

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE TEST OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Due to the fact that the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is still so widely used as a reliable and acceptable test for measuring one's English proficiency in most countries over the world including Indonesia, all people who are involved in English language learning and teaching, especially the policy makers and classroom practitioners, should pay big attention to the how to approach the test. It should be done so because to be honest, the education offered overseas universities such as in America, Canada, and England is still of higher quality than that offered in the local universities in Indonesia which means that in order to get quality education the adult learners of Indonesia do need to do further studies in more advanced and prestigious universities in those English speaking countries. Therefore, it is important that we take a close look into that type of English Test so as to go on the right track in our effort to make students in the country prepared for the test. This small paper attempts to provide some information about things which are necessary to realize when dealing with the TOEFL test. However, what has been elaborated here should be used merely as a trigger which is worth developing. Besides, this elaboration is not intended only for English teachers but also for English learners in non-English speaking countries like Indonesia.

Key Words: *TOEFL, elaboration, method, objective*

INTRODUCTION

That the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) besides the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is still a reliable and valid test for measuring one's English proficiency in Indonesia is undeniable. As can be seen that at many English courses as well as at colleges and universities in big cities of the country, for instance in Medan, TOEFL classes are offered. Not to deny that IELTS is also becoming more widely known and used in Medan especially for students who want to study at universities in Australia, for example. According to the writer, who has got some experiences in teaching both kinds of test, TOEFL and IELTS really can show the actual English ability of the testee concerned, in listening, speaking, reading and writing. It means that only those who are good at those language skills can get a good result of the test.

On this occasion, however, this paper only discusses about things with regards to TOEFL, especially how to prepare for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as a student or a teacher. More and more students who are normative speakers of English take the test which is administered in the United States, Canada as well as in many foreign countries. Approximately 380.000 students from 140 countries register to take the TOEFL test every year at test centers in the United States and in their home countries. Some of these people do not get a satisfactory score because they do not understand enough English and others because they do not understand the examination (Sharpe, 1988:5).

In relation to this, Goodman and William Ince (1980:1) say that one of the things that can puzzle and sometimes even frighten a person taking an examination is unfamiliarity with the content as well as the format of the test. Furthermore, Andrews (1983:2) states that "doing well in any examination depends not only on your knowledge of the subject or

proficiency in the language: it also depends on whether you possess the appropriate examination techniques.”

On the basis of the above points, therefore, in this article the writer will discuss what is the TOEFL?, its purpose, the language skills tested, some steps/method of teaching the TOEFL as well as some strategies for doing the TOEFL test.

ELABORATION

1. What is the TOEFL?

1.1 The TOEFL

TOEFL is the abbreviation for Test of English as a Foreign Language. It was developed in 1963 by a National Council on the Testing of English as a Foreign Language which was formed through the cooperative effort of over thirty organizations, public and private that were concerned with testing of the English proficiency of nonnative speakers of the language applying for admission to institutions in the United States.

In 1965, Educational Testing service (ETS) which now administers and provides the TOEFL test, and the College Board assumed joint responsibilities for the program. Educational Testing service administers the TOEFL program under the general direction of a Policy Council which represents the college Board and the Graduate Record Examination Board and such institutions and agencies as graduate schools of business, junior and community colleges, non profit educational exchange agencies, and agencies of the United States government (Swinton, et al 1980).

The first form of the TOFL was ready for international administration in February 1940; 920 candidates took it in 34 countries (Spolsky, 1979). While at present the TOFL is offered at designated centers in 135 countries throughout the world including all of the states of the United States (Sharpe, 1988). According to Sharpe, the TOEFL, under the International Testing Program is offered six times a year on regularly scheduled Saturdays in August, October, November, January, March, and May.

