

# **ACEHNESE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS’ STRATEGIES IN PREPARING FOR TOEFL PREDICTION: A preliminary study**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study focused on the strategies of undergraduate students in preparing for the TOEFL Prediction. The study distributed questionnaires to the students of Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, gathering a sample of 15 students of different majors. The findings revealed that the students’ most used strategy was self-study, involving learning with various English materials. This study suggests that future research focus on the reasons influencing test-takers’ decision in test preparation strategies.

**Keywords:** *students’ strategies; test preparation; TOEFL prediction*

## **INTRODUCTION**

As a language used worldwide, English has greatly penetrated into various aspects of life, including education, making it a *lingua franca* (common language) in international relations (Crystal, 2003). The use of English is seen as very important in the academic settings, so much so that higher education nowadays has decided to apply English language proficiency tests, i.e. TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), IELTS (International English Language Testing System), and TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) in order to determine students’

eligibility, especially for entry and exit requirements (Ng, 2007). In the case of TOEFL, this particular test has been widely employed to measure the English language proficiency of foreign students intending to study in any English speaking countries, such as Canada and the US (Hughes, 1989; Roberts, 2000; Vu & Vu, 2013). The TOEFL test scores have a significant role in deciding whether a non-English speaker prospective student can be admitted into the universities in those countries (Vu & Vu, 2013; Phakiti, 2016). This is also the case in Indonesia where many universities require their students to sit for the TOEFL test in order to evaluate their English competence and also to evaluate their admission or graduation (Hambali, 2008; Ermawan, Arifin, & Salam, 2014; Mahmud, 2014; Munadia, 2016; Samad, Jannah, & Fitriani, 2017).

The TOEFL that the universities in Indonesia administer, however, is called TOEFL Prediction, or TOEFL-Equivalent which has a similar format to the TOEFL ITP (Institutional Testing Program) (Mahmud, 2014). The TOEFL ITP gains its popularity and is preferred by Indonesian universities and institutions because of several reasons: the accessibility of learning materials, the availability of designated test centers, and the affordable price (Hambali, 2008). Still, the universities have then tried to administer the TOEFL Prediction for a much lower price for their students since the test result will only be used for internal purposes (Mahmud, 2014). Despite being used locally, TOEFL Prediction has a high-stake purpose as in the official TOEFL, which is to determine the students' future (Suryaningsih, 2014) such as their eligibility for undergraduate thesis examination; thus, the students try hard to pass the required minimum test scores.

Studies have shown that TOEFL, albeit only the Prediction version, is a challenging task for many Indonesian students in which a substantial number of students still fail to reach the standard scores, turning them into repeated test-takers (Hambali, 2008; Ermawan, Arifin, & Salam, 2014; Mahmud, 2014; Samad & Fitriani, 2016). Therefore, the growing use of TOEFL Prediction for graduation requirements in most Indonesian universities has become of great concern to students and also lecturers because the majority of the students are still struggling to

achieve the minimum threshold (Munadia, 2016; Samad & Fitriani, 2016). In order to obtain the minimum cut scores of such an English proficiency test, Liu (2014) asserts that students generally apply test-taking strategies. These strategies may include test preparation courses within any educational institution (Liu, 2014; Ma & Cheng, 2015) or online course (Sudrajat & Astuti, 2018).

In the context of this study, the university under study which applies TOEFL Prediction policy was Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh (Unmuha), a private university situated in Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh Province, Indonesia. Unmuha has regulated its undergraduate students to sit for the TOEFL Prediction as one of the requirements for thesis defense under the Decree of the Rector of Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh No. 065/2013 and under No. 105/UM.M/KEP/2016 for the minimum cut scores of TOEFL Prediction of 410 for non-English majors and of 450 for English major. The regulations for such a policy, as Ermawan, Arifin, and Salam (2014) have highlighted, may lead the students to have diverse responses; and therefore, the students' views on the test will likely affect the way they handle the test, including their motivation, their preparation, and their performance in the test (Stricker & Attali, 2010). It is therefore important to note that the students' preparation for the TOEFL Prediction test is an aspect that needs to be considered by the universities and their language centers administering the test as well as the lecturers who wish to accommodate the students' learning strategies and needs for the test in English language teaching.

Hence, in an attempt to fill the gap in the studies concerning the TOEFL test, this preliminary study sought to investigate the following question: "What are the strategies used by the students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh in preparing for the TOEFL Prediction?" This study aimed to provide the insights into the test preparation carried out by the university students in an effort to further their test-taking performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Overview of Test*

A test is defined as a way to measure an individual's capability, knowledge or performance in a particular field (Brown, 2004). In general, the word "test" in today's educational settings refers to examination, a literal meaning derived from its original Latin word "testum", which means a bowl usually used to analyze things ("Test", 2017). When a test is used to assess learners' ability or performance, it will yield some information, or scores, that will let test-makers understand the learners' competence (Zucker, 2003; Brown, 2004). Thus, a test needs to be well-designed in order for the test to adequately depict the capability of a test-taker.

