

Student's Difficulties and Their Overcoming Strategies in Comprehending Reading Section on TOEFL

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate which skills were most difficult in the TOEFL Reading Comprehension section and to identify the strategies frequently used by students to overcome these difficulties within the English Language Education Study Program during the 2023 academic year at Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang. This research employed a case study method, presented in a qualitative manner. The participants were third-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program enrolled in the Academic Reading course. Data collection techniques included classroom observation and questionnaires. Findings from the study indicated that the most difficult skill for students in the TOEFL Reading Comprehension section was Skill 6, which involves answering implied detail questions. This difficulty stemmed from the need to infer information not explicitly stated in the text, requiring a high level of concentration. Furthermore, the strategies students used to address these difficulties were based on Deborah Philips' theory, which outlines five main strategies incorporating 13 specific skills that assist students in improving their understanding of text passages more effectively.

Keywords: Student's Difficulties, Strategy TOEFL, TOEFL Reading Comprehension Section.

Introduction

In the contemporary context of globalization, the mastery of the English language is of paramount importance due to its extensive application across diverse sectors and nations. The comprehensive understanding of English necessitates the acquisition of the four fundamental linguistic competencies: speaking, listening, reading, and writing, which ought to be systematically imparted and cultivated at all tiers of education. Among these competencies, reading comprehension poses a considerable obstacle for numerous learners, as it necessitates both precise articulation of lexicon, phrases, and sentences, along with the capacity to comprehend the material being read. Empirical studies suggest that learners adopt a variety of reading strategies, and the employment of these strategies correlates significantly with their reading proficiency and linguistic competence. The selection of particular learning strategies by students can serve as an indicator of their academic performance and holistic learning aptitude. Consequently, the examination of students' reading strategies alongside their correlation to academic achievement is of considerable relevance, given the substantial variability in learning styles attributable to factors such as age, gender, cultural heritage, and educational background (Par. L, 2020).

To facilitate the enhancement of students' reading strategies, it is imperative to evaluate their English language proficiency through meticulously crafted assessments. Brown delineates

five prevalent categories of assessments utilized in language education. Firstly, aptitude assessments evaluate an individual's potential to acquire a new language. Secondly, diagnostic assessments identify specific linguistic attributes. Thirdly, placement assessments, which encompass curriculum-relevant materials, assist in determining an appropriate level of challenge for learners. Fourthly, achievement assessments are directly associated with specific lessons, units, or curricula. Lastly, proficiency assessments, which gauge an individual's overall linguistic competency for designated tasks, constitute the central focus of this investigation as per Brown's classifications. Proficiency assessments, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), are extensively utilized to evaluate the language capabilities of non-native English speakers within academic environments.

A scholarly investigation conducted by Dharmawan, K.A., & Desfitranita, D. (2018), entitled "An Analysis of Students' Difficulties and Strategies in Answering TOEFL Reading Comprehension Section," recognizes the TOEFL as a widely implemented proficiency assessment in academic settings, designed to measure English language skills among non-native speakers. Reading comprehension has emerged as the most formidable segment of the TOEFL for numerous students, who face challenges stemming from factors such as paraphrasing, note-taking, the recognition of complex vocabulary, topic comprehension, main idea identification, and restricted vocabulary.

In another study titled "Students' Ability in Reading TOEFL" by Badu H. (2020), the investigator evaluated the TOEFL reading performance of 70 eighth-semester English Education students at Bengkulu University, who had previously participated in TOEFL-related reading courses. The findings indicated that students continued to experience difficulties despite prior engagement with the reading section. The researcher is therefore inspired to scrutinize the specific reading comprehension obstacles encountered by these learners in the TOEFL assessment.

Concurrently, data procured from the Language Development Center at UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten for the academic year 2019/2020 corroborate the findings of Dharmawan and Desfitranita (2018), revealing that among 63 students who undertook the TOEFL reading section, only 30% managed to answer fewer than 20 items correctly, 49% answered fewer than 30, and merely 20% answered fewer than 40, underscoring the inherent challenges associated with the TOEFL reading component.

