

**Exploring the views of English Majors on taking TOEFL: Lessons learnt from an
Indonesian university**

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ABSTRACT

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is one of the standardized competence examinations. Before taking the thesis examination, undergraduates at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, in particular, are mandated to take the TOEFL. This research intends to examine how English majors in the English Department perceive the TOEFL exam. To collect data, semi structured interview protocols were done, and data were analysed qualitatively. Findings suggest that while it poses some challenges, TOEFL helps students in applying for jobs. This study implies that it is necessary to ensure that improvement in teaching the test in the classroom setting remains available.

Keywords: English Department Students, Narrative Inquiry, TOEFL, English Department

INTRODUCTION

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is one of the standardized competence examinations. According to Warfield (2013), university students' TOEFL scores serve as a measure of their English competence. Some colleges in Indonesia use the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to test students' English ability as one of the criteria for earning a bachelor's degree. Therefore, students are required to pass the TOEFL in order to acquire a bachelor's degree with a minimum score. Before taking the thesis examination, undergraduates at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, in particular, are mandated to take the TOEFL, according to Badu (2020). Many study programs have established this regulation for their students, and each study program has its particular grading criteria. Students in class of 2013 are needed to have a standard TOEFL exam score of 500. The benchmark TOEFL score also varies by grade level within the English education study program.

The researcher conducted a pre-observation involving English Department students, who are required to pass the TOEFL in order to graduate, in order to provide a brief overview of the difficulties associated with taking the TOEFL. Observations were made by asking students enrolled in the English education major about their difficulties in taking and passing the TOEFL. It was discovered that a number of students encountered difficulties in passing the TOEFL. Additionally, it was discovered that the problems they had encountered were related to their English comprehension. However, others considered the TOEFL as an impediment to graduation because students are not permitted to graduate if they do not meet the minimal score established by the associated faculty (Farkhan, Nurlia, Hauesa, 2019). Given that the English

Department at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo wants its students to have a TOEFL score of 500, achieving the minimum level can be deemed difficult.

According to preliminary observations, many English Department students, particularly at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, take TOEFL many times. The majority of these students took the exam multiple times in order to achieve the minimum score. TOEFL played a crucial role in determining an individual's English competence, and the university made it a regular requirement for students (Wibowo, 2020). In Badu (2020), students in classes from 2011 to 2012 are required to have a TOEFL score of 450, while students in classes 2013 and beyond must have a score of 500. After data from the language center indicated that some students pass the exam only once, while others take it three to six times or even more than 10 times, this has been an interesting issue to investigate (Badu, 2020). Therefore, the researcher is curious to discover the cause of the aforementioned problem.

This incidence should be examined further by assessing students' impressions of the TOEFL examination, particularly among students of English Education Study Programs who have passed the examination. The English Education Study Program and students who are nevertheless having problems with the test or have not yet taken it would benefit from these students' perspectives. In addition, the opinions of students who have taken the exam on this language policy can be gathered, allowing students to discuss their test-taking difficulties, tips for passing the test, prospective benefits from the test, and their expectations for the test.

The TOEFL research has been explored in many previous studies. For example, Sari (2019) published a study titled "English Language Teachers' Self-Reported Perceptions on TOEFL Preparation Program in Senior High School." The purpose of this study is to find out how English language teachers feel about their tactics for teaching TOEFL to students. The findings revealed that all teachers had a favorable opinion of the TOEFL program in senior high school, and that TOEFL should be implemented in the first grade to help pupils prepare for their future studies and careers.

Another study was conducted by Dewanti (2017). This study aimed to discover students' attitudes toward the TOEFL test as a thesis examination requirement for Medical Students at the University of Jambi, as well as their readiness for the exam. Almost all of the participants in this study believed that the TOEFL test should be required prior to the thesis examination since it had a positive impact on their learning and knowledge of English and motivated them to study hard in order to pass the test.

The third study was conducted by Alek et al. (2019). The goal of the study was to find out how students felt about the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which is one of the graduation requirements at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta. Nearly all of the participants agreed that TOEFL as a graduation requirement was a good idea. It was shown that the majority of participants viewed TOEFL to be a mandatory requirement for graduation since it allowed them to improve their English skills and motivate them to learn English. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the students' obstacles and gains are diverse.

