



## ASPECTS OF TOEFL PERCEIVED AS DIFFICULT BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A DESCRIPTIVE QUALITATIVE STUDY

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to explore and describe the aspects of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) that are perceived as challenging by university students. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design, the study seeks to capture students' firsthand experiences and perceptions regarding the difficulties encountered during the test. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire administered to undergraduate students who had previously taken an institutional TOEFL examination at the university level. The qualitative data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and sources of difficulty across the different sections of the test. The findings indicate that students experience notable difficulties in all three major sections of the TOEFL, namely listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. In the listening section, students reported challenges related to limited vocabulary knowledge, rapid speech delivery, and unfamiliar accents used by native speakers. Difficulties in the structure and written expression section were primarily associated with complex grammatical constructions and insufficient mastery of English grammar rules. Meanwhile, in the reading comprehension section, students identified time constraints and limited familiarity with academic vocabulary as the main obstacles to successful performance. Overall, the results highlight that linguistic limitations and test-related factors significantly affect students' performance on the TOEFL. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of university students' perceived difficulties in taking the TOEFL and underscores the need for targeted instructional support. The findings offer pedagogical implications for the development and improvement of TOEFL preparation programs in higher education, particularly in addressing vocabulary development, listening exposure, grammatical competence, and test-taking strategies.*

**Keywords :** *TOEFL, perceived difficulty, descriptive qualitative study.*

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dan mendeskripsikan aspek-aspek dalam **Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)** yang dipersepsikan sebagai tantangan oleh mahasiswa perguruan tinggi. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini berupaya menangkap pengalaman dan persepsi langsung mahasiswa terkait kesulitan yang mereka hadapi selama mengikuti tes tersebut. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terbuka yang diberikan kepada mahasiswa sarjana yang sebelumnya telah mengikuti ujian TOEFL institusional di tingkat perguruan tinggi. Data kualitatif kemudian dianalisis secara tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola-pola yang berulang serta sumber-sumber kesulitan pada berbagai bagian tes. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa mengalami kesulitan yang cukup signifikan pada ketiga bagian utama TOEFL, yaitu **listening comprehension** (pemahaman mendengarkan), **structure and written expression** (struktur dan ekspresi tertulis), serta **reading comprehension** (pemahaman membaca). Pada bagian listening, mahasiswa melaporkan adanya kendala yang berkaitan dengan keterbatasan penguasaan kosakata, kecepatan penyampaian ujaran yang tinggi, serta penggunaan aksen penutur asli yang kurang familiar. Kesulitan pada bagian structure and written expression terutama terkait dengan konstruksi tata bahasa yang kompleks dan kurangnya penguasaan kaidah tata bahasa Inggris. Sementara itu, pada bagian reading comprehension, mahasiswa mengidentifikasi keterbatasan waktu pengerjaan dan rendahnya

familiaritas terhadap kosakata akademik sebagai hambatan utama dalam mencapai performa yang optimal. Secara keseluruhan, hasil penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa keterbatasan linguistik serta faktor-faktor yang berkaitan dengan karakteristik tes berpengaruh secara signifikan terhadap performa mahasiswa dalam TOEFL. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai kesulitan yang dipersepsikan oleh mahasiswa dalam mengikuti TOEFL serta menekankan pentingnya dukungan pembelajaran yang terarah. Temuan penelitian ini juga memberikan implikasi pedagogis bagi pengembangan dan penyempurnaan program persiapan TOEFL di perguruan tinggi, khususnya dalam aspek pengembangan kosakata, peningkatan paparan terhadap keterampilan menyimak, penguatan kompetensi tata bahasa, serta strategi menghadapi tes.

**Kata kunci :** *TOEFL, kesukaran, descriptive qualitative study*

## INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency is widely acknowledged as a critical academic requirement in higher education, particularly for non-native speakers seeking to fulfil graduation criteria, secure scholarships, or pursue postgraduate study. As a result, standardized language assessments such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) play a central role in evaluating learners' English proficiency across listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. TOEFL scores are frequently used as gatekeeping criteria in academic contexts, underscoring the importance of understanding learners' experiences of the test in educational research (see Ali, 2025; Wicaksono et al., 2025).

