

Exploring Students Difficulties in Answering Reading TOEFL Section Test

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Abstract. Test of English Foreign Language (TOEFL) is widely used as a measurement for standardized English competencies. This study attempted to explore EFL learners' difficulties in dealing question of reading section in TOEFL test. Qualitative case study research design and semi – structured interview as the instrument to gain the data. In this study with four participants were purposively selected from the English Education Department of Private University of Jember who have passed the TOEFL test. The findings revealed that there were two factors that become a difficulties or obstacle faced by the TOEFL test-takers in completing TOEFL reading questions. First, the factor that is caused from several kind of questions that are difficult to answer for the participants, including; unstated detail questions, implied detail question, and vocabulary in context questions. Second, the factor that is caused by each participant's personally, including; lack of mastering vocabulary, limitation of time, and unfamiliar vocabularies. The results of this study are expected to have practical contribution on determining the appropriate strategies employed to minimize students' error during answering TOEFL test.

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INTRODUCTION

TOEFL has been acknowledge as an international standardized test to certify non-native speakers' English language competencies. TOEFL has been used widely in any aspects. One of the TOEFL aspects is used as an indicator of students' academic achievement in English field by many universities, such as a graduation requirement, especially in Indonesian context (Netta & Trisnawati, 2019; Ananda, 2016). As the graduation requirements, TOEFL is able to asses the students' English proficiency to ceetify their knowledge in English (Aliponga, 2013). In this regrad, to graduate from universities,

the test-takers are highly required to pass the TOEFL standard minimum score set by particular universities.

However, preparing the students to have a minimum score is a daunting task. Mahmud (2014) reported that there were many difficulties encountered by the test-takers in answering TOEFL questions to get the minimum score including incompetencies regarding the mastery of four English basic skills, less practice, lack of motivation, and the differences of test-takers' social status and age. Other struggle faced by the students as TOEFL test-takers is difficulty in answering the question of TOEFL which is mostly they were not introduced to the TOEFL from the beginning. So, many of them felt unfamiliar with TOEFL test (Rahma et al., 2022). As aforementioned, those all difficulties are in the light of following aspects: the lack of skills and social factors (social status and age).

More specifically, some previous studies indicated that the students have the difficulty in answering TOEFL Reading test questions. The students who find vocabularies are not familiar, it makes them feel difficult in understanding reading text. This is because they are less in mastering the vocabularies, so they cannot get the ideas in the text read. As (Hafid et al., 2021) in their research reported that there were three aspects causing students difficulty in finding specific information in the text, and having trouble to identify characteristics in reading text. Another study (Mahendra et al., 2020) claimed that the obstacle factors for the students in answering the TOEFL reading test questions are low-level motivation and lack of vocabularies. Moreover, duration is one of the other factors contributing to the students' difficulties during TOEFL test (Abboud & Hussein, 2011).

In addition, in the research from Samad et al., (2017) indicated that there were five aspects of difficulties in Reading TOEFL section faced by the students as test-takers, including difficulty in indicating the texts, topics, main ideas, and language knowledge were the students' problem aspects in answering the TOEFL reading test question (Febriani et al., 2019). Furthermore, Badu (2020) mentioned that finding the definition from structural clues was the most difficult level of the question for the test-takers in reading section. There were also some skills in reading TOEFL questions that were considered difficult to be answered by the students (Riswanto, et al., 2019). Likewise, the result from Nazri et al., (2020) argued that the difficulty faced by the TOEFL test-takers were regarding to the low competence in answering TOEFL reading test.

As mentioned earlier, many TOEFL test-takers face the difficulties to answering the question of TOEFL test situated on many different research contexts. Yet, there is limited empirical evidence on exploring the TOEFL test takers' difficulties situated in University level in Indonesia. So that, researcher chose this title as the research because of the suggestion of previous studies claiming that reading section is one of the TOEFL subsection that is still rarely researched. This study aims to explore various kinds of difficulties experienced by the students as TOEFL test-takers, especially in the reading section.

