EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON DIFFICULTIES OF STRUCTURE AND WRITTEN EXPRESSION IN TOEFL TEST: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore students' perceptions of the difficulties they encounter in the "Structure and Written Expression" section of the TOEFL test at Pamulang University. This study is grounded in the context of the ongoing challenges in test preparation, particularly as students face obstacles related to grammar, sentence structure, and familiarity with the test format. The research utilizes a qualitative approach, specifically employing a case study method to gain a deep understanding of the students' perspectives. Three participants were selected based on specific criteria: Academic Performance, completion of a TOEFL course in the previous semester, and varying levels of TOEFL scores. The data collection process involved in-depth interviews with the participants, which were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within their responses. This allowed for a rich, detailed interpretation of the challenges students face, focusing on their personal experiences with the "Structure and Written Expression" section. The findings from this research are expected to shed light on the common issues faced by students and suggest potential improvements in TOEFL test preparation methods. This study aims to provide valuable insights that could inform more effective instructional strategies, ultimately enhancing students' performance and confidence in the TOEFL test.

Introduction

The variety in human perception is well-recognized; every individual sees the world in their own way, which influences how they interpret and respond to different experiences. A person's preferences, whether they like or dislike something, are often

shaped by their personal beliefs and reactions. This notion highlights that each person has a unique perspective that guides their understanding of the world. Furthermore, individuals process information from various aspects of life, including their educational experiences, in ways that are personal to them.

Research shows that belief systems are the cognitive processes through which individuals become aware of and interpret information about their environment. Perception, however, is how we understand and make sense of the world around us. This process involves receiving input from the five senses, which helps individuals form a better understanding of their experiences. In other words, perception is the way we interpret the meaning of events or objects we encounter, which allows us to assess new information based on our previous experiences.

There are several definitions and perspectives on the concept of perception proposed by various experts. According to Konent (2011), perception is the entire process through which human consciousness engages with the surrounding environment. In this sense, perception can be summarized as the process of understanding the meaning of a stimulus. This stimulus is acquired through the sensing of objects, activities, or relationships among signs, which are then processed by the brain through cognitive procedures that begin with sensation. Additionally, Qiong (2017) explains that perception is a system through which individuals acquire awareness or understanding of sensory information. Walgito (2010) further clarifies that perception is a process that follows the sensing procedure, which is the method by which individuals receive stimuli through sensory organs. This process does not end with sensing, but continues with the process of perception, where the stimulus is further analyzed and interpreted.

This concept of perception is closely linked to standardized assessments such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). The TOEFL is a critical test for non-native English speakers who wish to prove their proficiency in the language. It goes beyond evaluating linguistic skills; it serves as a gateway to academic and professional opportunities in English-speaking settings. Among the test's various sections, the "Structure and Written Expression" section is often regarded as particularly challenging. This component tests the test-taker's knowledge of English grammar and their ability to construct grammatically correct and coherent sentences—essential skills for academic success.

The TOEFL is widely recognized as a benchmark for assessing English proficiency, with educational institutions and organizations across the globe utilizing it. Specifically, the "Structure and Written Expression" section is

pivotal in evaluating grammatical precision and sentence construction. Due to the importance of this section, understanding the difficulties students encounter in this area is key to enhancing their performance and test preparedness.

The TOEFL test has been extensively studied in the field of language assessment and test preparation. According to Shohamy (2001), effective preparation plays a key role in achieving high scores and meeting the requirements of both academic institutions and employers. TOEFL preparation research often focuses on strategies for test-taking, teaching methods, and the effectiveness of preparatory courses, as noted by Brindley (2001) and Weigle (2002). In other words, preparing well for the TOEFL test is essential for students to perform well and succeed in their academic and professional pursuits.

The "Structure and Written Expression" section of the TOEFL test evaluates a test-taker's grammar knowledge and their ability to produce accurate and coherent sentences. According to Eckes and Grotjahn (2006), this section can be particularly difficult for non-native speakers due to the complexity of English grammar rules and sentence structures. They also mention that students often struggle with identifying and correcting grammatical errors, which can affect their overall performance on the test. Moreover, this section requires students to apply their knowledge in a test-specific context, adding another layer of difficulty. Hsu and Chiu (2015) emphasize the importance of becoming familiar with the test format and the types of questions asked, stating that students who are not well-acquainted with the test format may find it challenging to navigate the questions effectively. In other words, understanding the test structure is crucial for students to perform well in this section.

