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# Exploring EFL Student's Difficulties and Strategies in Learning TOEFL ITP of Structure and Written Expression

## Abstract

The TOEFL test nowadays is crucial for students since it not only assesses English proficiency but also serves as a requirement for scholarships and college graduation. This study explores the difficulties of EFL students in learning the TOEFL ITP of Structure and Written Expression (SWE) and how EFL students overcome these difficulties in learning the TOEFL ITP of SWE. This study employed a narrative inquiry design. The data used in this study is qualitative data obtained from information provided by participants through questionnaires and interviews. The results of the study revealed several difficulties for students in learning TOEFL ITP, namely sentences with multiple clauses, sentences with inverted subjects and verbs, problems with prepositions, problems with the form of the verb, sentences with one clause, and problems with subject-verb agreement. The way students overcome difficulties in the TOEFL ITP of SWE is to re-learn what has been taught by the tutor, reopen the module, learn from several other references besides the reference given by the tutor, learn from YouTube, re-learn with classmates who have mastered the material, and do the practice questions independently. The findings in this research are expected to give an empirical contribution to TOEFL teachers' efforts to pay attention to students' difficulties in learning TOEFL ITP, especially SWE.

**Keywords:** Students difficulties, student's strategies, SWE, TOEFL

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, studying TOEFL is very important (Thu, 2019; Wang, 2019). TOEFL is not only to measure English proficiency but also for the sake of scholarship requirements (Al-Qahtani, 2021; Anwar & Mustafa, 2021). In addition, Thu (2019) added the TOEFL test is highly recommended for everyone who wants to continue his/her education level. In addition, currently, TOEFL is one of the requirements for student graduation at various universities in Indonesia (Karjo, 2020). Therefore, in the Indonesian context, English is considered a foreign language rather than a second language. This is what makes the TOEFL in Indonesia familiar, even in many countries in ASEAN (Collins & Miller, 2018). This is against the background that TOEFL scores are accepted by more than 6000 colleges, universities, licensing agencies, and immigration authorities in 136 countries (Alderson, 2009). In line with this, TOEFL in Indonesia is needed as a condition for graduating from study, meeting entry requirements for post-graduate colleges, meeting requirements for applying for scholarships, meeting job requirements, and meeting requirements for continuing study abroad.

For most Indonesians who want to continue their studies abroad, they must specifically study the TOEFL (Akmal et al., 2020; Karjo, 2020), and some also study IELTS (Ata, 2015). TOEFL ITP, especially paper-based, has three sessions: listening, structure and written expression, and reading. These three sessions are learned by Indonesians who want to continue their studies abroad, whether it's self-study through textbooks, eBooks, applications, and YouTube, as well as guided learning through courses and training. However, even though they have guided learning, there are still many Indonesians who find it difficult to study for the TOEFL and have difficulty answering the questions.

Research on student difficulties in learning TOEFL has been widely carried out (Ananda, 2016; Astri et al., 2022; Halim & Ardiningtyas, 2018; Hampp et al., 2021; Zulmaini, 2021). However, the research conducted is still general and not specific to one skill in the

TOEFL. In addition, it only uses one data collection instrument, such as interviews and questionnaires. Whereas studies on TOEFL must be specific (Anam, 2017; Bakeer & Abu-Naser, 2018; Laborda & Álvarez, 2021; Moradi et al., 2020). In the TOEFL test, each material is very specific (Phillips, 2001); for example, listening material is divided into several skills such as listening to short dialogues, long conversations, and long talks. Structure and written expression (SWE) material is divided into several skills, such as sentences with one clause, sentences with multiple clauses, more sentences with multiple clauses, sentences with reduced clauses, the sentence with inverted subjects and verbs, problems with the subject and verb agreement, the problem with parallel structure, the problem with comparatives, the problem with the article, and the problem with prepositions. Then, as well as reading, there are various skills to be divided into, such as questions about the ideas of the passage, directly answered questions, indirectly answered questions, vocabulary questions, and overall review questions. All these skills must be understood so that students do not encounter obstacles in answering questions in the TOEFL (Madya et al., 2020).

However, there are just a few qualitative analyses of students' difficulties in how they answer the TOEFL ITP test. Samad et al. (2017) conducted a study on answering reading sections, then suggested conducting a similar study that focused on how students overcome the problems they face. Meanwhile, Silviyanti et al. (2020) once researched students' difficulties in learning the TOEFL ITP but only focused on the listening section. Thus, research on student difficulties in learning the TOEFL that focuses on difficulties and strategies in learning structure and written expression is still very necessary.

