

Students' Perceptions on the TOEFL Test and Its Relevant Factors

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ABSTRACT

This study explores students' perceptions of the TOEFL test and the relevant factors influencing their English proficiency. The TOEFL test has become a mandatory component in many Indonesian higher education institutions and is widely required in professional sectors. Using a qualitative approach, the research involved undergraduate students from a privately funded university who had completed a TOEFL course. Data were collected through written interviews to ensure authenticity and minimize researcher influence. The findings reveal that students acknowledge the importance of TOEFL for academic and employment opportunities. However, many perceive the official TOEFL test as financially burdensome and question its ability to fully reflect their English capabilities, particularly for those who acquired English informally. Students also emphasized the need for more practical language skills, such as oral communication, in addition to test preparation. The study concludes that English instruction should align with students' future career needs while maintaining the validity of standardized assessment tools.

Keywords:

TOEFL Test, Student Perceptions, English Proficiency, Language Assessment, Higher Education, Communicative Skills, Standardized Testing

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INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have confirmed the use of English in numerous fields, such as business, employment, education, and even the dissemination of research or science (Ismail & Pek, 2023; Tauhid et al., 2022; Himawati, 2018; Englander, 2014; Muresan, & Pérez-Llantada, 2014). In the Indonesian context, scholars have also confirmed the use of English in education (Khasbani, 2019). Despite the absence of English teaching at the elementary level in some schools, English subject and further continued with regular test is commonly required in formal education from junior to high school. In other schools, English is even used as a medium of instruction (Khasbani, 2019; Mubarok & Sofiana, 2022).

Admittedly, English is important because it is globally used as a means of communication regardless of the people's background, profession, and culture (Crystal, 2003; Rohmah, 2005). Given the increasing role of social media driving people to communicate and interact worldwide massively, the use of English has been important as it helps people to interact more effectively and understandably (Karimah, 2021; Mukminin et al., 2023; Pikhart & Botezat, 2021). In sum, the role of English as a global language allows people around the world to communicate much more quickly than other possible international languages.

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Up to now, there have been many studies conducted in English language learning and other relevant factors (Amelia et al., 2024; Alamsyah & Dewi, 2021; Maji et al., 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2024). However, fewer studies have been conducted concerning the use of the TOEFL test and how the TOEFL subject is conducted in the English department (See e.g., Halim, & Ardiningtyas, 2018; Narayana, & Soepriyanti, 2023). In fact, the students' English capacity has been generally analysed through several standardized tests, and TOEFL is one of the very few standardized test enabling the learners to identify their English capacity. Using TOEFL means that the relevant education stakeholders can probably figure out the participants' abilities in English in more objective and reliable manner.

Furthermore, these formal tests are commonly taught in all English departments in Indonesian higher education context. Similarly, the TOEFL test has been mandatory for anyone who wishes to pursue a higher degree in formal Indonesian education (Karjo, & Ronaldo, 2019). Further, the application of TOEFL has also been required to accept workers or professionals in numerous fields, such as government workers or even the managers of companies (Mokodompit, 2023). The research aims to identify the students' perceptions of the significance of the TOEFL test to their future careers as language learners and potential professionals, as well as the TOEFL learning process conducted in their literature department. The research questions are formulated as follows: a) How do the students describe their perceptions of the TOEFL test?. b) How do the students describe their perceptions of TOEFL learning process conducted in their department? .

METHODS

Research design

The present study was conducted in qualitative research. The use of qualitative is related to the researcher's goal to identify the students' perception toward their TOEFL test, and also the relationship between English test and their potential English skill as a whole. Apparently, qualitative is used to identify the students' perception toward their own world (i.e. the TOEFL test). The researcher acts only to describe the students' perception without interfering or influencing their perceptions. Cleland (2017) elaborates that qualitative research focuses on the attempt to understand people's experience in a simple, easy, and analytical. Further, it also helps to seek answers using a systematically pre-defined set of procedures. In sum, the qualitative studies are commonly conducted in order that the researchers can possibly have more dependable data on the participants' experience, and the meaning that they describe regarding their experience (Lim, 2024). In sum, the attempt to identify and describe the participants' perceptions on TOEFL and their experience when learning TOEFL should be conducted in qualitative.

Participants

Participants on the present study were the students who are currently studying in a privately funded university majoring in Management and Accounting. The students are currently studying in the first semester. As one of the requirements for their thesis, prior to graduation the students must take a TOEFL test. To accomplish the above objective, all of the first semester students taking either Management or Accounting are given TOEFL course.

