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REVEALING THE STUDENTS' NEEDS, TREATMENTS, AND PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS TOEFL DIFFICULTIES

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Abstract

Many universities in Indonesia facilitate their students in gaining knowledge and a better understanding of TOEFL. Similarly, Satu Nusa Lampung University implements a Community Service Program to introduce the strategies, tips, and tricks in answering TOEFL sections. The objectives of this research are to identify the students' initial ability in TOEFL before the training program and to analyse the influence of the training program on the students' scores; further, the researchers also want to know the most difficult type of TOEFL section based on the students' perspective. This research applied a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the research problems. The researchers used TOEFL tests and a semi-structured interview guide as the instruments of this research. From the results, it is known that most students have difficulty answering Listening questions before the training program; therefore, their Listening score is the lowest of all sections. Besides, the students' score in all of the TOEFL sections after joining the training program increases which means that there is an influence of the training program on the students' scores in TOEFL. The result also found that, according to students' perspective, Listening is the most difficult section compared to others. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the students' needs related to their ability in answering TOEFL questions and offers insight about the most challenging TOEFL section for students.

Keywords: Difficulties, perspective, TOEFL, training program

INTRODUCTION

Since English has become one of international languages that is used by many people around the world, there are many tests that is used to measure someone's ability in English such as IELTS, TOEFL, Duolingo English Test, Cambridge English Qualifications, TOEIC, CELPIP and PTE Academic. From all of those proficiency tests, TOEFL is the prominent test that is mostly used by people worldwide. It is supported by Educational Testing Service (as cited in Effendi, 2024) which mentioned that TOEFL has been used by 9000 institutions, colleges, universities and agencies in around 130 countries of this world. Narayana and Soepriyanti (2023) also said that TOEFL is the most widely known and accepted test for non- native English speaker. That is why it is not surprising that TOEFL becomes the most accepted English test globally than other English proficiency tests.

Test of English as a Foreign Language or TOEFL is a standardized test that is used to know and to measure someone's proficiency in English. It is in line with (Aprilliandari and Sugiharto, 2023) who stated that a high score on TOEFL test from a test taker will be an indication that her or his ability in English acquisition. According to Effendi et al (2024) since its inception TOEFL has an evolution from a paper-based test to computer based- test and then evolved to an internet-based test. Meanwhile since it was launched till nowadays TOEFL test consistent to assess components of language skills like listening, structure or grammatical and reading comprehension. Furthermore, according to Bania, A.S (2024) there are some versions of TOEFL which launched by Educational Testing Service (ETS) such as Paper Based Test (PBT), Computer Based Test (CBT), Internet Based Test (IBT) and Institutional Testing Program (ITP). In this research the researchers decided to use TOEFL PBT in the realm of TOEFL Prediction Test where this kind of TOEFL is also used in the TOEFL training program.

However, when taking the TOEFL test, students frequently have difficulty in getting high marks; the cause of this may be a lack of preparation Masfufah (as cited in Anggraini et al., 2023). Another research which was done by (Maruf et al., 2020) also found that there are internal and external factors which mainly causing the Indonesian University students get low score in English proficiency. The internal factors consist of low motivation and learning anxiety, meanwhile the external factors such as poor English environment, inappropriate teaching method and class size.

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Besides, the challenges experienced by students in answering TOEFL test included limited basic skills and vocabularies, insufficient practice, low motivation, anxiety, and individual differences among students (Rahman and Purwaningtyas, 2023). Therefore, by identifying students' difficulties in doing TOEFL test, the teachers and researchers can decide the best strategies to overcome the students' needs in order to improve their TOEFL scores.

