The EFL University Students' Problems in Answering the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL): A Study in Indonesian Context

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Abstract— TOEFL is a standard language testing used to assess the students' English proficiency. This paper aims to explore the students' problems in answering the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). A qualitative method was used in this study where the data taken from an in-depth semi-structured interview and TOEFL test. The subjects of this research were 30 students from five different faculties of Samudra University in Aceh, Indonesia. To gain the data, the subjects were tested and interviewed. The data analysis revealed that the students' level difficulty in answering the TOEFL test was about above 60 per cent. The main problems of the students in answering the TOEFL test were described in several reasons, such as fewer English basic skills, no TOEFL preparation, and students' personal perception. Further, investigation on students' problems of TOEFL learning skills in each test section are needed and the provision of TOEFL subjects for the students is suggested to the university.

Keywords*: TOEFL, TOEFL Prediction, TOEFL Preparation, Students' Problems*

I. INTRODUCTION

The need to master English is absolutely crucial for university students in the present day. As an international language, the students are expected to master English either for a daily communication or for a formal discourse. English is considered to be quite significant not only in education, but also in other public sectors in which the students will interact (Mahmud, 2014, p. 2581). There have been many literatures reviewing how English is considered as an important thing for students (Buriro & Siddiqui, 2015; Senthamarai & Chandran, 2016). That the emergence of high demands in the globalisation era at developing countries, including Indonesia, has molded a reality that English is a very significant thing that should be acquired by students for their success in academic and job career (Buriro & Siddiqui, 2015; Senthamarai & Chandran, 2016).

Therefore, to improve and to mantain the students' English ability, Indonesia as one of Asian Countries has implemented TOEFL "Test of English as a Foreign Language". TOEFL is also addressed for students as a test to measure the level of their English proficiency. This test is acknowledged internationally as an English standard test (Warfield at al., 2013). Commonly, the score of TOEFL is used as an indicator for an academic affairs in the world in order to measure students' English skills, such as a skill of 'listening', structure' and 'reading'. For example, when the students intend to continue their education abroad, the universities there will absolutely provide a requirement of the students' TOEFL score submission as an indicator for their English proficiency. Nevertheless, currently, the TOEFL score has been applied as an indicator for the country as well, such as one of the requirements for the graduation examination and applying for a job at a particular institution.

In Indonesia, generally, most of universities and other education institutions have implemented the TOEFL score as one of the requirements to complete the students' academic study and to enroll the study. Each university has its own standard of TOEFL score as a requirement. Several universities preferred to require the score of TOEFL prediction/equivalent $\geq$ 450 or $\geq$ 500 and sometimes it depends on what study program is (Hambali, 2008).

For example in Aceh, as in Syiah Kuala University, in order to improve the competence of its graduates, Syiah Kuala University (Unsyiah) has required the TOEFL score of 475 for students in 2010 academic year above who enrolled the examination of thesis defense. As for the previous academic year students, the score that becomes the prerequisite of the graduate examination is 450. Various preparations are also conducted to support the success of the policy, such as the opening of free TOEFL preparation classes and the establishment of TOEFL learning as a compulsory subject in every study program in Unsyiah (Khatir, 2015).

The policy of Unsyiah rector to raise the minimum TOEFL score does not seem to be supported by the students' readiness. The reality found in the field is that the low number of students who can reach the score of 450 independently (without assistance). The second fact is that all the students with low performance in TOEFL test were not occupied in the TOEFL preparation classes (Khatir, 2015). The reality of the university students with low performance in TOEFL does not only occur at Syiah Kuala

University, but also in other universities in Indonesia and other Asian countries (Abboud, et al., 2011; Ananda, 2016; Hambali 2008; Mahmud, 2014; Silviyanti, 2017).

Based on the various facts that happened to other universities about the implementation of TOEFL score standard, so it is necessary to do a mapping about how the readiness and ability of the University of Samudra students to take the TOEFL test as one of the requirements of the graduation before the policy of TOEFL score standard is applied. This is because based on preliminary data found by researchers at Language Service Unit of Samudra University, which is the only implementing unit of TOEFL test at Samudra University, it was found that in general the students of Samudra University from various study programs have difficulty in responding to the TOEFL test. Most of them only reached the score of ≤ 400, and even this also happened to students of English Education Department who are considered to have more skills for the TOEFL test.

