

## **PROBLEMS FOUND ON THE TOEFL TEST QUESTIONS BY THE FIFTH SEMESTER PHYSICS STUDENTS OF DARMA AGUNG UNIVERSITY**

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### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi masalah yang dihadapi siswa dalam menjawab soal tes TOEFL. Dengan menggunakan metode deskripsi terfokus, penelitian ini dijalankan dalam kerangka penelitian kualitatif. Penelitian ini menyoroti mahasiswa semester lima Program Studi Fisika Universitas Darma Agung. Pengambilan sampel melibatkan seleksi yang homogen, sehingga menghasilkan jumlah sampel sebanyak 18 siswa. Pengumpulan data menggunakan kuesioner terbuka, mengikuti urutan terstruktur: mengidentifikasi populasi sasaran, memilih subjek sampel, mendistribusikan dan mengambil kuesioner. Penelitian ini terutama berfokus untuk menggambarkan kesulitan yang dialami oleh mahasiswa Program Studi Fisika Universitas Darma Agung dalam mengerjakan soal-soal tes TOEFL, yang dipengaruhi oleh sifat pribadi dan pengalaman sebelumnya. Secara khusus penelitian ini mengkaji kesulitan yang dihadapi mahasiswa Program Studi Fisika semester lima Universitas Darma Agung. Temuan ini menyoroti beberapa kesulitan, termasuk keterampilan dasar yang tidak memadai, kesempatan praktik yang terbatas, motivasi yang tidak memadai, dan variasi kemampuan individu siswa.

**Kata Kunci:** *Kesulitan, Ujian TOEFL*

### **Abstract**

*This study aims at identifying the problems encountered by students in answering the TOEFL test questions. Employing a focused description method, it operated within a qualitative research framework. The study targeted fifth-semester students of the Physics Study Program at Darma Agung University. Sampling involved homogenous selection, resulting in a sample size of 18 students. Data collection utilized open-ended questionnaires, following a structured sequence: identifying the target population, selecting sample subjects, distributing and retrieving the questionnaires. The research primarily focuses on delineating the difficulties experienced by Physics Study Program students at Darma Agung University in tackling TOEFL test questions, which are influenced by personal traits and prior experiences. It specifically examined challenges encountered by fifth-semester students Physics Study Program at Darma Agung University. The findings highlighted several obstacles, including inadequate foundational skills, limited practice opportunities, insufficient motivation, and variations in individual student abilities.*

**Keywords:** *Problems, TOEFL Test*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

English is a compulsory subject in schools as it is considered as a very important thing for people to interact with other people in life. English mastery makes one's life easier, which is why English is also learned at universities level (Andrade 2009). Unfortunately, although it is learned since primary schools, there are many students whose ability in using English is still not good yet. In universities, the ability of the students must be checked and measured by official test; one of them is by testing the students with TOEFL Test. TOEFL stands from Test of English as a Foreign Language. Usually, people take TOEFL because they want to know the level of their ability in English, including Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension.

Generally, the functions of TOEFL test are to facilitate people to pursue their study abroad, to apply an international level job, to apply scholarship in certain countries (Golubovich, Tolentino, and Papageorgiou 2018). Language tests are considered valuable tools for gauging the efficacy of both learning and teaching methodologies (Brown 2003; Bachman 1995 in Hussain 2015). In Indonesia, there are so many universities require their student to get specific score before graduating. It is also applied in Darma Agung University.

In Darma Agung University, the students must get score 450 to be permitted to register their Comprehensive Exam. There is a problem here as there were so many students failed at the test. Actually, the students are always given treatment or preparation before having the test yet they do not pass the passing grade given (450) especially from Physics Study Program. That is why the researchers are interested to conduct a research to find the problems or difficulties found by the students in TOEFL test.

