

AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' STRATEGIES IN ANSWERING TOEFL

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Abstract

This article aims at describing types of TOEFL questions seem the most difficult to be answered, the strategies used in answering each type of TOEFL questions, and the TOEFL score of the 8th semester of English Students in STKIP Setia Budhi Rangkasbitung Academic Year 2015/2016. TOEFL test, questionnaires, and interview were used as the instruments. The results showed that understanding idiom in listening, question of noun forms in structure and written expression, and reference question in reading comprehension are the most difficult question types. Related to the strategy, various ways are used in answering the TOEFL test. In addition, the TOEFL score of the eighth semester students of STKIP Setia Budhi was low.

Keywords: *Analysis, strategies, TOEFL*

INTRODUCTION

Since English is the most widely used language in the world and has played important roles in various fields of study, the ability to use English is extremely needed. Nowadays, having English ability either spoken or written has become one of the requirements in enrolling university and job placement. In testing the English ability, proficiency tests are employed. Madsen (1983) states that proficiency tests are done to show overall ability in the language, or they tell us how capable a person in specific area (such as speaking). They can also show if a person is ready for certain kinds of schooling or work. Test of language proficiency can be divided into two board categories. First, English as a second language (ESL) tests measuring communication or language skill. Second, bilingual tests that show which of two languages a person is more skilled in.

There are some proficiency tests in United States and Great Britain. In the United States, the tests are test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL), Michigan Test of Language Proficiency (MTELP), comprehensive English Language Test (CELT), Ilyin oral interview test (IOI), basic English skills test (B.E.S.T), interagency language roundtable oral interview (ILR)—to mention a few. While the proficiency tests in Great Britain are English language testing service examination, communicative use of English as a foreign language, test in English (Overseas), certificate of proficiency in English (CPE), preliminary English test (PET), the Oxford examination in English as a foreign language and many others.

As one of proficiency tests, test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) is one of standardized test that measure students' proficiency level in English. Standardized test consist

of different types of multiple-choice questions, given to a large number of people at the same time, graded by computer and timed. Similarly, Madison (1983) states that the purpose of TOEFL is indicating English proficiency of a person to colleges and university (primarily in U.S. and Canada) and to government and other agencies for placement of students in universities. Besides, TOEFL is used in work as one of employer recruitment mechanism nowadays.

To have good score of TOEFL, a person needs more knowledge of English and appropriate strategies in taking the test. The strategies can be used to ease students in answering the test. Every section of the test has different strategies to be employed. For example, in listening section, examinee must look ahead to the next question in paper and pencil based test, listen carefully, read and think about answer choice and answer each question before next question begin. Pyle and page (2002) state that it is best to glance at the possible answer choices before hearing the reading in order to get an indication of the topic of the reading. In accordance with the background, the problems of the research were stated as follows:

1. Which types of TOEFL questions seem the most difficult to answer?
2. What strategies do students use in answering each type of TOEFL questions?
3. How is the TOEFL score of the 8th semester of English Students in STKIP Setia Budhi Rangkasbitung Academic Year 2015/2016?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generally, test can be defined as a way to collect information of students' improvement. Brown (2004), states that a test is a method for measuring a person's ability, knowledge, or performance in a given domain. It is as one form of assessments. Besides, Heaton (1991) argues that testing and teaching are so closely interrelated that is virtually impossible to work in either field without being constantly concerned with the other. In addition, test may be constructed primarily as devices to reinforce learning and to motivate the student or primarily as a means of assessing the students' performance in the language. In addition, test can be categorized according to the types of information they provide. Based on the type of information, Hughes (2003) divides test into four. They are proficiency test, achievement test, diagnostic test and placement test.

The test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) is probably the most often used examination in the admission process of foreign students to colleges and universities in the United States. There are three kinds of TOEFL. They are paper-based TOEFL (PBT), computer-based TOEFL (CBT) and internet-based TOEFL (IBT). There are three sections in paper-based and computer-based test. They are listening comprehension, structure and written expression and reading comprehension. In addition, in paper-based test, test of written English (TWE) can

be added. The score is not incorporated into TOEFL score but is included as a separate score on the report sent to the institutions receiving your score report. In this test, the examinee is given one topic on which to write an essay using standard English. While in IBT, the test has the following order: reading, listening, speaking and writing. Structure section is excluded since it has been included in speaking and writing section.

