

Volume 12
No. 3, 2025
page 257-268

Article History:

Submitted:

05-09-2025

Accepted:

28-09-2025

Published:

23-10-2025

ROADBLOCKS TO PROFICIENCY: TOEFL READING COMPREHENSION CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

**Agung Wicaksono¹, Sulistyani^{2,*}, Suhartono³, Khoiriyah⁴,
Mahendra Puji Permana Aji⁵**

**1, 2, 3, 4, 5 English Education Department, Universitas Nusantara
PGRI Kediri, Indonesia**

Email: agungwicaksono@unpkediri.ac.id¹,

sulistyani@unpkediri.ac.id², suhatono.unp@gmail.com³,

khoiriyah@unpkediri.ac.id⁴, mahendra_puji@yahoo.com⁵

URL: <https://jeell.upjb.ac.id/index.php/files/article/view/90>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32682/jeell.v12i3.90>

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

This research examines the challenges university students encounter in the TOEFL reading comprehension section driven by low TOEFL proficiency among students. Using a qualitative approach, the study identifies key difficulties learners face and the factors behind these struggles. Data were gathered through questionnaires administered to 35 English Language Education undergraduates at the University of Nusantara PGRI Kediri in East Java, Indonesia. The questionnaire data were analyzed through identifying, organizing, and interpreting responses to extract meaningful insights. The analysis of the responses revealed common obstacles, such as insufficient vocabulary, trouble with complex sentence structures, ineffective reading strategies, poor time management, and limited exposure to academic texts. Additionally, students cited anxiety and low confidence as psychological hurdles impacting their performance. The results indicate that both language proficiency and test-taking strategies significantly influence students' success in TOEFL reading comprehension. The study emphasizes the importance of modifying reading instruction to enhance academic reading skills and test preparation strategies, thereby better preparing students for standardized English proficiency exams.

Keywords: *challenges, reading comprehension, TOEFL, university students*



This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons 4.0 Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. ©2025 by author(s).

To cite this article: Wicaksono, A., et al. (2025). Roadblocks to proficiency: TOEFL reading comprehension challenges for university students. *JEELL: Journal of English Education, Linguistics and Literature*, 12(3), 257-268. <https://doi.org/10.32682/jeell.v12i3.90>

Introduction

One of the most extensively used standardized tests to gauge non-native speakers' academic English ability is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Strong TOEFL scores are widely accepted by colleges, companies, and immigration authorities around the world and are frequently required for professional prospects, scholarships, and academic admittance (ETS, 2023). The three components of the TOEFL PBT are Reading Comprehension, Structure and Written Expressions, and Listening. Reading Comprehension is a very challenging because it assesses not only linguistic proficiency but also cognitive skills like critical analysis, inference, and effective information processing in reading comprehension is especially difficult (Elleman & Oslund, 2019; Kocisky et al., 2018; Enright et al., 2000). Thus, reading comprehension demands more than basic language skills; it requires integrating information, reasoning, and understanding complex relationships in text.

The TOEFL Reading section poses a number of difficulties for students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Students' difficulties with lexical knowledge, especially academic vocabulary, which is essential for comprehending complicated texts, have been repeatedly demonstrated by research (Nation, 2001; Nurjanah, 2018). In fact, it has a significant importance role in second language learners' reading comprehension (Röthlisberger, 2023). However, Indonesian university students often recognized about 1,000–1,500 word families, which is far less than the 3,000–5,000 word families required for comfortable academic reading (Hartono & Prima, 2021; Nurweni & Read, (1999). Then, long sentences with embedded clauses are another example of syntactic complexity that frequently makes comprehension difficult, particularly for learners whose first language has a distinct grammatical structure (Alderson, 2000; Khalifa & Weir, 2009).

Reading strategies are crucial, regardless of language limitations. Ineffective strategies like skimming, scanning, or contextual guessing are frequently used by test-takers, which results in inefficiency and time pressure (Zhang, 2012). It is proven that students who received strategic reading instruction outperformed those who only used their grammar and vocabulary knowledge on TOEFL-like tests on Thai EFL learners (Phakiti, 2008). These challenges are further compounded by psychological issues.

