
EFL Students' achievement in the TOEFL academic reading section: The case of an English Education program in a private University

HERA HARTATI^{1*}, ANGGIA PRATIWI², HERYSA OKTAWATI³

Abstract

This study was conducted to evaluate the reading proficiency of English students on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Quantitative descriptive research was implemented in this investigation. The investigation was conducted within the English Education Program of Merangin University. Forty-six students comprised the candidate population of graduates. Total sampling was used. Data were collected using the TOEFL book for four sets and the students' answer sheets. After conducting an analysis of the data, the study established a correlation between the item specification of the reading section in the TOEFL book and the responses of the students, specifically the topic and main idea, inference, vocabulary (synonym), details, and reference. Subsequently, the study also considered the conversion score in the TOEFL evaluation guide. The researcher discovered that students had low reading achievements on the TOEFL as a result of this research. Identifying the topic and main idea was the least successful accomplishment. The second category was inference, the third was reference, the fourth was vocabulary, and the final category was details. This study endeavors to focus on the reading subject and the methods of facilitating students' comprehension of the various components of reading. It is also necessary to teach effective reading strategies. For students, it is essential to enhance their reading proficiency, engage with reading passages, and engage in additional practice.

Keywords

Achievement, evaluation guide, reading section, TOEFL

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^{1*}Universitas Merangin, Indonesia, Corresponding email: hera.adit@gmail.com

^{2,3} Universitas Merangin, Indonesia

Introduction

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) helps individuals evaluate their English language proficiency. It is especially important for Indonesian university students. Many colleges have made it a prerequisite before students are permitted to sit their thesis defense. Certain universities establish a minimum score that students must achieve; should they fail to meet this criterion, they are compelled to retake the exam. Moreover, they must present a certificate from an authorized institution showing their score as part of the admission criteria for a program when pursuing postgraduate studies (S2) either inside Indonesia or abroad. Furthermore, many businesses and governments demand a TOEFL score among the requirements for potential recruits. This underlines the reality that TOEFL is a universally respected language evaluation instrument in English. A key metric of the English ability of people whose first language is not English is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). It is used worldwide to assess the language abilities of applicants to universities where English is the language of instruction.

The TOEFL consists of three sections: listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. Generally, all TOEFL programs evaluate the same language abilities. Listening, structure, writing, and reading are examined in three distinct sections: Section 1 (listening), Section 2 (structure), and Section 3 (reading) (Chairuddin & Ulfa, 2018). This is a standardized test, which means it is designed by an expert or a team of test designers. Test takers are expected to respond to every question according to their level of English proficiency. Scoring is guided by the particular book used or by the specific institution administering the test.

In Indonesia, where access to overseas education and scholarship opportunities increasingly depends on TOEFL scores, students' performance on this test greatly influences their future direction (Lengkoan et al., 2022). This suggests that students can obtain various advantages in their future lives from having a good command of English, including the ability to study abroad, receive scholarships, and opportunities in other fields. According to Badu (2020), some study programs have established this requirement for their students, and every program has its own grading standards. In particular, students of the English Education Study Program at Merangin University are required to achieve a minimum TOEFL score of 400; for students from other study programs, the requirement is 350. This indicates that students must reach a specific standard score to comply with institutional requirements. In reality, however, students have had difficulty meeting this standard. This was established through pre-observation of English Education Study Program students who needed to pass the TOEFL in order to receive their diploma. Based on their TOEFL scores, it was found that many students had to retake the exam multiple times because they had not yet reached the required level.

The TOEFL evaluates English language skills for academic and professional use (Fitria, 2021). There are three sections in the TOEFL: listening, structure and writing, and reading. The TOEFL comes in three varieties: the International TOEFL test, the Institutional TOEFL test, and the TOEFL-Like test (KampusYuk, 2020). The questions offered in the International TOEFL are always different for each administration, which sets it apart from the other two

types. The Institutional TOEFL Test and the TOEFL-Like Test typically use questions from past International TOEFL administrations. There are also three formats of the TOEFL: the Paper-Based Test (PBT), the Computer-Based Test (CBT), and the Internet-Based Test (iBT) (KampusYuk, 2020). The present study uses the TOEFL PBT format.