1.2 The purpose of the TOEFL

The purpose of the TOFL is to provide information useful to colleges and universities in making decision regarding the admission, placement, and possible assignment to special language instruction of foreign students • planning to study in the United States and Canada. The TOEFL scores are used to assess the foreign students' competence in English that he will need in order to successfully pursue a program of studies at a college or university. if a student fails to make a satisfactory TOEFL score, he cannot be admitted to any accredited college or university in the United States or Canada where English is the medium of instruction. Hale, et al (1984), state that more than 2,500 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada require the Test of English as a Foreign Language to determine the English proficiency of applicants where native language is not. English. However the TOEFL is also used by some agencies of the United States government in assessing the English language qualifications of nonnative persons (Duran, et al 1985). Furthermore, the TOEFL test measures your ability to use and understand the English language as it's read, written, heard and spoken in the university classroom. As the most accepted English-language test in the world, more than 9,000 universities, agencies, and other institutions in more than 130 countries accept the TOEFL test as part of their admissions criteria — including nearly every college and university in Australia and the UK. (<http://toeflgoanywhere.org/content/all-about-toefl-test>). Similarly, what has been mentioned shows that two thirds of the total number of countries in the world use the TOEFL test. Nowadays there are 196 countries in the world. <http://geography.about.com/cs/countries/a/numbercountries.htm>

1.3 The skills of language content that the TOEFL tests.

From 1963 to 1976, TOEFL consisted of five subtests: a. Listening comprehension, b. English Structure, c. Vocabulary, d. Reading, and f. Writing ability. Since September 1976, TOEFL has consisted of three sections a. Listening Comprehension, b. Structure and Written Expression, and c. Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension. However, since July 11, 1986, in addition to the three sections above, Essay section has been included three times a year (Lougheed, 1986). But again according to the 1989 - 1990 Bulletin of Information for TOEFL and TSE, the Essay test is given four times a year that is in September, October, March, and May.

The three-section TOEFL plus the Essay or Test of Written English section are described below.

Listening Comprehension

This section measures the ability to understand English as it is spoken in the United States. This section contains three parts (Part A, Part B, and Part C) with the oral material presented via tape recorder in each part. In Part A, you hear a sentence or a short statement, and then choose the printed (of four) that is closest in meaning to the one heard. There are 20 questions in Part A.

In Part B, you hear a short conversation between two people. At the end of each conversation a third person asks a question about the conversation. You must choose the one correct answer from the four answer choices given in your test book for each question. There are 15 questions in this part.

In Part C, you hear either a long conversation or a mini-talk or a lecture. After each conversation, mini-talk or lecture, you must answer three to five questions about what you heard. There are four answer choices in the test book for each question and you must choose the one correct answer. There are 15 questions in Part C.

Structure and Written Expression.

This section measures your ability to recognize language that is appropriate for standard written English. There are forty questions in this section. The first fifteen questions are incomplete sentences. In each sentence there is a blank space. Four possible words or phrases are given to complete the sentence, and you must choose the word or phrase that best completes the sentence.

In each of the remaining twenty five questions, four parts of a sentence are underlined. You must choose the underlined word or group of words that is incorrect. This part of the sentence must be changed in order to make a correct, grammatical sentence in written English. Grammatical points tested by these items involve agreement in the syntactic and semantic characteristics of function and content words, appropriate ordering, appropriate diction and idiomatic usage, appropriate usage of function words, appropriate and complete clause or phrase structure, and maintenance of parallel forms.

Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension.

This section measures your ability to understand the meanings and uses of words as well your ability to understand a variety of general reading materials. This section consists of sixty questions. The first thirty questions test your knowledge of English vocabulary. In each sentence one word or group of words is underlined. Below each sentence are four words that best keeps the meaning of the original sentence if it is substituted for the underlined word or group of words.

The last thirty questions in the test are based on reading passages. The questions are primarily about the main ideas and the secondary ideas in the passages. When enough information is given in a reading passage to make inferences or analogies possible, these kinds of questions are included. In all cases, the questions can only be answered by reading and understanding the passages. They do not require prior knowledge of the subject matter.

Essay Writing

This section measures your ability to write in English. In this test you will be required to write a 250 to 300 word essay in 30 minutes, based on a certain topic given in the test book. You will have no choice of topic on the Essay section. There are several discourse styles in English that you should be aware of. They are as follows:

1. Comparing and Contrasting.
2. Describing a Chart or Graph.
3. Stating a personal opinion.
4. Stating a case.

Source : Adapted from Prentice Hall TOEFL Prep BOOK by Lin Lougheed, 1986.