Ideally, however, a test should be constructed under several criteria: practicality, validity, reliability, authenticity, and washback (Zucker, 2003; Brown, 2004). A test is said to be practical if it provides affordable price, easy administration, proper test time, and easy scoring; a valid test means that the test is able to measure what it is intended to measure; a test is reliable when it shows the same results across different test times; an authentic test provides questions that are in context, relevant, and close to real life; and washback refers to the impact of the test (Zucker, 2003; Brown, 2004).

### *Overview of TOEFL*

TOEFL is a standardized language test commonly known as a product of Educational Testing Service (ETS) which aims to measure non-English speakers' proficiency (Stricker & Attali, 2010). TOEFL is immensely popular in higher education as evidenced by over 10,000 universities from more than 150 countries which use the TOEFL scores in the selection process of the admission of their prospective students (ETS, 2019a).

TOEFL was first initiated in 1963 by the National Council on the Testing of English as a Foreign Language, a council founded by above 30 public and private organizations (Wainer & Lukhele, 1997; Stricker & Attali, 2010). TOEFL was later taken over by ETS together with the College Board in 1965, and further joined by the Graduate Record Examinations in 1973 (Wainer & Lukhele, 1997; Stricker &

Attali, 2010). In 1975, ETS then became the sole administrator of TOEFL under the direction of the TOEFL Board (Spolsky, 1995 as cited in Roberts, 2000; Stricker & Attali, 2010). Since its initial creation, TOEFL has undergone several formats, from the first 1963 format to paper-based testing (PBT) in 1995 to computer-based testing (CBT) in 1998 to the internet-based testing (iBT) in 2005 (Roberts, 2000; Stricker & Attali, 2010; Vu & Vu, 2013). In addition to these, ETS also designs TOEFL ITP taking the format of its PBT predecessor, intending to be used for placement or evaluation in local/institutional settings only (ETS, 2019b).

The TOEFL Prediction referred to in this study follows the format of TOEFL ITP, comprising three sub-batteries: Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension. Following TOEFL ITP, the questions in TOEFL Prediction are designed in a multiple-choice format consisting of 50 items in the listening section, 40 items in the structure section, and 50 items in the reading section. The test is administered for about 115 minutes and is scored between 310 and 677 (ETS, 2019c).

### *TOEFL Test Preparation Studies*

Messick (1982) conceptualizes test preparation as “any intervention procedure specifically undertaken to improve test scores, whether by improving the skills measured by the test or by improving the skills for taking the test, or both” (as cited in Liu, 2014, p. 1). By this definition, it can be said that when a test-taker hopes to improve his/her test scores, he/she can carry on any type of activity prior to the test in order to be fully prepared. To this end, the strategies included in test preparation may generally be focused on (1) test-taking orientation, involving familiarity with test format and procedure; (2) coaching, involving intensive course; and (3) training, aiming for enhancing cognitive skills (Anastasi, 1981, as cited in Liu, 2014, p. 1).

Test preparation strategies have been researched in several cases. Roberts (2000) investigated the way 14 Korean learners of English prepared for the official TOEFL. His study revealed that the learners tried to improve their TOEFL scores by learning on their own by using several TOEFL preparation books or manuals (e.g.,

Barron's How to Prepare for the TOEFL, Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL Test) that are available in book stores. These manuals are intended to provide the learners with questions typical of TOEFL and to let them practice the model tests (Roberts, 2000). A study by Liu (2014) surveyed the strategies of 14,593 Chinese test-takers who had taken the TOEFL iBT. Her findings concluded that two most used strategies in preparing for the test included listening to English programs and watching English movies.

In addition to self-study, test preparation may also include training at TOEFL preparation courses. Masfufah (2018) examined 11 students taking a TOEFL preparation class at an Indonesian private college. Most of her respondents admitted that the preparation class helped them learn English for the test better. In addition, Ma and Cheng (2015) studied a number of Chinese students who joined a preparation course before sitting for TOEFL iBT. The students viewed that preparation course provide efficiency in learning for the test because they could get familiar with the test format quickly and obtain the satisfactory scores. An online TOEFL course is another way to prepare for the test as shown in the study by Sudrajat and Astuti (2008) who garnered data from 505 students taking an online preparation course. Most respondents stated that they gained sufficient motivation and confidence in learning English grammar needed for the TOEFL test.

## METHOD

This is a preliminary study designed to identify the strategies of the university students when preparing for the TOEFL Prediction. The study used a descriptive quantitative approach, employing a questionnaire survey to collect the data. The questionnaire was adapted from Hsieh (2017), who investigated the students' strategies on TOEIC, and consisted of questions about the demography, TOEFL test-taking experiences (e.g., number of time taking the test) and TOEFL preparation strategies of the students. The sample for the study was selected by using purposive sampling technique under the following criteria: 1) senior year students of Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, 2) wanting to sit for TOEFL Prediction test, and/or 3) having taken TOEFL Prediction test.

