



## **THE DIFFICULTIES FACED BY THE STUDENTS IN ANSWERING THE WRITTEN EXPRESSION SECTION OF THE TOEFL TEST**

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### **ABSTRACT**

TOEFL test is one of the requirements for the students of English Study Program FKIP UNRI to finish their study at S1 Degree. Based on the researcher's observation, most of the students did not pass the TOEFL Test. The students followed the test for several times till they reached the passing grade. It seemed that the students got difficulties in answering the TOEFL Test. So, in this research the researcher focused on analyzing the students' difficulties in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test. The aims of this research were to identify the categories of items in the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test which were difficult for the third-year students of English Study Program FKIP-UNRI . and to identify which categories of items that were easy for the students. This research was a quantitative research. The researcher analyzed the categories of items tested in TOEFL test, especially in the Written Expression section. There were 12 categories of items tested in the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test based on Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL Test by Deborah Phillips (2000: 144-221). The categories consisted of subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, comparative and superlative, the use of the verbs, the forms of the verbs, passive verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, articles, prepositions and usages. The result of the research showed that there were 10 categories of items that were difficult for the students. The categories were parallel structures, comparatives and superlatives, the use of the verbs, passive verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, articles, prepositions and usages. While the categories of items which were considered easy for the students were subject-verb agreement and the forms of the verbs. So, in general, the students got difficulties in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test.

Keyword: Analyzing the Difficulties, the Written Expression Section of the TOEFL Test.

### **1. Introduction**

TOEFL stands for test of English as a foreign language. It is probably the most often used

examination in the admission process of foreign students to college and universities in the United States (Michael; 1995:4). Sharpe (2000: 9) states that since 1963 the TOEFL has

been used by Latin American Scholarship program and others as a standard of measurement of English proficiency. Now, some professional licensing and certification agencies also use TOEFL score to fulfill the foreign language requirement for doctoral candidates whose first language is not English. There are three sections of the TOEFL test. They are Listening Comprehension section, Structure and Written Expression Section and Reading Comprehension Section. Listening Comprehension section measures the ability to understand conversation and talks in English. The Structure and Written section measures the ability to recognize language that is appropriate for standard written English. Reading Comprehension section measures the ability to read and understand short passages.

In English Study Program of FKIP-UNRI, the students have to take the TOEFL test which is usually used in comprehensive test as a requirement to complete their SI degree. They are provided with courses that can help them increase their TOEFL scores. They have listening subjects for two semesters; Listening I and Listening II. Both can help them in answering the Listening Comprehension section of the TOEFL test. They also take Structure I, Structure II, Structure III and Grammar subject that help them in the Structure and Written Expression section .and they have reading I, Reading II, Reading III and Reading IV that help them in the Reading Comprehension section.

In this research, the researcher focused her study on analyzing the difficulties faced by the third - year students of English Study Program FKIP-UNRI Pekanbaru in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test. The difficulties faced by

the students in answering the written expression of the TOEFL test referred to the categories of items of the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test that the students answered incorrectly. There were 12 categories of items tested in the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test according to Deborah Philips in her book entitled “Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL test (2000: 144 – 221). The categories consisted of subject/-verb agreement, parallel structure, comparative and superlative, the form of the verb, the use of the verb, passive sentences, verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, articles, preposition and usages.

The researcher had two reasons to do this research. Firstly, the third - year students of English Study Program FKIP-UNRI Pekanbaru learned Structure I, II, III and Grammar subjects that gave them contributions in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test. However, the students may get difficulties in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test because the items of the Written Expression questions of the TOEFL test can be a little tricky (Phillips, 2000 : 144). For example; the item of subject-verb agreement. Sometimes prepositional phrases can come between a subject and a verb. If the object of the preposition is singular and the subject is plural, or if the object of the preposition is plural and the subject is singular, there can be confusion in making the subject and the verb agree, e.g. *The key to the doors are in the drawer.* The students may consider that the sentence is correct because they think that the main subject is the key to the doors, the doors is the word which is closer to the verb are. The doors is plural so that they may think that the verb must be in the plural form. The correct form of the sentence

above is The Key to the doors is in the drawer, because the main subject of the sentence is the key, which is singular, so that it needs the singular verb “is”. Secondly, they may get difficulties in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test because of the interference of their first language. As Brown (1993: 193) states that the main cause of learners’ difficulties and mistakes in learning the target language is the interference from their first language into the target language. In this case, the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test examines the students’ knowledge to express themselves in the correct way in English writing. While there is a different way to express themselves in writing between their first language; Indonesian and the target language; English. For example, a student expresses a noun phrase, in Indonesian “teman-teman baru “. When he or she expresses it in English, she or he may express” friend new” while the correct one is new friends. It probably occurs as a result of the interference from his or her first language, Indonesian, into English. Based on the example above, it can be concluded that there is a different way to express the noun phrase between English and Indonesian. In Indonesian, the modifier comes after the modified word while in English, the modifier comes before the modified word.

