
EFL LEARNERS' ABILITY IN ANSWERING STRUCTURE AND WRITTEN EXPRESSION SECTION ON TOEFL PREDICTION TEST

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ABSTRACT

This study examines EFL students' ability in answering the Structure and Written Expression section of a TOEFL prediction test. Using a descriptive quantitative approach, the participants were 10 seventh-semester students of the English Education Department at UMMY Solok in the 2023/2024 academic year. Data were collected through a 40-item TOEFL prediction test. The results indicate that students' performance was categorized as poor in both sections. In the Structure section, the average number of correct answers was 5 (33%), while in the Written Expression section, the average was 10 (40%). The findings reveal that students experienced difficulties, particularly in identifying verb tenses. Therefore, it is recommended that students undertake more systematic preparation to improve their grammatical competence before taking the TOEFL test.

Keyword: TOEFL, structure and written expression, students' ability

INTRODUCTION

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized assessment designed to measure individuals' English language proficiency, particularly in contexts where English is not used as a first or second language (Muhajir & Gani, 2018). TOEFL functions as an indicator of learners' overall communicative competence and serves as an intermediary for evaluating academic and professional readiness in English-mediated environments (Agustina Sari et al., 2021). For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, the Structure and Written Expression component holds particular significance, as it reflects their mastery of grammatical accuracy, syntactic awareness, and formal language use, which are fundamental for academic writing, scholarly communication, and effective classroom instruction. Consequently, many institutions and scholarship providers require

TOEFL scores as a prerequisite for admission, graduation, or employment, positioning grammatical competence as a critical factor in students' educational and career advancement (Mesiono & Sahana, 2021). The implementation of TOEFL, therefore, not only measures language proficiency but also supports the development of learners' linguistic knowledge and professional opportunities beyond graduation.

There are several types of TOEFL tests commonly administered worldwide, including the Paper-Based Test (PBT), Computer-Based Test (CBT), and Internet-Based Test (iBT) (Imran, 2019). The PBT relies on traditional written media, such as pencil and paper, to complete the test (Ubaedillah, 2020). The CBT utilizes computers as the testing medium and assesses four language skills: listening, reading comprehension, structure, and writing (Zuhrayana, 2018). Similarly, the iBT is widely accessible online and evaluates four major competencies: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Parwanto, 2011).

In the TOEFL prediction test, three primary components are assessed: listening, reading comprehension, and structure and written expression (Utomo & Damayanti, 2019). The listening section measures participants' ability to comprehend spoken English through a 50-item test, while the structure and written expression section consists of 40 items that evaluate grammatical knowledge and sentence accuracy. The reading comprehension section includes 50 items that assess understanding of written academic texts (Gina, 2019).

TOEFL serves two main functions: as a measurement of students' language abilities and as a benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process (Putri, 2017). Furthermore, it is widely used as a requirement for admission to higher education institutions and as a graduation prerequisite in many universities (Husna, 2018; Utomo & Damayanti, 2019).

The Structure and Written Expression section focuses on grammatical competence, including sentence construction, syntactic accuracy, and appropriate language use (Imran, 2019). This section is presented in multiple-choice format and is designed to assess learners' understanding of English grammar rules and their application in formal written contexts (Kristiyanti & Baehaqi, 2018). It is divided into two parts: Part A (items 1–15), which consists of incomplete sentences requiring the selection of the correct grammatical structure, and Part B (items 16–40), which involves identifying errors in written expressions (Fitria, 2021; Tilana et al., 2019).

Despite its importance, many EFL learners experience significant difficulty in this

section due to limited grammatical awareness, insufficient exposure to authentic academic English, and challenges in applying rules under time constraints. Based on short interviews conducted on Saturday, January 7, 2024, several recurring issues were identified. Students demonstrated limited vocabulary and listening comprehension, which led them to spend excessive time on the listening section and lose focus on subsequent questions. In the structure and written expression section, many students struggled to identify appropriate tense usage, subject–verb agreement, and sentence patterns. As a result, students tended to rush through the reading section without employing effective skimming and scanning strategies. These findings indicate that grammatical weakness and poor test management strategies significantly affect students' overall TOEFL performance, particularly in the structure and written expression component.