Despite the proliferation of English language instruction and TOEFL preparation programs, evidence suggests that many university students continue to encounter significant challenges when attempting the TOEFL. For example, recent qualitative research has documented persistent difficulties in listening due to rapid speech rates, unfamiliar accents, and limited vocabulary knowledge (e.g., Ali, 2025). In addition, learners frequently report challenges with grammatical complexity in the structure and written expression section (Hampp et al., 2024) and with reading comprehension due to academic vocabulary and time constraints (Wicaksono et al., 2025). These findings align with broader applied linguistics research that highlights the interaction between linguistic competence and strategic processing in standardized test performance. From an applied linguistics perspective, perceptions of difficulty not only reflect language proficiency but also learners' strategic orientations and affective responses in test contexts.

Understanding students perceived difficulties in TOEFL performance is therefore vital for applied linguistics research and pedagogy because it sheds light on the interaction between language skill, cognitive processing, and test format familiarity. Such insights can inform the design of more targeted instructional approaches and preparation programs that address both linguistic weaknesses and strategic test-taking competencies. Indeed, contemporary research underscores the value of integrating learner perceptions with empirical performance data to inform instructional design in EFL contexts.

Accordingly, this study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to identify and describe the specific aspects of the TOEFL that university students perceive as difficult, as well as the underlying reasons for these perceptions. By foregrounding students' voices, the research aims to contribute to applied linguistics scholarship

on language assessment and EFL pedagogy, with implications for enhancing TOEFL preparation practices in higher education settings. In short, two research questions would be which aspects of the TOEFL are perceived as difficult by university students? And what factors contribute to students' perceptions of difficulty in these TOEFL aspects?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **TOEFL as a Measure of English Proficiency**

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is widely used as a standardized measure of academic English proficiency for non-native speakers. Developed and administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the TOEFL is designed to evaluate learners' ability to understand and use English in academic settings, where complex language processing and content comprehension are required (ETS, 2021). The assessment targets core receptive and structural language skills, including listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension—each of which reflects linguistic and cognitive demands typical of university study (Chapelle & Douglas, 2020; ETS, 2021). From an applied linguistics perspective, TOEFL performance is considered not only a proxy for language competence but also an indicator of learners' readiness to engage with academic discourse, participate in instructional settings, and manage cognitively demanding tasks in English-medium environments (Harsch & Hartig, 2022).

### **Difficulties in Listening Comprehension**

Listening comprehension is widely acknowledged as one of the most challenging skills in second language acquisition, particularly in academic contexts where learners must process complex input under time constraints. Research conducted after 2020 has consistently shown that learners encounter difficulties due to rapid speech rates, unfamiliar accents, and limited exposure to authentic spoken English (Goh, 2021; La'biran & Dewi, 2026). From a cognitive perspective, these challenges can be understood through the framework of working memory and information processing theories, which posit that learners' ability to comprehend spoken language is constrained by the simultaneous demands of decoding, syntactic parsing, and retaining information in memory (Vandergrift & Goh, 2021). In the TOEFL listening section, these demands are amplified, as students must not only understand lecture or conversation content but also integrate and synthesize information to answer inferential and detail-based questions, reflecting higher-order comprehension processes.

Moreover, from an applied linguistics and assessment perspective, listening comprehension difficulties are not solely a function of linguistic competence but are also shaped by learners' familiarity with academic discourse conventions and pragmatic cues in spoken English (Gunantar & Rosaria, 2025). Socio-cognitive theories of language testing suggest that performance on standardized tests like TOEFL is mediated by both knowledge of the language and test-taking strategies, including selective attention, note-taking, and anticipation of discourse structure (Chapelle & Douglas, 2020). Thus, students' perceptions of difficulty in TOEFL listening can be viewed as an interaction between their linguistic resources, cognitive capacities, and strategic competencies, highlighting the importance of pedagogical interventions that combine language development with listening strategy training

in EFL contexts.

### **Challenges in Structure and Written Expression**

Grammar is a foundational component of both receptive and productive language skills, serving as the structural system through which meaning is constructed and interpreted. In the context of standardized language assessments such as TOEFL, mastery of grammatical forms is essential for accurately understanding sentences and producing coherent written responses. Recent research indicates that many EFL learners struggle with grammatical complexity, including syntactic parsing, tense consistency, and clause integration, especially under the time constraints imposed by the test (Azar & Hagen, 2020; Awwalia & Rais, 2025). From a second language acquisition perspective, these challenges can be understood through the lens of interlanguage theory, which highlights the developmental and transitional nature of learners' grammatical knowledge, as well as the role of cognitive load in processing complex structures during real-time assessment (Selinker, 2021).

