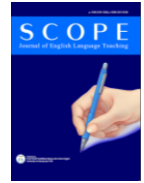




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Research Article

## Overcoming Challenges: First-Year College Students Struggling with TOEFL Structure Section

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### A B S T R A C T

English as an esteemed skill for students and served as a global standard for competitiveness. It is officially taught in Indonesian high-schools, but many first-year college students battle serious challenges when transitioning university-level English requirements, notably in the TOEFL structure section. This research seeks the difficulties experienced by 39 first-year students from various background of high-school who willing to participate in the research at a university in Madura, and had unfamiliar experiences in TOEFL previously. The document analysis conducted in this research by analyzing TOEFL Structure and Written Expression test scores and in-depth interviews. The results showed specific gaps in students' grammar knowledge and test-taking strategies. They also struggled with adjective clauses, passive voice, and descriptive phrases. These difficulties underscore the misalignment between high-school English materials and the demands of TOEFL, underlying the strategies to bridge this gap. The basic-to-advance English material and TOEFL needs to be introduced in the high-school settings. Along with it, at the university level could serve more than once English class.

## INTRODUCTION

English as a lingua franca is needed to be taught to students. It has also become the global standard for competing in the globalization era (Nishanthi, 2018; Pajarwati, Mardiah, Harahap, Siagian, & Ihsan, 2021). In the current Indonesian curriculum, English is officially taught in high schools. The students are familiarized with the various kinds of reading texts and trained by using grammar in the text (Sulistyaningrum & Sumarni, 2023). With sufficient provisions, the students are expected to be able to continue their studies in college more easily.

A test becomes the final assessment of learning English at school. It is usually given in the middle and at the end of the semester. The types of tests given are multiple-choice and essay tests. Most of these tests only measure students' reading, writing, and grammar comprehension skills. Then, students will get a final score which is the result of the test. This score is widely considered by the general public as a student's English ability. The test is not a standardized test that is a benchmark for students' English ability.

One widely used standardized test is the TOEFL. This official test measures students' English language skills

(Mustafa & Anwar, 2018). The test results show a score that can be used as a reference for the student's level. This test can be used by English learners from various school levels.

At the university level, passing the TOEFL test is a significant issue. It is part of graduation requirements with approximately 450 minimum scores. First-year university students feel under pressure since they are not familiar with this typical test in high school settings. While students receive English instruction during their junior and senior high school years, the depth and focus of this curriculum often fall short of equipping them with the skills needed to excel in the TOEFL, especially in the structure section.

It is undoubtedly true that TOEFL is one of the graduation requirements in university settings in Indonesia, and the students have to pass it anyway. According to ETS (Educational Testing Service), TOEFL measures the students' English proficiency and is intended for non-native English speakers. For TOEFL ITP, it covers listening, structure and written expression, and reading. However, Indonesian high school curricula primarily emphasize basic English skills, focusing on conversational abilities and general comprehension rather than formal language structures and academic rigor. The students must be taught English at the basic-to-advanced level previously and then followed by TOEFL materials (Tangkelangi, 2020). For the first-timers taking this test, it wouldn't be easy (Slamet & Sulistyaningsih, 2021). This creates a gap where students may perform well in general English but struggle with the specific demands of the TOEFL structure section, which assesses detailed grammatical understanding and sentence structure recognition.

Many studies found that TOEFL is difficult to bring to the knees, even for English department students. The research that had been done in the English Department of STKIP YPUP (Halim & Ardiningtyas, 2018), Department of English Language Education, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry (Akmal, Rasyid, Masna, & Soraya, 2020), the Education Department in Tarbiyah and Teaching Training Faculty of UIN Alauddin Makassar (Rahman, Kamsinah, & Nur, 2021), English Language Study Program of Islamic Studies Ma'arif Metro Lampung and IAIN Metro Lampung (Sari, Suhono, Latief, & Hasyim, 2021) and the Postgraduate English Program of a State University in Mataram (Narayana & Soepriyanti, 2023) found that the students still need to face the challenges in executing TOEFL test. It is also faced by students of one of the universities in Madura. Many of them cannot graduate immediately because of TOEFL scores that do not meet the standards. In this university, the TOEFL predictions is done by the Language Center. They pay a very cheap test fee, and the majority are doing the test more than 10 times.