The purpose of this research was to identify which categories of items of the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test that were difficult for the students. By identifying the difficult categories faced by the students in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test, it can give contributions for students, who want to follow the test. The students can pay attention to the categories of the Written

Expression section of the TOEFL test, especially for the categories that are considered difficult in order to prepare themselves in the comprehensive exam on usage as one of the requirements to finish their study at S1 Degree. Other contributions are for lecturers. Lecturers can teach the structure and grammar subjects clearly that give contribution to the students in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test and lecturers can explain the strategies of answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

### The Written Expression Section of the TOEFL Test

The Written Expression section of the TOEFL test examines the people’s knowledge of the correct way to express themselves in English writing (Phillips: 143). In the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test, the people who take the TOEFL test are asked to identify an error in sentences by choosing one of the four underlined words or phrases that must be changed in order for the sentences to be correct.

Deborah Phillips in her book entitled “Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL test (2000: 144 – 221) describes skills that help participants in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test. She classifies the skills based on the problems that appear in answering the Written Expression questions. The problems are subject/ verb- agreement, parallel structure, comparative and superlative, the form of the verb, the use of the verb, passive sentences, verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, articles, preposition and usages.

#### *Subject-Verb Agreement*

There are some situations on the TOEFL test when subject-verb agreement can be a little tricky. The situations are when the positions of subject-verb agreement appear after prepositional phrases, expressions of quantity, inverted verbs, certain words. So, the skills that the people, who take the test, should master when dealing with subject-verb agreement in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test are:

1. Make verbs agree after prepositional phrases.

Sometimes prepositional phrases can come between the subject and the verb. If the object of the preposition is singular and the subject is plural, or of the object of the preposition is plural and the subject is singular, there can be confusion in making the subject and verb agree. For example; *the key to the doors is in the drawer.*

2. Make verbs agree after expressions of quantity.

A particular agreement problem occurs when the subject is an expression of quantity such as all, most, or some, followed by the preposition *of*. In this situation, the subject (all, some, most) can be singular or plural, depending on what follows the preposition *of*. For example; *all of the books were interesting.*

3. Make inverted verbs Agree

There are some situations in which the subject comes after the verb. The situations occur after question words, after place expressions, after negative expressions, after omitted conditional, and after some comparisons. When the subject and verb are inverted, it can be difficult to locate them, and it can therefore be a problem to make them agree.

For example: *behind the house were bicycles I wanted.*

4. Make verbs agree after certain words

Certain words in English are always grammatically singular, even though they may have plural meanings. For example: *everybody is going to the theater.*

### **Parallel Structures**

There are several situations in which participants of the TOEFL test should be particularly careful of parallel structure. Parallel structures are required in the following situations. (1). with coordinate conjunctions, such as and, but and or. (2). With paired conjunction, such as both...and, either...or, neither...nor, not only... but also. (3). So, the skills they have to master related to this problem are:

1. Use Parallel structure with coordinate conjunction.

The job of coordinate conjunction (and, but, or) is to join together equal expressions. In other words, what is on one side of these words must be parallel in what is on the other side. These conjunctions can join nouns, or verbs, or adjectives, or phrases, or subordinate clauses or main clauses; they just must join together two of the same thing. For example; *he eats and sleeps only when he takes a vacation.*

2. Use Parallel structure with Paired Conjunctions.

The paired conjunctions both.....and, either.... or, neither.... nor, not only.... but also, require parallel structure. For example; *I know both where you went and what you did. Either Mark or Sue has the book. The tickets are neither in my pockets nor in my purse. He is not only an*

*excellent student but also an outstanding athlete.*

3. Use Parallel Structure with comparisons.  
When a sentence is comparative. It describes the similarities and the differences between the two things. The similarities or the differences must be in parallel form. The comparative sentences are indicated by -er... than or the more... than. e.g. *My school is farther than your school. What is written is more easily understood than what is spoken.*

### **Comparatives and Superlatives**

Sentences with incorrect comparatives and superlatives can appear on the TOEFL test. It is therefore important to know how to do the following.