This section of the TOEFL requires candidates to demonstrate their grasp of English grammar rules, sentence structure, and syntactic accuracy. Test-takers are tasked with identifying and correcting errors in sentences, as well as selecting the most appropriate grammatical forms to complete them. Despite its significance, many students report significant challenges with this section, which can impact their overall test performance and self-confidence. While previous research on TOEFL preparation has explored broader issues such as general language proficiency and test-taking strategies, there is a gap in understanding the specific challenges students face with the "Structure and Written Expression" section. By focusing on students' perceptions of this particular section, this study aims to offer a more focused understanding of these difficulties.

Understanding students' perceptions is crucial for several reasons. First, it provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of current

instructional methods and study materials. If students consistently report difficulties in particular areas, it signals a need for targeted instruction or revised resources. Second, a deeper understanding of students' experiences can assist educators in developing more effective teaching strategies to address these challenges, ultimately improving students' performance and boosting their confidence in tackling the test.

Moreover, understanding students' perceptions of their learning difficulties offers valuable insights into the challenges they encounter and their experiences with test preparation. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), students' subjective experiences can have a significant impact on their learning outcomes and test performance. They argue that students' self-reported difficulties and perceptions of their abilities can influence their motivation, engagement, and overall performance. In other words, how students perceive their challenges can shape their attitudes and results in test preparation and performance.

At Pamulang University, a number of students from the English Literature Department face considerable challenges in mastering the "Structure and Written Expression" section of the TOEFL. These difficulties may arise from several factors, such as gaps in foundational grammar knowledge, ineffective study strategies, or unfamiliarity with the test format. While quantitative research has offered insights into general trends and performance, there remains a gap in understanding the subjective experiences and perceptions of students regarding this specific section.

Based on previous experiences in English classes, there are several challenges students face in online learning, particularly with grammar rules, sentence construction, and syntactic accuracy. These difficulties often lead to negative performance and a lack of confidence in their overall TOEFL test results. In light of these issues, this study will focus on specific problems: students' struggles with grammar rules related to sentence structure in the TOEFL test, as well as challenges with sentence construction and syntactic accuracy. The objectives of this study are to investigate students' perceptions of the difficulties they face in terms of sentence structure and written expression in the TOEFL test.

Thus, this study explores students' perceptions and experiences with the "Structure and Written Expression" section of the TOEFL test. By utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study aims to uncover the specific challenges faced by students in this area. In-depth interviews with three selected participants will provide detailed personal insights into their struggles and experiences, offering a nuanced perspective on how students perceive and tackle these difficulties.

Research Methods

Design

This qualitative study was designed as a case study to explore students' perceptions of the difficulties they face in the "Structure and Written Expression" section of the TOEFL test. The goal of this approach is to gain a deeper understanding of the specific challenges students encounter. According to Creswell (2009, p. 23), qualitative research is a method used to investigate and understand individuals or groups in relation to social or human issues. As Amanda & Palmer (2006) suggest, qualitative research focuses on participants' subjective experiences to uncover the meanings and behaviors associated with specific social phenomena. In this context, qualitative research provides valuable insights into the personal experiences of students as they navigate the challenges of the TOEFL test.

Qualitative descriptive studies might be carried out for this have a look at. making use of a poem as a gaining knowledge of tool assisted in studying extra about grammar and literature, thinking about this studies's subject is English literature students. This examine will use language and phrases to explain the kingdom and state of affairs, employing a qualitative approach from time to time known as descriptive qualitative.

As supported by using Ary, et.,al (2010), "qualitative studies seeks to recognize a phenomenon by using that specialize in the total photo rather than breaking it down into variables. The purpose of qualitative research is a holistic image and intensity of expertise as opposed to a numeric analysis of statistics". similarly, This takes a look at used qualitative and thematic evaluation design due to the fact the purpose of this study will look into more thoroughly and describe how the implementation of poetry in coaching getting to know grammar to English literature college students of Pamulang university.

Mitchell (1991) states:

> "Inside the field of sociology, qualitative techniques generally tend to refer to ethnography, interviewing, and historical sociology. Ethnography involves an investigator's intensive immersion in the world of the humans he or she studies and delineates a dating among what people say and what people do; interviewing – carried out over an extended period or on a one – shot basis – privileges actors' subjectivities and definition of situation; and while ethnography and interviewing generally tend to rely on actors of the prevailing second, historical

sociology in particular focuses on beyond occasions the usage of written facts contained in records".

Participants

The participants of the study are from the eighth semester of the English Department at Pamulang University, South Tangerang. There are more than 30 students in the class. They are students in an upper-intermediate level course. However, the study focused on three students who were selected intentionally based on their academic performance (Participants must have completed TOEFL course in the previous semester and also they are from different level of TOEFL score.) and their active participation in the class.

Instrument

The techniques to gather data employed in this study include in-depth interviews, thematic analysis, and participant observation, which are all aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties students face in this section of the TOEFL test. These methods were chosen to ensure that the study captures a full range of experiences and perceptions from the participants.