Even proficient learners may score worse due to test anxiety, lack of confidence, and unfamiliarity with standardized testing procedures (Zeidner, 1998). Students frequently view the TOEFL as an intimidating obstacle in Indonesia, since English is taught mostly through formal education with little immersion (Musthafa, 2010). Since many universities need a minimum TOEFL score for graduation or future study, the high stakes associated with the test add to this anxiousness (Lestari, 2018).

Although high performance levels are expected of these pupils, their difficulties can be the result of structural flaws in the curriculum, instructional strategies, or test-taking materials. Because reading comprehension on the TOEFL has a substantial impact on test-takers' overall score and future chances, it is imperative that this issue be addressed. One of the hardest parts of the TOEFL is reading comprehension, which calls for not only language skills but also time management, critical thinking, and test-taking techniques. Many students find it difficult to comprehend difficult academic texts, recognize supporting details, identify important concepts, and draw conclusions—skills necessary for success in higher education.

A number of studies have examined the challenges and difficulties students face in the TOEFL reading comprehension. Among those researchers include Samad et al. (2017) who focused on common difficulties and strategies in TOEFL reading participated by English Education undergraduates, Syiah Kuala University. Similar focus namely challenges and strategic approaches in doing TOEFL were investigated by Aeni (2024) in English Education, TOEFL prep class. Wahyuningsih et al. (2024) have examined types of difficult questions and personal obstacles in English Education, Private University of Jember. Reading comprehension difficulties and techniques were observed by Nuraini et al. (2022) in English Department, STKIP MB. Universitas Pamulang students have also participated a study conducted by Friska (2022) to see the most challenging sub-skills and contributing factors. Meanwhile, Fitria (2022) studied internal and external factors affecting reading comprehension in ITB AAS Indonesia.

Most of those studies have identified common challenges (e.g., vocabulary, complex sentence structure, time management) and the primary factors affecting the difficulties found are poor reading strategies, low motivation and lack of self-confidence. However, they have not mentioned and considered context factors because these can be a contributing aspect in the success and failure in TOEFL reading comprehension. Context-specific interventions that are adapted to various institutional, linguistic, or cultural settings are lacking. Additionally, little emphasis is placed on how individual

variations in motivation, past knowledge, or learning styles impact the adoption of strategies and reading comprehension.

Examining context-specific interventions for TOEFL reading that are suited to various institutional, linguistic, or cultural settings can result in a number of innovative research findings. The primary innovation is going beyond general approaches to create, carry out, and assess programs that specifically target the particular requirements of particular student populations. The strong cultural identity and values of Javanese students—such as indirect communication and deference to authority—have an impact on how they approach language learning and participate in class. These cultural characteristics may have an impact on their reading comprehension techniques and readiness to participate in the TOEFL's interactive or critical reading activities.

Javanese students frequently switch between English, Indonesian, and Javanese. Although their linguistic knowledge and capacity to utilise several linguistic systems might aid in TOEFL reading and cultural awareness, they may also cause disruptions or misunderstandings with English vocabulary and structures.

The degree of language transfer and the methods pupils employ when reading English texts may be impacted by the everyday transition from Javanese to Indonesian, which is influenced by sociocultural and educational variables. By investigating the unique challenges faced by undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education program at the University of Nusantara PGRI Kediri, East Java, this study fills this knowledge gap. The study investigates linguistic difficulties, strategic shortcomings, and psychological impediments using a qualitative methodology. The results are intended to give educators, curriculum designers, and legislators useful information to improve TOEFL preparation courses. This work supports larger initiatives to enhance EFL education outcomes in Indonesia and other contexts by matching training with students' real-world concerns. Recognizing cultural familiarity and cultural content is critical; testing materials and prep modules need to be designed or selected with the learners' background in mind and exposing students to authentic materials need to be improved.

