

An Investigation to the Students' Difficulties in the Skills of Reading Comprehension at TOEFL Proficiency Subject

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to find out the difficulties faced by the students in the skill of reading comprehension at TOEFL Proficiency subject at the seventh semester of Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar. Descriptive qualitative approach was implemented in this research. Students of seventh semester from English Department in the academic year of 2023/2024 were as the subject of the research, and reading comprehension test as the object of the research. The researchers collected the data from the students' final exam from their TOEFL subject. The result showed that there were some problems/difficulties faced by the students/participants after analysing the data and collected the interview from some participants, they were: 1) lack of vocabulary, 2) lack of time and losing focus in the reading comprehension, 3) unfamiliar text and lack of practising, and 4) lack of motivation. From the problems faced by the participants, the researchers also found the results of their test achievement were categorized as satisfied since 46,75% (36 students) got the score range 80-100. From the findings obtained, the researchers concluded that more practices need to be taken if the students/participants want to get a better result of the TOEFL test in the future.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Reading Skill, TOEFL Proficiency

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INTRODUCTION

These days, being able to speak and understand English is essential since it is an international language that is utilized in many different contexts. Nonetheless, listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four communication skills that students at all educational levels should acquire and become proficient in. Of those four skills, reading skills are the one that they struggle with the most because it involves understanding what they have already read in addition to knowing how to pronounce words, phrases, and sentences correctly. A test is simply defined as a means of evaluating an individual's aptitude, expertise, or performance in a particular area (Brown, 2000:384). The test is a systematic and objective tool or procedure to obtain the desired data or descriptions about a person, in a manner that can be said precisely and quickly (Arikunto, 2013:32). The test, according to the researcher, is a methodical, objective, and standardized process consisting of a set of questions or exercises that the test-taker must complete in order to determine their skills and level of knowledge. The test is crucial to the teaching and learning process because it allows teachers to assess both the success or failure of their

learning programs and the test's learning objectives. Generally speaking, the test serves two purposes: it measures the students and it gauges the effectiveness of the teaching program (Sudijono, 2011). This implies that tests can be used to gauge students' aptitude and competency in addition to serving as a gauge for the effectiveness of instruction.

Although there are many different kinds of tests, the researcher only looks at the ones that are frequently included in language curricula in this study. Five test kinds that are frequently included in language curricula are described by Brown. First, a "aptitude test" is intended to assess an individual's general aptitude or capacity for learning a foreign language and succeeding in that endeavor. Secondly, the purpose of "diagnostic test" is to identify a specific aspect of a language. Third, "placement test" indicates the point at which a student will find a level or class to be appropriately challenging—that is, neither too easy nor too difficult—by sampling material to be covered in the curriculum (i.e., it has content validity). Fourth, "achievements test" has a direct bearing on a lesson, a unit, or even the entire curriculum in the classroom. Fifth, "a proficiency test" is not meant to be restricted to a particular curriculum, course, or level of language proficiency (Brown, 2000:390-391). There are five different test kinds that can be utilized, as can be inferred from Brown's explanation above; however, in this case, the researcher concentrates on the proficiency test.

According to Dharmawan (2018), proficiency is defined as the attribute of having exceptional skill, ability, and experience. However, in the context of this study, proficiency refers to having adequate language skills for a given task. A proficiency test can be used to gauge a person's language proficiency. A variety of proficiency tests are available, including the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Cambridge First Certificate in English Examination (FCE), the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English Examination (CPE), the International Student Admission Test (ISAT), the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and others (Hughes, 2003; Tamba et al., 2023). This indicates that a wide range of test options are available for assessing non-native English proficiency.

Warfield, Laribee, & Geyer (2013) stated that the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a proficiency exam used to gauge a student's level of English language proficiency. International recognition for this test has been received (Herman et al., 2023; Manurung et al., 2023). The purpose of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is to evaluate speakers of English who do not speak it as their first or second language. An internationally recognized test of English proficiency, the TOEFL assesses a non-native speaker's academic level of English. Naturally, it is crucial to match students' proficiency on English proficiency exams. It is among the crucial prerequisites for admission for students intending to pursue their studies overseas (Putra, Lubis and Siregar, 2020). Additionally, it becomes very important for certain governments, businesses, and scholarship programs. Furthermore, some Indonesian institutions have recently started using it specifically as one of the requirements to be hired. In conclusion, a job seeker will therefore benefit from having their TOEFL certificate.