Related to the strategy used in answering TOEFL test, Pyle and Page (2002) state that read answer choices before hearing the reading in order to get an indication of the topic of the reading. In addition, read the entire sentences, apply the formula, and eliminate incorrect answer in answering structure and written expression. Furthermore, for answering reading comprehension, Pyle and Page (2012) propose several strategies. They are skimming the question; skim the passage, and read the passage. While for vocabulary question, learn prefixes, suffixes and roots, and use them for clues on vocabulary question.

METHODOLOGY

The Descriptive design was utilized in the research. This design tried to describe the phenomenon. Furthermore, Borg (1983) states that the descriptive is primarily concerned with finding out “what is” The subject of this research would be chosen randomly from the 8th semester students of English Department of STKIP Setia Budhi Rangkasbitung in academic year 2015/2016.

The test, questionnaire and interview were utilized as instruments of this research. The test would be conducted to gather the data of the TOEFL score of the students. The questionnaire would be administered to the students to get the data about their strategies in answering each type of TOEFL questions. Lastly the open interview would be used to strengthen the data from the questionnaire.

FINDINGS

a. Types of TOEFL Questions

In a complete test, the TOEFL consists of several kinds of questions. These are included in the three sections of the test i.e. Listening, Structure and Written Expressions, and Reading Comprehension. The results of each question would be explained as follows.

Section 1 Listening Comprehension

In this section, the students tried to demonstrate their ability in answering the questions based on what they heard. In section 1, there were seven kinds of question. They were understanding the details, situations, acts, relations, imply information, idiom, and functions.

The data showed that in questions related to understanding the details, there were approximately 7 (29%) students who answered correctly. Then, for questions in understanding

the relations or summary, it was approximately 10 (42%) students who answered correctly. In understanding the situations, it was about 11 students (46%) who answered correctly. Then in understanding the acts, there were 9 students (37.5%) who answered correctly. Furthermore, in understanding the functions, there were approximately 7 students (29%) who answered this kind of questions correctly. The last two kinds of questions were the understanding the imply information and idiom. For these questions, there were 8 students (33.3%) and 6 students (25%) who answered correctly. Thus, it was clear that the most difficult question understood the idiom.

Section 2 Structure and Written Expressions

In this section, the students were required to analyze some grammatical problems and try to choose the possible answer. In this test, the questions were about subject verb agreement, adverb connector, appositive, coordinate conjunction, adjective clause, degree of comparison, past participle, passive meaning, noun forms, article, verb forms, distinguishing alike and like, preposition, countable and uncountable noun, pronoun, using other and another, adverb of time, present perfect continues, parallelism, adverb of manner, the use of such and such as, and diction.

The data showed that in the questions of subject verb agreement, there were approximately 7 students (29%) who answered correctly. Then, there were about 9 students (38%) who answered correctly for questions related to adverb connector and appositive. For coordinate conjunction problems, there were 13 students (54%) who answered correctly. The other question was about adjective clause, there were 11 students (46%) who answered correctly. For comparison or comparative, there were 6 students (25%) who answered correctly. For past participle problems and passive meaning, there were 9 students (38%) who answered correctly. Referring to the noun forms, there were only two students (8%) who answered correctly. Hence, the most difficult question was noun forms.

Section 3 Reading Comprehension

In this section, the students were tested to understand, interpret and analyze reading passage. It also tested the knowledge of English vocabulary. The questions were about course, implied details, main idea, organization of ideas, reference, specific information, stated details, vocabulary and transition.