In the past period, a waiver was given if the test 10 times still did not pass. However, there is currently a new rule that if anything happens, they must pass. Thus, the English lecturers in this university are mandated to teach TOEFL as the material in their English class to minimize delays in student graduation.

Based on that issue, this situation can lead to confusion for first-semester college students. Since the English subject is delivered in the first year of college, they get pressure to master TOEFL. Finding the lack of their English ability and adjusting to the college demands is challenging enough. In terms of examining the struggles, this research is done. Subsequently, in total, 39 students couldn't agree more that TOEFL is their new nightmare. Furthermore, without adequate preparation, students may find the academic vocabulary and grammatical complexity of TOEFL questions intimidating, leading to lower scores and increased frustration. The role of the English lecturers matters in overcoming this issue. Their ability to convey materials affects the students' understanding of the materials (Sulistyaningrum & Sumarni, 2023).

In the previous school settings, the students are not given the TOEFL materials and drilling questions. It becomes one of several reasons for them to hardly pass the required score (Akmal et al., 2020). Therefore, they find it quite challenging to achieve a good score on the structure section of the test. It is crucial to analyze the specific parts of structure skills because it feels like *an uphill battle* to pass the TOEFL structure section. Thus, this research aims to uncover the underlying challenges and provide recommendations to bridge the gap between high school English instruction and the proficiency levels required for TOEFL, ultimately supporting students in meeting their academic and language goals. This study focuses on non-English department students who are located at a university in Madura. Even more, students' characteristics and suggestions will be different in every need. Thus, the researchers are interested in analyzing the phenomenon.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative document analysis approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenses, & Razavieh, 2010). The data were collected by asking the respondents to take the TOEFL Structure and Written Expression section test. The test was conducted among 39 first-year students at a university in Madura who were willing to participate in this research. They had also never taken the TOEFL test before. They were from various backgrounds of high school, senior high school, Islamic senior high school, and vocational high school students.

The questions were cited from the Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL Test book. To gather deeper insights into their struggle, interviews were conducted with five selected students. They are those who had the highest and lowest scores during the test. The scores obtained were then analyzed on what number and what materials were found to have the most errors. Those linked with the interview results on the difficult materials that the students face. It also revealed the gap between high-school English instruction and the current demands.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

39 participants participated in this research. Structure and written expression with 40 questions that had been done by the participants, showed that the correct answers were no more than 20 questions.

**Table 1** Total Correct Number

Respondents	Total Correct	Respondents	Total Correct
1.	10	21.	20
2.	14	22.	9
3.	16	23.	18
4.	15	24.	12
5.	12	25.	14
6.	16	26.	8
7.	16	27.	12
8.	13	28.	17
9.	12	29.	9
10.	13	30.	19
11.	13	31.	10
12.	9	32.	19
13.	14	33.	14
14.	11	34.	15
15.	13	35.	19
16.	13	36.	9
17.	13	37.	17
18.	11	38.	12
19.	13	39.	16
20.	12		

The most correct answers among 40 questions were number 9 (25 respondents), 18 (24 respondents), 8 (22 respondents), 16 (22 respondents), and 15 (21 respondents). On the other hand, the less correct answers were number 13 (1 respondent), 12 (5 respondents), 35 (5 respondents), 2 (6 respondents), and 40 (6 respondents).

### 1. Challenges

The 25 respondents were able to execute question number 9 about the use of adjective clauses. Meanwhile, only one respondent greatly answers question number 13. It was also adjective clause material, but different structure.