While previous research has chiefly focused on the ability of students to successfully achieve a passing score on the TOEFL examination, along with the diverse strengths and limitations they experience, this investigation aims to clarify the most challenging skills within the TOEFL reading segment and the strategies that students typically employ to overcome these obstacles. Specifically, it investigates the cohort of 2023 students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang and critically analyzes which TOEFL reading competencies they identify as the most daunting and the approaches they implement to improve their performance.

Methods

This research employed a case study methodology within a qualitative research paradigm. As articulated by Creswell & Creswell (2018), qualitative research yields descriptive data that is obtained directly from participants or via behavioral observations, which are subsequently subjected to analysis through statistical tools, question-based instruments, and interpretive methods. Qualitative research engages the investigator in authentic environmental contexts, thereby converting information from these settings into various modalities, including videos, interviews, dialogues, field notes, reflections, photographs, and recordings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The subjects of this research comprised third-semester students participating in the Academic Reading course within the English Language Education Study Program. Primary data were acquired

through systematic classroom observations and the administration of questionnaires. The observations were meticulously executed to obtain comprehensive insights into the course dynamics, while questionnaires were distributed to elicit students' perspectives and experiences. The questionnaire, adapted from Deborah Philip's theoretical framework on reading comprehension strategies, encompassed supplementary items devised by the researcher. It comprised closed-ended Likert scale inquiries, with answer options including “Always”, “Often”, “Seldom”, “Never”, alongside an open-ended segment aimed at identifying the specific skills that students found most challenging in the TOEFL reading comprehension section.

Result and Discussion

Result

The research was conducted on October 3, 2024. This research afforded the researcher significant insights into the competencies that students perceive as most problematic within TOEFL reading comprehension, as well as the methodologies they utilize to mitigate these difficulties. Questionnaires were disseminated to fifty (50) students who were involved in the research.

1. The most difficult skill in the reading comprehension section on TOEFL.

In this section, the researcher delineates the percentage corresponding to each item in the questionnaire related to the obstacles students face in the TOEFL reading section. This interview encompasses inquiries regarding specific competencies within the TOEFL reading comprehension domain, along with open-ended questions that delve into the reasons students identify certain skills as particularly difficult. The competencies recognized as the most formidable in the TOEFL reading comprehension assessment are grounded in theories posited by experts, including those articulated by Deborah Philip. In total, there exist thirteen competencies.

Table 1. Percentage of Difficult Skills in TOEFL Reading Comprehension Section

No.	Skill	%
1	Skill 1	4.51%
2	Skill 2	6.02%
3	Skill 3	6.02%
4	Skill 4	11.28%
5	Skill 5	3.76%
6	Skill 6	18.80%
7	Skill 7	7.52%
8	Skill 8	6.77%
9	Skill 9	6.02%
10	Skill 10	12.03%
11	Skill 11	0.75%
12	Skill 12	7.52%
13	Skill 13	9.02%

The table presented above reveals that the skill deemed most challenging within the TOEFL reading comprehension segment is skill 6, which exhibits the highest frequency at 18.80%. This finding implies that skill 6 represents the most formidable component for examinees in this particular section.

2. Strategies used by students to overcome difficulties in the reading comprehension section on TOEFL.

In this segment, the researchers articulate the percentage corresponding to each response alternative from the closed-ended questionnaire. This questionnaire offered four response options: always (scoring 4), often (scoring 3), seldom (scoring 2), and never (scoring 1). The strategies pertinent to the TOEFL

reading comprehension section are derived from Deborah Philips' theoretical framework, encompassing five strategies that correspond to thirteen distinct skills requisite for the application of these strategies.

Deborah Philips proposes five strategies for addressing the TOEFL reading comprehension segment: (1) Skim the passage to ascertain the primary idea and overarching structure of the content; (2) Review the questions beforehand to discern the language skills being assessed; (3) Identify the pertinent section of the passage relevant to each question; (4) Meticulously read the segment of the passage that contains the answer; and (5) Select the most precise answer from the four options provided in the assessment.