By looking at the previous studies, it is assumed that there are several differences that differentiate this proposed research from the studies above. The first difference is the participants where the first previous study focuses on teachers as opposed to students. However, while the second, the third, and this proposed research focus on university students, the difference in terms of locations and education institutions is presumed to be able to provide dissimilar results. Furthermore, it is assumed that different institutions offer dissimilar courses regarding English learning and therefore, it is safe to say that this research might discover new findings regarding students' voices in TOEFL. The research questions of this present study are

outlined as “*What do English majors perceive the TOEFL as the requirement for getting a bachelor’s degree in the English Department?*”

This research intends to examine how English majors in the English Department perceive the TOEFL exam, which include the voices of those who have passed the test and those who have not. In accordance with the research background and objectives, the researcher hopes that this research would be helpful for the readers. Theoretically, the readers are able to understand more about the TOEFL test and why the TOEFL test is required in the English Department. Also, the readers might be able to learn about the difficulties in taking the TOEFL test so that they are able to avoid the problems that they might face in the future. Practically, it is expected that this research can be beneficial for teaching activities in the English Department, such as constructing learning materials that focus on TOEFL tests or creating a course that has the capability of increasing their TOEFL scores. Lastly, this research is expected to be a reference for the next researcher who wants to conduct a similar research in the area of TOEFL or other English language tests.

LITERATURE REVIEW TEST OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

TOEFL, which stands for test of English as a Foreign Language, is an examination which is broadly utilized to measure non-native speakers’ English capabilities. The TOEFL is a type of test that is used to assess a person’s English skills in general and for everyone, regardless of their background. In general, all TOEFL programs assess the same four language skills. Section 1 (listening), section 2 (structure), and section 3 (reading) are the three different portions in which listening, structure, and writing, as well as reading, are tested (Chairuddin & Ulfa, 2018). TOEFL program aims to provide detailed information on an English learner's potential to succeed in university or at employment. The TOEFL was founded in 1962 by the National Council on the Testing of English as a Foreign Language, a group of educators and government officials with the goal of creating an English-language assessment for international students who wish to study at American colleges (ETS, 2005).

According to Alderson (2009), there are two formats of TOEFL test that offered by ETS: Paper-Based Test (PBT) and Internet-Based Test (IBT). The TOEFL test was first administered in Indonesia by the English Language System (ELS), a specialized institution for TOEFL testing known as Institutional TOEFL. The university may also offer a TOEFL-like, a 12 TOEFL-equivalent test, or a TOEFL prediction, such as through the university's center for language studies or language laboratory. This type of TOEFL test is exclusively used internally to assess students' English ability for educational purposes (Mahmud, 2014).

VOICES IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The viewpoint of students is the opinion of people who have experienced something, in this case the TOEFL test. By learning the students' voices of the reasons why English Department students have repeatedly failed the TOEFL, it is possible to enhance the English Department's learning process and curriculum. Perception or voices, according to Kaymaz (2012), is a complex process via which individuals accept or evaluate information from their surroundings. Through the students' voices, incoming English major students who will take the TOEFL test will be able to understand the rationale and advice for attempting the test. In order to get

additional information about TOEFL, which is utilized as a measurement tool for how TOEFL should be passed by students, it is necessary to collect students' voices.

The most widespread idea of the curriculum throughout history and into the present day is that of content or subject matter delivered by teachers and mastered by students. Null (2011) explained that curriculum is the heart of an education since it is related to the things that should be taught in a school and combining thought, action, and purpose. Curriculum is also considered as a specific, tangible subject that is always tied to decision making within institutions, whether they are schools, churches, nonprofit agencies, or governmental programs and unlike education, curriculum requires those who discuss it to address what subject matter should be taught (Null, 2011).

TOEFL CLASSES IN UNIVERSITAS NEGERI GORONTALO

As stated before, curriculum is how subjects should be taught in a school and therefore, it is safe to say that it needs to be constructed in such a way in order to draw the full potential of the students. This is also the case in Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, specifically the English major students where they are required to possess sufficient English skills. The curriculum that is implemented on the teaching of English major students include four skills-related courses namely listening, reading, writing, and speaking (Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, 2022). All of these skills are considered to be crucial in order to instill the necessary knowledge regarding the use of English itself and to measure the said knowledge, TOEFL test is selected.

Before taking their thesis examination, TOEFL is one of the graduation criteria for English majors at UNG. Students who have not passed the TOEFL cannot take the examination for the thesis seminar. Consequently, TOEFL is an essential component for English education pupils. Minimum TOEFL score required for English education majors is 500. Students who have not attained the minimal score must continue to take the examination until they do, at which point they are permitted to take the thesis exam.