The study took place at the Language Center of Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, a private university in Banda Aceh, Aceh Province, Indonesia. The enumerator disseminated the questionnaires to the students who visited the center from April 15 – 20, 2019. The enumerator first asked for the students' consent prior to their responding to the questionnaire, and eventually gathered a total of 15 respondents who were willing to participate in the study. Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. The collected responses were then taken for analysis which included the frequency counts and the percentage.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The following Table 1 shows the demographic background of the respondents in the study. As seen here, the number of male and female students are almost equal although males outnumber females a bit (53.3%), with the average age of 22.9 years. Most students are from the Economy department (53.3%) and already beyond the senior year (2014 and 2015; 40% each).

Table 1

*Demography of the Respondents*

Variable	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	8	53.3
Female	7	46.7
Age		
21	2	13.3
22	3	20
23	5	33.3
24	5	33.3
Major		
Economy	8	53.3
Law	2	13.3
Public Health	2	13.3
Engineering	3	20
Intake Year		
2014	6	40

2015	6	40
2016	0	0
2017	3	20

In terms of the experiences in sitting for the test, the majority of the students had taken TOEFL Prediction (66.7%), with most of the students had only taking the test once. These results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2  
*TOEFL Test-Taking Experiences of the Respondents*

Variable	Frequency	%
Experience in Taking TOEFL		
Yes	10	66.7
No	5	33.3
Number of Times Taking TOEFL		
1	7	46.7
2	6	40
3	2	13.3

The following Table 3 describes the responses of the students when asked about the preparation strategies used for the TOEFL Prediction.

Table 3.  
*TOEFL Preparation Strategies of the Respondents*

Strategy	Frequency	%
Taking English courses at the university	3	15
Taking English courses at the language schools outside university	1	5
Taking TOEFL-prep courses at the cram school	3	15
Taking TOEFL practice tests (from TOEFL books)	1	5
Self-study (e.g., read English books/newspapers, listen to English songs, watch English movies, etc.)	12	60

As seen in above table, test preparation strategies vary among the respondents; however, the frequently used general strategy was self-study (60%),

involving a variety of English materials (e.g. listening to English songs and watching English movies) to help them in preparing for the TOEFL test.

In this case, findings similar to these were also indicated in a study by Roberts (2000) who found that most of the Korean students studied TOEFL on their own and at private courses. Some students also practiced TOEFL from TOEFL preparation books (or manuals); some used those written in Korean while others in English. In addition, some also mentioned that they used authentic materials in English to prepare for TOEFL. Regarding TOEFL preparation books, the students remarked that the books helped them to further the skills needed in the TOEFL test, to enhance the strategies in the TOEFL test-taking, and to measure the level of TOEFL readiness. In this current study, however, only one student indicated that he/she learned from TOEFL books to prepare for the test. The majority of the students here admitted to studying general English on their own with English-related materials. These same strategies were also highlighted in the research of Ermawan, Arifin, and Salam (2014) that included taking TOEFL preparation training, practicing with TOEFL books, watching English movies, and listening to English songs.

The findings in this present study were also corroborated by another study by Liu (2014) which surveyed 14,593 Chinese test-takers who had taken the TOEFL iBT. Her study revealed that three most used general strategies included listening to English programs (25%), watching English movies (24%), and reading English books (18%).

In this study, the students at Unmuha seemed to prepare for the TOEFL Prediction by choosing their own way of learning, which may involve reading books and listening to English-related materials. They would rather self-study, for various reasons that are unable to assume here, than study at TOEFL preparation courses available in and outside campus.

Despite the aforementioned supported evidence for common TOEFL test preparation strategies, this study still faced some limitations. One limitation revolves around the number of participants involved; it is clear that this initial study needs larger data in order to have a grasp on general strategies in preparing for the

TOEFL test. Another limitation is related to lack of information on the factors affecting the participants in choosing the said strategies. It is impossible to draw conclusions on why they study on their own or why they take a TOEFL preparation course, for example.

However, regardless of these limitations, this study still offers useful insights into the university students' efforts in improving their TOEFL test performance. In addition, the implications of the study include future studies to focus more on the factors affecting the test-takers in using specific or general strategies and English language teaching and learning to provide more understanding on English language proficiency testing.

## CONCLUSION

Test preparation strategies are the ways to enhance test-takers' performance which may involve a number of different materials. In this study, the majority of the students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh chose to improve their test scores by studying on their own or in other words, self-study, rather than joining a general English course or a TOEFL preparation course. The students' self-study included reading books, listening to songs, and watching movies all in English. The findings of this study, however, cannot further confirm the underlying reasons as to why the students preferred to self-study. Therefore, it is suggested that further research focus on the reasons or factors influencing the choice of test-takers' preparation and also the success or failure of test-takers' performance.

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