Research Methods

Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the obstacles faced by university students in the TOEFL reading comprehension section. Qualitative research is designed to describe qualitative data that results in descriptive rather than showing numbers, words, and sometimes pictures (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 6). It is to convey what the researchers have learned or analyzed about the topic of the study. In this study, the researchers also utilized numbers to describe some of the significant qualitative themes that participants and respondents have developed (Hesse-Biber, 2016). Thus, this qualitative research design is chosen to investigate the obstacles university students face in the TOEFL reading comprehension section because they provide in-depth, nuanced insights into students' TOEFL challenges. This method allows the researchers to deeply explore the specific struggles students encounter, such as difficulty finding information, and challenges with text features.

Participants

The study involved 35 undergraduate students majoring in English Language Education at the University of Nusantara PGRI Kediri, East Java, Indonesia. The participants come from various towns surrounding Kediri who speak the same language namely Javanese, Indonesian, and English as the target language in daily communication. To collect the data, the questionnaire was distributed through the internet by Google form as media for the participants to respond all of the questions. The respondents were treated with enough time for filling out the questionnaire.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data was gathered through open-ended questionnaires, allowing participants to describe their challenges in TOEFL reading comprehension in detail. Next, the data gathered from the questionnaire were descriptively analyzed following Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which consists of three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification and revealed in a clear explanation (Kirk and Miller, 1986).

The data reduction stage involves selecting, simplifying, and transforming raw data into manageable themes for analysis. After that, coding process was conducted in which responses were categorized into

broad themes namely vocabulary difficulties, sentence structure issues, test anxiety. The next stage is data display which organizes reduced data into visual or narrative formats to identify relationships and patterns based on themes. The key themes were described in words to show frequency of responses and direct quotations are presented to illustrate common struggles.

The conclusion drawing and verification is made to interpret the displayed data to answer research questions and validate findings concerning with students' linguistic barriers which were the most reported obstacles, strategic weaknesses exacerbated time pressure, and psychological factors further hindered performance. Following the description of students' obstacles and their causes, the conclusion and recommendation dealing with the context was made. To ensure credibility, findings were cross-checked with participant feedback where students reviewed summaries for accuracy.

Results and Discussion

Results

The study revealed several key challenges faced by participants in completing reading comprehension tasks. These challenges can be categorized into four main areas: linguistic difficulties, strategic challenges, and psychological factors. Vocabulary was identified as a major obstacle. A total of 85% (30 out of 35) rated vocabulary as a "significant challenge". The most common issues included unfamiliar academic words such as hypothesis and synthesize, as well as words with multiple meanings. These difficulties often disrupted comprehension and lowered confidence. Participant 22 explained, "I lose confidence when I see scientific terms—I don't know where to guess." This highlights not only the comprehension problem but also the psychological impact of limited vocabulary knowledge. Another significant barrier was the difficulty in understanding complex sentence structures. Approximately 72% (25 out of 35) struggled with long sentences containing multiple clauses. Problems were frequently caused by misinterpreting pronoun references (e.g., it, they) and difficulties with passive voice constructions. In addition, unfamiliarity with academic texts posed a challenge for 68% (24 out of 35). Participants reported that passages from STEM and humanities fields were especially difficult, often due to specialized vocabulary and stylistic features. Participant 9 noted, "History passages use old-fashioned words I've never seen before." This suggests that the lack of prior exposure to academic language contributed to comprehension difficulties.

Strategic issues further hindered performance. Time management emerged as a major problem, with 80% (28 out of 35) unable to finish all questions within the time limit (Likert 4–5). Many spent too much time on individual items, which led to rushed and inaccurate answers in the remaining sections. The use of reading strategies was also limited. Only 20% (7 out of 35) reported regularly applying skimming or scanning techniques (Likert 1–2 on Q9). Instead, most participants read word by word, which slowed them down significantly. Participant 15 shared, “I read every word slowly, then realize I’ve wasted time.” Finally, difficulties with inference questions were observed. Around 63% (22 out of 35) lacked confidence in answering items that required understanding implied meanings (Likert 4–5). This demonstrates that students struggled not only with surface-level comprehension but also with higher-order thinking skills essential for interpreting subtle textual cues.