For a more specific understanding about the skills/areas of language content, number of questions, and- time duration for each section covered in the TOEFL test, let's see the following table.

SECTION	PART	QUESTIONS	MINUTES
<i>Listening Comprehension</i>	A : Short Statements	20	40
	B : Short Conversations	15	
	C : Mini - Talks	15	
<i>Structure & Write Expr.</i>	A : Choose a correct word or phrase	15	25
	B : Identify an incorrect word, or phrase.	25	
<i>Vocabulary & Read Compr</i>	A : Synonyms	30	45
	B : Reading Comprehension	30	
<i>Essay</i>		1	30
Total		150+Essat	140

1.4 Acceptable Scores

Under the American system of Education, each university and college determines for itself what TOEFL score is acceptable. So there is no answer to what really constitutes a

passing TOEFL grade. However, according to the reports issued by the POEEI staff based on their survey in 1977, in general, it may be said that students with a score range of 550 and above are usually admitted to the college with no restrictions. Students with scores between 500 and 549 may need some initial limitation on academic load and supplementary instruction in English for at least the first term. Students with scores between 450 and 499 may be admitted if strong in all aspects of their application other than English. Consideration may be given to the field of study and the TOEFL section scores. But such students must have a significant amount of English instruction (perhaps half time) with corresponding in normal course load.

In addition the reports also say that in general a slightly high score was required for students at the graduate level than those at the under graduate level; however, the field of study can have some bearing on the decision. Students in fields such as journalism require near native proficiency in English, while students in technical fields such as mathematics, chemistry, medicine with slightly less proficiency. The lowest TOEFL score would lead to 200 and the highest score 800 (Langley, 1981).

Lougheed (1986), on the other hand, says that admission requirements vary from institution to institution and year to year. He specifies the TOEFL scores AS follows.

Admissions Policy	Graduate Humanities	Graduate Sciences	Under-graduate	Technical School or 2 – year College
Acceptable with supplementary language training and reduced course load	500-550	450-500	400-500	400-450
Further English training required	Below 500	Below 450	Below 400	Below 400

1.5 Score Results for the Test of Written English (Essay).

The essays written for the TWE will be read and evaluated by 2 experienced, trained evaluators. The score will be reported on a scale of 1 to 6. The average of these two scores will be your score. If the readers' interpretations of your essay differ by more than 2 points, a third evaluator will read your essay. However, the TWE score will not affect your total TOEFL score.

SCORES :

EXPLANATION OF THE SCORES

- 6 : Clearly demonstrates competence in writing or both the rhetorical and syntactic levels, though the essay may have occasional errors.
- 5 : Demonstrates competence in writing or both the rhetorical and syntactic levels, though the essay will have occasional errors.
- 4 : Demonstrates minimal competence in writing on both the rhetorical and syntactic levels.
- 3 : Demonstrates some developing competence in writing, but the essay remains flawed on either the rhetorical or syntactic level, or both.
- 2 : Suggests incompetence in writing.
- 1 : Demonstrates incompetence in writing.

(Bulletin of information for TOEFL and TSE, 1989-90)



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1.6 What Needs Knowing in Preparing for the TOEFL Test.

The Method

We are now familiar with the language content areas covered in the TOEFL test and how the questions in each part of the section are constructed. By knowing the types of questions, number of questions as well as the duration of time for each section, the teacher will be helped to prepare his or her students for the TOEFL test or at least he or she will know which kind of materials the students are necessarily taught or provided with, where to direct the goal of his or her teaching, and what types of exercises should be given in order to reach the goal. It might be unlikely for the teacher to effectively help prepare the students for the TOEFL test without first understanding the TOEFL thoroughly. But it doesn't mean that by simply knowing all about the TOEFL the teacher will be able to use the best method and successfully help prepare the students. "The TOEFL is not based on a specific course of study; therefore, no single school, text book or method is best to help prepare a person for the TOEFL test. The TOEFL is designed to measure a person's proficiency in English-which can only be achieved after a long period of study and practice (Bulletin of information for TOEFL and TSE 1989 - 1990).