In response to this requirement, the professor in certain courses has considered the TOEFL, despite the fact that it is not specifically required. In the fourth semester, there is a course entitled Listening in Professional Context that focuses on listening. Actually, this is merely a general listening course, however some TOEFL listening practice has been conducted in this course. In the meantime, for the reading, there is the topic Advance Reading in which the professor assigns some TOEFL reading for the students to practice their reading skills.

METHOD

Narrative inquiry was employed in this study to learn about the experiences of those who have graduated from the English Department and passed the TOEFL test. This research was conducted at the Department of English Education in a university in the Province of Gorontalo, Indonesia. The primary reason for determining the Department of English Education as the preferred site of this research because by looking from the fact of English Department students who fail many times in taking TOEFL. Furthermore, this research seeks the participant who has experienced passed the TOEFL

The data of this research were collected by using an interview. This present research applied the semi-structured interview. By building a relationship with the participant, the researcher started the interview with small talk. For example, ask their name, the condition, their feeling when they become the graduates and their activity after graduate. The questions

were asked in the Indonesian Language to make the participants answer the question comfortably, which would make the researcher and the participant close each other and create the comfortable situation before the participant answering the main question about their feeling and experience to pass the TOEFL. Then, the researcher started the interview based on the questions to the participants in order to gain the data. The researcher utilized thematic analysis in this study, which is defined as a method for summarizing data that also requires interpretation in the selection of codes and the construction of themes. The ability to be employed within a wide range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks, as well as to be applied to a wide range of study questions, designs, and sample sizes, is a defining property of thematic analysis (Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This research intends to examine how English Education majors in the English Department perceive the TOEFL exam, which include the voices of those who have passed the test and those who have not. Based on this statement, the researcher questions are: *“How do English Education students view the TOEFL as the requirement for getting a bachelor’s degree in the English Department?”* Based on the responses of each participant, it is discovered that most participants perceived TOEFL test, while it poses some challenges, as helping them in applying for jobs.

TOEFL HELPS STUDENTS IN APPLYING FOR JOBS

Aside from the previous explanations, TOEFL test is regarded as one of the most required documents in applying for works, which is perceived as a positive response. Participant 8 stated that this test is required in applying for jobs in various offices and companies.

“TOEFL itu menurut saya punya banyak fungsi dan kegunaan, seperti sebagai cara untuk melihat kemampuan bahasa Inggris seseorang dan juga bisa dipakai di dunia kerja karena saya pernah mendengar banyak kantor atau perusahaan yang menggunakan TOEFL sebagai persyaratan.” (Participant 8, p.5)

“In my opinion, the TOEFL has many functions and uses, such as as a way to see a person's English skills and can also be used in the world of work because I have heard that many offices or companies use TOEFL as a requirement.” (Researcher translation)

Participant 5 also perceived TOEFL as a necessary document in applying for a job, such as in banks. It is worth noting that the answer of this participant also displayed a negative response, which would be explained in the next section.

“Menurut saya, TOEFL penting untuk banyak hal seperti persyaratan wisuda ataupun melamar pekerjaan, contohnya di bank. Hanya saja, saya berpikir kalau tes ini agak membebani mahasiswa karena mereka kurang familiar dengan tesnya. Menurut saya, tes TOEFL ini perlu disosialisasikan pada siswa

SMA karena banyak mahasiswa yang sepertinya terjebak karena tidak mengetahui syarat ini.” (Participant 5, p.3)

“In my opinion, TOEFL is important for many things such as graduation requirements or applying for jobs, for example in a bank. It's just that, I think that this test is a bit burdensome for students because they are not familiar with the test. In my opinion, this TOEFL test needs to be socialized to high school students because many students seem trapped because they do not know this requirement.” (Researcher translation)

On the basis of the aforementioned responses, it is clear that the TOEFL is required for assessing students' proficiency in English as a second language, which highlights the significance of the test itself. In addition, it is anticipated that students must pass the exam as a requirement for graduation from the English Department. Using the TOEFL test as a measure of measuring students' English skills is thought vital since graduates of the relevant department are expected to demonstrate fluency in English; thus, this test is deemed necessary.