In short, based on the explanation above, the following questions are formulated as the research questions of this study:

1. How is the level of difficulty faced by the students in answering the questions of the TOEFL test?
2. What factors do influence the students' low achievement in TOEFL score?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *TOEFL Test*

TOEFL test (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is a standardized test to assess non-native English speakers' proficiency. The test has been firstly conducted by American Council to measure English proficiency as a foreign language since 1962 (Sulistyo, 2009 cited in Ananda, 2016). Since its implementation, TOEFL has developed into several versions because of a change of the perception in the language development. The versions begin from *Paper and Pencil Based TOEFL* (PBT) including three (3) test sections: (a) *listening comprehension*, (b) *structure and written expression*, and (c) (*reading comprehension*), *the computer based TOEFL* (CBT), until *internet based TOEFL* (IBT) in 2005.

The version of TOEFL test commonly used by several universities in Indonesia as a requirement of students' graduation is *Paper Based TOEFL* (PBT) prediction which adopts the test questions from any TOEFL resources, such as books, internet sites, and ETS (*English Testing Service*). The test sections covered in the TOEFL prediction are similar as *Paper and Pencil Based TOEFL* (PBT), including *listening*, *structure and written expression*, and *reading comprehension*. According to Hambali (2008), the version of TOEFL prediction is utilised based on several reasons, including the availability of material source, the low budget, and the internal use.

B. *The Factors of Problem in TOEFL*

Several researches which concentrated on the TOEFL implementation in Indonesia have been conducted. For example, a research conducted by Hambali (2008) focused on analysing the use of *the shorcut strategy* to the teaching-learning of the second TOEFL section, *structure and written expressions.* Through this research, it is expected that *the shortcut* strategy can help students in recognising the most proper answer to each test question in section 2. Further, in 2014, the research was also carried out in order to find the problems faced by Indonesian undergraduate students in answering the TOEFL. The research was conducted by Mahmud (2014) in one of the state universities in Makasar which involved the samples from three classes/departments, including English education, natural science (IPA), and social science (IPS). The results of this research showed that the main problems faced by those university students in answering the TOEFL questions are an inadequate English basic ability, a lack of English training, and students' different condition including the age and the social status.

Meanwhile, in 2016, Ananda (2016) conducted a study which involved the students of IAIN Ar-Raniry and Syiah Kuala University as the samples in order to investigate the problems encountered by the students in answering the TOEFL questions in section 2, *structure and written expression*. The results of this study revealed that *inversions* (12%), *subject-verb agreements* (10%), *adverb clause connectors* (7%), *passives* (6%), *reduced adjective clauses* (5%), *parallel structures* (5%) and *use of verbs* (5%) are the most difficult question topics.

Further, a research carried out by Devira (2017) aimed to find out the factors of difficulty faced by English undergraduate students of Syiah Kuala University in answering the TOEFL test questions of section three, *Reading Comprehension*. The results of this study shows that the factors encountered by those students including the knowledge background, the difficulty of material, the purpose of reading, the level of concentration, the motivation, and the interest to read. Also, the difficulties in terms of *reading comprehension skills* includes the difficulties in answering *transition questions* (80.75%), *implied detail questions* (61.20%), *unstated detail questions* (61%), and *vocabulary questions* (56%).

Lastly, Silviyanti, et al. (2017) conducted a study which involved 30 students of English department, Syiah Kuala University as the samples in order to investigate the most difficult skills in TOEFL listening comprehension test. The results of this study showed that among 17 sub skills, *listen for double negative expression* was the most difficult questions for the students to answer, followed by *listen to English Idioms* and *listen for synonyms*.

III. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative method to deeply explore a certain process or program for finding a comprehensive, deep, and systhemathical information

(Cresswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). The instruments utilised in this study were the test and semi-structured interview. The TOEFL test items provided to the participants in this study were taken from Phillips (2001). This test was used to answer the first question of this study. The semi-structured interviews were designed based on the findings of Mahmud (2014) and Abboud and Hussein (2011) with modifications to suit the study objectives. This interview provided answers for the second question of this study regarding the factors which cause the students' low achievement in TOEFL score. The interview itself was given after they had taken the TOEFL test in order to make the subjects could easily and fairly recognise their problems in achieving the TOEFL score. The subjects in this study were thirty (30) students of Samudra University from five (5) different faculties who took the TOEFL test in Language Center of Samudra University and had completed the general course of *English* or *English II* in each of their study department. The reason for choosing this procedure was that by using a purposive sampling, to find another understanding about if *English* general course required for university students is enough to prepare the students into the TOEFL test at the end of their academic study.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

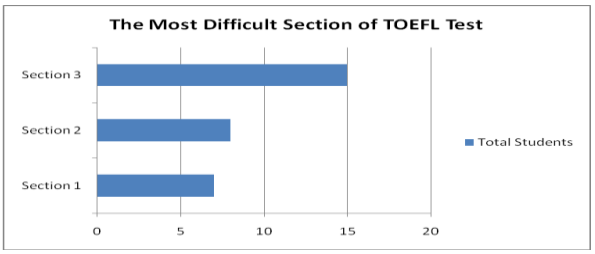
A. *The Level of Students's Difficulty in TOEFL Test*

The results obtained from the test revealed that there were only 6 of 30 Samudra University students who can reached the TOEFL score for ≥ 400 and < 450, while the rest of them only stood on the score position of < 400.

TABLE I. STUDENTS TOEFL SCORE

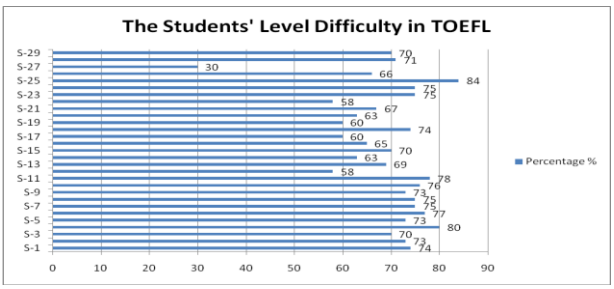
No	Sample	TOEFL Score			
		Section 1	Section 2	Section 3	Total
1	S-1	41	31	31	340
2	S-2	37	33	40	360
3	S-3	38	33	35	350
4	S-4	33	22	36	303
5	S-5	37	42	28	356
6	S-6	37	29	30	320
7	S-7	38	33	32	343
8	S-8	38	27	35	333
9	S-9	42	33	31	353
10	S-10	38	37	28	343
11	S-11	32	35	31	326
12	S-12	**30**	**60**	**38**	**426**
13	S-13	35	40	38	376
14	S-14	**37**	**38**	**45**	**400**
15	S-15	35	40	37	373
16	S-16	**41**	**40**	**39**	**400**
17	S-17	**42**	**45**	**38**	**416**
18	S-18	31	33	40	346
19	S-19	**47**	**40**	**39**	**420**
20	S-20	43	33	30	353
21	S-21	38	41	37	386
22	S-22	**32**	**58**	**41**	**436**
23	S-23	37	36	31	346
24	S-24	38	35	31	346
25	S-25	31	31	27	296
26	S-26	42	29	43	380
27	S-27	41	43	28	373
28	S-28	37	40	32	363
29	S-29	41	35	37	376
30	S-30	41	31	31	343

From the table above, it reveals that the highest number of students' difficulty was particularly on the section 3 of *Reading Comprehension*, which then it was continued by the section 1, *Listening Comprehension* and the section 2 *Structure and Written Expresion*. The following chart presents the most difficult section of the TOEFL test for Samudra University students.



There were 15 students with the lowest score in section 3 *Reading Comprehension*, followed by 8 students with the lowest score in section 2 *Structure and Written Expression*, and 7 students in section 1 *Listening Comprehension.* This result was also supported by the interview findings, in which most of the subjects admitted that the section 3 *Reading Comprehension* was considered as the most difficult one in TOEFL test because of their inadequate vocabulary, unknown reading skill for long texts and limited time. These were also some of the reading difficulties faced by Syiah Kuala University undergraduate students in comprehending the reading texts of TOEFL test (Devira, 2017; Fitriani, 2015). Therefore, to improve the students' academic reading comprehension in dealing with the TOEFL and IELTS test, Fitriani (2015) adopted a text-based view by using the genre-specific metacognitive strategies of visualisation and summarisation in her study.