Moreover, from an applied linguistics and language assessment perspective, difficulties in the structure and written expression section are not merely a reflection of incomplete grammatical knowledge. Socio-cognitive and task-based frameworks suggest that learners' performance is influenced by their strategic competence, including error detection, time management, and the ability to allocate attention effectively under test conditions (Chapelle & Douglas, 2020; Gunantar & Rosaria, 2025). Thus, students' perceived difficulties in this section of TOEFL emerge from the interaction between linguistic competence, cognitive processing demands, and strategic test-taking skills. These insights underscore the importance of instructional approaches that integrate explicit grammar instruction with strategy training, helping learners manage both structural challenges and the pressures of timed assessments.

### **Reading Comprehension Difficulties**

Reading comprehension in the TOEFL requires learners to process extended academic texts under strict time constraints, integrating information across paragraphs and making inferences about complex ideas. Recent research indicates that many students struggle with insufficient academic vocabulary and limited familiarity with discipline-specific terminology, which significantly impairs their ability to comprehend and respond accurately to reading questions (Nation, 2022; Wahyuningsih et al., 2024). From a cognitive perspective, difficulties in reading comprehension can be understood through schema theory and the interactive-compensatory model, which suggest that learners rely on both prior knowledge and language proficiency to construct meaning; when vocabulary or background knowledge is lacking, comprehension suffers, particularly under timed conditions (Anderson, 2021).

Furthermore, applied linguistics and assessment research highlight that TOEFL reading performance is influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by metacognitive strategies such as skimming, scanning, and identifying main ideas (Ghazal et al., 2023). Socio-cognitive frameworks of language testing posit that learners' test performance is mediated by the interaction between language knowledge, strategic processing, and

task demands (Chapelle & Douglas, 2020). Therefore, students perceived difficulties in the reading section reflect both gaps in academic vocabulary and suboptimal use of reading strategies, underscoring the need for instructional interventions that integrate vocabulary development, strategy training, and timed reading practice to enhance performance in standardized academic assessments.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences regarding the difficulties they encountered while taking the TOEFL. The descriptive qualitative approach was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of students' subjective experiences and to identify recurring patterns in their reported challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design allows for rich, contextually grounded insights that are particularly valuable in applied linguistics research on language assessment.

The participants consisted of undergraduate students from a single university who had completed an institutional TOEFL test. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that all participants had direct experience with the test, thereby providing relevant and informed perspectives on its challenges (Palinkas et al., 2015). A total of 24 students participated in the study, representing a range of academic disciplines and proficiency levels.

Data were collected using an interview, which invited participants to describe their experiences, opinions, and perceived difficulties across the different sections of the TOEFL. Open-ended questions were chosen to elicit detailed responses and allow participants to express challenges in their own words, providing richer qualitative data than closed-ended instruments.

The primary research instrument employed in this study was an interview, designed to elicit rich, qualitative data on students' perceptions and experiences regarding TOEFL difficulties. Interview are particularly suited to descriptive qualitative research because they allow participants to express their experiences in their own words, providing insights that structured instruments may overlook (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the context of applied linguistics, such instruments align with socio-cognitive and task-based theories of language assessment, which emphasize that learners' performance and perceptions are shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by cognitive strategies, affective responses, and prior experience with the test format (Chapelle & Douglas, 2020; Vandergrift & Goh, 2021).

## **THE RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

#### **Aspects of the TOEFL are Perceived as Difficult by University Students in Listening Section**

The findings indicate that the Listening Comprehension section was perceived as the most difficult component of the TOEFL test by nine participants. Those participants explicitly identified listening as the most challenging section, emphasizing the difficulty of processing spoken English in real time. They reported that they had to understand conversations and lectures quickly, which required a high level of concentration and immediate comprehension. One participant stated that the Listening section was the most difficult because it required rapid

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understanding of spoken English without the opportunity for repetition or clarification. This time-sensitive nature of listening tasks contributed to increased cognitive load during the test. In addition, they noted that although all sections of the TOEFL were generally challenging, Listening remained the most difficult. This difficulty was further exacerbated by environmental factors during the test administration. The participant explained that when taking the TOEFL in a large auditorium with many test-takers, the audio quality was not clearly audible, making it difficult to comprehend the spoken input accurately. Overall, the findings suggest that difficulties in the Listening Comprehension section are associated not only with linguistic demands, such as processing speed and real-time comprehension, but also with external factors, including test administration conditions and audio clarity. These combined factors significantly affect students' ability to accurately understand spoken English during the TOEFL examination.