Instruments

Instruments are tools that the researcher used to elicit the data from the participants. in the present study, the researcher used interview as her research instruments. Interview is beneficial in some respects, for instance, it can elicit data, which are more elaborate compared with questionnaire. However, due to the potentially complicated and influential impact that the researcher has to her students, the researcher applied the written interview to her students. In this case, the data elicited will be written account instead of oral account. Letherby and Zdrowski (1995 as cited in Handy, & Ross, 2005, p. 41) confirm that given the commonly involved qualitative research, which requires transcribing verbal interviews into written text, abstracting

key themes from these texts, written accounts may sometimes generate data which is easier to engage with and analyse than verbal interviews.

There are two research questions in the present study. The following are the research questions directed to the students focusing the TOEFL and other relevant aspects.

First research questions

- a. Are you planning to take official TOEFL test or unofficial one?
- b. Are there any possible challenges/difficulties when taking TOEFL test?
- c. Do you think that the result of TOEFL test indicates the overall English skill)?
- d. How important is the TOEFL test for you as an accounting/ management student?
- e. How important is the TOEFL test for you when seeking a job?
- f. How important is the TOEFL test to improve your career?

Second research questions

- a. What do you think about the TOEFL learning process conducted in your college?
- b. What do you think about the lecturers who teach TOEFL in your college?
- c. What do you think about the learning media and the other learning sources used to learn TOEFL in your college?
- d. Do you think that learning TOEFL can significantly increase your English ability?

Data analysis

As the data were mostly taken from written text consisting the participants' responses (written interviews), the researcher employed theme analysis. The steps of data analysis were simplified from the steps of theme analysis offered by Naeem et al. (2023)

- a. Familiarization with the data
In the first step, the researcher usually transcribes the data and tries to familiarize with the data.
- b. Selection of keywords,
In the second step, the researcher usually examines the data closely. The data which consists of recurring patterns, terms or visual elements are designated as keywords.
- c. Coding
In the third step, the researcher identifies potential codes which are generally derived from short phrases or words, known as codes.
- d. Theme development
Further, the researcher develops the themes. This action involves organizing codes into meaningful groups to identify patterns and relationships, thus providing insights into the research question.

Data collection procedure

- a. The researcher proposed the title of the research along with the focuses of her research to the head of department.
- b. After gaining approval, the researcher writes the research proposal.
- c. The researcher plans to elicit the data from the participants.
- d. The participants are notified approximately three a week before data elicitation.
- e. The participants are gathered in one class and given the research instruments containing items to elicit their perceptions on TOEFL and other relevant questions.

- f. Prior to the distribution of the written question, the students are given necessary information on the research, the purpose, and the right of the participants in the research.
- g. After the collection of written interviews, the researcher analysed the data using the theme analysis (Naeem et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of the TOEFL Test

Theme	Number of Responses (N = 73)
Official TOEFL test is perceived as useful for multiple purposes, such as scholarships, employment, or higher education prerequisites.	43
Taking an unofficial TOEFL test is considered more affordable.	11
The cost of the official TOEFL test is perceived as expensive.	19
TOEFL test requires advanced English skills to succeed.	12
Students encounter various challenges in specific TOEFL sections. The most difficult is the listening section, followed by reading and structure.	61
There is a strong correlation between TOEFL scores and overall English proficiency.	52
Some students argue that TOEFL scores do not reflect real English ability, especially for those who learn English informally.	21

Table 1 illustrates students' perceptions of the TOEFL test based on responses from seventy-three participants. The most prominent concern was the difficulty of specific sections, with listening identified as the most challenging, followed by reading and structure. A significant number of students acknowledged the TOEFL test as a valuable requirement for academic and professional purposes, yet many expressed concern about the high cost of the official test, prompting some to prefer more affordable unofficial alternatives. While over half of the participants believed that TOEFL scores reflect overall English proficiency, others argued that the test does not fairly assess the abilities of learners who acquire English informally. These responses highlight both the perceived importance of TOEFL and the practical challenges students face in engaging with it.

Table 2. Students' Perceptions of the TOEFL Learning Process in Their Department

Theme	Number of Responses (N = 73)
The TOEFL teaching process conducted at the university is generally well-perceived by students.	52
There is a need for more interactive learning tools or applications to support independent learning.	11
TOEFL learning is important, but greater emphasis should be placed on oral communication skills for career readiness.	10

The Role Of TOEFL Test For Employment

It is undoubtedly true that the TOEFL test has been widely recognized as a test that indicates the ability of English learners. However, some scholars also consider that TOEFL is

mainly used to identify the learners' English ability for scientific or educational purposes (Badu, 2020). She argues that despite the wide recognition of TOEFL test results in some agencies or employment that require this test. TOEFL test is more relevant to the educational aspect. For instance, the recognition of TOEFL can be used as a requirement for postgraduate or doctoral programs in Indonesian and foreign countries. Specifically, the TOEFL is required by 4,400 universities and colleges worldwide at the graduate and undergraduate levels (Abraham, 1990, as cited in Badu, 2020).