1. In-Depth Interviews
2. Thematic Analysis
3. Participant Observation
4. Data Triangulation.

Data Collection

The data collection methods used in this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges students face in a particular section of the TOEFL test. To capture a wide range of experiences and perceptions from the participants, a combination of in-depth interviews, thematic analysis, participant observation, and data triangulation was employed.

1. In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants via Google Meet. These interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of students' experiences and perceptions regarding their difficulties in the TOEFL test. A set of ten open-ended questions was used, which were designed to encourage detailed responses. The interview responses were then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1992) flow model, which involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions.

2. Thematic Analysis: The data from the interviews were examined through thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns in the students' responses. This helped to clarify the specific challenges they face and to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences with the TOEFL test.

3. Participant Observation: In addition to the interviews, participant observation was employed to gain further insights into students' behaviors and interactions within their learning environment. Observing students provided contextual information that supplemented the interview data and offered a more holistic understanding of their challenges.

4. Data Triangulation: To ensure the reliability and comprehensiveness of the findings, data triangulation was used. By combining the methods of in-depth interviews, thematic analysis, and participant observation, the study was able to capture a well-rounded view of the students' experiences and perceptions, enhancing the validity of the results.

Data analysis

In this study, the researcher analyzed the data by following a systematic approach. First, the data were collected through interviews and observations. After gathering the data, the researcher carefully selected, identified, and focused on the relevant information in relation to the research questions. Next, the data were presented in clear and coherent sentences to organize the findings. Finally, a conclusion was drawn based on the presented data. To ensure the validity of the data, the interviews were supplemented by observations, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the findings.

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the difficulties faced by students in the "Structure and Written Expression" section of the TOEFL test at Pamulang University. Through semi-structured interviews with three students from the English Literature Department, several common challenges were identified. The main issues discussed were related to grammatical accuracy, sentence structure, and unfamiliarity with the test format.

1. Grammatical Accuracy:

All three students reported significant challenges with grammatical accuracy, especially under timed conditions. One student expressed, *"I always struggle to find and fix errors in my sentences quickly. When time is running*

out, it's even harder to decide on the right grammar structure." Another participant added, *"I get confused with things like subject-verb agreement and tenses. I don't have a strong grasp on advanced grammar rules, so I make mistakes in these areas, especially when under pressure."*

According to the responses above, all three students expressed that they face significant challenges with grammatical accuracy, particularly when working under time constraints. The students highlighted that the pressure to complete tasks quickly makes it difficult for them to identify and correct errors, especially with complex grammar rules like subject-verb agreement and tenses. The sense of urgency during the test seems to exacerbate these difficulties, leading to more mistakes under pressure.

2. Sentence Structure:

Sentence structure was also a consistent issue for the students. Two participants mentioned that they found it difficult to create sentences that were both grammatically correct and logically coherent within the limited time. *"I often get mixed up between simple, compound, and complex sentences. It's tough to know how to structure my sentences properly when the clock is ticking,"* said one participant. Another noted, *"I have trouble with conditionals and passive voice, especially when I need to form them quickly during the test."*

Based on the responses above, it is clear that students face challenges in constructing sentences that are both grammatically accurate and logically coherent, particularly under time pressure. The students reported difficulties in distinguishing between different sentence types, such as simple, compound, and complex sentences, which hindered their ability to structure sentences correctly. Additionally, the pressure to form correct structures quickly, especially with more complex elements like conditionals and passive voice, adds to their struggle during the test.

3. Familiarity with the Test Format:

A major theme that emerged was the students' lack of familiarity with the TOEFL "Structure and Written Expression" section's format. Despite having completed a TOEFL preparation course, they still felt unprepared for the specific question types. *"Even after all the prep, I wasn't sure how to approach some of the questions, especially when the errors in the sentences were subtle,"* one student explained. *"The multiple-choice format is confusing. Sometimes, it's hard to pick the right answer when the options are very close to each other."*

Based on the findings, it appears that the students felt unprepared for the specific question types in the TOEFL "Structure and Written Expression" section, even after completing a preparation course. They highlighted their

struggle with the format, particularly the multiple-choice questions where the options were often very similar. This suggests that despite prior preparation, students still felt unsure about how to approach certain questions, especially when the errors in the sentences were subtle.

4. Test-Taking Anxiety and Time Pressure:

The students also reported experiencing anxiety and stress due to the time pressure of the exam. *"The clock is always ticking, and it makes me rush. I sometimes make mistakes that I wouldn't make if I had more time,"* shared one participant. Another added, *"The time pressure causes me to panic, and that affects my performance. It's not just about grammar; it's about staying calm and managing the stress."*

The responses from the students in the interview above indicate that the time pressure during the exam causes significant anxiety and stress. One participant mentioned that the constant ticking of the clock forces them to rush, leading to mistakes they wouldn't typically make if given more time. Another participant shared that the pressure not only affects their grammar but also their ability to stay calm, highlighting how stress can influence overall performance during the exam.