1. Form comparatives and superlatives correctly.  
The problem with some of the comparative and superlative sentences on the TOEFL test is that the comparative or superlative is formed incorrectly. So, it is important to understand how to form the comparative and superlative to answer such question correctly. For example; Bob is taller than Ron.
2. Use comparatives and superlatives correctly.  
Another problem with the comparatives and superlatives on the TOEFL test is that they can be used incorrectly. The comparatives and superlatives have different uses, and it is important to understand the different uses to answer such questions correctly. For example; *the history class is the largest in the school.*

3. Use the irregular -er, er structure correctly.  
An irregular comparative structure that has been appearing frequently on the TOEFL test consist of two parallel comparatives introduced by *the*. For the example; *the harder he tried, the further he fell behind.* The two parallel comparatives in this sentence is *harder* and *further*.

### **The Forms of the Verb**

It is common in the Written Expression part of the TOEFL test for the verbs to be formed incorrectly. Therefore, the forms of the verb should be checked correctly. The forms of the verb consist of the base form, the present tense, the present participle, and the past participle. The strategies that the participants have in answering Written Expression of the TOEFL test related to the forms of the verb are: firstly, check what comes after *have*. If the form of the verb appearing after *have* is the base form and present participle except past participle, so, it is wrong, because the form of the verb after *have* is the past participle. Secondly, check what comes after *be*. It is correct if the present participle or the past participle come after *be*. Thirdly, check what comes after *will, would and other modal auxiliaries*. The form of the verb after *will, would and other modals* is the base form.

### **The Uses of the Verb**

Many different problems in using the correct verb tense are possible in English. However, four specific problems occur frequently on the TOEFL test. So, it is important to pay attention to these four as skills needed in answering the Written Expression of the TOEFL test.

1. Knowing when to use the past with the present.

2. Using *had* and *have* correctly.
3. Using the correct tense with expression.
4. Using the correct tense with *will* and *would*.

### ***Passive Verb***

Sentences in which the error is an incorrect passive are common in the Written Expression of the TOEFL test. To answer the question of the Written Expression of the TOEFL test related to passive verb correctly, it is important to be able to recognize correct form of the passive and to determine when a passive verb rather than an active verb is needed in a sentence.

### ***Nouns***

The same type of problem with nouns appear often in the Written Expression of the TOEFL test. The participant should be familiar with these problems so that they will recognize them easily. They should be able to do the following: (1) use the correct singular or plural noun. (2) distinguish countable and uncountable nouns. (3) recognize irregular singular and plural nouns. (4) distinguish the person form and the thing

### ***Pronouns***

Pronouns in the Written Expression of the TOEFL test are important to be checked the correct function in the sentence (as a subject or object, for example) and they agree with the noun they are replacing. The following pronoun problems are the most common on the TOEFL test : (1) distinguishing subject and object pronouns. (2) distinguishing possessive pronouns and possessive adjectives. (3). Checking pronoun reference for agreement. So, to answer the question of the Written Expression of the TOEFL test related to the pronouns

correctly, the participants have to be able to solve the four pronoun problems by mastering them.

### ***Adjectives and adverbs***

Many different problems with adjectives and adverbs are possible in the Written Expression of the TOEFL test. To identify this problem, it is needed to able to recognize adjectives and adverbs. There are three skills involving adjectives and adverbs that will help the participants on the Written Expression of the TOEFL test: (1) knowing when to use adjectives and adverbs. (2) using adjectives rather than adverbs after linking verbs. (3). Positioning adjectives and adverbs correctly.

There are still problems that are related only to adjectives. They are: -ly adjectives, predicate adjectives and -ed and -ing adjectives. The skills to handle this problem in answering the question of Written Expression of the TOEFL test are recognize -ly adjectives correctly and use -ed and -ing form correctly.

### ***Article***

Problems with articles in answering Written Expression of the TOEFL test can be handled by mastering the rules of the articles. The rules of the articles are: distinguishing a and an, making articles agree with nouns and distinguishing specific and general ideas.

- 1) There are two common types of problems with prepositions in the questions of the Written Expression of the TOEFL test. They are incorrect prepositions and omitted prepositions. To be able to answer the question correctly, it is important to recognize incorrect prepositions

and when prepositions have been omitted.

- 2) Usage. Phillips (2000 : 221) states that in English, certain groups of words have similar uses, and these words are sometimes confusing in the Written Expression of the TOEFL test. It is caused by some words which have similar meaning but they are different in use. The following problems are the most common: (1) when to use *make* and *do*. (2) When to use *like*, *unlike* and *alike*. (3) when to use *other* and *another*. So, it is important to master the rules of three problem.