Furthermore, it is discovered that some of the participants perceived TOEFL as a necessary document in applying for works because it is stated that there are various of companies and offices that assert TOEFL as one of the required documents. Based on this statement, it is safe to assume that, nowadays, various of companies and offices need the individuals who have the sufficient capability.

TOEFL TEST POSES CHALLENGES

After analyzing the data, it is found that some students are burdened with this condition where among the answers came from Participant 2 who stated that the duration of the examination itself is too short.

“Menurut saya, tes TOEFL itu agak sulit atau challenging karena tes TOEFL itu waktunya agak sedikit dan untuk persiapannya juga butuh waktu yang cukup.” (Participant 2, p.1)

“In my opinion, the TOEFL test is rather difficult or challenging because the TOEFL test takes quite a bit of time and it also takes a lot of time to prepare.” (Researcher translation)

Participant 3 also stated that they faced problems during the exam, specifically in listening and structure sections.

“Masalah utama saya itu di bagian listening karena mungkin saya tidak terlalu paham di section ini. Di structure juga saya agak kurang paham karena grammar memang menurut saya agak sulit. Jadi menurut saya, minimal scorenya bisa diturunkan agar tidak banyak yang tertahan untuk ujian.” (Participant 3, p.2)

“My main problem is in the listening section because maybe I don't really understand this section. In terms of structure, I also don't understand a bit because grammar is in my opinion a bit difficult. So, in my opinion, at least the

score can be lowered so that not many are stuck for the exam.” (Researcher translation)

Participant 4 similarly answered that they also faced problems, specifically in listening and structure sections.

“Untuk saya sendiri, masalah yang paling besar itu ada di bagian listening dan structure karena saya agak kurang familiar dengan audio dan grammar. Untuk reading, saya cukup percaya diri dan berdasarkan score yang saya dapatkan, section terakhir cukup mudah.” (Participant 4, p.3)

“For myself, the biggest problem is in the listening and structure sections because I'm a bit less familiar with audio and grammar. For reading, I'm quite confident and based on the score I got, the last section is quite easy.” (Researcher translation)

On the basis of the aforementioned responses, it is clear that the TOEFL poses challenges for the participants, which include the low capability in working on the listening and structure sections. This finding signifies that some students are not prepared to take the test, which resulted in the aforementioned challenges. In addition, it is also learned that some participants are unable to do the exam as they intended due to the short time limit of the test itself. This finding indicates that the participants were having a hard time in filling up the questions during the examination, which might be the result of lack of preparation.

DISCUSSION

TOEFL is stated to be required in applying for a job since TOEFL test is a proof of one's capability in utilizing English (Chairuddin & Ulfa, 2018). It is also added that the students who possess good English proficiency would get a better opportunity in job hunting, promotion, get higher salaries, and school admission (Alek et al., 2019). By looking at the previous claims, one can imply that TOEFL is now required as one of the documents in applying for a job and due to this, it can be inferred that in the world of work, English has now become one of the sought skills and with the development of informatization as well as globalization, it is evident that most people all over the world are communicating with the people of other regions in only one internationally recognized language, that is, English (Rao, 2019). Therefore, it can be said that by proficient in English, one might be able to handle the world of work.

Meanwhile, despite its benefits, some participants think that TOEFL poses challenges for the students. Among the challenges are the low capability in working on listening and structure sections. In the study conducted by Alek et al. (2019), it is learned that students tend to face a problem in structure section, which related to lack of vocabulary and lack of grammar understanding. Therefore, it is safe to say that the participants faced the said challenge due to their lack of knowledge in the language itself. Furthermore, other participants stated that the time limit of the test is too short and caused them to answer the questions in a reckless way. It could also be said that the participants had a hard time in understanding the questions since it is presumed that they are unable to understand the question in a short time.

CONCLUSION

This research intends to examine how English Education majors in the English Department perceive the TOEFL test. Participants responded positively by implying that TOEFL helps in applying for jobs, while perceiving that TOEFL test also poses challenges. There are some recommendations to make the students' result in TOEFL. It is recommended for the teachers and lecturers to improve the quality of materials that concerns with TOEFL since the assumed cause of the students' inability in passing the minimum score is the lack of understanding in the test itself. For the students, it is recommended that they discover various methods in overcoming their lack of knowledge regarding TOEFL test since the university might not change its policy regarding the prerequisite. Finally, it is recommended for the future researcher to conduct a research that focuses on the cause of students' inability in passing the minimum score.

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