Reading comprehension is an essential English skill that all students must possess in order to comprehend texts effectively. However, there are numerous challenges that students encounter when it comes to understanding the strategies for solving reading problems specifically found in the TOEFL test. Achieving a high score on this test is no simple task. The utilization of effective reading strategies plays a crucial role in understanding the text and overcoming any difficulties that may arise during the reading process. The difficulties faced by TOEFL test takers in the reading section significantly impact their test results. To determine which components of the TOEFL reading section students find challenging, a study was conducted among students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember.

METHOD

The research conducted for this study follows a mixed-method approach (MMR), which involves integrating both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The combination of these two methods in an MMR approach helps to address the limitations of each method by leveraging the strengths of qualitative methods to balance out the weaknesses of quantitative methods. By employing this mixed-method approach, the research aims to generate more robust and reliable conclusions.

This study's data is divided into two categories: primary data and secondary data.. The primary data in this research from the result of students questionnaires, and the secondary data from the results of the interview. The information was gathered through questionnaires and interviews conducted by 60 students from all faculties who had taken the TOEFL test at Universitas Muhamamdiyah Jember. 60 students as respondent for the questionnaire instrument, and 9 students representatives from each faculty as respondents for the interview instrument. Students who had taken the TOEFL test were chosen as research participants in this study because they could explain the difficulties they encountered and what strategies they used in the TOEFL reading section. The research was taken at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember.

(Cresswell (2015), n.d.) discusses the following types of mixed-method designs: convergent designs, explanatory sequential designs, and exploratory sequential designs. In this research, explanatory sequential design was used, the quantitative data were collected first, then qualitative data were collected, typically with the goal of further elaborating on the results or a particular finding. As mentioned above, the research used an explanatory sequential design. So, in the first stage, the scale/research instrument was distributed and analyzed in quantitative to answer the first question in research problem. Then, to answer the second question in research problem, the next step conducted interviews and analyzed in qualitative. Various types of mixed-method designs, including convergent designs, explanatory sequential designs, and exploratory sequential designs.



Gambar 1. Design of the research

In this study, an explanatory sequential design was employed, where quantitative data were initially collected and analyzed to address the first research question. Subsequently, qualitative data were gathered and analyzed to further elaborate on the results or explore a specific finding, which aimed to address the second research question. As previously mentioned, the research followed an explanatory sequential design. Consequently, in the initial stage, a quantitative approach was utilized, involving the distribution and analysis of scales or research instruments to answer the first research question. Following that, in order to address the second research question, interviews were conducted and qualitative data were collected and analysed.

In order to collect the data, questionnaire and interview were distributed to students who participated in this study. Google Form was used to create the questionnaire, and Google Meet was used to conduct interviews. In this research used data analysis techniques from Miles and Huberman's theory. According to (Miles, et al., 2014), qualitative data analysis uses words arranged in an expanded and described text. According to Miles & Huberman, the data analysis process is divided into three steps. Data reduction is the first stage, followed by data presentation and conclusion-drawing. This research use triangulation technique for data validity testing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the result of the research entitled Investigating The Students Strategies and Difficulties in Facing TOEFL Reading Section. Data collecting activity was conducted on May 18, 2023. The sample is 60 students from all faculties who have taken the TOEFL test at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember. This result is based on the data collected through the questionnaire completed by the students. The questionnaire about students' TOEFL reading strategy. is a closed questionnaire with a 5-point likert scale. The are 14 questions in the questionnaire that contains 14 indicators of reading strategy, the question guide was inspired from (Abdul Samad et al., n.d.-b), that focused on students' strategy facing TOEFL reading section.

Table1. Strategy Categories Score

Categories	Scores
Always	5
Often	4
Sometimes	3
Rarely	2
Never	1

The Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) of the quantitative data were calculated to implement the frequency of usage strategy. According to Oxford's language learning strategy usage (Li, 2020), the mean scores for each statement were classified into three levels: high (mean of 3.5 or above), medium (mean of 2.5 to 3.4), and low (2.4 or lower). The lower the mean value of the statement, the less often the strategy is used by students. Conversely, the higher the mean value of the statement, the more often the strategy used by students.

Table 2. The Result of Strategy

No	Statements	Mean (M)	SD	Level
1	I use key words to search for main idea.	4,40	0,88	High
2	I skim or can the text to search for the idea.	3,78	1,07	High
3	While reading, I have a purpose in mind and try to focus on what I read in the passage.	4,38	0,84	High
4	I use my background knowledge whenever I read a text.	4,21	0,86	High
5	I use prediction skill while I am reading a text.	3,38	1,13	Medium
6	Focusing on important information in a text through skimming a whole text.	4,00	0,93	High
7	I guess a meaning of a text through activating mybackground knowledge.	4,06	0,95	High
8	I make a literal translation.	3,45	1,04	High
9	I read in details to answer questions.	3,98	1,21	High
10	I use context clues to understand the meanings of vocabulary.	4,25	0,81	High
11	I guess from (suffixes, prefixes) and semantic knowledge (synonym, antonym) to understand unfamiliar vocabulary.	3,88	1,02	High
12	I keep reading a text even I find some difficult words in the text.	3,90	1,17	High
13	I read questions prior to reading a text.	4,28	1,07	High
14	When text becomes difficult, I repeat reading text to increase my understanding even when I find it difficult.	4,63	0,75	High

According to the interview results, one aspect proved to be the most difficult, namely the third aspect in the first indicator, that is: responding to implied questions. According to the respondents, this is due to several factors, limited time to comprehend the question,