The findings reveal several reasons why participants considered the Listening Comprehension section of the TOEFL test to be difficult. The primary difficulty was related to the requirement to process spoken English in real time. Participants reported that they needed to understand the speaker's message quickly while simultaneously retaining information, which increased cognitive demand during the listening task. Several participants emphasized that the speed of speech delivery was a major challenge. They explained that speakers in the listening audio often spoke too quickly, making it difficult to capture and comprehend all the information presented. As a result, participants frequently struggled to follow the flow of ideas and identify key information accurately. In addition, limited linguistic competence, particularly in vocabulary and pronunciation recognition, was identified as another contributing factor. One participant stated that listening comprehension was difficult due to weak vocabulary knowledge, which required additional cognitive effort to interpret spoken input. The participant further explained that understanding spoken English was not immediate, as they needed to mentally process and translate the information before fully comprehending it, unlike proficient English users who can understand speech more automatically. Overall, the findings suggest that difficulties in the Listening Comprehension section are primarily caused by rapid speech delivery, limited vocabulary knowledge, and insufficient automaticity in processing spoken English. These factors collectively hinder participants' ability to effectively comprehend spoken input during the TOEFL test.

The participant also stated that most specific problems encountered in the listening comprehension section in which they experienced several specific difficulties in both short conversations and long conversations in the TOEFL Listening Comprehension section. These difficulties were primarily related to maintaining attention, processing spoken input in real time, and retaining information from the audio. In short conversations, participants reported that the rapid pace of speech made it difficult to immediately understand the meaning of the dialogue. As a result, they often failed to capture important information before the conversation moved on. This led to incomplete comprehension and uncertainty when answering related questions. In long conversations, participants experienced greater challenges in sustaining concentration throughout the entire dialogue. They reported that they often lost focus in the middle of the conversation, which affected their ability to understand the

overall meaning and sequence of ideas. One participant stated: *"In long conversations, I often struggle to maintain focus from the beginning to the end, so I cannot fully understand the content of the conversation."* In addition, participants highlighted difficulties in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary and academic terms used in the listening passages. The presence of new or complex lexical items further hindered their comprehension and increased cognitive load during the test. Another issue identified was the inability to replay the audio. Participants explained that in long conversations, they needed to remember a large amount of spoken information, but the lack of repetition made it difficult to recall details accurately when answering questions. As a result, they often struggled to select correct answers due to incomplete retention of the audio content. Overall, the findings suggest that the specific problems in the Listening Comprehension section are related to rapid speech delivery, difficulties in sustaining attention, limited vocabulary knowledge, and the inability to replay audio recordings. These factors collectively reduce students' ability to process and retain spoken information effectively during the TOEFL test.

The findings reveal that participants experienced a range of negative emotional responses while working on the TOEFL Listening Comprehension section. These emotional states were primarily characterized by feelings of difficulty in maintaining focus, nervousness, stress, confusion, panic, and uncertainty in answer selection. Some participants reported experiencing difficulty in concentrating during the listening tasks. One participant stated that they felt unable to maintain focus while completing this section, which affected their overall comprehension of the audio materials. In addition, several participants described feelings of nervousness and pressure due to the need to listen attentively and process information in real time. Despite these challenges, some participants attempted to remain calm in order to improve their understanding of the spoken input. One participant explained: *"I felt nervous and pressured because I had to listen very carefully, but I tried to stay calm so I could understand the information better."* Other participants reported stronger emotional reactions such as panic, confusion, stress, and doubt regarding their answers. These emotions often emerged when they were unable to fully understand the listening passages or when they were uncertain about the correctness of their responses. Overall, the findings suggest that the Listening Comprehension section of the TOEFL test triggers significant emotional strain among students. Difficulties in maintaining concentration, combined with time pressure and rapid speech delivery, contribute to heightened levels of anxiety and reduce students' confidence in their answers.

### **Aspects of the TOEFL are Perceived as Difficult by Students in Structure Section**

The findings revealed that the Structure and Written Expression section was perceived as the most challenging component of the TOEFL by several participants. Specifically, twelve participants identified this section as the most difficult compared to the listening and reading sections. According to the participants, the primary source of difficulty stemmed from the complexity of English grammar rules and sentence structures. They reported that questions in this section were often confusing because they required a thorough understanding of grammatical concepts, making it more demanding than the listening and reading components. This finding suggests that insufficient grammatical competence remains a significant obstacle for students when taking the

TOEFL examination.