On the basis of the above point, therefore it can be concluded that an attempt to study English shortly before taking the TOEFL test will probably not be very helpful. It is suggested by King and Nancy A. Stanly (1982) for instance that students who want to take a TOEFL course should be with at least low intermediate English proficiency.

In the following the writer will propose one way or method of preparing students for the TOEFL test in general. The students here are supposed to have got at least lower intermediate English proficiency.

According to the writer one way of preparing adult students for the TOEFL test is by exposing them to a lot of exercises or practice tests that will lead them to the actual types of questions on the TOEFL test. The problems in the exercises or practice tests given should reflect the problems in the actual test. There are many TOEFL books which have exercises or practice tests similar to the actual questions on the TOEFL test that can be used as models. However, before the exposure, the teacher should know the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the students. The teacher must know exactly in which areas every student is capable and in which areas he or she needs more study.

One way of detecting or finding the students' weaknesses as well as their strengths is by giving them diagnostic tests. These tests can be taken from a used TOEFL test or TOEFL books for instance the one written by Sharpe (1988). Each diagnostic test should include the four sections or at least the Listening Comprehension and the Structure and Written Expression sections. In addition, to make sure what problem areas to cover in the course, it is also essential for the teacher to give the students a list of problem areas taken from the TOEFL test (particularly the Structure and Written Expression section) and ask them to show which areas they find most difficult. Or the teacher can also predict, based on his or her experience, which problems the students most probably find difficult. Why their weaknesses are so important for the teacher to know is that students who want to prepare for the TOEFL test, normally, only want a short course.

Based on the problem areas that have been discovered, the teacher, then, can provide teaching materials and exercises for the students. In this case the teacher instead of giving every exercise taken from a TOEFL book, she or he had better create some more specific or detailed exercises, which lead to the actual types of questions on the TOEFL test. There should be clear specific objectives for each topic or subject matter and be accompanied by exercises or practice tests and explanation or elaboration. In the process the teacher can either begin with teaching/explanation and then exercises or vice versa. In other words, the teaching - learning process can be done either from practice to theory or theory to practice.

Different types of exercises covering the same problem area should be given before going to another problem area to enable the students to answer or solve that kind of problem. After two or three - separate problem areas have been answered correctly, the teacher can give them an exercise containing the three problem areas. At this stage the problems are jumbled or mixed. The purpose of doing so is to make sure whether students really have mastered the subject matters. These steps are to be followed until all the problem areas found earlier are covered.

After all the problem areas have been given following the above steps, a practice test which is similar to the TOEFL test is given. Their answers are checked and the mistakes they made should be discussed or elaborated, Discussion or elaboration is necessarily done especially for the Structure and Written Expression section. Normally students' knowledge of structure of the language helps them to listen and read better. For example they hear: This is Fred's book. Where's Henry's? And the choice answers are as follows:

- (A) He is in the bathroom.
- (B) He is reading a book.
- (C) Henry is sick.
- (D) It's on the table.

In this case, with the help of their knowledge of structure of English, they will know that *henry's* (Henry's) means 'Henry's book' which can be changed into pronoun. 'It'. Therefore they will choose (D).

Also, the reason why discussion, elaboration as well as examples are important is that they are, adult students. They need to know why an answer is correct and another is not. Mackay (1965: 325) says that "in the presentation of the structure and meanings of the language more mature learners may demand to know the rules. However, in this paper the writer suggests that the teacher should also the students for a better mastery.

1.7 General Objectives for the TOEFL test.

It was mentioned earlier that to help prepare students for the TOEFL, test, the teacher concerned should know first the problem areas on which he or she will base his or her objectives, teaching materials and exercises. In connection with this, King et al. (1982) suggest the following objectives for the TOEFL test as an attempt to help prepare students for the TOEFL test.

Listening Comprehension.

Objectives for Listening Comprehension Section

Part A : Similar Sentences

- ▶ 1 Derive meaning via grammatical structure.
- 2 Hear sounds accurately.
- 3 Interpret the meaning of multiple-definition words.