## **PERTINENT IDEAS**

There are some relevant researches about TOEFL problems faced by the students. Tira (2021) found that the students' difficulty in doing TOEFL listening are both external and internal factors. The External factors are the speaker's accent, the speakers' speed, the speakers' intonation/emphasis, the speakers' pause in pronouncing a sentence, the choice of words and foreign terms conveyed by the speaker, the sentence structure conveyed by the speaker is too complex, and audio interruption causes the audio sounds less/unclear. Meanwhile the Internal factors are students do not have previous experience doing TOEFL test, students have lack of practice in TOEFL listening, students have limited time in doing TOEFL listening test, students feel a lot of listening questions which consist of 50 questions, students do not have hearing

Desmalia Purba <sup>1)</sup>, Jelita Panjaitan <sup>2)</sup>, et al., **Problems Found On The Toefl Test Questions By The Fifth Semester Physics Students Of Darma Agung University**

impairment in listening, students have memory limitations when listening to TOEFL, students lack of motivation and enthusiasm, students lack of concentration or focus, students have limited mastery of foreign/unfamiliar vocabularies, students feel boredom when listening, students feel easily distracted by sounds or other things, students tend to translate any foreign vocabularies when listening, students have trouble catching or finding keywords, students are busy along with other activities when listening, such as playing writing instruments, and taking notes or doing other things.

Risa (2023) found that the difficulties in doing TOEFL are the students do not understand the conversations because the speakers speak too fast so they cannot get the point of the conversations and questions. Besides that, the other difficulties are the texts of reading comprehensions are long and very difficult.

Based on the researches above, it can be summarized that the difficulties faced by the students vary based on the individuals. Problem is a matter or situation regarded as unwelcome or harmful and needing to be dealt with and overcome. It is a difficulty (ies) found when one does the exam of TOEFL. The TOEFL Test, or Test of English as a Foreign Language, is a standardized exam designed to evaluate the English language proficiency of non-native speakers. Many colleges and universities across North America, as well as numerous institutions and agencies, mandate official TOEFL score reports. The acceptable TOEFL score differs based on the particular requirements of the institution or agency involved. Below is a table illustrating the format of the TOEFL test:

**Table 1. TOEFL Format**

No	Section	Number of Items	Time Allocation
1	Listening Comprehension		
	Part A: Short Dialogue	20	40 - 50 minutes
	Part B: Longer Conversation	15	
	Part C: Talks	15	
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>		
2	Structure and Written Expression		25 minutes
	Part A: Structure	15	
	Part B: Written Expression	25	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	
3	Reading Comprehension		55 minutes
	<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	

In general, there are three levels of foreign language mastery known, namely basic level, intermediate level, and advanced level. However, for TOEFL scores, experts usually group the scores into the following four levels (Carson, et al. 1990 in Royani: 2022):

**Table 2. Levels of English Mastery**

No	Levels	Score Range
1	(Elementary	310 - 420

Desmalia Purba <sup>1)</sup>, Jelita Panjaitan <sup>2)</sup>, et al., **Problems Found On The Toefl Test Questions By The Fifth Semester Physics Students Of Darma Agung University**

2	Low Intermediate	420 - 480
3	High Intermediate	480 - 520
4	Advanced	525 - 677

## RESEARCH METHOD

The type of research methodology used in this study is qualitative research. According to Denzin and Lincoln's definition cited by Borg et al. (2003:24), qualitative research is a multi-method approach that focuses on interpretation and involves a naturalistic approach to the research subject. This means that qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena naturally. Moleong (2014:6) adds that qualitative research aims to understand phenomena experienced by research subjects, such as behavior, perceptions, motivations and actions, holistically using verbal and language descriptions, in certain natural contexts and using various scientific methods.

Descriptive Method was applied in this research. Operating within a qualitative research paradigm, this study is descriptive in essence. Its goal is to elucidate, elaborate, and delve into the intricacies surrounding the challenges encountered by fifth-semester students of the Physics Study Program at Darma Agung University when responding to TOEFL test questions. In this research, the population is the fifth-semester students of the Physics Study Program at Darma Agung University in the academic year 2021/2022. The total sample used is 19 students.

During the research process, an open-ended questionnaire is employed by the researcher. This questionnaire serves as a tool to capture the challenges encountered by participants in responding to TOEFL test questions. The procedures done by the researchers in collecting the data are deciding the sample of research; distributing the questionnaire to all samples; and collecting the survey.

The analysis follows an inductive approach, characterized by multiple stages involving organization, categorization, synthesis, interpretation, and writing. Responses from participants are grouped together based on similarities, facilitating the categorization process. This research applied an *after-data-collection* analysis.