Reading is one of the four skills that students should be proficient in when learning English. One of the English language skills that students must master in order to acquire new knowledge and information is reading. Reading is the most important skill in the educational setting, according to Brown (2006), because it can be used to gauge a student's general language proficiency. One of the language skills that students need to master is reading comprehension. Good comprehension skills are necessary for students to be able to interpret and assimilate information from reading the material. Every subject requires reading comprehension because reading is an integral part of every lesson. As such, it is necessary for students to possess a solid grasp of their abilities.

There are typically five different kinds of questions in the TOEFL's reading comprehension section. First, there are questions about the primary concepts (main topic); second, there are questions about specifics that are mentioned in the reading text; third, there are questions about specifics that are not mentioned in the text; fourth, there are questions about details that are implied; and fifth, there are questions about vocabulary that is related to reading texts (Fitria, 2022; Sinambela et al., 2023). Multiple-choice questions with four options are the kind found in the reading section provided. How to select one right response from the four options provided to answer reading comprehension questions. According to Ang-zie (2020, p. 52), there are specific patterns and supports in the material tested in the reading exam. The reading's theme, key concepts, definitions of vocabulary terms, specific information, deductions, exceptions, and references to specific pronouns are among the things we are expected to know.

Hence, Fitria (2022) stated that reading can be a difficult skill for English language learners to acquire, and reading passages for the TOEFL can be particularly difficult (Simanjuntak et al., 2023). This calls for a thorough comprehension of intricate grammatical structures as well as a large vocabulary of sophisticated terms. The reading portion of the TOEFL test intimidates a lot of people. The reading portion may present a challenge because it consists of four to six texts and seven to fourteen questions. On the other hand, the TOEFL Reading section is one of the easier ones to understand. Test-takers may encounter various issues with each section.

Takers should spend the most time on reading comprehension (Tuncay, 2018). Test Takers are required to adhere to a set of times. Participants are unable to complete reading all of the assigned passages and providing answers that adhere to the guidelines. Each passage is given a few minutes, for a total of fifty to sixty minutes. Other contributing factors may include losing concentration during the test, which consists of 50 listening comprehension questions to complete in 35 minutes, as well as 40 written expressions and structure questions to complete in 25 minutes. Some takers may still complete the section on structure and written expressions because they are fatigued from completing the two sections.

Some previous studies about this research have been conducted. One of them was from Fitria (2020) in her research. Her research was about to find out how difficult it is for students to read for the TOEFL prediction exam. In this study, qualitative research is used. The results highlight some of the challenges students had when reading the TOEFL. Among the external factors are: 1) Skimming the text to identify the primary idea or point of the entire reading. 2) Employing scanning strategies to comb through a lengthy reading to locate more focused information. 3) Starting with the questions and moving on to the TOEFL reading. 4) Sense that the reading passages for the TOEFL cover less or are not as familiar. 5) Feeling that the TOEFL reading passages are excessively lengthy or extensive. 6) Observing a large number of foreign words in the TOEFL reading. 7) Think there are too many reading-related TOEFL questions? 8) Feeling that there is not enough time to complete the TOEFL reading questions. As for internal factors, the pupils 1) Experiencing difficulty recalling the passages on the TOEFL. 2) Having a tendency to select simpler questions before more complex ones. 3) Not paying close attention when taking the reading portion of the TOEFL exam. 4) Having taken the reading portion of the TOEFL previously. 5) Not having much experience reading passages from the TOEFL. 6) Finding the TOEFL reading questions boring. 7) Finding it easy to get sidetracked from reading the TOEFL reading questions. 8) Focusing on analyzing every word and sentence as you read the TOEFL passages

There are some similarities and differences between the previous study from Fitria (2022) with this research. The similarities from both researches are the research's focus is to TOEFL, especially reading comprehension. The method used is also same, using qualitative descriptive research. But there are some differences between previous study

with this research. Past study focused on seeking the difficulties in reading comprehension based on the internal and external factors, while this research focuses on seeking the difficulties of the students in answering the TOEFL reading comprehension.