Reading is an essential part of the academic world. Among the most important learning processes involving reading are accessing information, gaining knowledge, completing assignments, and undertaking assessments. Every student must develop reading as one of the most important skills, as it serves as the portal to information and knowledge (Adora et al., 2024). Furthermore, research by Prijana et al. (2022) found that students with strong reading abilities often obtain better academic results. Students need to understand texts thoroughly in order to grasp nuances in their reading, which is necessary for writing assignments and completing other academic work. Reading habits also support greater language comprehension and vocabulary growth. Reading different genres of literature exposes students to new vocabulary and various linguistic styles, thereby expanding their vocabulary and improving their communication abilities, both of which are essential for academic and professional achievement. Therefore, reading comprehension is a significant issue in this study.

Reading Comprehension is included in the TOEFL to assess students' proficiency in understanding written content, covering both the main topic and specific vocabulary within the text. This section is placed in Section 3, the last part following listening and structure in the TOEFL (Papageorgiou et al., 2019). Most people find this section simpler than the previous two. Nevertheless, Reading Comprehension questions present their own unique difficulties, as do the Listening and Structure sections. According to Brante and Strömsö (2018), students will encounter various types of texts that typically feature in the Reading Comprehension section, including those on history and science. The section consists of fifty items, and the processing time is approximately fifty-five minutes, meaning students must answer each question in roughly one minute. The reading portion of the TOEFL evaluates whether students can comprehend written English as found in textbooks and other academic resources, specifically in the PBT format. Barron's (2005, p. 209) identifies several features of PBT TOEFL reading comprehension: there are between three and five reading passages on the TOEFL; each passage has an average of ten questions; the passages are typically between 250 and 300 words long; all questions are multiple-choice with only one correct answer; students mark their answers on a paper answer sheet; and they are able to return to earlier passages and questions, erase mistakes, and change their answers on the sheet.

Several studies have been conducted by researchers related to this investigation. According to Jaelani et al. (2022), EFL students struggled to locate main ideas, references, and word meanings in the TOEFL reading comprehension section. The mean, the mean score in inference was 6.4 and in finding information it was 7.2. Therefore, EFL learners lacked proficiency in inference and information-finding tasks. Samad et al. (2017) and other researchers found that the most challenging skill in the TOEFL reading comprehension section is the implied detail question skill, followed by the stated detail question skill, and the use of context to deduce meanings of difficult words, to respond to main idea questions, and to find meanings from word components. Hammad (2021) discovered in his study that Palestinian students had difficulty with the themes and terminology of the reading section in

both the TOEFL iBT and revised paper-based TOEFL due to limited background knowledge. He investigated the challenges Palestinian university students encounter in the reading components of both the internet-based and paper-delivered versions of the Test of English as a Foreign Language. Sixty-five fourth-year English major students from Al-Aqsa University participated in the research. The researcher utilized four different instruments: a test, a group semi-structured interview, and two individual semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed several challenges faced by students in relation to the reading sections of both test formats, including the lack of relevance of the test topics to their existing knowledge, insufficient experience with long texts, slow reading rate, and inadequate language proficiency. Furthermore, the study provided numerous suggestions aimed at experts from the Educational Testing Service, as well as students and faculty at Al-Aqsa University. From their perspective, such subjects and terminology are foreign, sophisticated, and unrelated to their background knowledge in the field. In addition, [Fajri \(2019\)](#) identified the difficulties experienced by 20 Indonesian EFL university students completing the TOEFL reading comprehension test. Multiple instruments were used in the investigation, including a questionnaire, an interview, an observation card, and a quiz. The most challenging question types were those demanding implicit responses (50%), followed by vocabulary questions (40%) and inference questions (33%). The present study, however, differs from the others. It examines the reading section of the TOEFL with specific focus on the topic and main idea, inference, vocabulary (synonym), details, and reference. The TOEFL book used at Merangin University contains four sets of questions, and the specific components were identified by examining each set. The book was developed by combining questions from verified sources. In assessing students' achievement in the reading section, the TOEFL evaluation guide was used as a scoring reference. None of the earlier research examined how well EFL students at Merangin University performed on the reading section of the TOEFL. The purpose of this study was to investigate EFL students' achievement in the reading section of the TOEFL.