Skim the passage to ascertain the primary idea and overarching structure of the content

There were 7 questionnaire questions given to the participants and the percentage of students' answers can be seen in the Table 2:

Table 2. Techniques Used in the First Strategy

No.	Item	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
1	Anda membaca kalimat pertama di setiap paragraf untuk menemukan gagasan utama.	2%	12%	36%	50%
2	Anda terlibat dalam proses mengidentifikasi topik atau konsep tertentu dalam kalimat awal.	0%	10%	38%	52%
3	Anda dengan cermat meninjau teks untuk memverifikasi bahwa Anda telah mengidentifikasi kalimat topik secara akurat.	2%	10%	54%	34%
4	Anda membuang alternatif yang jelas salah dan memilih respons yang sesuai dari opsi yang tersisa.	2%	14%	30%	54%
5	Anda memeriksa kalimat awal setiap paragraf untuk mendapatkan wawasan tentang keseluruhan organisasi konsep.	4%	10%	64%	22%
6	Anda mencari indikator leksikal yang menandakan hubungan antar paragraf.	0%	22%	44%	34%
7	Anda memilih respons yang menggambarkan hubungan antara paragraf.	0%	22%	48%	30%

The data show that students successfully apply different techniques for skimming passages to identify main ideas and structural organization, as evidenced by the high percentages of “often” and “always” responses on these items.

Review the questions beforehand to discern the language skills being assessed

The questionnaire consisted of 14 inquiries directed towards the participants, with the proportion of student responses illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Techniques Used in the Second Strategy

No.	Item	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
1	Anda mengidentifikasi kata kunci yang relevan dari pertanyaan.	2%	18%	24%	56%
2	Anda memeriksa kutipan tertentu dalam teks untuk menemukan istilah penting atau konsep sentral.	0%	12%	44%	44%
3	Anda dengan cermat menganalisis kalimat yang mencakup istilah-istilah penting atau konsep sentral tersebut.	2%	8%	44%	46%
4	Anda mencari jawaban yang secara akurat mengartikulasikan kembali konsep dari teks.	2%	16%	60%	22%
5	Anda membuang tanggapan yang salah dan memilih yang paling akurat.	0%	8%	38%	54%
6	Anda menyelidiki kata kunci dalam penyelidikan.	4%	0%	46%	50%
7	Anda berkonsentrasi pada mengidentifikasi kata kunci atau konsep yang ada dalam teks.	2%	10%	56%	32%
8	Anda meneliti kalimat yang mencakup istilah penting atau konsep sentral.	0%	2%	58%	40%
9	Anda memastikan jawaban yang benar berdasarkan teks dan mengecualikan opsi yang kurang cocok.	4%	2%	42%	52%

10	Anda memilih jawaban yang tidak relevan atau tidak terdapat dalam teks.	28%	24%	22%	26%
11	Anda mencari kata ganti di dalam teks.	4%	18%	48%	30%
12	Anda mengenali kata benda yang ditunjukkan oleh kata ganti.	0%	12%	60%	28%
13	Anda dengan hati-hati meninjau segmen kalimat sebelum kata ganti.	0%	14%	44%	42%
14	Anda menghilangkan opsi yang salah dan memilih respons yang paling akurat.	2%	6%	40%	52%

The data indicate that students systematically employ the tactic of pre-reviewing questions to discern the linguistic competencies being evaluated, as evidenced by the elevated proportions of “often” and “always” responses for each query.

Identify the pertinent section of the passage relevant to each question

The investigation encompassed eight queries posed to the respondents, with Table 4 depicting the allocation of their replies in percentage format.

Table 4. Techniques Used in the Third Strategy

No.	Item	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
1	Anda menggambarkan kata kunci yang relevan yang terkait dengan pertanyaan.	2%	12%	50%	36%
2	Anda melakukan pencarian di dalam teks untuk mengidentifikasi kata kunci atau konsep inti yang signifikan.	0%	6%	50%	44%
3	Anda terlibat dalam pemeriksaan yang cermat terhadap kalimat yang menggabungkan kata kunci ini.	2%	8%	44%	46%
4	Anda mencari jawaban yang akurat seperti yang berasal dari kalimat tertentu.	0%	4%	46%	50%
5	Anda membaca dengan teliti kalimat awal untuk mengukur esensi pertanyaan.	2%	14%	50%	34%

6	Anda secara sistematis menganalisis konsep-konsep utama dan detail pendukung dalam teks.	4%	20%	48%	28%
7	Anda mengekstrapolasi implikasi teks baik sebelum dan setelah Anda membacanya.	2%	18%	40%	40%
8	Anda memilih jawaban yang selaras dengan kalimat pengantar dan penutup teks.	0%	16%	48%	36%

The analysis revealed that students systematically employed the technique of identifying segments of the text pertinent to the inquiry, as evidenced by the elevated proportion of “often” and “always” responses recorded for each item.