METHODS

Based on interpretivism, this qualitative case study (Yin & K., 2018) aimed to explore the difficulties faced by TOEFL test-takers when working on TOEFL test, especially in the TOEFL reading section. This methodological framework investigates a particular

phenomena that exist and are happening in life. Case studies are also used to explain some contemporary circumstances such as “why” or “how” in some social phenomena (Yin & K., 2018). The case study that used is a single case because the number of cases only focused on one case being studied, namely the participants' difficulties in working on the reading TOEFL test questions. Therefore, the study case approach allowed the researcher to study particular students as TOEFL test-takers in an attempt to understand the case of the difficulties in reading section of TOEFL.

In this research involved four EFL students in the Islamic Private University of Jember, Indonesia. The participants were obtained voluntarily through an ethical research process by distributing a letter of consent via a casual conversation through the Whatsapp application. The participants who volunteered to participate in this research were four students that willingness to engage in this research. They have fulfilled demand of this research by carrying out the TOEFL test at private Islamic University of Jember, in Indonesia. The participants were 1 male and 3 females with the age range 23 to 24 years old who were at the 9th semester level in the English Education program study. To protect the participants' privacy, this current study adopted ethical research of confidentiality (Allen, 2017) while gathering, analyzing, and presenting the data by assigning pseudonym.

In the data collection process, the researcher used a semi-structured interview technique (Barkhuizen, et al., 2014) with the aim of eliciting comprehensive data based on the research topic. Furthermore, all the interviews were conducted by meeting face to face and followed up through virtual media communication by using WhatsApp. The interview guidelines of this research adopted from Hidayah & Nazriani (2022) to get in-depth description about difficulties in reading section TOEFL test. More specifically, there were 5 interview items designed to explore the participants feeling about difficulties in reading section TOEFL test, including (1) Did you face difficulty when answering questions of reading TOEFL test?; (2) What the difficulties did you face when answering TOEFL reading test?; (3) Did you find difficult word in reading text when doing TOEFL test?; (4) What kind of questions were difficult to answer for you? (5) How did you solve your problem when facing difficulty to answer the questions?. To obtain the validity and credibility of the data, we conducted the interview several times with the participants. During the interview, the researcher recorded the interview activities by via audio which is the transcribed for further analysis. Throughout the consideration of interview quality and time management efficiency, the researcher interviewed in the Indonesian native language for approximately 30 – 40 minutes.

Afterwards, the result of the interview were analyzed using thematic data analysis techniques. Data analysis techniques that emphasize the preparation of coding with reference to predetermined questions, so that research questions could be adapted to the themes that have been arranged and can be used as a reference in explaining the phenomena occur. Braun & Clarke (2006) the detailed stages are as follows: (1) Familiarizing yourself with the data (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, (6) Producing the report. Afterwards, the final outcome was appropriately presented by applying Widodo's (2014) analytical framework to examine all the data. As a result, the methods used to analyze the data consisted of five steps: attentively and repeatedly listening to an audio recording to ensure accurate

transcription; organizing the layout of the transcribed data; thoroughly interpreting the interview data; reproducing or reconstructing the interview data; and establishing the reliability of the data. To increase the credibility of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researcher utilized peer debriefing technique (Janesick, 2015), which is acknowledged in the previous sentence, to be more precise, the process of peer debriefing involved evaluating the method used to collect the data.

FINDINGS

This research was designed to explore students' difficulties as TOEFL test-takers during answering questions of TOEFL in reading section in a private university of Jember. Based on data that the researcher got from interview with participant (VD#1), the data showed that reading section in TOEFL, that was conducted by Language Center of Islamic University of Jember, the participant still faced difficulties. As well what was conveyed by MH#1 that the difficulty was faced by her because of lack of mastering in long text and some unfamiliar vocabularies. Also the result of interview was conveyed by NI#1 showed the difficulty for him was caused of difficult vocabulary. Therefore, those had been stated in excerpts of interview.

" Yes, I was having difficulties. ... there were some factors that caused me faced difficulties when answering TOEFL reading questions." (Quote of Interview VD#1, 7th Januari 2023)

" According to my personal experience ... whether there was difficulty when answering TOEFL reading questions, so the answer was I faced a few difficulty. Especially, in mastering of the questions in form of long text." (Quote of Interview MH#1, 10th Januari 2023)

" Yes, I had quite faced difficulties in TOEFL reading test. Because some questions and vocabularies were difficult and I did not know about the words." (Quote of Interview NI#1, 11th January 2023)

As it had been described from the previous data interview that the constraint or the difficulty in answering TOEFL questions in reading section was still faced by the participants as TOEFL test-takers. These difficulties include; difficult vocabularies, less in mastering of the text meaning. Regarding this, it could be strengthened by evidence that the researcher had been collected from interviewing the participants.