9. Nimbostratus clouds are thick, dark gray clouds \_\_\_\_ forebode rain.
- (A) what  
(B) which  
(C) what they  
(D) which they

**Figure 1** TOEFL Structure Question

Question number 9 was an active voice, but number 13 was a passive voice. It showed the limitation of the respondents in identifying the questions. The fact that adjective clause questions are one of the fewer errors among all the question types was found in the research by Lubis, Nasution, Nasution, and Hasibuan (2020).

The following most correct answer was number 18. It was a written expression form, and the respondents performed well. The question related to the use of simple past tense in passive voice. In contrast, the second line of the less correct answer was number 12. Only five respondents could answer it correctly. It was about descriptive phrases or adjective phrases.

18. Segregation in public schools was declare unconstitutional by the Supreme Court
- A                      B                      C
- in 1954.
- D

**Figure 2** TOEFL Written Expression Question

According to the interview with the respondents, finding the wrong answer in the written expression was more challenging. The Respondent 26 and Respondent 36 thought that the questions were seemed to the correct sentences. They need to re-read the questions to find the answer, even though those were still low correct. They used to learn about the tenses while in high school. They were hard to determine which tense should be used in the questions. The difficulty in understanding grammar played as the main reason (Aniuranti & Tsani, 2024; Hadi, 2020). Even though one of the most correct answers was about implementing the simple past tense question, Respondent 29 felt it difficult to change it into a passive voice.

Respondent 26 addressed his view that the simple active voice questions were easier to do than the passive voice. The difficulty in recalling their memory in the use of passive voice patterns took them longer to solve the questions (Fitria & Muliasari, 2022). This is in line with the research results of Qonaatun (2019), where the passive questions were the most errors for students, as many as 79,1% of the test-takers made errors.

Respondent 21 and 32 said that they also used their sense to answer the questions. Sometimes, the correct answer is not always based on the grammatical structure, but also on the common words for certain situations. They were found to correctly answer number 40 where the use of 'doing' wasn't appropriate collocation in the bank.

The low range of vocabulary led them to do less while doing the test (Akmal et al., 2020; Awwalia & Suhardi, 2020; Gunantar & Rosaria, 2023; Slamet & Sulistyarningsih, 2021). The respondent 26 expressed the feeling by stating,

*"The vocabularies were strange for me, I found it difficult to understand the meaning of it and to find the correct or incorrect answers."*

## 2. Recommendation

All the respondents had the same voice that the TOEFL test was beyond their daily routine in high schools. They were taught the tenses but kind of the questions were different with what they had done and it made them rack brains.

Previous research also stated that many students do not know about the TOEFL test (Juliana & Amaniarsih, 2020). Thus, schools need to familiarize students with the TOEFL test. The goal is not only to make them familiar, but teachers will also know the students' actual English level.

## CONCLUSION

This research underlines the challenges faced by the first-year college students as a key component of university graduation requirements. Due to the exposure to English during high schools, they still struggle to pass the proficiency standards. It is caused by the gaps in grammar knowledge and unfamiliarity with TOEFL-style questions. The results showed that the respondents performed well on simpler active voice, they found difficulties with passive voice, descriptive phrases, and error identification in written expression style questions. These were compounded by their reliance on intuition rather than a solid understanding of grammatical rules.

Thus, the findings suggest a crucial need for targeted interventions by integrating TOEFL material in high-school settings. The result shows that one of the difficulties is the lack of vocabulary. Then, in the high school curricula, could elaborate the materials into the vocabulary type of questions in TOEFL and familiarize the students with TOEFL vocabularies.

The curricula for English as one of the subjects should be taught more than once to ensure basic English and in-depth materials for the TOEFL. According to the reason behind their low test scores, the teachers should modify the technique of delivering materials and give them more

practice. Furthermore, English lecturers at the university level need to address these gaps by paying attention to the clear and focused explanation of the structure section. By doing it, they can be better equipped to pass the minimum scores, reducing frustration and elevating their readiness for academic and professional challenges.

Since the research does not cover the ways to overcome the issues, future research could examine the best therapies or solutions. Moreover, the structure and written expression need to get special attention.

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