Methodology

Quantitative descriptive analysis formed the basis of this research. It can be used to gain a thorough understanding of an issue or to stimulate fresh research concepts ([Bhandari, 2022](#)). Descriptive research is preferred because it offers a methodical, factual, and correct portrayal of the reality in the field. The subjects were deliberately selected, and the findings suggested that the general reading ability for academic communication purposes was higher than that of other groups. The test was the instrument utilized for this investigation. A reading comprehension test was used by the researcher. This evaluation included 35 items and was organized as a reading comprehension test based on TOEFL criteria. After the researcher developed the tool, the reading comprehension exam was given. The test was given to the participants all in one session. The quantitative technique is then applied to one variable in this study. A quantitative descriptive approach is a type of quantitative research in which findings are presented as numerical descriptions ([Salmaa, 2021](#)). It implies that the study deals with the development of statistical data. It aims to gather measurable data for statistical analysis of English proficiency among the sample population, using the TOEFL test completed by

English Education students of Merangin University. The research data hence comes from Merangin University students' English proficiency especially in reading section.

The data source consisted of 46 students from the English Education Study Program. Data analysis was performed in multiple phases, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The researcher gathered data using a conversion system. This means that each correct answer has an assigned point value. For instance, one correct answer is converted to a score of 22, two correct answers are converted to 23, three correct answers are worth 24, and so on. The correct answer values are found in the conversion table. After the converted scores for each section are determined, they are summed, divided by three, and multiplied by ten, yielding a final score between 220 (lowest) and 677 (highest). The first step is to count the number of correct answers and compare them against the conversion table. For example, if a student has 30 correct answers in Listening Comprehension, 30 in the Structure and Written Expression section, and 35 in Reading Comprehension, these numbers are then matched against the conversion table.

Table 1. *Example of scoring TOEFL*

Criteria	Listening	Structure and Written Expression	Reading
Correct Answer	30	30	35
Converted Score	51	54	48

Next, calculate the conversion value in the following ways. First, add all three converted values = $51+54+48 = 153$ (converted). Second, divide the number of values by 3 (three) = $153:3 = 51$. Third, multiply the result by 10 (ten) = $51 \times 10 = 510$. From the steps described above, the final TOEFL score is 510. This score exceeds the standard TOEFL score required for the English Education Study Program, which is 400. Therefore, students who achieve this score have passed the TOEFL and can enroll as graduate candidates at Merangin University.

This study aimed to describe students' achievement in the reading section of the TOEFL. The test was administered to identify the most challenging components in the reading section. The test was taken from four sets of TOEFL book questions, specifically from the reading section. It consisted of 35 questions. Each set of the TOEFL Book has the same number of items for each reading comprehension component, although the item numbers differ across sets.

Table 2. *The item specification of the reading section of the TOEFL book*

No	Components of Reading	TOEFL BOOK			
		Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Set 4
1	Topic and main idea	4	4	4	4
2	Inference	5	5	5	5
3	Vocabulary (synonym)	8	8	8	8
4	Details	14	14	14	14
5	Reference	4	4	4	4
	Total	35	35	35	35

After collecting the data, the researcher analyzed the score of students' reading comprehension in TOEFL. Students' scores were based on the guide used by Merangin University. Each

student's number of correct answers was converted into a score within a specific range according to the evaluation guide. If a student had one correct answer, they received a score of 22, and so on. In analyzing the data, the researcher divided the students' answers into five components based on the item numbers of the test. The researcher calculated the score for each component using a percentage formula, then displayed and described the data for all components.