Based on the lack of understanding or previous research on the specific difficulties and strategies that EFL students face when taking the TOEFL ITP for structure and written expression, an empirical study conducted by us, the researchers, in one community in Indonesia, especially the "Dompus scholarship hunters community," located in Dompus Regency, West Nusa Tenggara Province, found that their TOEFL scores were still low even though they had attended TOEFL training. Even though they have studied and followed the previous TOEFL training. Lack of knowledge in answering TOEFL questions is a serious thing faced by students. This research aims to fill the gap by providing insights and solutions for EFL students to overcome the difficulties they encounter in this aspect of the TOEFL ITP. This study aims to explore the difficulties of EFL students in learning the TOEFL of Structure and Written Expression (SWE) and how EFL students overcome the difficulties of learning the TOEFL of Structure and Written Expression (SWE)..

## **METHOD**

A narrative inquiry design was used for this study. The information used in this study was qualitative data gathered from student responses to questionnaires and interviews. Moreover, there were 20 respondents in this research. They were all taken as samples because they had participated in the TOEFL training organized by the STKIP Yapis Dompus campus. These students also have a TOEFL learning experience. In addition, there were four students were selected as informants for the interview section. Purposive sampling was used to select these participants in order to learn more about the four chosen informants' coping mechanisms for learning SWE-related challenges.

The data used in this research was collected from the students through questionnaires and interviews and was provided as written and verbal statements.

According to Creswell (2014), research data takes the form of information from respondents. As a result, the information being referred to here is both a written declaration—in the form of completing the Google form—and an oral declaration—in the form of the outcomes of the interview—relating to the student's approach to overcoming challenges while taking the TOEFL ITP section two.

### Data Collection

Students were instructed to use modules modified from Deborah Phillips' TOEFL book (Phillips, 2001). For TOEFL test takers, this book served as a general guide. The test was divided into three sessions: listening discussion, structure and written expression (SWE) sessions, and reading sessions. In the second session, there were two sections, namely, part a, structure, and part B, written expression (Sharpe, 2004). Part A contained 15 multiple-choice questions with incomplete sentences that required selecting one of four possible responses (A, B, C, or D) (Tumijo & Riyanto, 2019). On the provided answer sheet, students had to select one response by rounding up using a standard computer 2B pencil. Part B, written expression, contains 25 questions marked with an asterisk (A, B, C, and D) (Yoestara & Putri, 2019). Students were instructed to identify the incorrect response from the four highlighted alternatives. The underlined word or phrase that needs to be changed in order for the sentence to be correct was the student's choice (Ananda, 2016).

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Difficulties of EFL Students in Learning TOEFL of SWE

Based on the data obtained from the questionnaire, the authors found that students had difficulties answering the SWE questions. The skills that students still find difficult will be shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Questionnaire result

No	Respondents	Type of Difficulties	Specific Difficulties
1	R1, R7, R11, R17	Sentences with multiple clauses	Use coordinate connectors, adverb of time and cause, and another adverb of connectors
		Sentences with inverted subjects and verbs	Invert the subject and verb with questions words
		Problems with prepositions	Recognize when prepositions have been omitted
2	R2, R6, R13, R20	Sentences with multiple clauses	Adjective clause connectors
3	R3, R8, R12, R19	Problems with the form of the verb	After will, would, or other modals, use the base form of the verb
4	R4, R10, R14	Sentences with one clause	Be careful of the object of prepositions, and appositives
5	R5, R9, R15, R16, R18	Problems with subject/verb agreement	Make inverted verb agree

## Problems with the form <sup>1</sup> After *have*, use the past participle of the verb

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There were various student difficulties related to SWE. Difficulties that arise include sentences with multiple clauses that focus on discussing the use of coordinate connectors, adverbs of time and cause, and other adverb connectors. In the SWE question, some sentences have more than one or two clauses. In simple terms, a clause is defined as a collection of words consisting of a subject and a verb (Yoestara & Putri, 2020). Some coordinate connectors are still difficult for students even though they only consist of the words and, but, or, so, and yet. These connectors connect the clauses mentioned above. The problem that occurs is that students do not understand that after the connectors appear, what appears is a complete sentence containing a subject and a verb. Another difficulty is regarding the use of adverbs of time and cause. They have a separate connector that has its own time and cause characteristics such as when, once, until, while, because, and since.

Problems with prepositions become difficulties for students. They find it difficult to determine the right proposition when answering the TOEFL ITP questions. Prepositions are many; they have their characteristics and forms (Hajri et al., 2018). The forms of prepositions include the most common: in, at, on, by, about, for, after, off, etc. Prepositions are prepositions that are placed before nouns, pronouns, noun phrases, noun clauses, and gerunds. The types of errors made by students are errors in combining verbs and prepositions. "Called off" means canceled, while "called on" is to visit. Meanwhile, the sentence that was built from the question was "The game was called on because of rain." That sentence is wrong because it contains the word "visit," not "cancel" (Pyle & Page, 2002).