METHOD

A. Research Design

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 reading comprehension section 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.

B. Data Sources

Data source in this research can be subject and object. The subject of this research is the students of seventh semester of English Education Department who are studying at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar. There are 3 classes, they are PIA1, PIA2 and PIA3. PIA1 consists of 23 students, PIA2 with 29 students and PIA3 is with 30 students. The total number of the subjects is 92 students who are taking TOEFL Proficiency subject as one of their subjects in the seventh semester.

Object in this research is the students' test from TOEFL taken from reading comprehension skills. The test will be taken from their final test from the subject as the data to be analysed. The answer sheets will be taken and given scores.

C. Place and Time of the Research

The study was carried out at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, located on Jl. Sangnualuh 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. starting in September 2023 and lasting until February 2024.

D. Technique of Data Collection

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 necessary data. Third, test 1 response sheets and student question sheets were used to compile the data. The data was then copied and submitted to perform the analysis

E. Technique of Data Analysis

1. Conducting an analysis of the data after gathering it. data analysis that was done in the following steps:
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 reading comprehension.
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 reading comprehension
8. Drawing the research's findings with extensive description will enable the researcher to make her point to the reader clear.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

The test of reading given to the students on Monday, 5 February 2024 located at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, Jl. Sangnualuh No. 4 in Pematangsiantar city. There were 77 students who took the test and the results obtained in the following table 1.

Table 1. Results of students' score from Reading Comprehension Test

No	Student's Registered Number	Students' Initial Name	Score
1	2001030009	OS	84
2	2001030005	CRLN	84
3	2001030072	DMS	84
4	2001030008	NGM	76
5	2001030016	RAS	78
6	2101030040	GWS	72
7	2101030020	HRS	78
8	2101030017	GES	84
9	2101030001	AOPM	80
10	2101030009	TMP	86
11	2001030071	RMS	74
12	2101030053	IPP	62
13	2001030084	MRG	86
14	2001030081	YAS	74
15	2001030018	BAS	86
16	2101030006	LPS	82
17	2001030056	DNP	86
18	2001030037	DNS	82
19	2001030082	DYPSG	76
20	2001030073	AA	76
21	2001030061	RS	84
22	2001030059	JMWLT	86
23	2001030006	RIH	84
24	2101030033	GT	64
25	2101030013	KLZ	70
26	2001030048	TNK	16
27	2001030085	DP	76
28	2001030063	MR	56
29	2101030039	ANT	96
30	2101030042	AGDB	72
31	2001030075	IPSH	24
32	2001030001	NYD	80

No	Student's Registered Number	Students' Initial Name	Score
33	2001030050	FYS	86
34	2001030023	RMPP	86
35	2001030058	KS	84
36	2001030043	YLS	84
37	2001030017	RGS	82
38	2001030010	LDR	86
39	2001030035	SOS	86
40	2001030046	LSN	84
41	2101030061	HTS	62
42	2101030018	CRS	82
43	2001030032	ECYG	86
44	2001030094	RSH	84
45	2101030035	RoS	26
46	2001030031	ECS	42
47	2101030016	RSS	76
48	2101030036	HoS	26
49	2101030012	LTSS	88
50	2001030055	RiS	58
51	2001030047	DBD	76
52	2001030014	RRSS	30
53	2001030020	MSS	56
54	2001030027	MDS	36
55	2001030051	AuA	70
56	2101030060	EIP	76
57	2101030034	VNS	92
58	2101030002	SAA	92
59	2001030079	GES	16
60	2001030019	SRL	24
61	2001030078	SNP	82
62	2001030053	RCS	86
63	2001030066	RisS	18
64	2001030039	BaA	58
65	2001030021	DLN	38
66	2001030038	IWT	64
67	2001030045	DWT	86
68	2001030022	AMN	86
69	2101030050	SMM	76
70	2001030034	ERS	38

No	Student's Registered Number	Students' Initial Name	Score
71	2001030004	JNS	28
72	2001030028	ChH	54
73	2001030033	HTL	50
74	2001030024	DMSi	68
75	2101030047	NoS	96
76	2101030044	CBS	64
77	2101030007	NoA	86