There are many universities through their Language Centre in our country which facilitated their students by TOEFL Training Program to introduce and make sure that their students get better understanding in TOEFL. One of those universities is Satu Nusa Lampung especially English Literature faculty which conducted TOEFL preparation Training Program as their Community Service Program towards The Three Pillars of Higher Education. TOEFL Preparation Training Program was done with consideration by following some courses or TOEFL Training Program the students will get some treatments about the strategies, tips and tricks in answering the TOEFL test, so it is able to make the students achieve better score in TOEFL. Sulastri and Nafiah (2024) said that the students must do improvement like more practicing and follow TOEFL classes or TOEFL- specific training for having better score. Furthermore, it is also supported by (Sakurai in Maharani and Putro, 2021) who states that TOEFL preparation program is a learning program to improve students' reading, structure and listening skills in the academic English language.

From many research which focus on TOEFL training mentioned above none have discussed about the influence of TOEFL training for changing students' score, further none of those research which focused on finding the most challenging TOEFL skill based on student's perspective. In addition, by using a pre and post-test design, the results are not just the difficulty ranking, but also which section is the most trainable. A section can be hard but respond well to training will be valuable. Additionally, incorporating students' perspectives provides deeper insights into the underlying causes of their difficulties. Consequently, the research can explain both ***what*** aspects are problematic and ***why*** these challenges occur, thereby enabling the development of more targeted and effective practice activities to address them.

Therefore, through this TOEFL Training Program the researchers want to identify the students' initial ability in TOEFL before the training program and also to analyse the influence of training program towards the students' score, further the researchers also want to know the most difficult type of TOEFL section based on the student's perspective.

The TOEFL and Its Types

PBT is a TOEFL version which comes first where the participants will use paper and pencil to conduct the test. This TOEFL test measure someone's ability in three skills like reading comprehension, structure and written expression and the last is listening with the range score of tests is around 310 up to 667. The next version of TOEFL where the computer era has growing up is CBT or Computer Based Test which also used to know someone ability in reading comprehension, structure written expression, as well as listening comprehension. The scope score of this version is around 30 till 300. In Millennium era where internet mostly used in this world there is TOEFL IBT or people know it as Internet Based Test. According to Anggraini et al., (2023) since its inception in 2005, IBT or Internet Based Test has surpassed CBT as the most popular way to take the TOEFL test. The IBT format is the only one TOEFL format that includes a speaking component. This is the main reason it has turned into a TOEFL test favored by US institutions because it provides the most accurate assessment of a language's conversational competence among English students. Different from other version, the skills which will be tested in TOEFL IBT consist of structure and writing expression, reading comprehension, speaking and the last is listening. The scale of score in this exam is start from 0 up to 120 points. Another version is TOEFL ITP or Institutional Testing Program. It is one of tests developed by ETS (Educational Testing Service) which focused on the use of English in academic sector. This kind of TOEFL version is only recognized by certain institution and inapplicable to be applied globally. The skills which needed to be tested in this version are reading comprehension, with 50 questions, structure and written expression with 40 items and the last is listening comprehension with 50 items in the form of multiple choice. The minimum score in TOEFL ITP is 310 meanwhile for the highest score is 677.

From those types of TOEFL mentioned above, the TOEFL Training Program held by English Literature majoring of Satu Nusa Lampung University used PBT which consisted of three parts of skill such as listening, structure- written expression and reading comprehension with 150 questions during two hours. It is in line with TOEFL Proficiency subject which is included into the subjects list for English Literature majoring students especially in the fourth semester.

TOEFL Training Program of Satu Nusa Lampung University

The result of research in 2024 which was done by Sulastri and Nafiah found that the average score of students in answering TOEFL test can be categorized into extremely limited user level. It means that the TOEFL score of English Literature Study Program from Satu Nusa Lampung University students can be concluded into Low

scores. It was because lack of experience in learning and practicing TOEFL. The limitation time which was given in doing the TOEFL Test also influenced their score since they did not know how was the best strategies in doing TOEFL Test they needed more time, besides that the lack of vocabularies also made them difficult in comprehending the text so that was why it made their score became lower. Therefore, the Community Service Program Activities in this TOEFL Training have been carried out as reinforcement for the students in understanding the type of question and strategies that can be applied in working TOEFL.