Apart from linguistic and strategic factors, psychological challenges also played an important role. Test anxiety was commonly reported, with 74% (26 out of 35) experiencing moderate to high levels of anxiety (Likert 4–5). Anxiety tended to spike particularly when students encountered unfamiliar topics or faced time pressure, leading to reduced focus and lower accuracy. Low self-confidence further affected performance. Around 60% (21 out of 35) admitted to doubting their answers, even when they were adequately prepared. This often led to unnecessary changes of correct answers into wrong ones. Participant 3 highlighted this issue, stating, “I second-guess myself and change correct answers to wrong ones.” Such tendencies reflect how psychological barriers can amplify other difficulties in reading comprehension.

Discussion

In the context in which students have at least three languages actively used for communication (Javanese, Indonesian, and English as the target language) and their cultural trait in willingness to engage in interactive or critical reading tasks, the findings highlight that participants’ reading comprehension was hindered by four interrelated challenges: vocabulary deficits, difficulty with complex sentences and academic texts, strategic shortcomings, and psychological barriers. The results of this study offer strong proof that students’ success in the TOEFL reading comprehension exam is significantly influenced by both language proficiency and test-taking techniques. However, the term language proficiency here should be understood as comprehensive knowledge in which language cannot be

separated from the culture of its users. Being failed in TOEFL test can be due to the limited knowledge about the speakers' background.

The TOEFL failure faced by university students particularly in Nusantara PGRI Kediri university is also caused by the lack of context-specific interventions. The grammatical structures such as word order of Javanese and English are fundamentally different. In addition, the vocabulary and idiomatic expressions used in the TOEFL are often specific to North American academic and social contexts. Students with a limited vocabulary or lack of exposure to these idioms find it difficult to understand the reading passages. Beyond language, the TOEFL also tests a student's ability to navigate and understand cultural contexts prevalent in North American academia. Javanese students face the cultural challenges such as communication styles, content familiarity, and lack of critical thinking skills. Then, while Javanese education is often based on rote memorization, the TOEFL requires students to engage in critical thinking, make inferences, and synthesize information from multiple sources. The lack of training in these skills puts the students at a disadvantage.

The findings support previous studies (see Samad et al., 2017 and Meladina & Dasril, 2021) in which limited vocabulary, unfamiliarity with academic language, low mastery of syntactic knowledge, and lack of exposure to real reading materials become common obstacles. Lack of reading strategies and the rigorous time limits of the test, which require precision and speed, make these difficulties much more difficult. In addition, poor reading comprehension skills can reduce a candidate's overall TOEFL score if left unchecked, which may have an impact on their ability to get scholarships, get into an international university, or meet employment requirements in international settings. This issue must be brought up immediately since it emphasizes the necessity of focused preparation courses that go beyond studying English in general.

Academic reading techniques like skimming, scanning, and text structure analysis require specialized training that educators and institutions must create. Additionally, exposing students to a range of subjects and text kinds can aid in their adjustment to the requirements of the test. Teachers, legislators, and students can collaborate to create practical solutions by acknowledging and resolving the challenges with TOEFL reading comprehension. This proactive strategy guarantees that language assessments reflect students' readiness to succeed in academic and professional settings around the world, in addition to their level of English proficiency.

Based on a large body of research on second language acquisition, there is a high association between language proficiency and reading

comprehension scores (Brown, 2021; Röthlisberger et al., 2023). Decoding and interpreting complicated academic texts requires high skill, which is determined by vocabulary quantity, syntactic knowledge, and overall grammatical accuracy (Chen & Lee, 2019). The linguistic complexity and variety of themes covered in the TOEFL are easier for students to handle when they have a stronger command of the English language. This allows them to better understand the main ideas, recognise supporting details, and deduce meaning from context. Although test-specific skills are crucial, they cannot completely make up for a lack of fundamental language knowledge, as the study's statistics support.