Further, in accordance with the students incorrect answers on each section of the TOEFL test, the following chart presents the level of difficulty by Samudra University students in answering the TOEFL.



suggested that it seems important for the parties of Samudra University to provide the TOEFL as a compulsory program or subject for their students. In running the class program, applying several teaching methods to teach the TOEFL that has been adopted by several previous studies is also more significant, such as conducted by Ismail and Zalha (2017) for listening skill, Hambali (2008) for structure skill , and Fitriani (2015) in reading comprehension skill.

B. The Factors of Students' Problems in TOEFL

Based on the test and interview with the subjects taking the TOEFL test, it was found that most of the students found difficulties in answering the TOEFL. There were several problems affecting the students' low performance for the TOEFL test, which were discussed as follows:

1. Fewer Basic Skills in English

There is no adequate basic skills in English was the main problem encountered by the students, particularly the students at the last semester (7-th semester/above). The students mentioned that they took the TOEFL test only because it was a requirement for applying a graduation. Regarding the TOEFL test itself, they mostly did not understand about every skill of English, such as listening, structure, and reading, which were tested. Even, they stated that they were not able to speak in English and understand English conversations and reading texts. In addition, they said that TOEFL was something new for them, which was never introduced before in their academic study. Suddenly, in the end of their academic study, they were required to have a TOEFL score for a graduation. This case also happened among students of Graduate Program in state universities of Makassar as described by Mahmud (2014, p.2583) that the main problem faced by the respondents in her study was less English ability, even the students majoring in English Department.

The different thing came out from students of the 5-th semester. Even, they stated that the test of each section in TOEFL test was quite difficult, they confidently could answer several TOEFL questions. Some of them acknowledged that the TOEFL test had been familiar among them since in Senior High School (SMA) and joining English course. However, they admitted that they were never introduced to the TOEFL test during their university study and had no TOEFL practices outside the campus. They believed that if they had adequate practices in TOEFL, they were able to handle the difficulties of the test.

2. No Preparation

Another main and significant problem that needs to be considered in this issue was that there was no TOEFL preparation class that had been offered to the students before joining the test at the end of their academic study. All students mentioned that the TOEL preparation class was very needed in order to make them familiar with the test and to help them recognise several skills/strategies for the TOEFL test. They strongly shared similar opinions that the subjects of general english course (MKU) and English II were not quite adequate to prepare them to do the TOEFL test. This was because those courses only provided them very basic English materials, such as subject, pronouns, and verb forms. Moreover, they had been never practiced into listening and reading practices. Therefore, the students strongly suggested to the university to make a policy to program a TOEFL as a subject or a compulsory extracurricular activity for each department of Samudra University. As a consequence, they expected that the students would have adequate preparation in the end of their study when taking the TOEFL test, and moreover, the score of TOEFL was very needed today for their job applications.

3. Students' Individual Perceptions

Based on the interviews, most of the subjects shared similar opinions that they felt motivated to participate actively in TOEFL preparation class if it would be offered at the campus. However, there were also two (2) students commenting a different opinion regarding their motivation in learning TOEFL. They argued that eventhough they had a big intention to learn English and to join TOEFL class in English course, sometimes, they felt unless motivated during the course/study. This was due to that some of their lecturers also seemed to be less capable in English skills, particularly in explaining the content of English source materials used in the lectures. Therefore, the subjects expected that the lecturers of Samudra University also need to have good English skills, not only the students.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has discussed and presented the facts of SamudraUniversity students' ability in answering the TOEFL test. The findings of this study shows that many of students find it difficulties in handling the TOEFL test and reach the TOEFL achievement under the required score for a graduate examination. The level of their difficulties in TOEFL test is above 60 per cent which is affectected by several problems, such as fewer basic skills in English, no TOEFL preparation class, and students' personal perception. The findings of this study provides important suggestion to the university in order to program a TOEFL preparation class or make it as a compulsory subject so that the students are familiar with the TOEFL test and aware of the importance of TOEFL at the present days. The adoption of recent approaches in teaching TOEFL is also suggested to the teachers/tutors of TOEFL preparation class in order to improve the students ability and minimise their difficulties in TOEFL.

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