The theme of this TOEFL Training Program is "Boosting Your English Skills and Reaching Your Best Score in TOEFL" with the purpose to introduce the type and strategies in answering TOEFL question so the students of English Literature are able to achieve better score. The participants involved in this TOEFL Training Program were the students of English Literature study program Satu Nusa Lampung University. It was started from May till July 2024 in the third floor of Satu Nusa Lampung University building with eight times for total meetings included pre- and post- test, two meetings for Reading skill, two meetings for structure- written expression and the two rest meetings for listening skills. Moreover, all of English Literature' lecturers in this University have been included into this Community Service Activities in TOEFL Training Program.

In the first meeting of this TOEFL Training Program students were given pre- test in order to see their readiness and also their initial ability before getting the treatments. In the next day the students got materials, tips, strategy and small exercise related to structure- written expression in TOEFL for two days. In the fourth and fifth days the students got materials, tips, strategy and small exercise about listening skill in TOEFL. Then it was followed by materials, tips, strategy and small exercise of reading skill for two days. In the last day the students were given post- test in order to see their result score after getting the treatments.

METHOD

This research applied a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the research problems. According to Zaenab et al., (2025) quantitative and qualitative data were collected in parallel to allow for cross-validation and more comprehensive understanding of the intervention's effects. In addition, Ponce and Pagan (as cited in Adara et al., 2024) assumed that mixed-methods approach has been popular in recent years especially for the education purposes in order to minimize the shortfalls of quantitative and qualitative methods. Furthermore, Pardede (2019) said that mixed-methods research also seems to be well known for investigating the phenomenon in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Johson & Golombek (as cited in Bidari and Ghanawali 2023) also stated that mixed-methods research in language education views the valuable insight to learners' behavior, perspective and attitude. In this research the quantitative components focused on the students' initial competencies in TOEFL section and after getting the treatment through training program, meanwhile the qualitative components illuminated the students' perception related to TOEFL difficulty.

This research was conducted in the third-floor building of Satu Nusa Lampung University which was also the place for English Literature Study Program did their Community Service Program Activities. All of students from English Literature Study Program were involved in this research during May till July 2024. It means that 102 English Literature Study Program students became the population of this research. Further, there are only 30 students who came from various ages and semesters were taken as the sample of this research. This sample was chosen by using random sampling technique to avoid the bias selection.

Moreover, the researchers used TOEFL PBT Test which consist of three sessions such as Listening, Structure- Written Expression and Reading Comprehension as the instrument to find out the students' initial ability before the training program and also to see the influence of this training program towards their score. Meanwhile, the researchers used a semi-structured interview guide as the instrument to find out the students' perceptions. According to Wahyuningsih et al., (2024) a semi-structured interview guide was used to explore students' perceptions of TOEFL skills difficulty. The questions were designed to elicit participants' experiences, perceived challenges, and strategies related to the TOEFL test.

In order to identify the students' initial ability in TOEFL before training program, the researchers used result of students' TOEFL pre- test score (the score before giving the treatment) as source of data. After following some treatments delivered by the English lecturers during the TOEFL training program, the students were distributed TOEFL test to analyse the influence of training program towards the students' score. Therefore, the researchers used this TOEFL post- test score as a source of data to know its influence. However, in order to know the most difficult type of TOEFL section based on the student's perspective, researchers used the result of semi-structured interview guide as a source of the data. This semi- structured interview guide was developed by the researchers based on TOEFL theory and previous studies. The Content validity was established through expert judgment by an English lecturer. Reliability was addressed by using a semi-structured interview protocol applied consistently to all participants. Meanwhile because TOEFL is a standardized test, its validity and reliability were not re-examined in this research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The table below shows student's Pre- test score based on TOEFL conversion to find out the students' initial ability in TOEFL before training program.