ARM: *"Constrained by the lack of vocabulary in English, it is very difficult to respond the implied questions, it takes a lot of time."*

and their limited vocabulary as the respondents said,

DYS: *"To get an answer to an implied question, you have to read it repeatedly and find it difficult to find the meaning of the question."*

And the last is because, inaccurate in responding to implied questions, so they are misled by other answer options, as the respondents said,

YP: *" Sometimes confused with other choices with similar words."*

FAS: *"Because in this case we must be able to understand ideas or questions indirectly to answer any questions that arise."*

Discussion

The students' various strategies are evidenced by the earlier data. Each statement's frequency of occurrences varies. Based on Table 4.1, 13 items in each statements are at a high level, which means that participants in this study often/always used all the strategy items. And, there is 1 item at medium level, which means that participants didn't use this strategy that often compared to the other 13 statements. Based on the results of calculations using descriptive statistics in table 4.1, the strategies most often used by students in the reading section of the TOEFL are:

1. Repeat the reading text to increase understanding. (Statement 14; Mean: 4,63 and; SD: 0,75)
2. Using keywords to search for main idea. (Statement 1; Mean: 4,40 and; SD: 0,88)
3. Focus on what they read in the passage. (Statement 3; Mean: 4,38 and; SD: 0,84)

Based on the interview, the results of the interviews are reported below:

a) Aspect 1

In the first aspect, the second indicator, namely recognizing the organization of ideas, was chosen by 5 out of 9 respondents to be the most difficult indicator. They have difficulties in recognizing the organization of ideas because they don't know how to find the organization of ideas, it is considered difficult to identify the connections between the ideas in one or more paragraphs and those in other paragraphs, and sometimes the answers in the answer choices seem the same so they often choose the wrong answer.

R: *"Because I don't understand how to find the organization of ideas in paragraphs."*

SM: *B) Because sometimes it is difficult to understand the meaning of each sentences in the paragraph."*

b) Aspect 2

In the second aspect, the first indicator, namely answering stated detail questions correctly, was chosen by 5 out of 9 respondents. This is due to the limited vocabulary they have, and they find it difficult to understand the statement and intent of the question.

DYS: *"Because of a problem with understanding the entire statement, it has to be read again and again."*

ARM: *"Because of the lack of my English vocabulary, some words may be unfamiliar for me."*

c) Aspect 4

In the fourth aspect, the third indicator, namely giving meaning for difficult words using by context, was chosen by 7 out of 9 respondents. This is due to a lack of vocabulary, and difficulties in giving meaning according to the context required in answering questions.

IPN: *"Because even if we understand the context spoken of, but if we do not know the meaning of the word, it is still difficult to answer."*

ARM: *"Because there was a lack of vocabulary in the English language, it was difficult to find the real meaning."*

d) Aspect 5

In the fifth aspect, the first indicator, namely the ability to search for specific information, was chosen by 7 out of 9 respondents. This is due to misunderstandings in understanding the information in the question text, it is difficult to identify the information precisely.

SM: *"Sometimes I don't understand the delivery of sentences, so there are often misunderstandings and a lack of information about the meaning of the questions."*

DYS: *"Sometimes it is difficult to identify information in the text of question."*

There are 5 questions of the interview about difficult aspects faced by students in TOEFL reading section. Based on the results of the interview, the following are the results of the respondents' answers:

Q1: 5 out of 9 students chose option B. The test for this part of the question was challenging for many students. In recognizing the organization of ideas, test-takers must be able to identify how the ideas in one or more paragraphs relate to those in additional paragraphs. In addition, students struggle to find the information they need to respond to questions because they get stuck or confused.

Q2: 5 out of 9 students chose option A. A stated detail question focuses on a single fact from the passage rather than the entire passage. The passage typically provides the answers to these questions in the correct order, and the correct response is frequently a restatement of the information provided in the passage. This indicates that although the words used to express the ideas in the correct answer are frequently different from those used in the passage. For the students, it is the second most difficult skill.

Q3: All of the students chose option A. This type of question contains implied words that indicate that the answer is not stated directly. It's critical to understand that the students don't have to draw the answer in this type of question. Rather, some information will be provided in that passage, from which the students can draw its conclusions. All of the respondents found it difficult to answer this question because they were often fooled by the available answer choices, limited time was also one of the factors why students made mistakes in this part of the question, because students had to read the text carefully to find the right answer for the answer.

Q4: 7 out of 9 students chose option C. Students should use context to help them understand the meaning of words that are challenging to understand and for which they are not expected to have prior knowledge. In this instance, the passage will make it clear what the word means in relation to the passage.

Q5: 7 out of 9 students chose option A. The ability to search for specific information, students might be asked to locate a specific piece of information in the passage in the final question that follows a reading passage (or a paragraph of a passage). It's difficult for students because of their lack of vocabulary and the limited time that made students feel frustrated to find the correct answer.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this research is to investigate the strategy that students used and what difficult aspects students faced in TOEFL reading section at Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember. It can be concluded that the strategies students used in TOEFL reading section are; repeat the reading text to increase understanding; using keywords to search for main idea; focus on what they read in the passage. And for the difficult aspects students faced is responding to implied questions. According to their explanation they get problem with their limited vocabulary and limited time doing the TOEFL reading section.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Last but not least, I want to thank Allah for everything. Additionally, I want to express my gratitude to my partner, parents, sister, and brother for their unfailing support and encouragement of my work. And thank you to my first advisor, Anita Fatimatul Laeli, M.Pd MCE, and my second advisor, Yeni Mardiyana D, M. Pd, for their guidance, suggestions, and comments on this journal.

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