The data showed that there were about 11 students (46%) who answered correctly. For implied details, there were about 9 (38%) who did it correctly. Then, the students who answered correctly the main idea and organization of ideas were about 11 (46%). Referring to reference, there were about 2 students (8%) who answered correctly. Pertaining to specific information, stated details and vocabulary, there were about 7 students (29%) who answered correctly. In

relation to transition, there were about 13 students (54%) who answered correctly. Therefore, reference question was considered as the most difficult questions.

b. Students' Strategies in Taking TOEFL

Relating to the students' strategies in answering TOEFL, the results showed that there were 20 students (87%) who did not know the strategy while 3 students (13%) knew the strategy. In addition, there were 65% of the students who considered the time allocation. The students used different strategies in answering section 1. Most of the students (87%) listened to the direction carefully. They employed bottom up strategies to understand detailed information. The results showed that there were 91% of the students who focused on the words they knew to get information. They also used top down to understand implied information and situation. The results showed that there were 91% of the students who employed top down strategy. Besides, there were 70% of the students who did a note taking during listening. In addition, some of the students predicted what the questions would be about. It could be seen that there were 52% of the students who paid attention to other question items before they were asked. Furthermore, there were 57% of the students who answered the questions before they heard the questions.

For section 2, there were 74% of the students read the sentences thoroughly before they answered the questions. On the contrary, few students (39%) directly focused on the answer choices without reading the question items completely. In addition, there were 78% of students who disregarded the most difficult question. They continued to answer the next questions. Besides, most of students analyzed and matched the questions with the answers one by one. The data showed that there were 96% of the students who did it. Moreover, there were 83% of the students who paid attentions into the underlined words in determining the wrong word, phrase or clause.

For section 3 i.e. reading comprehension, there were 48% of the students who read the text first then read the questions. They also tried to understand whole text when they read the text at the first time. The data showed that there were 74% of the students who did it. Then, during reading the questions, there were 70% of the students who tried to understand certain words only which are related to the questions.

Students' Score in TOEFL

The data showed that the average students score of TOEFL was 369 (paper based test). These score could be split up into listening score, structure and written expressions, and reading comprehension. The average score for the listening comprehension was 41. This meant that the students answered approximately 14 to 15 questions correctly. For the next section, the structure and written expressions average score was 35. It meant that the students approximately

answered 11 questions correctly. Lastly, the average score of reading comprehension was 35. It meant that the students approximately answered 15 questions correctly. The highest score was 423 and the lowest score is 303.

There were three students (12.5%) who scored 347. There were two students (8.3%) who scored 423, 363 and 313. There was only a student (4.2%) who scored 420, 413, 410, 407, 403, 390, 387, 383, 377, 373, 357, 350, 330, 317 and 303. In summary, there were seven students (29.2%) who got the TOEFL score upper than 400 and seventeen students (70.8%) who scored below 400.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, it was clear that the TOEFL score of the eighth semester students of STKIP Setia Budhi was low. It could be seen from the result of the test, most of the students got the score which was below 400. This happened for several factors. First, they never had a TOEFL test and TOEFL preparation before so that they did not have well preparation. Second, they did not know the kinds of questions in TOEFL. It could be seen from the result of questionnaire. There were 87% of the students had not joined TOEFL test yet. Third, they did not know the strategy in answering TOEFL. Since they did not know the kinds of questions, they did not know the way how to answer them. The result of questionnaire showed that there were 87% of the students who did not know the strategy. Fourth, they did not know the meaning of the vocabulary they had in TOEFL. However, vocabulary plays important role. Wilkins (as quoted by Thornbury: 2002) states that without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.

Related to the most difficult question type, idiomatic expression was considered as the most difficult question in listening comprehension. The students got used to understand words and expressions literally so that they got difficulty in understanding idiomatic expression. Besides, they did not accustomed with English culture. While for structure and written expressions, noun forms was considered as the most difficult questions. It was caused by their lack of word families understanding. For reading comprehension, reference was considered as the most difficult questions.

In accordance with the strategy in answering TOEFL, most of the students used bottom up for detailed information and top down for implied information and situation in listening comprehension. For structure and written expressions, they read the entire sentences before they answered the questions. They also left the difficult questions and tried to answer the easy questions. While for reading comprehension, many of students read the questions first, and then read the text related to the questions. Besides, most of them employed top down strategies in understanding the text. There were several general strategies in answering TOEFL proposed by

Longman.