" The difficulties that I faced was the time was not enough for me to answer the questions. ... the text were too much and long, so sometimes I felt difficult to understand the meaning ... Sometimes I was not careful about the questions, because there were many questions that were tricky for me." (Quote of Interview VD#2, 07 Januari 2023)

" ... I faced the difficulties in answering the questions of TOEFL reading section. Because there were several questions that made me confused to find the answer in the text. ... Also it needed more time to do the test for me." (Quote of Interview NI#2, 11th January 2023)

"The difficulties that I faced, first was about the text which was long, so I felt bored and sleepy when reading them. ... several vocabularis that were unfamiliar and new for me, so I felt difficult to understand the meaning of the text. Then, also duration of time which was too short for me to do lots of the reading TOEFL questions" (Quote of Interview HW#2, 10th January 2023)

" ... Some of the difficulties when answering the reading TOEFL questions for me was about insufficient time management to complete on fifty questions of TOEFL reading section. ... Difficulties in understanding some vocabularies in scientific context and understanding point in the text." (Quote of Interview MH#2, 10th January, 2023)

Based on the result of interview above, the data showed that most of the participants faced the difficulties in TOEFL reading section due to several factors such as; time limitation, long reading passages, difficulty in understanding the content of the passages, and unfamiliar vocabularies. As also it had stated in previous study (Maizarah, 2019; Qrgez & Rashid, 2017).

Third item tried to explore information related to vocabulari difficulties found in the text and the questions in TOEFL reading section. The data from the participants explained that the unfamiliarity in some vocabularies was most basic factor for participants to feel hampered in compliting the test in reading section. In addition, the vocabulary with a scientific contexts and rarely encountered themes of passage were also an obstacles for the participants. This was illustrated in the following interview data.

" Yes, I found several difficult vocabularies. Because those vocabularies were unfamiliar and I had not known before. ... so I could not understand the context of the text." (Quote of Interview HW#3, 10th January 2023)

" Yes, I did. Because I thought several vocabularies were very not familiar with me. ... maybe it was influenced with the lack of my reading culture in the scientific context. Because there was some texts that took a difficult themes, such as film or industrial development, so the vocabularies were new for me." (Quote of Interview MH#3, 10th January 2023)

" Yes, I found quite a lot of new vocabularies in the reading texts. ... because the vocabularies were new and had not been studied before, I just knew when taking TOEFL. ... When studying for TOEFL preparation we did not learn and get the new vocabularies that might be related to the questions in TOEFL reading section." (Quote of Interview NI#3, 11th January 2023)

Based on the result of interview from three participants above, the data indicated that the lack of vocabulary was the main factor that greatly influenced the participants in answering TOEFL reading test. Moreover, when preparing the participants for the TOEFL test, the participants did not get new vocabularies that might be related with the context of passages in TOEFL reading section. This is hoped that TOEFL instructor could provide additional vocabularies related to the context that often appear in the passages of TOEFL reading. So that the addition vocabularies given is able to support participants' vocabulary more widely.

In the next instrument, the researcher collected the data related about what kind of difficult questions were often faced by the participants as TOEFL test-takers. Through the data that the researcher collected, there were several kind of questions were difficult according to the participants, such as unstated detail questions, implied detail questions, and vocabulary in context questions. That is as illustrated in the following interview result.

"The difficult question for me was about the question that should find another meaning of the vocabulary that was asked, ... Then, the question that asked about a context was not mentioned in the text and sometimes there were similarities in the choices so I felt trapped. ..." (Quote of Interview HW#4, 10th January 2023)

"The question that was difficult for me was when I answered about question which looking for the answer but there was not mentioned in context of the text. ... The question was about concluding from the statement in the question, and the last was about looking for other meaning from vocabulary asked. ..." (Quote of Interview VD#4, 7th January 2023)

"The difficult questions, according to me, were about question that to find an answer that was not stated in the passage, some questions that we had to draw conclusion from information in the passage, the last was about looking for other meaning of vocabulary asked." (Quote of Interview NI#4, 11th January 2023)

In the last item, the researcher gathered the data about what strategy that is used by the participants when facing difficulties in doing the test of TOEFL reading section. The following is fragment of the data interview from the participants.