Given the above academic emphasis, scholars perceive that the English test should not be given in the form of a TOEFL test. They perceive that the role of TOEIC as a benchmark for employment or professional purposes is more relevant. Specifically, Gaspar and Haryanto (2018) scrutinized the two international tests and perceived TOEIC as more appropriate as it measures the ability to communicate in everyday life. For instance, the TOEIC texts given in the tests mostly signify various business activities, such as advertising, meetings, or writing application letters.

In sum, the students' positive perceptions identified in the study were relevant to what Rahmi (2025) has researched in that she recognized that most of the students who had the TOEFL test had a positive effect on the TOEFL Test. Specifically, she analyzed the students graduating from UIN Mahmud Yunus. The participants were 373 students who graduated from UIN Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar. She used mixed methods, questionnaires, and interviews as supporting instruments. The research findings stipulate that most students indicated positive effects on the TOEFL test, as indicated by 78.87%. All graduates had positive effects on the TOEFL test applied on their campus. Unlike the above finding, the present study slightly indicated fewer positive perceptions toward TOEFL, particularly the official one. Of the 73 participants, 54 planned to take the official TOEFL test (approximately 73.97%). In comparison, the rest showed doubt due to the perceived expensive cost of the official TOEFL test, as indicated by 11 participants (approximately 15.06%); thus, taking an unofficial test might be better as it is more affordable.

The Role Of TOEFL TES In Signifying The Students' Overall English Ability And Employment Reality

While recognizing TOEFL as the primary standard for measuring the students' English skills (Ling et al., 2014), the research conducted by Meisuri et al. (2022) confirmed that most students he researched tended to disagree that the institutional TOEFL test could measure four English skills. The participants thought the test could not measure the four English skills because it lacked writing and speaking aspects. Most respondents disagree with using the institutional TOEFL as the only English proficiency test since it is too difficult for those who do not use English daily. They thought there must be other English proficiency tests that could be utilized.

Despite the above debates, most scholars agree that higher institutions need to prepare students' English skills, which are more relevant for employment (Prasetya, 2023). In this case, English teaching practices in college should be geared to the needs of employment and not only to linguistic skills, which generally end with the TOEFL test indicating their scores.

Affordability vs Quality

The mushrooming TOEFL test, provided by local or non-English institutions, has also attracted many English learners. It should be admitted that the reason for taking English TOEFL-like tests is chiefly affordability. It has been commonly known that the official TOEFL test charges are expensive for test takers (IDP, 2025). The online TOEFL test or institutional TOEFL test can also measure the student's ability to understand the basic skills of the test takers' English skills. Further studies should also highlight the issue of affordability so that the students who learn English can be adequately evaluated and motivated to take TOEFL or another test, which indicates their English skills more objectively. It is also possible that the institutions provide more options for the students so that they can choose the test based on their preferences rather than the requirement from the higher institution.

CONCLUSION

The role of TOEFL is undoubtedly important for English learners as it can identify the learners' abilities more objectively. Given the instrumental purposes that most learners have, the English lecturers and those involved in English teaching in college should be meticulously aware of the learning objective stated in the curricula. In fact, with the increasing demand for employability of higher education graduates, higher education stakeholders should also identify the relevance of English learning and their future potential employment. For instance, those who learn English in the English department and those who learn English in Management or Accounting should have different emphases on how they should learn, and they will be tested. It is important as the English they must apply in future employment might differ. Furthermore, the need to communicate more effectively should also become an essential consideration among the education stakeholders, so teaching English in a higher education context should teach them language and harness the students to communicate more effectively in their future employment.

The study was conducted using a qualitative method. Unlike the quantitative paradigm, qualitative emphasizes more effort in capturing the students' perspective on TOEFL and other relevant factors than in meticulously identifying the numerical aspects of the participants. In other words, the present study merely focused on the themes that might be perceived as important and generate potential new findings for further study. Further study should be conducted in quantitative studies involving more participants so that the precise figure and perception can be measured more precisely, leading to more valid and reliable data. Additionally, the students recruited in the present study were those learning English with the researcher in the English class. Therefore, the relationship between the researcher and her students might also affect the study results.

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