## FINDINGS

The categories of difficulties in TOEFL Test that is described by Mahmud (2014) are (1) fewer basic skills; (2) less practice; (3) less motivation and (4) Students' individual differences. Then, based on the results of the questionnaires, it was found that most of the students faced problems or difficulties in doing TOEFL Test. Besides that, they also did not pass score in 450.

The identified problems are then expanded upon in alignment with the findings derived from the questionnaire data, as outlined below:

### 1. Inadequate Foundational Skills

From all the participants, there are 11 participants (58%) got the score beneath 350.

There are 7 participants (37%) getting the score between 351 – 400. Then, the last range scores in group of 401 to 450 were got by 1 participant (5%). This may happened because the students do not have rich vocabulary. It makes them difficult to solve Reading Comprehension test and also Structure and Written Expression test. Then, the students also found that it is hard for them to listen and understand the conversation or talks from the audio. It can be caused by their habit to ignore the conversation with the native speakers and it is very rare for them to listen English conversation, English songs or dramas even movies.

## **2. Limited Practice Opportunities**

From the responses to the practice question, approximately 58% of the 19 students expressed the need for additional practice in the tryout. Despite conducting the exercise twice, many still perceive it as insufficient and desire more frequent practice sessions. In comparison, popular English courses often provide TOEFL simulations three times: first as an entry test to assess initial knowledge, secondly midway through the course to gauge comprehension, and finally as a final test, typically the ITP (Institutional Testing Program), serving as both a progress report and a requirement for studying abroad. Prior to taking the test, students typically attend a 10-hour preparation class where they receive tips, tricks, examples, and explanations for TOEFL questions, resulting in a total of two TOEFL tests during this preparatory period. However, students feel this is inadequate, as evidenced by the questionnaire results indicating that 19 students expressed the need for more practice during the preparation class. TOEFL preparation classes offer practice tryouts as frequently as possible, but respondents indicated a desire for more practice than what is currently provided. Given that most respondents are in their fifth semester students of the Physics Study Program at Darma Agung University and are expected to have a higher level of English proficiency, this increased need for practice is noteworthy.

## **3. Insufficient Motivation**

One of the problems faced by the students in taking the TOEFL test is about their motivation. Based on the research result, it was found that the primary reason for students taking the TOEFL test is solely to fulfill a study completion requirement. This is evident as the highest number of students, 11 of 19 students (58%). There are 8 students stating that they took the TOEFL test to assess their abilities (42%). The significance of motivation becomes apparent in students' success in answering TOEFL questions. As many students take the TOEFL test merely to meet campus requirements, they lack motivation to engage in additional TOEFL learning outside the university, such as participating in TOEFL tryouts or preparation courses offered by English institutions. Financial constraints also contribute to this situation. Many students face financial difficulties, which impact their motivation to enroll in TOEFL preparation or tryout courses offered by English institutions.

Given the expense associated with taking the TOEFL test or participating in related activities, students may find it challenging to prioritize these opportunities.

#### **4. Variations In Individual Student Abilities**

The questionnaire administered to the participants aimed to gather personal data while ensuring their anonymity. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants involved. In language test research analyses, personal background factors such as native language, ethnicity, sex, age, and university status have been noted to have small yet significant effects on language tests. For instance, the native language could pose challenges in answering questions in a second language due to interference from the first language (Zeidner, 1987). Therefore, describing the participants' personal backgrounds is essential to anticipate potential difficulties stemming from these aspects. The participants in this study comprised 14 female students and 15 male students, all in their fifth semester of the fifth-semester students of the Physics Study Program at Darma Agung University and aged between 21 and 25 years old. The students consists of 17 Niasness and 2 Bataknesse. Additionally, all the students never take the TOEFL test yet. It is their first experience taking the test. Regarding the influence of their local language, 10 students stated that their local language affected their ability to understand English, particularly in answering the TOEFL test questions. Conversely, 9 students reported that their local language had no impact on their English proficiency.

### **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

After analyzing the data, the findings and discussions reveal that students encounter challenges when responding to the TOEFL test on the fifth-semester students of the Physics Study Program at Darma Agung University are four problems. They are inadequate foundational skills, limited practice opportunities, insufficient motivation, and variations in individual student abilities.

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