Table 1. The Student's TOEFL Pre- Test Score

No.	Participants	Student's Pre- Test Score			Total Score Based on TOEFL Conversion
		Listening Section	Structure- Written Expression Section	Reading Comprehension Section	
1	Student 1	52	54	63	563
2	Student 2	52	52	63	556
3	Student 3	49	50	63	540
4	Student 4	50	50	60	533
5	Student 5	47	48	61	520
6	Student 6	44	44	60	493
7	Student 7	38	45	59	476
8	Student 8	37	40	58	450
9	Student 9	35	40	60	450
10	Student 10	37	38	60	450
11	Student 11	36	40	59	450
12	Student 12	35	38	61	446
13	Student 13	33	36	65	446
14	Student 14	35	37	61	443
15	Student 15	33	35	65	443
16	Student 16	35	38	37	433
17	Student 17	35	38	58	433
18	Student 18	35	37	58	433
19	Student 19	38	35	55	426
20	Student 20	33	37	58	420
21	Student 21	35	36	55	420
22	Student 22	29	37	60	420
23	Student 23	41	43	58	413
24	Student 24	29	37	58	413
25	Student 25	30	37	55	406
26	Student 26	29	33	59	403
27	Student 27	31	31	59	403
28	Student 28	30	36	55	403
29	Student 29	30	29	59	393
30	Student 30	27	29	54	363

From the conversion table above, it can be seen that during those tested sections most of students achieve biggest score in Reading section where this section has the highest score if we compare from others. This great performance is followed by Structure- Written Expression, where students achieve the second highest score after Reading Comprehension. However, it proves that students get the lowest score in Listening from the two other tested sections. This table also describe that there is a students' need related to their ability in answering the question of TOEFL test.

It can be said that students only have few obstacles in doing their Reading Comprehension test, consequently their score is also surpassing the other sections. Following this result, Structure- Written Expression section occupies the second rank in terms of students' performance after the Reading section. Some of students have minimal difficulties in doing their test as a result their scores fall into the second highest category after Reading Comprehension. Then, it is assumed that most students get difficulty in answering Listening questions before the training program, therefore it influences their performance in doing the Listening test.

In order to ensure the transparency regarding the percentage of students in answering each TOEFL section, the researcher delivered a diagram as below;

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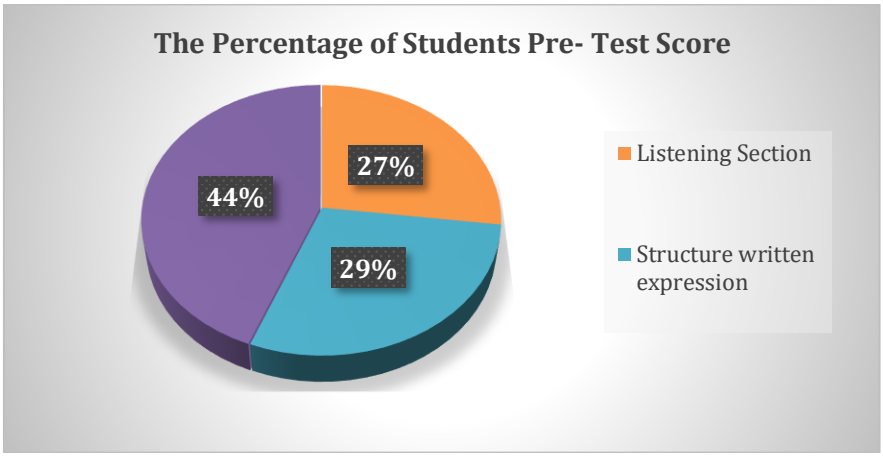


Figure 1. The Percentage of Students' Pre- Test Score in Each TOEFL Section

Based on the diagram above, it shows that from those tested students there are 44% students got their highest score in reading section compared to their score in structure written expression and listening sections. It seems that Reading Comprehension becomes the skills where students only make few mistakes in answering the question. Meanwhile it is also found that 29% of students achieve their better score in Structure- Written Expression than other two sections. Further, there were only 27% student who caught Listening section as their highest score. It indicates that most of students faced difficulty in answering Listening section before the training program. It may be because there is a high cognitive load where they have to listen, process the meaning, interpret the information which means it needs a high level of concentration. Lack of exposure and practice in Listening section also may become another reason which make the students have low ability.