First, be familiar with the directions. Second, listen carefully to the conversations and talks. You should concentrate fully on what the speakers are saying in the recording program because you will hear it one time only. Third, know where the easier and more difficult questions are generally found. Within each part of the listening comprehension section, the questions generally progress from easy to difficult. Fourth, never leave any answers blank on answer sheet. Even if we are unsure of the correct response, we should answer each question. There is no penalty for guessing. Fifth, use any remaining time to look ahead at the answers to the questions that follow. When finish with one question, we may have time to look ahead at the answers to the next question.

To be more specific, the followings are strategies for each section. In listening comprehension, the first step is predicting the questions by reading the answer choice while listening to the direction. Then, focus on the second speaker for part A. Next, recognize the key words in that line. After that, draw a conclusion about whom probably talking is, what s/he will do next and where the conversations take place. Afterward, identify negative, wishes, untrue condition, and idiomatic expressions. While for part b, first is preview the answers to the Listening Part B questions. While we are looking at the answers, we should try to guess the topics of the conversations will be heard and the questions. Second is listening carefully to the first line of the conversation since it usually contains the main idea, subject, or topic of the conversation, and such questions will often be asked. Third is drawing conclusions about the situation of the conversation: who is talking, where the conversation takes place, or when it takes place during listening. Therefore making inferences about the conversation is needed. Fourth is follow along with the answers in test book and try to determine the correct answers. Detailed questions are generally answered in order in the conversation, and the answers often sound the same as what is said in the recording program. Fifth is you should guess even if you are not sure. Never leave any answers blank. Sixth is use any remaining time to look ahead at the answers to the questions that follow.

Strategies for section 2 are as follows. First, study the sentence. Its aim is to determine what is needed to complete the sentence correctly. Then, study each answer based on how well it completes the sentence. Answers that do not complete the sentence correctly must be disregarded. Next, do not try to eliminate incorrect answers by looking only at the answers since the incorrect answers are generally correct by themselves. The incorrect answers are generally incorrect only when used to complete the sentence. Afterward, never leave any answers blank. Be sure to answer each question even if you are unsure of the correct response. Subsequently, use time as effective as possible. Do not spend too much time on the Structure questions.

While for reading comprehension, the first strategy looking ahead at the questions to determine what types of questions must be answered. Each type of question is answered in a different way. The second is finding the section of the passage that deals with each question.

The question-type tells us exactly where to look in the passage to find correct answers. Such as for main idea questions; look at the first line of each paragraph. For directly and indirectly answered detailed questions, choose a key word in the question, and skim for that key word (or a related idea) in order in the passage. The third is skimming the reading passage to decide the main idea and the overall organization of ideas in the passage. It is not necessary to understand every word and detail in each passage to answer the questions correctly since it is a waste of time to read the passage with the intent of understanding every single detail before trying to answer the questions. For vocabulary questions, the question will tell us where the word is located in the passage. For overall review questions, the answers are found anywhere in the passage. The fourth is reading the part of the passage that contains the answer carefully. The answer will probably be in the same sentence (or one sentence before or after) the key word or idea.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on research findings and discussion presented in the previous part, several conclusions can be drawn. First, the most difficult question types are understanding idiom in listening, question of noun forms in structure and written expression, and reference question in reading comprehension. Second, most of the students used bottom up for detailed information and top down for implied information and situation in listening comprehension. For structure and written expressions, they read the entire sentences before they answered the questions. They also left the difficult questions and tried to answer the easy questions. While for reading comprehension, many of students read the questions first, and then read the text related to the questions. Besides, most of them employed top down strategies in understanding the text. Third, the TOEFL score of the eighth semester students of STKIP Setia Budhi was low. It could be seen from the result of the test, most of the students got the score 369.

With the presented conclusions, several suggestions to the English department students of STKIP Setia Budhi and English department lecturer can be addressed. First is the suggestion for the English department students of STKIP Setia Budhi. They should use appropriate strategy in answering TOEFL test. Besides, they should get accustomed to tune their ear to English and speak to native English speaker as often as possible. Second is the suggestion for English department lecturers of STKIP Setia Budhi. They have to provide the students with information related to strategies in answering TOEFL by conducting workshop or TOEFL preparation class.

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