"... personally, I used suggesting or guessing way. So I translated the texts by guessing from word to word in order to become a complete sentence or meaning. Then, I matched between the text and the intended question and chose the correct answer." (Quote of Interview MH#5, 10th January 2023)

"The strategy that I used was by re-reading and understanding the text and the questions carefully. Then, I looked for the answer choices that had similarities with the text or sometimes I used feeling to answer them. ..." (Quote of Interview VD#5, 7th January 2023)

“ Strategy that I used when answering the difficult questions was taking main sentence in the text then I searched the word that was same with the answer. So it was more to guess between the answer and questions asked.” (Quote of Interview NI#5, 11th January 2023)

The interview data above showed that what strategies used by the participants when experiencing difficulties in answering the TOEFL reading test. Through the interview that had been conducted by researcher, showed that the participants more used a guessing and matching in solving their difficulties. It showed that the strategy to be able to answer the difficult questions needed for the TOEFL test-takers. The strategy is like what tips that can be used by the participants to answer difficult questions efficiently. As stated by previous study (Zalha et al., 2020; Rahmasari, 2017).

DISCUSSION

This current study explored the students' difficulties in facing the TOEFL test. In this section, the researcher discussed the findings of the research related to two research questions also related to the aims of this study: to know the students' difficulties in facing the TOEFL test. The researcher had collected the data using interview as instrument in order to answer the research questions. Based on the result that discovered after analyzing the data, the following section discusses about the findings of this study.

Based on research presented from the results of interviews conducted with participants, it was found that the TOEFL test participants still experienced obstacles when working on the TOEFL questions in the reading section. As stated by the participants in the research interview excerpts, there were several inhibiting factors that influenced the TOEFL test takers to be able to complete the TOEFL test in the reading section, including difficulties in understanding the intent of the reading; Lack of mastery of vocabulary; unfamiliar vocabulary; Difficulty in understanding vocabulary. This finding in line with earlier studies (Mahendra et al., 2020; Hafid et al., 2021) who analyzed about difficulties in reading TOEFL section test. The next difficulties of the students in facing the TOEFL test is because of the limitation of time, which found in study by Abboud & Hussein (2011), which involved sixty subjects of different post-graduate students and of different specializations participated in this study. The result showed that duration was about the students' problem. Because they could not manage the time well yet.

Furthermore, other factors that caused the students facing difficulties in doing on TOEFL reading questions, namely some skills that were considered difficult by participants. As in the results of the interviews data in finding, the questions such as about unstated detail and vocabulary in context were the most difficult skills for TOEFL test takers to work on. The study conducted by Fajri (2019) shows the same thing that most TOEFL test takers face the most problems. In addition, questions about conclusions also include skills that were quite difficult for participants, which was also mentioned in research conducted by Elfiondri, et al., (2020) which examined the problematic sub-skills in TOEFL reading, showing that conclusions are the second level in the skill difficulty category in the TOEFL

reading section. Some of these skills are questions that are relatively difficult for TOEFL test takers to do by the students.

CONCLUSIONS

This research used qualitative case study method (Yin & K, 2018), that carried out by analyzing the participants' difficulties in questions of TOEFL reading section in a detailed and structured manner. In accordance with the research data obtained from the four participants, it can be concluded that there are two factors that become a constraints or obstacles faced by the TOEFL test-takers in completing TOEFL reading questions. First, the factor that is caused from several kind of questions that are difficult to answer for the participants, including; unstated detail questions, implied detail questions, and vocabulary in context questions. Second, the factor that is caused by each participant's personally, including; lack of mastering vocabulary, limitation of time, and unfamiliar vocabularies. Therefore, TOEFL test organizer or TOEFL instructors are expected to be able to share or provide knowledge about TOEFL, especially in reading section, so it can minimize the problems that occur during completing TOEFL test such as providing some strategies and tips that can be used by the participants.

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