Participants identified several reasons why the Structure and Written Expression section was considered the most challenging part of the TOEFL test. The most frequently reported difficulty was the need for a strong understanding of English grammar. Participants indicated that success in this section requires comprehensive knowledge of grammatical rules, including tenses, prepositions, sentence structures, and other essential aspects of English syntax. Several participants emphasized that their limited mastery of grammar significantly contributed to their difficulties. They reported that inadequate grammatical knowledge often made it difficult to distinguish between correct and incorrect answer choices. As one participant explained, *“Structure is difficult because it requires a good understanding of grammar. If you do not understand grammar well, all answer choices seem correct, making it difficult to determine the right one.”* In addition to grammatical challenges, some participants acknowledged that limited vocabulary knowledge further complicated their performance in this section. They felt that insufficient vocabulary hindered their ability to fully understand sentence contexts and identify appropriate grammatical structures. Furthermore, participants noted that the Structure and Written Expression section demands careful attention and extensive preparation. They highlighted the importance of understanding the specific patterns and formulas associated with different question types. According to the participants, answering structure questions accurately requires not only grammatical competence but also familiarity with test formats and strategic problem-solving skills. Consequently, they believed that guessing answers without a clear understanding of the underlying grammatical principles was ineffective and often resulted in incorrect responses. Overall, the findings suggest that difficulties in the Structure and Written Expression section are primarily associated with limited grammatical competence, insufficient vocabulary knowledge, and a lack of familiarity with the specific rules and patterns tested in TOEFL structure questions. These factors collectively contribute to students’ perceptions of this section as the most demanding component of the examination.

Furthermore, in term of specific Problems Encountered in the Structure and Written Expression Section, they encountered in the Structure and Written Expression section, participants reported difficulties related to both sentence completion and written expression (error recognition) tasks. However, the findings indicate that the greatest challenge was associated with the written expression component. In the sentence completion section, participants explained that they often struggled to select the correct answer because several options appeared grammatically acceptable. Although multiple alternatives seemed plausible, only one answer conformed to the grammatical rules required by the sentence. This similarity among answer choices frequently created confusion and uncertainty during the test. The written expression section was perceived as even more demanding. Participants noted that, unlike other TOEFL sections, they were not required to choose the best answer from a set of alternatives. Instead, they had to independently identify the grammatical error within a sentence. One participant stated: *“In the written expression section, we are not given answer choices as in other sections. We have to determine by ourselves which part of the sentence is incorrect, either in its usage or placement. This is*

*what makes it difficult.*”. Similarly, another participant explained that identifying errors in a sentence was particularly challenging because a lack of grammatical knowledge made all parts of the sentence appear correct. As a result, participants often experienced uncertainty when deciding whether a particular word, phrase, or structure was grammatically acceptable. Another recurring issue concerned the complexity of sentence analysis. Participants reported that although identifying basic sentence elements such as subjects and verbs was relatively manageable, evaluating the overall grammatical structure required deeper analysis. They emphasized that successful performance depended on recognizing specific grammatical patterns and understanding how sentence components function together. Consequently, many participants felt that extensive practice was necessary to develop the ability to detect errors accurately and efficiently. Overall, the findings suggest that the primary difficulties in the Structure and Written Expression section stem from challenges in grammatical error recognition, uncertainty in evaluating sentence correctness, and limited familiarity with the structural patterns commonly tested in TOEFL questions. These difficulties indicate that students require not only knowledge of grammatical rules but also advanced analytical skills to evaluate sentence structures effectively.

The findings revealed that participants experienced a range of negative emotions when working on the TOEFL section they perceived as the most difficult. The most frequently reported feelings were nervousness, anxiety, stress, panic, and lack of self-confidence. These emotional responses were largely associated with time pressure and uncertainty regarding the correctness of their answers. Several participants reported feeling anxious and under pressure due to the limited time available to complete the questions. They explained that the need to identify correct answers quickly often led to confusion and fear of making mistakes. One participant stated: *“While working on the section, I felt anxious and pressured because of the limited time. I was often confused and afraid of making mistakes. Sometimes I became frustrated because even though I had studied grammar, I still answered many questions incorrectly.”* Similarly, another participant emphasized that the continuous countdown of time created additional pressure during the test. This pressure increased feelings of nervousness and concern about making errors, particularly when dealing with questions that required careful grammatical analysis. Participants also reported experiencing panic and stress, especially when they encountered questions they found difficult to understand. Limited confidence in their grammatical knowledge often intensified these emotions. Some participants indicated that they doubted the answers they had selected and were uncertain whether their choices were correct. As a result, they occasionally felt resigned to the possibility of receiving incorrect scores despite their efforts. Overall, the findings suggest that difficult TOEFL sections, particularly the Structure and Written Expression section, evoke substantial psychological pressure among students. Time constraints, uncertainty in answer selection, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence in grammatical competence contribute to heightened levels of anxiety and stress during test-taking. These emotional factors may negatively influence students’ performance and reduce their ability to apply their language knowledge effectively under examination conditions.