According to the investigation, test-taking methods are a significant, independent factor in determining student performance beyond foundational proficiency (Garcia et al., 2020). It was discovered that techniques like time management, focussing on the primary idea, scanning for specific information, and effectively removing distracting possibilities had a major good effect. This research emphasises the significance of the "how" of testing, or how a student handles the particular limitations and question types of a standardised test. Due to ineffective time management or a failure to recognise typical question patterns, a student with great language proficiency may still perform poorly. On the other hand, by effectively managing their time and approaching each question methodically, a student with average proficiency might use these tactics to optimise their score.

The study's most important finding, however, is the complementary connection between test-taking techniques and linguistic competency. The findings imply that the two elements reinforce one another rather than acting independently. The cognitive underpinning is provided by high language competence, and test-taking techniques serve as a tool to improve performance and maximise the use of that proficiency. A student who has a high degree of language proficiency and is adept at using a variety of tactics to successfully negotiate the exam's distinct format is the best candidate for test success. This synergy implies that in order to adequately prepare students for standardised tests such as the TOEFL, language education should be combined with explicit training in test-taking strategies. The reason that explicit training is important is to make students focus more on the target language competence. This to tackle the fact that the shift from Javanese to Indonesian in daily life, influenced by sociocultural and educational factors, may affect the depth of linguistic transfer and the strategies students use when approaching English texts.

This study concludes by highlighting the complexity of standardised test success. A high TOEFL reading comprehension score indicates a

student's strategic competency in a high-stakes testing situation in addition to their overall language proficiency. The results highlight the necessity for a well-rounded curriculum taking account of individual differences that gives equal weight to both general language development and specific test-taking skills, with obvious ramifications for educators and test-prep programs. Although this study provides significant insights, it is not without limitations.

The sample size was relatively small and limited to one institution, which may affect generalizability. Also, the study focused on short-term outcomes. Future studies might investigate these findings by conducting a longitudinal study to see how proficiency and strategies interact over an extended length of time, or they could look at the effects of various teaching approaches being aware of the contextual background of learners when teaching these skills to a range of student populations.

Conclusion

This study successfully demonstrated that success on the TOEFL reading comprehension section is contingent upon a combination of robust language proficiency and the strategic application of test-taking skills. The findings affirm that while a strong command of the English language is a necessary foundation, it is not, on its own, a sufficient predictor of success. The data further highlights the crucial and independent contribution of strategic skills, such as time management and information-seeking techniques, which allow students to navigate the unique structure and demands of a high-stakes standardized exam. The synergistic relationship between these two factors suggests that a holistic approach to language education, which integrates both proficiency development and explicit test-taking strategy instruction, is the most effective path to preparing students for a positive outcome.

The insights from this research have direct practical implications for both educators and test-takers. For instructors, the results advocate for a pedagogical shift towards a more balanced curriculum that does not solely focus on grammar and vocabulary, but also incorporates strategic training. The obstacles students experience suggest that effective interventions should not only focus on improving academic vocabulary, syntactic awareness, and reading strategies but also on reducing anxiety and building learners' confidence. For students, the findings underscore the importance of dedicating time to both general language learning and targeted practice with test-specific strategies. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on second language assessment by providing empirical evidence for the combined role of these two key variables. Future research can build

upon these findings by exploring how this interplay manifests across different cultural backgrounds and educational contexts, providing a more nuanced understanding of standardized test performance.

