

**AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' PROBLEMS IN THE READING SECTION OF  
TEST OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (TOEFL) : A STUDY AT  
SENIOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT, MATARAM  
UNIVERSITY IN ACADEMIC YEAR 2015/2016**



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**By:**

**RISMA AYU  
E1D112105**

**ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDY PROGRAM  
LANGUAGE AND ART DEPARTMENT  
FACULTY OF TEACHER TRAINING AND EDUCATION  
MATARAM UNIVERSITY**

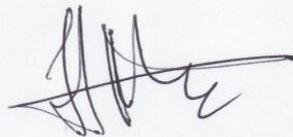
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## RATIFICATION

An article entitled “AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS’ PROBLEMS IN THE READING SECTION OF TEST OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (TOEFL) : A STUDY AT SENIOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT, MATARAM UNIVERSITY IN ACADEMIC YEAR 2015/2016 2015/2016” by Risma Ayu (E1D112105) has been approved as partial fulfillment of the requirements for Bachelor Degree in English Education, Department Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Mataram.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Arafiq', written over a horizontal line.

**Arafiq, S.Pd., M. Hum.**  
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**Risma Ayu, I Made Sujana, Arafik**

**University of Mataram**

**ABSTRACT**

This study is aimed at identifying the types of students' problems in answering the TOEFL reading subtest and the causes of the students encounter the problem. The population of this study is senior students from semester 6 and above of English Education Department at Mataram University, Indonesia. However, the number of sample is 60 students, taken by using purposive sampling. The data is gathered through a test of TOEFL Reading, questionnaire, and interview. This is a kind of descriptive study which data is employed by quantitative and qualitative method. The findings reveal that: 1) the types of students' problems in answering the test are on eight topics that cover the question types about unstated detail, implied detail, vocabulary in context, a question of organization, main idea, stated detail, a question of tone, and referent; 2) the causes of students encounter the problem are manifested through the internal factor of students' perception, feeling, thought, and experience in working with the TOEFL such as they have less vocabulary, their behavior in reading the text gradually, often repeating the text they read, getting stuck in part of the difficult text, and working the test in hurry that make the students were unable to finish the test on time. Besides, the students did not use exact strategies as they had been taught by their lecturers.

*Key words: TOEFL, reading comprehension test, students' problems.*

**ANALISIS PERMASALAHAN MAHASISWA DALAM SOAL READING TOEFL  
(TES BAHASA INGGRIS SEBAGAI BAHASA ASING) PADA MAHASISWA  
BAHASA INGGRIS FAKULTAS KEGURUAN DAN ILMU PENDIDIKAN  
UNIVERSITAS MATARAM TAHUN AKADEMIK 2015/2016**

**Risma Ayu, I Made Sujana, Arafik**

**Universitas Mataram**

**ABSTRAK**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi jenis masalah yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa dalam menjawab soal bagian Reading dalam TOEFL, serta faktor kendala dalam menjawabnya. Populasi dalam penelitian ini adalah mahasiswa senior jurusan pendidikan bahasa inggris di universitas mataram Indonesia, mulai dari semester 6 keatas. Subjek yang diambil sebanyak 60 mahasiswa melalui *purposive sampling*. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui tes bagian Reading dalam TOEFL, kuesioner, dan interview. Dengan demikian, jenis penelitian ini merupakan studi deskripsi dimana data diolah secara kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Sehingga hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan 1) Jenis masalah yang dihadapi mahasiswa dalam menjawab soal Reading TOEFL ditemukan dalam delapan jenis atau topic pertanyaan diantaranya adalah pertanyaan mengenai *unstated detail, implied detail, vocabulary in context, a question of organization, main idea, stated detail, a question of tone*, dan *referent*; 2) Penyebab mahasiswa dalam menjawab tes ialah berasal dari faktor internal mahasiswa itu sendiri yang meliputi sikap dan pengalaman mereka saat menghadapi tes seperti penguasaan kosa-kata bahasa inggris yang kurang, faktor sikap atau cara yang selalu membaca soal terkesan lambat, mengulang-ulang, terfokus dan berhenti pada teks yang sulit dipahami, dimana tes tersebut memiliki rentang waktu yang sangat terbatas, dan selalu terburu-buru sehingga membuat mereka tak dapat menyelesaikan tes secara tepat waktu. Selain itu, para mahasiswa juga tidak pernah menggunakan strategi yang telah diajari oleh dosen.

Kata kunci: TOEFL, Pemahaman Reading, Permasalahan Mahasiswa

## **1. Background of the Study**

Most students and employees whose first language is not English have been constrained to join a test of English. That is TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), which is known as one of the International assessment tools that has been recognized and respected for testing English proficiency (Warfield *et al.*, 2013) cited in Mahmud (2014) since English is used as a main language to communicate across the world.