Based on the results obtained by the students, the researchers found that there were 36 students (46,75%) who got score 80-100 and the score in letter was A, 22 students (28,57%) got score 60-79,9 and got the score with letter B, and 7 students (9,09%) got score 40-59,9 with score letter C and 12 students (15,58%) got score lower than 40. The percentage showed that the achievement for reading comprehension section test was quite successful although there were some problems faced by the students. After the test done, the researchers did some interviews to the students with random participants and encountered some problems/difficulties faced by the students:

1. Lack of vocabulary

From all participants interviewed, the researchers got answers that they didn't understand the text as a whole since the text given in the text was unfamiliar. The text that participants always encountered before was related to the text of genre, especially genre based education, such as narrative, descriptive, recount, report, and so on, while the text given in the TOEFL for reading comprehension was totally different. This made the participants was facing problems, especially to the meaning of vocabulary in the text. The only thing that they could do was to guess the meaning and this caused the participants to do the win-win solution or getting luck for their answers.

2. Lack of time and losing focus in the reading comprehension

The next problem faced by the participants was the losing the focus during their exam for the reading comprehension. This happened because of the duration of the test and the position of reading comprehension as the last skill to be tested. Participants faced the first test, listening comprehension with 50 number of questions for 35 minutes, and second test, structure and written expressions with 40 number of questions for 25 minutes. Since some participants were not familiar and not well practiced for the TOEFL test, when the time for section no.2, structure and written expressions, was over, the students were still dealing with structure and written expressions test, while the time was for reading comprehension section. For sure, the participants tried to complete the section no. 2 until it was completed. When section no. 2 was completed, the time for the section no. 3, reading comprehension, was already being used and not enough time to complete the test. 50 number of questions for reading comprehension for 55 minutes as the rules meant that the participants were expected to complete or answer every number in about a minute. This caused the participants were tired and lost of their focus to complete the last section, reading comprehension skill.

3. Unfamiliar and lack of practising

Unfamiliar with the skill of reading comprehension was similar to lack of practising to the skills. If participants had a good practising for the TOEFL test, this meant that they had a good preparation for the test. Dealing with TOEFL test didn't mean that someone need to be clever but also he/she should be able to be familiar and experienced in the

TOEFL test. This will bring him/her to be able to tackle every problem/difficulty from the test given. For example, how the participants were able to manage the time in answering the reading comprehension test, how the participants could use the strategy of skimming and scanning during reading the text and try to comprehend the text.

4. Lack of motivation

This last problem was the unique and very familiar for every participant who was learning/studying. It was lack of motivation. Participants (students) who were taught in the class of TOEFL in the seventh semester, they were having a low motivation to study more about TOEFL since the class of TOEFL in the seventh semester was scheduled after the participants/students went back from school (after their teaching practice program). Seventh semester students were obliged to do the teaching practice program as the requirement subject for them before completing their studying from the campus. All participants interviewed were unified to say that they were tired after doing all the teaching practice program at school like teaching, doing administrating, picket, etc. After going back from school, they were scheduled to continue their studying in the campus, including attending the class of TOEFL subject. This situation caused the motivation to study the subject of TOEFL became less since they were tired and boring after their teaching practice program. TOEFL subject had lots of skills to be learnt and more exercises were given to the students to do since the limited of time in the class, but only some of them completed the exercises and some of them didn't. Moreover, some of the participants were honest to say that they completed the exercises by copying from their friends since they had no time and were busy with all the duties at school for their teaching practice program.

CONCLUSION

Referring to the data analysis and discussion explained above, the researchers concluded that the achievements for the reading comprehension test given to the participants/students could be categorized as satisfied since from 77 participants participated in the reading comprehension test, there were 36 students got score range from 80-100, 22 students got score range from 60-79,9, 7 students got score range from 40-59,9 and 12 other students got score lower than 40. Although the results showed the achievement was satisfied, the researchers found some problems faced by the students during the reading comprehension test, they were: lack of vocabulary, lack of time and losing focus in the reading comprehension, unfamiliar with the text and lack of practising, and lack of motivation. These factors mentioned were obtained from interview to the students/participants.

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