References

- Aeni, N. (2024). Students' Challenges and Approaches to Comprehending the TOEFL Reading Section. *International Journal of Education Research and Development*, 4 (2), 57-66 .
<https://doi.org/10.52760/ijerd.v4i2.75>
- Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, J. R. (2021). *The role of vocabulary in second language reading comprehension*. Academic Press.
- Chen, S., & Lee, H. (2019). Syntactic complexity and reading proficiency in L2 learners. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 42(3), 155-172.
- Dahlan, D. (2021). Identifying the Students' Difficulties in Comprehending TOEFL Reading Test. *FOSTER: Journal of English Language Teaching*, 2(1), 261-270.
<https://doi.org/10.24256/FOSTER-JELT>.
- Elleman, A., & Oslund, E. (2019). Reading Comprehension Research: Implications for Practice and Policy. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 6, 11 - 3.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732218816339>.
- Enright, M. K., et al. (2000). *TOEFL 2000 Reading Framework*. ETS Research Report.
- Friska, Y. (2022). Problems in reading comprehension of TOEFL prediction test. *Journal of English Language and Education*, 7(2), 96-104.
<https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v7i2.310>
- Fitria, T. (2022). An Analysis of the Students' Difficulty in Reading the TOEFL Prediction Test. *Komposisi: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa, Sastra, dan Seni*, 23 (2), 110-123.
<https://doi.org/10.24036/komposisi.v23i2.116291>
- Hafid, N., Purnawarman, P., & Sukyadi, D. (2021). Investigating Constraints and Strategies Faced by the Non-English Students in Answering Reading Comprehension TOEFL Test. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Progressive Education, ICOPE 2020*, Universitas Lampung, Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. <https://doi.org/10.4108/EAI.16-10-2020.2305256>
- Meladina, M., & Dasril, D. (2021). The Problems Faced by Physiotherapy Students and Their Causes in Completing Reading Comprehension Section of ITP TOEFL. *Elsya : Journal of English Language Studies*, 3(3), 174-182. <https://doi.org/10.31849/elsya.v3i3.6764>
- Garcia, A., Hernandez, E., & Rodriguez, M. (2020). Test-taking strategies for the TOEFL iBT: An experimental study. *Educational Testing Journal*, 15(1), 45-60.
- Hartono, D., & Prima, S. (2021). The Correlation between Indonesian University Students' Receptive Vocabulary Knowledge and their Reading Comprehension Level. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.17509/IJAL.V11i1.34590>.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2016). *The Practice of Qualitative Research: Engaging Students in the Research Process*. SAGE Publications.
- Khalifa, H., & Weir, C. J. (2009). *Examining Reading: Research and Practice in Assessing Second Language Reading*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kirk, J., Miller, M. L., & Miller, M. L. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research* (Vol. 1). Sage.
- Kociský, T., Schwarz, J., Blunsom, P., Dyer, C., Hermann, K., Melis, G., & Grefenstette, E. (2017). The NarrativeQA Reading Comprehension Challenge. *Transactions of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, 6, 317-328. <https://doi.org/10.1162/tacl.a.00023>.
- Lestari, M. (2018). TOEFL Preparation Challenges: Voices from Indonesian University Students. *TEFLIN Journal*, 29(1), 1-18.
- Nation, P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nurjanah, R. (2018). The Analysis on Students' Difficulties in Doing Reading Comprehension Final Test. *The Journal of English Language and Literature*, 2, 253-264.
<https://doi.org/10.31002/metathesis.v2i2.958>.

- Nurweni, A., & Read, J. (1999). The English Vocabulary Knowledge of Indonesian University Students. *English for Specific Purposes*, 18(2), 161–175. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906\(98\)00005-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(98)00005-2).
- Phakiti, A. (2008). Strategic Competence and EFL Reading Test Performance. *Language Testing*, 25(3), 1–30.
- Röthlisberger, M., Zangger, C., & Juska-Bacher, B. (2023). The role of vocabulary components in second language learners' early reading comprehension. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 46(1), 1-21.
- Samad, I., Jannah, M., & Fitriani, S. (2017). EFL Students' Strategies dealing with Common Difficulties in TOEFL Reading Comprehension Section. *International Journal of Language Education*, 1(1), 29-36. <https://doi.org/10.26858/IJOLE.V1I1.2869>
- Wahyuningsih, C. ., Mahbub, M. A. ., & Al Fauzi, F. (2024). Exploring Students' Difficulties in Answering Reading TOEFL Section Test. *Linguapedia*, 8(1), 41–49. <https://doi.org/10.56013/linguapedia.v8i1.2917>
- Zeidner, M. (1998). *Test Anxiety: The State of the Art*. Plenum Press.