5. Strategies for Improvement:

Despite these challenges, the participants offered several suggestions for improving their performance. *"More practice with TOEFL-specific exercises could help me get used to the test format,"* one participant suggested. Another recommended, *"We should have more grammar-focused lessons that cover complex sentence structures and advanced grammar rules. That way, we'll be better prepared for the test."*

Based on the responses above, it is clear that the students have identified ways to improve their performance on the TOEFL exam. They emphasized the importance of more targeted practice with TOEFL-specific exercises to become familiar with the test format. Additionally, the students suggested incorporating more grammar-focused lessons that address complex sentence structures and advanced grammar rules, which they believe would better prepare them for the test and improve their overall performance.

Discussion

Based on the analysis in this study, the findings show that students face several ongoing challenges in the "Structure and Written Expression" section of the TOEFL test. These challenges include issues with grammatical accuracy, sentence structure, and a lack of familiarity with the test format.

These results are consistent with previous research, particularly Eckes and Grotjahn (2006), who highlighted the importance of grammatical accuracy and sentence structure in the TOEFL context. They pointed out that many students struggle with these aspects, particularly when under time pressure. Additionally, the study's finding that students are not familiar with the test format aligns with the work of Hsu and Chiu (2015), who found that unfamiliarity with the test's structure often causes confusion and negatively affects student performance.

In response to these challenges, the findings of this study emphasize the need for more focused teaching strategies. Specifically, providing more practice with TOEFL-specific questions would support Peterson's (2001) recommendation that repeated exposure to test-like questions helps students become more familiar with the test and reduce test anxiety. This is also in line with Brindley's (2001) view that language success is strongly linked to the amount of practice students get, particularly in test-like environments.

Furthermore, the study's focus on targeted grammar instruction is consistent with Lee and S. (2019), who emphasized the critical role of grammatical accuracy, particularly in sentence structure, in TOEFL performance. Their research found that students who received focused grammar instruction showed significant improvement in their test results. These findings support the current study's suggestion that a more structured grammar curriculum tailored to TOEFL requirements could be beneficial. Similarly, Wang and Lin (2016) demonstrated that teaching methods directly affect students' performance on the "Structure and Written Expression" section, underlining the importance of targeted grammar exercises in reducing common errors in sentence formation and syntax.

The study's recommendation to address test-taking anxiety is also well-supported by existing research. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) identified the negative impact of language anxiety on cognitive processes, noting that anxious students are often less able to perform well on tests that require quick, precise responses, such as the TOEFL. This supports the current study's suggestion to develop strategies that reduce anxiety, which would help students focus better during the exam. In addition, Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasized the importance of feedback in improving student outcomes, further supporting the idea that strategies to reduce anxiety and increase confidence can improve student performance.

In conclusion, these findings highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach to TOEFL preparation, combining practice with TOEFL-specific questions, targeted grammar instruction, and strategies to manage test-related anxiety. This approach would better prepare students for the specific demands of the TOEFL test. This is consistent with Ma and

Cheng (2015), who found that well-designed preparation courses significantly increase students' confidence and performance. By incorporating insights from previous research, it is clear that improvements in teaching strategies are essential to help students overcome the challenges of the "Structure and Written Expression" section. This comprehensive approach will not only enhance student performance but also build greater confidence in their ability to succeed on the test.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that this study successfully identified several key challenges that students face in the "Structure and Written Expression" section of the TOEFL test. The students consistently struggled with issues related to grammatical accuracy, sentence structure, and familiarity with the test format, despite their prior TOEFL preparation. These challenges, along with test-taking anxiety and time pressure, appeared to negatively affect their performance and confidence. The findings suggest the need for more targeted instructional strategies to address these common difficulties. Focused practice on TOEFL-specific question types, enhanced grammar instruction, and stress management techniques could significantly benefit students. By addressing these areas, students would not only improve their English proficiency but also feel more confident and prepared when navigating the TOEFL test format.

There are some suggestions based on the findings and conclusions of the research. First, teachers are encouraged to evaluate their teaching methods to find the most effective strategies for achieving learning objectives. Additionally, they should consider incorporating TOEFL preparation courses that provide more practice with specific test structures and question types. This would help students better prepare for the TOEFL test. Second, for future researchers, it is hoped that they will explore more creative ideas and topics to further enhance the quality of learning at the university level. In addition, for those interested in studying the same issue, it is recommended to consider the limitations of this study to achieve more comprehensive and improved results.

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