Results and Discussion

The data consist of the final TOEFL test scores of English Education Study Program students at Merangin University, based on three assessment categories: Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension. The raw scores were converted and then classified. The table below shows students' TOEFL achievement.

Table 3. *Students' achievement in TOEFL*

No	Range of students' score in TOEFL	Amount of students	%
1	350-400	10	21.28
2	300-349	30	65.96
3	250-299	6	12.77
4	200-249	0	0
	TOTAL	46	100

From the table above, it can be seen that most students scored in the second range (30 students or 65.96%). Ten other students (21.28%) scored in the first range, and 6 students (12.77%) scored in the third range. No students scored in the fourth range. The table above shows scores across all sections (listening, structure and written expression, and reading). Furthermore, only 10 out of 46 students could reach the standard TOEFL score of 400. Related to the research question and purpose of this study, the analysis was focused on students' achievement in the reading section of the TOEFL. After analyzing the students' reading achievement, the following results were obtained:

Table 4. *Conversion score of students' achievement in the reading section*

Amount of correct answer	Students' conversion score	Freq.	%
2	23	1	2.13
5	25	4	8.51
6	26	2	4.26
7	27	5	14.89
8	28	10	21.28
9	28	7	12.77
10	39	2	4.26
11	30	4	8.51
12	31	3	6.38
13	32	2	4.26
14	34	1	2.13
15	35	1	2.13
16	36	3	6.38
22	42	1	2.13
	Total	46	100

The frequency column shows the number of students who obtained each score. All frequencies were divided by the total number of students (46) and then multiplied by 100 to calculate the percentage. As shown in the table, one student (2.13%) obtained the highest score (42), having answered 22 questions correctly. The most common score was 28, obtained by 10 students (21.28%), each of whom answered 8 questions correctly. The lowest score was 23, obtained by 1 student (2.13%) who answered only 2 questions correctly. These results show that students varied considerably in their ability to answer TOEFL reading questions. Students' achievement in TOEFL reading comprehension for each component and each set can be seen in the tables that follow:

Table 5. *Students' reading achievement in TOEFL for the main idea component*

Amount of correct answer	Students' conversion score	Set 1 (8)	Set 2 (13)	Set 3 (12)	Set 4 (13)	total	%
0	0	4	8	5	0	17	37
1	22	4	5	7	2	8	17
2	23	0	0	0	4	4	8
3	25	0	0	0	7	7	15
		8	13	12	13	46	100

The following conclusions can be drawn from the table. The main idea component consisted of four questions. First, of the eight students who received TOEFL Book Set 1, four students got 1 correct answer and four students got zero. Second, of the thirteen students who received Set 2, five students got 1 correct answer and 8 students got zero. Third, of the 12 students who received Set 3, seven students got 1 correct answer and 5 students got zero. Fourth, of the 13 students who received Set 4, seven students got 3 correct answers, 4 students got 2, and 2 students got 1. Overall, from 46 students, 37% got zero correct, 17% got 1 correct answer, 8% got 2 correct answers, and 15% got 3 correct answers.