As a matter of fact, many people especially students are unable to pass the threshold English proficiency score being standardized. Actually, some institutions' requirements vary in terms of TOEFL minimum score. In English Education Department of Mataram University, Indonesia, has embodied a benchmark policy for the college undergraduates to achieve a minimum TOEFL score of 500 for graduation. Afterwards, from random interviews the researcher has done, it indicates that students are burdened with the current minimal score policy being governed.

As noted earlier by Sujana, Syahrial, and Fitriana (2005) who has analyzed the English Education Department of Mataram University students' problems with the TOEFL delivered the result that overall, on average 51.3 percent answered correctly. Further for any section was answered 52 percent correctly in the Listening Section, 52 percent in the Structure and Written Expression, and 50 percent in the Reading Section.

This converts into a problem, because rationally they are English students then it should be no matter in resorting TOEFL. Therefore, this challenges the researcher's inquiry to investigate the senior students' problems in countering TOEFL and the

causes that make the students encounter the problem will be attempted to submerge, since answering Reading Section was the lowest score they could achieve.

## **2. Review of Related Study**

Many researchers disagree when reading is just decoding or recognizing an individual word which sounds out the phonemes, yet deeper than it, 'to understand the message and content of text'. NARAP in 2006 has confirmed the definition of Reading from Collaborative Panel among stakeholders of educational community in determining the term that reading is centered on understanding (Cline, 2006).

That is what the readers need to do while working with the Reading comprehension section of TOEFL, since reading comprehension is seen as an 'interactive process' (Wood and Connelly, 2009) that the students must integrate their cognitive with the text with their aim to get the meaning, messages, and information related. And it is affected by our background knowledge, experience, vocabulary master, and strategy in getting understanding of reading (Alderson, 2000).

However, TOEFL is transformed into three version such as Paper Based Test (PBT), Computer Based Test (CBT), and Internet Based Test (IBT). The most common type for test version is PBT, and Mataram University still utilizes it. However, the test has limited time to solve. Hence the readers as test takers need strategy to work it. It depends on how test takers work with their particular cognitive style profile and degree of cognitive flexibility, their language knowledge, and their repertoire of test-taking strategies (Cohen and Upton, 2006) because different reader or student has certain strategy which match for him/ herself, for example skimming (pay attention the subheading) strategy might working to the certain students but might be unable to apply by other students. The main thing is choose the right strategy for the right occasion (Skehan, 1991, p.20) cited in Majid and Mohamad (2011).

In working the test, the students still find the problems. As it has found by Sujana et. Al (2005) were determining topic and main idea, comprehending fact and detail, interpreting contextual vocabulary, finding referent, understanding tones, and also finding inference and conclusion.

Consequently, after ten years running, it is attempted to do research about the students' problem which still happened in the present-day.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This present research aimed at identifying the students' problems in the Reading section of TOEFL and the factor is causing the problem. The research was conducted in English Department Faculty of Teacher Training and Education in University of Mataram in which the population was senior students of afternoon classes. The subject in this research was limited to senior students who were in semester 6 to 14 who have passed Listening courses I, II, and III. As a result, 60 of them became the sample of the research. The data were collected through TOEFL test, questionnaire, and interview. There are some actions were conducted:

1. During the period of testing, the students were given 50 questions of Reading subtest of TOEFL within 55 minutes to complete. Then identifying the students' correct and incorrect answers and the types of questions of their problem.
2. They were given a questionnaire sheet, consisting of 25 statements of 4 likert-scale that need to be filled up. This questionnaire is aimed at submerging their problems in experiencing the TOEFL test.
3. In addition, to ensure the data finding, there was also an interview section for twelve respondents who could represent the entire sample. It is clear

that the researcher obtained the data using triangulation techniques in order to obtain some descriptions of the research result.

#### **4. Research Finding and Discussion**

From the TOEFL Reading subtest, the students' problems in the test are found. The indicator of the question types that the researcher takes into account as the students' problems is while the incorrect answers is 'bigger than' or 'equal to' the correct answers, and/or the failure is seen if 'incorrect  $\geq$  30 students' (in words, if a half or more than a half students of sixty total students answer incorrectly).

It has been known that the question items which become the students' difficulties are indicated to 29 questions that cover 8 topics problem as tabled. As a result, the difficulties appear to be 58 percent of items problem. Meanwhile, the 21 rest questions which are indicated to 42 percent are not considered to be the problems since the number of students who answered correctly is bigger than those who answered incorrectly.