Moreover, after following some treatments delivered by English lecturers during the TOEFL training program, the students were distributed TOEFL test. The table below shows the conversion score of students' TOEFL post- test.

Table 2. The Student's TOEFL Post- Test Score

No.	Participants	Students' Post- Test Score			Total Score Based on TOEFL Conversion
		Listening Section	Structure- Written Expression Section	Reading Comprehension Section	
1	Student 1	58	63	66	623
2	Student 2	55	61	65	603
3	Student 3	50	54	63	556
4	Student 4	49	51	63	543
5	Student 5	49	50	63	540
6	Student 6	47	50	63	533
7	Student 7	47	49	61	523
8	Student 8	45	47	61	510
9	Student 9	44	46	60	500
10	Student 10	44	44	60	493
11	Student 11	38	46	61	483
12	Student 12	41	43	60	480
13	Student 13	38	42	63	476
14	Student 14	40	40	63	476
15	Student 15	38	45	59	476
16	Student 16	41	46	58	476
17	Student 17	37	40	65	473
18	Student 18	41	43	58	473
19	Student 19	38	46	58	473
20	Student 20	38	45	58	470
21	Student 21	38	44	59	470
22	Student 22	37	43	60	466
23	Student 23	38	41	58	456

24	Student 24	38	40	58	453
25	Student 25	37	40	58	450
26	Student 26	35	40	60	450
27	Student 27	37	38	60	450
28	Student 28	33	40	61	446
29	Student 29	33	41	60	446
30	Student 30	35	37	61	443

The TOEFL Post-test was distributed in order to see whether there is any influence of treatments given by the lecturers during the training program towards the students' score. Therefore, the researchers compared students' score of post- tests based on the TOEFL conversion to their pre- test score to get the gain score, the manually calculated based on formula below.

The students' Gain score = post-test score - Pre- test score

In order to get better understanding of gain score from each of students, the researchers elaborated it into the table below;

Table 3. The Students' Gain Score

Participants	Students' Score in Listening		Gain Score in Listening	Students' Score in Structure		Gain Score in Structure & Written Expression	Students' Score Reading Comprehension		Gain Score in Reading
	Post - Test	Pre-Test		Post - Test	Pre-Test		Post - Test	Pre-Test	
Student 1	58	52	+6	63	54	+9	66	63	+3
Student 2	55	52	+3	61	52	+9	65	63	+2
Student 3	50	49	+1	54	50	+4	63	60	+3
Student 4	50	49	+1	51	50	+1	63	60	+3
Student 5	49	47	+2	50	48	+2	63	61	+2
Student 6	47	44	+3	50	44	+6	63	60	+3
Student 7	47	38	+9	49	45	+4	61	59	+2
Student 8	45	37	+8	47	40	+7	61	58	+3
Student 9	44	35	+9	46	40	+6	60	60	0
Student 10	44	37	+7	44	38	+6	60	60	0
Student 11	38	36	+2	46	40	+6	61	59	+2
Student 12	41	35	+6	45	38	+7	61	60	+1
Student 13	36	33	+5	42	36	+6	63	65	-2
Student 14	40	35	+5	40	37	+3	63	61	+2
Student 15	38	33	+5	45	35	+10	65	63	+3
Student 16	41	35	+6	46	38	+8	58	37	+21
Student 17	37	35	+2	40	38	+2	65	58	+7
Student 18	42	35	+7	43	37	+6	59	58	+1
Student 19	38	38	0	46	35	+11	58	55	+3
Student 20	38	33	+5	45	37	+8	58	58	0
Student 21	38	35	+3	44	36	+8	59	55	+4
Student 22	37	29	+8	43	37	+6	63	60	+3
Student 23	38	41	-3	41	43	-2	58	58	0
Student 24	38	29	+9	40	37	+3	59	58	+1
Student 25	37	30	+7	40	37	+3	58	55	+3
Student 26	35	29	+6	40	33	+7	60	59	+1
Student 27	37	31	+6	38	31	+7	60	54	+4
Student 28	33	30	+3	40	36	+4	61	55	+6
Student 29	35	30	+5	41	29	+12	60	59	+1
Student 30	35	27	+8	37	29	+8	61	54	+7