3. Meticulously read the segment of the passage that contains the answer

The survey instrument consisted of 13 items for respondents, and Table 5 illustrates the proportion of student replies.

Table 5. Techniques Used in the Fourth Strategy

No.	Item	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
1	Anda menemukan istilah tertentu dalam materi tekstual.	0%	10%	50%	40%
2	Anda menggunakan petunjuk dengan cara yang terorganisir.	0%	18%	54%	28%
3	Anda dengan cermat memeriksa bagian teks yang mengikuti petunjuk.	0%	10%	46%	44%
4	Anda secara sistematis membuang tanggapan yang jelas salah dan memilih jawaban yang paling tepat dari alternatif yang tersisa.	0%	4%	44%	52%
5	Anda menganalisis pentingnya segmen istilah yang ada.	0%	10%	56%	34%
6	Anda mengidentifikasi istilah dalam korpus tekstual.	0%	6%	64%	30%
7	Anda meneliti kalimat yang menyertakan istilah dengan sangat hati-hati.	0%	4%	50%	46%
8	Anda mencari indikator kontekstual	0%	2%	52%	46%

	untuk memfasilitasi pemahaman makna.				
9	Anda memilih jawaban yang sesuai dengan konteks tersebut.	0%	0%	52%	48%
10	Anda menemukan kata dalam teks.	0%	2%	58%	40%
11	Anda rajin memeriksa kalimat yang menyertakan item leksikal.	0%	4%	48%	48%
12	Anda mencari isyarat kontekstual untuk menafsirkan artinya.	0%	6%	44%	50%
13	Anda memilih jawaban yang secara akurat mencerminkan makna sesuai dengan konteksnya.	0%	0%	50%	50%

The empirical evidence indicates that learners proficiently utilize the approach of meticulously analyzing the segment of the text that contains the solution, as demonstrated by the elevated frequencies of "often" and "always" replies throughout the items.

4. Select the most precise answer from the four options provided in the assessment.

The questionnaire included 9 items for the participants, and Table 6 displays the percentages of student responses.

Table 6. Techniques Used in the Fifth Strategy

No.	Item	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
1	Anda memilih istilah penting atau konsep utama dari penyelidikan.	2%	8%	48%	42%
2	Anda melakukan pemeriksaan teks untuk mengidentifikasi konsep utama.	0%	6%	46%	48%
3	Anda memilih jawaban yang paling sesuai dengan isi pertanyaan.	0%	0%	40%	60%
4	Anda mencari indikator yang mengungkapkan sentimen atau perspektif penulis dalam teks	2%	10%	46%	42%

5	Anda memilih jawaban yang mencerminkan emosi atau sikap penulis.	0%	14%	50%	36%
6	Anda menganalisis konsep utama dan detail pendukung dalam teks.	0%	12%	48%	40%
7	Anda menyimpulkan tujuan teks.	0%	12%	56%	32%
8	Anda meneliti konsep-konsep utama dan rincian pendukung untuk memahami perkembangan teks.	0%	18%	52%	30%
9	Anda merumuskan kesimpulan mengenai perkembangan teks.	0%	14%	58%	28%

The evidence suggests that learners consistently employ the tactic of identifying the most appropriate answer for each inquiry from the presented alternatives, as evidenced by the elevated percentages of "often" and "always" responses across the items.

Moreover, Table 7 delineates the computed percentages of responses from participants pertaining to the five strategies utilized in the TOEFL reading comprehension segment.