In addition, the number of students who answered incorrectly or failed of those total items problem is on average 67 percent. It means that the number of student succeeded in working with the TOEFL Reading test is on average 33 percent.

Their difficulties are covered into eight types of problem based on the question topics of the subtest. Those are the topics about 'Unstated Detail', 'Implied Detail', 'Vocabulary in Context', 'Organization', 'Main Idea', 'Stated Detail', 'Tone', and also 'Referent'.

It is important to consider the causes of the problem. It is found that the students' problems were appearing through the internal factor of students. The causes as has stated at above findings are similar to what Alderson has explored about the factors affecting the difficulty of reading test on his book entitled 'Assessing Reading' (2000: 93). First of all is the text length. In this case, the students' thought reading

passages are too long and unfamiliar for them. Thus, they are getting hard to understand the words. Based on the findings, this because the students are lack of vocabulary. Most students did not use any specific strategy since TOEFL particularly in reading passage has a limited time to solve, while the students must struggle with the long and difficult text, then strategy is a must.

In addition, most students' behavior when facing the TOEFL especially on reading comprehension section becomes a problem. Indeed, it influences their score achievement while their behavior as well as presence or looking back or repeating action while reading, they read was too rapidly, and they led themselves stuck on the difficult part of the text. Those behavior could waste the time provided, and indeed, made them work in hurry. As a result, they could not finish the test on time.

Their perception on reading as a boring activity is having an influence while working with the test. As Alderson (2000: 93) stated appreciation, joy, and individual interpretation which simply cannot be measure are affecting the reading during test.

The findings from ten years ago that has done by Sujana *et al.* (2005) where the English students' problems were on determining main idea, comprehending detail, finding referent, scanning the tone question, and interpreting vocabulary in context.

However, compared to the previous study, this research revealed its differentiation that the result of students' ability in working with the test is getting worse. Previously, it has resulted a balance between 50 percent respondents failed in answering 25 items question that become the problem (Sujana, *et al.*, 2005).

Lately, from the total 50 reading items question with 60 students as the test takers proved that there were 58 percent which indicated to 29 item questions were considered to be the problem. Meanwhile, the rest was 42 percent which indicated to 21 item questions did not considered to be the problem since it is contrast with the

indicator being governed. In addition, the number of the students who failed to answer the test correctly is on average 67 percent.

Finally, because of the problems happened generally, it reminds us that all students must put their outreach efforts in terms of working with the TOEFL especially on Reading section. Most importantly, it is truly expected to have a policy of TOEFL as a new independent lecture to help students become accustomed in working with TOEFL test, since it is a requirement for graduation in university.

## **5. Conclusion**

After conducting the research, some conclusions can be concluded. The fact that, from the total 50 reading item questions with 60 students as the test takers proved that there were 58 percent items question become the problem. In addition, the number of students who failed to answer correctly is on average 67 percent.

Their difficulties are covered into eight types of problem based on the question topics of the subtest. Those are the topics about 'Unstated Detail', 'Implied Detail', 'Vocabulary in Context', 'Organization', 'Main Idea', 'Stated Detail', 'Tone', and also 'Referent'.

Indeed, the causes of their problem in answering the subtest were found. It is manifested through the internal factor of students' perception, feeling, thought, and experience in working with the TOEFL such as they are lack of vocabulary, their behavior in reading the text gradually, presence or repeating the text they read, getting stuck in part of the difficult text, and working it in hurry that make the students unable to finish the test on time. Besides, the students did not use exact strategies as they had been taught by their lecturers. In addition, their feeling and thought about reading is a boring activity that would affect their mind in working with the reading test, since reading activity needs the joy and appreciation.

## 6. Suggestion

One of the researcher's expectations is that this paper can assist the EFL (English Foreign Language) students and teachers to be aware of the problems as has explored, then overcome it as soon as possible for the sake of better quality of education. Hence, by doing this research experience, the researcher offer some worthy suggestions that need to be considered: 1) Since they are the students of English Department, therefore they must put their much effort in engaging with the TOEFL by recognizing the types of questions, in order to know the kind of appropriate tactic or strategy to overcome the test; 2) The students need to improve their English vocabulary to help them understand the English words especially in reading test that uses high academic words frequently. Try to keep reading, memorizing, and applying the words in daily either written or spoken; 3) The faculty should now provide credit point for TOEFL or IELTS or other English proficiency test as an independent lecture to have them accustomed in working with the tests. The fact that tests are required to accomplish for university graduation, also for enrolling to the new institutions either to study or work; 4) It is suggested also for the EFL teachers to improve their teaching methods, and become consistent to give best for the students.

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