From the table above it can be seen that there is a difference of students' score in post- test after getting treatments through the training program. It means that the students develop a better comprehension in grammatical Structure- Written Expression after the training program, achieve better understanding in Listening when learning the material delivered by the lecturers, further they are able to answer the question by using strategy and tips given by the lecturers. Overall, it can be concluded that there is influence of treatments given by the lecturers during the training program towards the students' score.

In the meantime, the result of semi- structured interview guide developed by the researcher reveal students' perspectives on the most difficult TOEFL section. From the total number of semi- structured interview guide questions, it is concluded that Listening is the most difficult type of TOEFL section compared to the other two sections. It is because its real- time nature, which obliges the students to process the spoken input immediately without any repetition. Besides that, the speed of native speaker in speaking also makes the students get difficulty to identify the key information. The time pressure for answering a single question then lose focus after one miss answer also contributes to students' challenges. Students also unfamiliar with the types of test format in the Listening section then it makes them confuse to choose the appropriate answer. Lack of practicing also becomes the factor which contributes the difficulty of students in doing their Listening section.

This finding seems the new information in this field since other researchers like (Maruf et al., 2020) which have been mention in Introduction focus on finding the internal and external factor causing the low score of English and (Rahman and Purwaningtyas, 2023) who found that limited basic skills, vocabularies, insufficient practice, low motivation, anxiety, and individual differences among students as the students' challenge experience.

CONCLUSION

Based on the first research findings it can be concluded among the three tested sections of PBT TOEFL (Listening, Structure- Written Expression and Reading Comprehension) the majority of students struggle in choosing the appropriate answer of Listening section before they participate in the TOEFL Preparation Training Program. It is proven that most of them answer incorrectly for their test then make their Listening score becomes the lowest score from other sections. It draws a conclusion that students need more exposure and Listening practice than other TOEFL sections in order to improve their ability and achieve the appropriate score. This finding is in line with last finding of this research where according to students' perspective, Listening is the most difficult section compared to others. As they claimed that Listening is the highly complex section because they are forced to process the information without any repetition. Moreover, the audio also presents native speaker speaking at a fast pace which causes them to miss critical points. The variety of listening format often confuses them since they lack of information related to the appropriate strategies for each format. The students also recognize that limited opportunities to practice and experience the listening exercise impacted them to choose the appropriate answer in Listening section.

From the second finding it can be concluded that there is an influence of training program towards the students' score in TOEFL. The result reveals that most students' scores in all of TOEFL section improve after getting the treatments in training program. It can be seen from the difference of students' score before and after they follow the training program. The students' score in post- test are relatively higher compared to the students' score in pre- test. It means that the students are able to comprehend and apply the strategies, tips and tricks given in the training program for doing their TOEFL test.

Consider about the short timeframe of the training program as the limitation of this research, it provides a better understanding about the effectiveness of TOEFL training program. Therefore, the researchers suggested implementing similar program for enhancing students' score in TOEFL. Furthermore, considering Listening as the most difficult section based on students' perception and experience, the researchers also recommend to focus on the efficient method, tips and strategies in answering TOEFL Listening section, spoken language resources, authentic or supplementary Listening material to improve the students' ability.

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