A multiple clauses is a sentence that consists of two or more clauses. There are two types of multiple clauses: noun clause connectors and adjective clause connectors (Haryanti & Setyandari, 2018). A noun clause can function as the object of a verb or a preposition, and a noun clause can also be a subject. The most common noun clauses found in the TOEFL ITP are who, what, which, whoever, whatever, and whichever. It is common in SWE that the test for the verbs to be formed incorrectly. Therefore, the students must check the correct form. This skill is part of the difficulty for students. The thing that became the basis of their difficulty was the change in the form of the verb. Change the form of the verb from the basic form to the present, present participle, past, and past participle (Muhajir & Gani, 2018). To find out the answer to this skill, of course, by paying attention to what comes after have, what comes after be, and what comes after will, would, and other models (Fitria, 2021).

Some sentences in English have just one subject and verb, and students need to find the subject and verb in the TOEFL ITP test. However, Phillips (2001) argued that certain structures, such as objects of preposition, appositives, and participles, may confuse locating the subject and verb because each of these structures can look like a subject or verb. Based on the interview with the students, many students argued that they felt confused about locating them in the proper way. So, the students must be sure that the sentences have a subject and verb. Furthermore, the object of a preposition is a noun, pronoun, gerund, or noun clause that comes after a preposition such as in, at, by, behind, on, and so on to form a prepositional phrase. Then, appositives can confuse the students because an appositive is a noun that comes before or after another noun and has the same meaning. Subject or verb agreement is talking about the suitability between subject and verb or between verb and

subject. This skill is one of the most difficult skills for students. But in fact, this skill can be easy if students understand the basics of changing verbs based on the subject. In this case, students have difficulty understanding inverted verbs like agree. In the TOEFL ITP question, the subject and verb positions are reversed so that the subject is after the verb (Ubaedillah, 2020).

### **The Way of EFL Students Overcome Difficulties in Learning TOEFL of SWE**

Based on the results of interviews with four participants, there were some findings. These were some findings from relearning and reopening the module, learning from several other references besides those given by the tutors, learning from YouTube, and studying with classmates who have mastered the material. First, the way students overcome SWE difficulties is by relearning what the tutor has taught and reopening the module. Every skill that exists has certainly been taught by the tutor, but there are still difficulties that students encounter. In this way, students can overcome their difficulties through independent learning activities in the modules that have been given. According to Roza (2020), overcoming difficulties made by students is an effort for these students to be able to overcome their difficulties. Overcoming difficulties themselves is part of the student's initiative.

Therefore, the way students overcome SWE difficulties is by learning from several other references other than those given by the tutor. In the TOEFL training session, students have been given references by the tutor, but they are also looking for other references because the reference given by the tutor is only one reference, even though there are many TOEFL book references. By looking for other printed reference books, students feel they have a better understanding and other ways to answer SWE questions that arise. In addition, students look for sources of electronic books available on the internet; of course, this will add student reading references so that they can overcome their difficulties in answering SWE questions.

Moreover, the way students overcome SWE difficulties is by learning from YouTube sources. Learning about it is often done by students because they feel comfortable doing it. In addition, learning through YouTube for them is not about time, they usually study using it at night, by watching, they feel more understand what has been conveyed by the tutor. In addition, they feel awkward if they ask their tutors what they don't know, so they prefer to re-learn via YouTube. In addition, Nofrika (2019) revealed that learning through YouTube can improve students' English skills. Besides, the way students overcome difficulties in SWE is by relearning with classmates who master the material. Asking and studying with other friends is one of the good activities carried out by students. Together, they learn to understand the material that is still difficult. According to Solfema and Wahid (2018), studying with peers in one class can increase students' knowledge. The language of explanation used by his classmates is easier to understand. There are several advantages to studying with peers, including the lack of reluctance, low self-esteem, and shame (Solfema & Wahid, 2018).

In addition, the way students overcome difficulties in SWE is by doing practice questions independently. Independent learning is part of students' creativity, especially in the TOEFL training that has been carried out, where all students are given the same module so that they can learn independently by practicing the questions in the module. Moreover, the module provided contains so many practice questions that it is not wrong if students do

the practice questions independently at home. Thus, working on questions independently is part of independent learning, where independent learning, according to McKendry and Boyd (2012), can increase students' understanding of a subject matter.

### **CONCLUSION**

The TOEFL ITP of SWE skills are still challenging for students, according to the study's findings such as using coordinate connectors, adverbs of time and cause, and another adverb of connectors, inverting the subject and verb with questions words, identifying instances where prepositions have been omitted, adjective clause connectors, after will, would, or other models, using the base form of a verb, being cautious of an object of prepositions, and appositives, make the inverted verb agree, using the past tense.

As for other findings, how students overcome their learning difficulties, namely by relearning what has been taught by the tutor, reopening the module, learning from several other references besides the reference given by the tutor, learning from YouTube, and relearning with classmates who have mastered it, doing practice questions independently. The findings in this research are expected to give an empirical contribution to TOEFL teachers' attention to students' difficulties in learning TOEFL ITP, especially SWE.

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