### **Aspects of the TOEFL are Perceived as Difficult by University Students in Reading Section**

There are three of participants identified the Reading Comprehension section as the most difficult

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component of the TOEFL test. The participant expressed that, compared to the other sections, the reading section presented a higher level of difficulty and required greater effort to complete. This perception indicates that reading comprehension was considered the most challenging part of the test for that participant, particularly in relation to the other TOEFL sections. They reported that the Reading Comprehension section was difficult due to the considerable amount of time required to complete the tasks. According to the participant, this section demands the ability to read and understand multiple texts within a limited time frame, while also identifying and responding to various types of questions. In addition, they indicated that the need to process and comprehend a large volume of written information simultaneously contributed to the perceived difficulty of this section. The findings indicate that the participant experienced specific difficulties in the Reading Comprehension section, particularly in dealing with implied questions (inference questions). The participant reported that these questions were challenging because the answers were not explicitly stated in the text, requiring a deeper understanding and interpretation of the reading passage. As a result, the participant needed to engage in higher-level reasoning to infer the intended meaning. In addition, limited vocabulary knowledge was identified as another major difficulty. The participant explained that TOEFL reading passages often contain complex and unfamiliar words, which hindered comprehension of the text. This lexical limitation also affected the participant's ability to interpret meaning accurately and draw appropriate conclusions from the passage. Overall, the findings suggest that the main problems in the Reading Comprehension section are related to difficulties in making inferences from implicit information and limited vocabulary knowledge, both of which require strong reading comprehension and analytical skills.

The findings reveal that the participants experienced negative emotional responses while working on the Reading Comprehension section of the TOEFL test. Specifically, the participant reported feeling afraid and nervous when dealing with difficult reading passages and questions. In addition, the participant often felt confused when encountering challenging items, which led to an increased amount of time required to process and understand the questions. This confusion contributed to a sense of uncertainty during test-taking, particularly when selecting the correct answers. Overall, these findings suggest that difficult reading tasks in the TOEFL test may trigger emotional responses such as anxiety, nervousness, and confusion, which can potentially affect the participant's reading performance and decision-making process.

## **Discussion**

### **The TOEFL Listening Section**

The analysis of participants' responses reveals several interrelated factors that contribute to difficulties in the TOEFL Listening Comprehension section. These factors can be categorized into linguistic, cognitive, test-related, and contextual dimensions.

1. **Rapid Speech Delivery.** One of the most frequently reported difficulties is the fast rate of speech in the listening passages. Participants indicated that speakers often deliver information too quickly, which limits their ability to process and interpret the input in real time. Consequently, important information is often missed,

particularly in short conversations where responses must be made immediately.

2. **Limited Working Memory and Inability to Sustain Attention.** Participants also experienced difficulties in maintaining concentration throughout longer listening passages. They reported losing focus during long conversations, which affected their ability to follow the sequence of ideas. This suggests limitations in working memory capacity and sustained attention, both of which are essential for successful listening comprehension.

3. **Limited Vocabulary Knowledge.** Insufficient vocabulary knowledge was identified as another significant factor. Participants stated that unfamiliar words and academic expressions hindered their understanding of spoken input. In many cases, they needed additional time to mentally process lexical items, which disrupted real-time comprehension.

4. **Lack of Listening Automaticity.** The findings also indicate a lack of automatic processing in listening. Participants reported that they could not immediately understand spoken English and often needed to translate or analyze the meaning internally. This slow processing reflects limited listening fluency and insufficient exposure to authentic spoken English.

5. **Test Format Constraints.** Participants highlighted structural limitations of the TOEFL Listening section, particularly the inability to replay audio recordings. The one-time listening condition required them to retain large amounts of information simultaneously, which increased cognitive load and made it difficult to recall details accurately when answering questions.

6. **External Factors Related to Test Conditions.** In addition, environmental factors during test administration also contributed to comprehension difficulties. Some participants reported that poor audio clarity in the examination setting made it harder to hear and understand the listening passages effectively.