4 Match sounds and meaning to letter combinations.

Part B : Short Conversations

5 Identify the speakers.

6 Avoid sight-sound problems.

7 Recognize language functions.

8 Relate vocabulary to context.

Part C: Mini-Talks and Longer Conversations.

9 Anticipate the topics and the questions.

10 Recognize paraphrases of words and phrases.



2.5.2.1 Structure and Written Expression.

10 - Point Checklist of Problem Areas

- 1 Check for subject and verb (both present neither repeated).
Example of error: *Children they need love and protection*
- 2 Check verb agreement, tense; and form.
Example of error : *That student has living here for ten years*
- 3 Check for full subordination.
Example of error: *Because wanted to learn fast the girl studied all the time.*
- 4 Check the verbals.
Example of error: *This is a very interested book.,*
- 5 Check pronoun form, agreement, and reference.
Example of error: *It was me who answered the telephone.*
- 6 Check word form.
Example of error: *Those roses smell real sweet.*
- 7 Check word order.
Example of error: *The policeman asked the man what was he doing.*
- 8 Check for parallel structure.
Example of error: *He likes to swim, to play tennis, and riding horses.*
- 9 Check for unnecessary repetition.
Example of error: *He is a very fast, quick runner.*
- 10 Check for correct usage.
Example of error: *She is interested for learning Arabic.*

2.5.2.2 Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension.

Objectives for Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Section

Part A: Vocabulary

- 1 Increase your vocabulary systematically.
- 2 Recognize Ineffective strategies for dealing with the vocabulary section.
- 3 Use effective strategies for dealing with the vocabulary section.

Part B: Reading Comprehension

Reference

- 4 Identify referents.

Main Idea

- 5 Focus on the main idea.
- 6 Observe the flow of ideas.

Inference

- 7 Draw logical inferences.
- 8 Make accurate predictions.

Restatement

- 9 Interpret common features.
- 10 Recognize restated information.

The way how to help the students to achieve the general objectives above is by making several specific objectives for each of them. Exercises are given for each specific objective. The exercises should be from easy ones to more difficult ones. For the “Written Expression”, for instance, the teacher can give exercises like the following types.

- a. Ask the students to correct the underlined word or phrase in a sentence. (Here, the word or phrase is underlined by the teacher).

E.g., Mark always' does his home work careful. _____

- b. Give them an exercise containing sentences with two words/phrases underlined., and have them choose which one is incorrect.

E.g. Heart attacks are fatally in 75 percent of occurances.

A

B

- c. Give them an exercise containing sentences with three words/phrases underlined and ask them to choose the incorrect one.

E.g. Telegraph service across the Atlantic was successful

A

B

established in 1866.

C

- d. Give them an exercise containing sentences with four words/phrases underlined and ask them to choose the incorrect one. (This type of exercise is the same as that in the TOEFL test).

E.g. A baby starts learning the meanings of words as they

A

are spoken by others and later uses they in sentences.

B

C

D

- e. Give the students an exercise containing sentences with no words underlined. But each of the sentences must have one word incorrect. Then ask the students to identify the incorrect word in the sentence.

E.g. When adult children experience too much frustration, its behaviour ceases to be integrated.

It should be noted, however, that in all the exercises the students should be asked to give the correct forms of those they chose to be incorrect.

CONCLUSION

It is a fact that the Test of English as a Foreign Language maintains its reputation as a tool for measuring one's English ability in Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing that the test is still so widely used in 130 – 140 countries around the world. As a result the test is also used in Indonesia where the language is used only as a foreign language. In other words, most Indonesian people who want to study overseas especially in Canada and America must prove that they are able to get a good TOEFL score. Therefore, all teachers of English students in Indonesia should be made very familiar with this sort of test. What TOEFL is, the types of questions asked, the objectives of each content of test, the method and strategies for doing the test must be exposed to the students. What the writer has put in this paper is intended to make everyone of us involved in English language teaching pay more attention to this matter as a sign of our care and responsibility. It is so because this test is unique as it forces the students to use multiple skills when answering a single question (<http://busyteacher.org/4792-how-to-teach-toefl-top-10-tips-that-work.html>). Finally, the writer hopes that this small article will be of some benefit to all of us. Hopefully.

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