Table 7. Calculate of Each Strategies

No.	Strategies	Total percentage components				Total	Percentage 100%			
		N	S	O	A		N	S	O	A
1	Skim the passage to ascertain the primary idea and overarching structure of the content	10	100	314	276	700	1.42%	14.28%	44.85%	39.42%
2	Review the questions beforehand to discern the language skills being assessed.	50	150	626	574	1.400	3.57%	10.71%	44.71%	41%

3	Identify the pertinent section of the passage relevant to each question	12	98	376	314	800	1.5%	12.25%	47%	39.25%
4	Meticulously read the segment of the passage that contains the answer.	0	76	668	556	1.300	0%	5.84%	51.38%	42.76%
5	Select the most precise answer from the four options provided in the assessment.	4	94	444	358	900	0.44%	10.44%	49.33%	39.77%

Discussion

In this section, the researcher summarizes the findings gathered from class observation questionnaires, focusing on the most difficult skill results and the strategies students used to tackle difficulties in comprehending TOEFL content. Reading constitutes an essential competency for learners, particularly in the context of attaining success and excelling in the TOEFL examination. It necessitates that students not only cultivate the requisite knowledge and abilities but also gain insight into their own proficiencies. Furthermore, they are required to formulate strategies for the comprehension of TOEFL materials to adeptly navigate the challenges they face during their test preparation. As previously articulated, this research endeavors to ascertain the most formidable skills within the TOEFL reading comprehension domain and the methodologies employed by students to surmount these obstacles.

The most difficult skill in the TOEFL reading comprehension segment by the third-semester students enrolled in the Academic Reading course of the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang.

The data previously delineated underscores three principal competencies that are particularly arduous within the TOEFL reading comprehension section. The level of difficulty is exemplified by the percentages corresponding to each competency. These three predominant challenges were articulated by fifty students, with skill 6 being recognized as the most challenging competency in this particular section.

Research conducted by Septiana, T.I. (2021), entitled "Analysis of Student Problems in the TOEFL Reading Section," features an initial commentary from a student (NB) who articulated, "In all honesty, reading skill number 6 poses significant difficulty for me, as the answer is not explicitly articulated within the text. I frequently find it challenging to pinpoint keywords or phrases that may assist me in drawing conclusions prior to selecting an answer."

Strategies employed by third-semester students in the Academic Reading course of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang to mitigate challenges in TOEFL reading comprehension.

As evidenced by the data, students implement a diverse array of strategies with differing frequencies. Based on the responses from the questionnaires, it is evident that students predominantly utilize speed reading as a fundamental strategy to expeditiously ascertain the main idea and overall structure of the text when addressing TOEFL reading inquiries. Moreover, students consistently read the questions prior to engaging with the text to facilitate their responses in the reading comprehension segment. Another frequently employed strategy involves identifying passages pertinent to each

question; a considerable number of students reported utilizing this technique. Additionally, students commonly scrutinize sections containing answers meticulously to enhance their comprehension. Lastly, in the process of selecting answers from the provided options, students frequently opt for the most suitable response, thereby illustrating their methodical approach to navigating TOEFL reading comprehension queries.

In a study conducted by Samad et al. (2016) titled "EFL Students' Strategies for Overcoming Common Difficulties in TOEFL Reading Comprehension," the challenges and strategies of undergraduate students in completing TOEFL reading assessments were investigated. Third-semester students in the English Education Study Program at Singaperbangsa University in Karawang employ a variety of strategies to tackle difficulties associated with TOEFL reading comprehension. The strategies most commonly utilized encompass speed reading to discern the main idea, prioritizing the reading of questions, concentrating on relevant textual segments, and selecting the most appropriate answer. This indicates that students place a premium on contextual comprehension and the implementation of effective methodologies to adeptly address TOEFL challenges.

CONCLUSION

Following the comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the data presented in the preceding chapter, the investigator underscores that the primary objective of this research endeavor is to discern which competencies pose the greatest challenges within the TOEFL Reading Comprehension segment and to ascertain the strategies that students commonly employ to surmount difficulties encountered in this domain. Consistent with the aims of the study, the results elucidate the following: Firstly, six out of the thirteen competencies delineated in Deborah Philips' publication were recognized as the most arduous skills within the TOEFL Reading Comprehension assessment. Secondly, it was noted that students implemented five distinct strategies to address TOEFL reading comprehension inquiries, particularly when such inquiries necessitated the application of these demanding skills. This investigation accentuates the significance of employing efficacious reading strategies to mitigate challenges in TOEFL reading comprehension.

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