Overall, the findings suggest that difficulties in the TOEFL Listening Comprehension section arise from a combination of linguistic limitations, cognitive processing constraints, test design features, and external environmental conditions. These interconnected factors collectively reduce learners' ability to accurately comprehend spoken English in real-time testing situations.

In addition, those participants employed various strategies to overcome difficulties in the TOEFL Listening Comprehension section. These strategies were primarily aimed at improving listening exposure, enhancing vocabulary knowledge, and increasing familiarity with spoken English in different contexts. A common strategy reported by participants was extensive exposure to English listening materials. Participants stated that they regularly listened to English podcasts, videos, and other audio resources to improve their listening skills. One participant explained that they practiced listening through podcasts and other learning materials, in addition to using textbooks and mobile applications to strengthen their overall English proficiency. Another frequently mentioned strategy was consistent practice with TOEFL listening exercises. Participants reported that repeated exposure to TOEFL-style questions helped them become more familiar with the test format and improved their ability to identify key information during listening tasks. In addition, some participants actively took notes while listening in order to capture important points and support their comprehension. Vocabulary development was also highlighted as an important strategy. Participants noted that expanding their vocabulary made it easier to

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understand spoken English, particularly in conversations containing unfamiliar words or academic expressions. Furthermore, some participants engaged in more informal listening practices, such as listening to English songs, watching English-language films without subtitles, and occasionally listening to podcasts even when they were not particularly enjoyable. One participant stated that these activities contributed to noticeable improvements in their listening ability, especially after participating in intermediate-level English classes. Overall, the findings suggest that students rely on a combination of intentional practice, extensive exposure to authentic listening materials, vocabulary enhancement, and note-taking strategies to overcome difficulties in the Listening Comprehension section. These strategies reflect their efforts to develop both linguistic competence and listening fluency in order to improve TOEFL performance.

### **The TOEFL Structure and Written Expression Section**

The analysis of participants' responses reveals several underlying factors that contribute to the difficulties experienced in the TOEFL Structure and Written Expression section. These factors are interrelated and collectively influence students' performance during the test.

First, insufficient grammatical competence emerged as the most dominant factor. Participants consistently reported difficulties in applying essential grammatical rules, including tenses, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, and sentence structure patterns. This lack of grammatical mastery often resulted in confusion when selecting correct answers, particularly because multiple options appeared grammatically plausible. In addition, participants experienced considerable difficulty in identifying grammatical errors in sentence-based tasks, indicating a limited ability to apply grammatical knowledge in contextualized test items.

Second, limited metalinguistic awareness also contributed to students' challenges. Although some participants demonstrated partial understanding of basic grammatical elements such as subjects and verbs, they struggled to analyze the overall syntactic structure of sentences. This indicates that their knowledge of grammar remained largely declarative rather than procedural, making it difficult for them to evaluate sentence correctness at a deeper structural level.

Third, lack of familiarity with TOEFL test formats and question patterns was identified as another contributing factor. Participants emphasized the importance of understanding specific question types and structural "formulas" commonly used in the test. Those with limited exposure to TOEFL-style items reported greater difficulty in responding accurately and efficiently, whereas repeated practice helped improve recognition of question patterns.

Fourth, limited vocabulary knowledge further compounded participants' difficulties. Insufficient lexical competence hindered their ability to fully comprehend sentence meaning, which in turn affected their capacity to evaluate grammatical accuracy within context.

Finally, affective factors such as test anxiety and time pressure played a significant role in shaping students' performance. Participants reported experiencing nervousness, stress, panic, and low self-confidence, particularly when working under strict time constraints. These emotional responses often led to decreased concentration and

increased uncertainty in answer selection, thereby negatively affecting overall performance.

Overall, the findings suggest that students' difficulties in the TOEFL Structure and Written Expression section are not solely caused by linguistic deficiencies but are also influenced by cognitive and affective factors, as well as limited familiarity with test-taking strategies. These interconnected factors highlight the need for instructional interventions that address both language proficiency and test-taking competence in an integrated manner.

In addition, some strategies used to overcome difficulties in the TOEFL structure and written expression section that the findings revealed that participants employed a variety of learning and test-taking strategies to overcome the challenges they encountered in the Structure and Written Expression section. The most commonly reported strategies included reviewing grammatical concepts, practicing TOEFL questions, utilizing online learning resources, and analyzing previous mistakes.