### A. Research Design

This is a quantitative research, intended to find out which categories of items in the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test were difficult for students. This research was conducted at the third- year students of English Study Program FKIP UNRI Pekanbaru in Academic Year of 2002-2003. It was done for 4 months from April to July in 2003. The population of the study was all of the third-year students of English Study Program FKIP-UNRI Pekanbaru. The number of the students was 40 persons. According to Morgan (1970) in Educational and Psychological measurements, "Determining Sample Size for Research Activities." PP. 607-610, Vol: 30, determines if the number of population is 40 persons, the number of its sample is 36 persons. So, the number of sample in this research was 36 persons.

To know the students' difficulties in answering the written expression section of the TOEFL test, the researcher used a test form of TOEFL. The students were asked to identify the incorrect one or

ungrammatical form of sentences by choosing one of the four underlined words or phrases. the items of the test were adapted from Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL test book by Deborah Phillips, Cliffs TOEFL Preparation Guide by Michael at al and Baron, how to prepare for the TOEFL by Sharpe. The number of items consisted of 40 items. Each item tested different categories of grammar. The categories of items were subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, comparative and superlative, the use of the verbs, passive verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, articles, prepositions and usages. The number of items of each category was different. It was arranged based on the problems that appear in answering each category of items in the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test as described above.

To measure the reliability and the validity of the test items, a try out was conducted at the third -year students of English Study Program of IAIN SUSQA Pekanbaru

To analyze the students' difficulties faced by the students, the following formula was used.

$$D = \frac{E}{N \times I} \quad (\text{Hughes, 1989: 76})$$

When the average level of difficulty is higher than 40 %, the category is considered difficult. On the other hand, the average level of difficulty is smaller than 40 %, the category is considered easy.

### B. Research Findings

The followings are the result of the test explaining the students' difficulties in answering the written

expression section of the TOEFL test. The difficulties were classified into several categories which were determined based on the problems that always appear in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL Test.

The categories were subject-verb agreements, parallel structures, comparatives and superlatives, the uses of the verbs, passive verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, articles, prepositions and usages.

**TABLE 1**  
**The Level of the Difficulties Faced by the Students in answering the Written Expression Section of the TOEFL Test**

Number	Categories of Items	D (%)	Remark
1	Subject-Verb Agreements	36,1	Easy
2	Parallel Structures	68,5	Difficult
3	Comparatives and Superlatives	62,03	Difficult
4	The Forms of the Verb	26,8	Easy
5	The Uses of the Verb	59,7	Difficult
6	Passive Verbs	84,7	Difficult
7	Nouns	50,7	Difficult
8	Pronouns	56,5	Difficult
9	Adjectives and Adverbs	59,2	Difficult
10	Articles	51,8	Difficult
11	Prepositions	41,6	Difficult
12	Usages	59,2	Difficult

Based on the table above, there were two categories of items considered easy for the students in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test; they were subject-verb agreements and the forms of the verb (D= 36,1% and D= 26,8%). Both were considered easy because they had level of difficulties smaller than 40 %. While the rest of the categories were considered difficult for the students because they had level of difficulties bigger than 40 %. The categories were parallel structures, comparatives and superlatives, the use of the verbs passive verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, articles, prepositions and usages.

#### 4. Conclusion and Suggestion

Based on the result of the research, the researcher concludes that many of the third- year students of English Study Program of FKIP UNRI Pekanbaru got difficulties in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test.

There were 12 categories of items of the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test. 10 categories of the items were difficult for the students. The items were parallel structures, comparatives and superlatives, the use of the verbs passive verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs, articles, prepositions and usages. Among them, the most difficult items were passive verbs with the average level of difficulty 84,7 %. While the easy items were about subject-verb agreements and the form of the verbs.



The easiest item was the form of the verbs with the average level of difficulty 26,8%.

In this research, the researcher suggests that:

1. The students have to pay attention to the categories of the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test, especially for the categories that are considered difficult in order to prepare themselves in the comprehensive exam on usage as one of the requirements to finish their study at S1 Degree in English Department.
2. Lecturers should teach the structure and grammar subjects clearly that give them contribution in answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test.
3. Lecturers should explain the strategies of answering the Written Expression section of the TOEFL test as described by Deborah Phillip in her book “ Longman Preparation Strategies for the TOEFL Test.

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