Table 6. *Students' reading achievement in TOEFL for the inference component*

Amount of correct answer	Students' conversion score	Set 1 (8)	Set 2 (13)	Set 3 (12)	Set 4 (13)	Total	%
0	0	0	3	0	1	4	9
1	22	3	7	4	10	24	52
2	23	4	3	5	2	14	30
3	25	1	0	2	0	3	7
4	26	0	0	1	0	1	2
		8	13	12	13	46	100

The inference component consisted of five questions. First, of the eight students who received Set 1, one student got 3 correct answers, four students got 2 correct answers, and three students got 1 correct answer. Second, of the thirteen students who received Set 2, three students got 2 correct answers, seven students got 1 correct answer, and three students got zero. Third, of the 12 students who received Set 3, one student got 4 correct answers, two students got 3 correct answers, five students got 2 correct answers, and four students got 1 correct answer. Fourth, of the 13 students who received Set 4, two students got 2 correct

answers, ten students got 1, and one student got 0. Overall, from 46 students, 9% got zero correct, 52% got 1 correct answer, 30% got 2 correct answers, 7% got 3 correct answers, and 2% got 4 correct answers.

Table 7. *Students' reading achievement in TOEFL for vocabulary component*

Amount of correct answer	Students' conversion score	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Set 4	Total	%
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	22	0	3	3	1	7	15
2	23	8	7	7	5	27	59
3	25	0	3	2	4	9	20
4	26	0	0	0	2	2	4
5	27	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	28	0	0	0	1	1	2
		8	13	12	13	46	100

There were eight questions for the vocabulary component. The following conclusions can be drawn from the table. First, of the eight students who received Set 1, all students got 2 correct answers. Second, of the thirteen students who received Set 2, three students got 3 correct answers, seven students got 2 correct answers, and three students got 1 correct answer. Third, of the 12 students who received Set 3, two students got 3 correct answers, seven students got 2 correct answers, and 3 students got 1 correct answer. Fourth, of the 13 students who received Set 4, one student got 6 correct answers, two students got 4 correct answers, seven students got 2 correct answers, and three students got 1 correct answer. Overall, from 46 students, 0% got zero correct, 15% got 1 correct answer, 59% got 2 correct answers, 20% got 3 correct answers, 4% got 4 correct answers, and 2% got 6 correct answers.

Table 8. *Students' reading achievement in TOEFL for the details component*

Amount of correct answer	Students' conversion score	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Set 4	Total	%
0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
1	22	0	2	0	0	1	2
2	23	3	3	3	5	16	35
3	25	5	5	4	5	19	41
4	26	0	0	2	1	3	7
5	27	0	0	1	1	2	4
6	28	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	29	0	0	2	0	2	4
8	30	0	0	0	1	1	2
9	31	0	1	0	0	1	2
		8	13	12	13	46	100

The details component consisted of fourteen questions. The following conclusions can be drawn from the table. First, of the eight students who received Set 1, five students got 3 correct answers and 3 students got 2 correct answers. Second, of the thirteen students who received Set 2, one student got 7 correct answers, five students got 3 correct answers, three students got 2 correct answers, two students got 1 correct answer, and one student got 9 correct

answers. Third, of the 12 students who received Set 3, two students got 7 correct answers, one student got 5 correct answers, two students got 4 correct answers, four students got 3 correct answers, and three students got 2 correct answers. Fourth, of the 13 students who received Set 4, five students got 3 correct answers, five students got 2 correct answers, one student got 4 correct answers, one student got 5 correct answers, and one student got 8 correct answers. Overall, from 46 students, 2% got zero correct, 2% got 1 correct answer, 35% got 2 correct answers, 41% got 3 correct answers, 7% got 4 correct answers, 4% got 5 correct answers, 0% got 6 correct answers, 4% got 7 correct answers, 2% got 8 correct answers, and 2% got 9 correct answers.

Table 9. *Students' reading achievement in TOEFL for the reference component*

Amount of correct answer	Students' conversion score	Set 1 (8)	Set 2 (13)	Set 3 (12)	Set 4 (13)	Total	%
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	22	5	5	4	8	22	48
2	23	1	8	8	5	22	48
3	25	2	0	0	0	2	4
4	26	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	27	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	28	0	0	0	0	0	0
		8	13	12	13	46	100

There were four questions for the reference component. The following conclusions can be drawn from the table. First, of the eight students who received Set 1, five students got 1 correct answer, one student got 2 correct answers, and 2 students got 3 correct answers. Second, of the thirteen students who received Set 2, five students got 1 correct answer and eight students got 2 correct answers. Third, of the 12 students who received Set 3, four students got 1 correct answer and eight students got 2 correct answers. Fourth, of the 13 students who received Set 4, eight students got 1 correct answer and five students got 2 correct answers. Overall, from 46 students, 0% got zero correct, 48% got 1 correct answer, 48% got 2 correct answers, and 4% got 3 correct answers.