A number of participants emphasized the importance of strengthening their understanding of fundamental grammar concepts, particularly tenses, subject-verb agreement, and other essential grammatical rules. They believed that improving their grammatical competence was crucial for successfully answering structure questions. One participant explained:

*"The strategy I use is reviewing basic grammar concepts, such as tenses and subject-verb agreement. In addition, I regularly practice questions from books and applications to become familiar with question patterns."*

Practice was identified as another key strategy. Participants reported that repeated exposure to TOEFL questions helped them recognize common patterns and structures, enabling them to answer questions more quickly and accurately. Several participants noted that familiarity with recurring question types reduced uncertainty and increased their confidence during the test.

In addition to self-practice, participants frequently used online resources, particularly YouTube videos, to learn effective test-taking strategies. They reported watching instructional videos to gain insights into quick-answer techniques and methods for approaching different types of TOEFL questions. Some participants also created personal notes summarizing important patterns, rules, and strategies that could be applied when encountering similar questions in future tests.

Another strategy involved reviewing questions after completing the test. Participants indicated that analyzing previously answered questions helped them identify errors and better understand grammatical concepts. This reflective learning process enabled them to avoid repeating the same mistakes and improved their performance on subsequent practice tests.

Furthermore, some participants reported using the elimination technique when answering multiple-choice questions. By eliminating clearly incorrect options, they were able to narrow down the possible answers and increase the likelihood of selecting the correct one. This strategy was particularly useful when they were uncertain about specific grammatical rules.

Overall, the findings suggest that students rely on a combination of grammar review, extensive practice, independent learning through online resources, error analysis, and strategic test-taking techniques to overcome

difficulties in the Structure and Written Expression section. These strategies reflect students' efforts to improve both their linguistic competence and their familiarity with TOEFL question formats, which they perceive as essential for achieving better test performance.

### **The TOEFL Reading Section**

Based on the participants' responses, several underlying factors contribute to difficulties in the TOEFL Reading Comprehension section. These factors are primarily related to linguistic limitations, cognitive processing demands, and test-related characteristics.

First, limited vocabulary knowledge emerged as a key factor affecting reading comprehension. The participant reported difficulty understanding unfamiliar words frequently found in TOEFL reading passages. This lexical limitation hindered overall comprehension and reduced the ability to interpret meaning accurately, particularly when encountering academic and complex texts.

Second, difficulties in handling implied or inference questions were identified as another major challenge. The participant indicated that answers to such questions are not explicitly stated in the text, requiring deeper interpretation and critical thinking skills. This suggests a limitation in higher-order reading comprehension abilities, particularly in making inferences based on contextual information.

Third, the time-consuming nature of the reading section was also highlighted as a contributing factor. The participant explained that completing multiple passages and answering various types of questions within a limited time frame was challenging. This indicates that time pressure increases cognitive load and limits the ability to process texts thoroughly.

Overall, the findings suggest that difficulties in the Reading Comprehension section are caused by limited vocabulary knowledge, insufficient inferential reading skills, and time constraints. These interconnected factors reflect both linguistic and cognitive challenges that affect the participant's reading performance in the TOEFL test.

In addition, the findings indicate that the participants employed several strategies to overcome difficulties in the Reading Comprehension section of the TOEFL test. One of the main strategies was engaging in extensive practice by completing TOEFL exercises prior to the test. This repeated practice helped the participant become more familiar with the format and types of questions in the reading section. In addition, the participant reported developing a habit of reading English texts regularly to improve reading comprehension skills and increase familiarity with academic vocabulary. The participant also utilized TOEFL preparation materials, such as *Cliffs TOEFL*, as a structured guide for practice and skill development. Furthermore, the participant followed advice and guidance provided by lecturers, which contributed to a more focused and directed preparation process. Overall, these strategies reflect an effort to improve both reading proficiency and test familiarity in order to enhance performance in the TOEFL Reading Comprehension section.

## CONCLUSSION AND SUGGESTION

### Conclusion

The study concludes that TOEFL performance is shaped by the interaction of linguistic knowledge, cognitive processing abilities, affective factors, and strategic competence. These findings highlight the importance of integrating language instruction with test-taking strategy training in TOEFL preparation programs to improve students' performance in higher education contexts.

### Suggestion

TOEFL preparation programs should emphasize intensive listening practice using authentic materials with various accents. Grammar instruction should focus on sentence analysis and frequent TOEFL-type exercises. Reading classes should incorporate time-management strategies and academic vocabulary development. Future research may involve interviews or mixed-method approaches to gain deeper insights into students' TOEFL experiences.

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