Based on the description above, the summary of students' achievement in the reading section for each component is shown in Table 10. Students' Reading Achievement for Each Component.

Table 10. *Students' reading achievement for each component*

Reading comp	Topic/ Main idea	Inference	Vocabulary (synonym)	Details	Reference
Amount	47	65	98	144	69
%	11.11	15.37	23.17	34.04	16.31

From the table above, it can be concluded that 11.11% of correct answers were for topic and main idea, 15.37% for inference, 23.17% for vocabulary, 34.04% for details, and 16.31% for reference. This means that students had the lowest achievement in identifying the topic and main idea, followed by inference, reference, vocabulary, and details in ascending order of achievement.

Based on the description above, the lowest achievement was in identifying the topic and main idea. Students failed to identify the key point of the passage as a whole. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by [Jaelani et al. \(2022\)](#), who found that students lacked the ability to identify main ideas, references, and word meanings in the TOEFL reading comprehension section. According to [Mikulecky and Jeffries \(2007, p. 35\)](#), when finding the topic, students must pay attention to repeated words in the passage that indicate the topic. In identifying the main idea, students must recognize how the repeated word is developed into sentences. This means that students must understand the characteristics of a topic. The main idea represents the significant ideas that the authors develop across the paragraph; these are sometimes presented through keywords and explicit or implied messages. To locate the main concept of a passage, test-takers must comprehend the entire paragraph, not merely read it ([Arshad et al., 2020](#)). [Fajri \(2019\)](#) also identified the difficulties of 20 Indonesian EFL university students completing the TOEFL reading comprehension test. The most challenging question types were those demanding implicit responses (50%), followed by vocabulary questions (40%) and inference questions (33%).

Regarding students' achievement in the inference component, students tended to skim the passage due to time constraints. This is supported by [Peirce \(2009, p. 230\)](#), who noted that interacting with a passage requires strategies such as skimming and scanning, as these activities help students find the meaning of a passage in a short time. Students can also apply context clues in vocabulary and references to infer word meanings from cues provided in surrounding words. This study's findings are consistent with those of [Nanda and Azmy \(2020\)](#), who showed that students' limited vocabulary and lack of strategies impede their capacity to comprehend a text and lower their reading achievement. As further noted by [Aziez and Aziez \(2018, as cited in Elfiondri et al., 2020\)](#), uncontrolled vocabulary instruction — where students were not taught vocabulary based on relevance, transferability, and utility for generative use — was among the factors contributing to limited vocabulary size. Students can guess unfamiliar words only when they know 95% of the vocabulary in a text, which is feasible only if the vocabulary load consists of the first 3,000 most frequently used words. Therefore, it can be inferred that the students' vocabulary level is very low. According to [Samad et al. \(2017\)](#), students struggle to understand the meaning of reading passages and are unable to fully comprehend all of their contents, noting that the difficulties arise from limited vocabulary, poor strategy use, and insufficient time management.

Conclusion

Based on the findings presented above, students' reading scores on the TOEFL were still low. Regarding the reading components, the identification of topic and main idea showed the lowest achievement, followed by inference, reference, and vocabulary, with details showing the highest achievement. Therefore, it is recommended that courses educate and assist students in understanding all components of reading and in applying efficient reading strategies. Students should also work to improve their reading comprehension across all components of reading. In addition, they need to read more widely, as this may help them develop their vocabulary and raise their overall language awareness.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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