Previous studies have consistently reported persistent difficulties in students' ability to answer structure and written expression questions. Syahrin (2020) highlighted the importance of identifying commonly problematic grammatical areas and the factors contributing to student errors. Similarly, Humairoh (2018) found that students frequently encountered challenges in clauses, subject–verb agreement, parallel structures, comparative and superlative forms, verb forms, passive constructions, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, articles, prepositions, and appropriate usage. Ubaedillah (2020) further identified eight grammatical elements as the most difficult for management students in TOEFL tests. Supporting these results, Handayani (2019) also reported that nursing students experienced difficulties in key grammatical areas, mainly due to limited grammatical competence, lack of practice, and unfamiliarity with the TOEFL test format.

However, most existing research has focused on identifying general error types or analyzing grammatical difficulties across diverse student populations and institutional contexts. There is limited empirical evidence specifically examining the overall ability profile of English Education students in answering the Structure and Written Expression section within a TOEFL prediction test context, particularly at the institutional level. Moreover, few studies have explored how grammatical competence in this section reflects the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs in developing formal language accuracy among pre-service teachers.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this research gap by analyzing the ability of seventh-semester students in the English Education Department at Universitas Mahaputra

Muhammad Yamin during the 2024/2025 academic year in answering the Structure and Written Expression section of the TOEFL prediction test. This research aims to provide a more contextualized understanding of students' grammatical competence and to inform curriculum development and instructional strategies for improving EFL learners' academic language proficiency.

METHOD

Design of the Research

The study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine students' performance in the Structure and Written Expression sections of the TOEFL test. Descriptive research aims to systematically portray the characteristics of a population or phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2018). In this context, quantitative approaches facilitate the application of statistical techniques to numerical data, enabling the objective examination of variables and the relationships among them as measured through standardized instruments (Creswell, 2018). Descriptive quantitative inquiry thus emphasizes the collection, measurement, and analysis of data through statistical and mathematical procedures (Siyoto & Sodik, 2015). Accordingly, this study sought to assess students' levels of proficiency in completing the TOEFL, with particular emphasis on the Structure and Written Expression components.

Population and Sample

Population is very important to support the research to be carried out. Population is the entire subject that is used in a research (Suryatman, 2019). Seventh-semester students of English Education Department of FKIP UMMY Solok who are registered in the 2023/2024 academic year were the population of this research. The total population consists of 13 students. The reason for choosing them as the population is because they have taken the TOEFL course in the sixth semester. In addition, they have also taken the TOEFL Preparation class as a mandatory program provided by UPT Bahasa UMMY.

Sample is object that can give information or data related to research. Sample is part of the number population (Sugiyono, 2013). The sampling technique used was total sampling. It is a sampling technique where the number of samples equals the population

(Sugiyono, 2013). The reason for choosing total sampling is because according to Sugiyono (2013), if the population is less than 30, the entire population can be used as sample research. The sample of this study were only 10 students from the 13 population since 3 students were doing internship in other cities and could not participate on the research. However, although the sample was limited, the study offers preliminary insight since it was an exploratory research.

Instrumentation

Research instruments play a critical role in ensuring the systematic collection and accuracy of data in empirical studies. An instrument is defined as a tool used to measure, observe, or record quantitative information in a structured and consistent manner (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The selection of an appropriate instrument is therefore fundamental, as it directly influences the validity and reliability of the data obtained.

In this study, a standardized test served as the primary research instrument. The assessment items consisted of Structure and Written Expression questions adapted from the Cliffs TOEFL Preparation Guide, with a total of 40 items administered within a 25-minute time limit. This source was selected because it is widely recognized as a reputable TOEFL preparation resource that closely aligns with the format, difficulty level, and content specifications of the official TOEFL test. The items are developed based on established grammatical and syntactic frameworks commonly assessed in standardized English proficiency examinations, thereby supporting content validity. Furthermore, the use of a well-established preparatory guide enhances the reliability of the instrument, as the questions have been extensively used in instructional and evaluative contexts, providing consistent and comparable measures of students' structural and written expression competencies.

Technique of Data Collection

Data were collected through an offline, paper-based testing procedure designed to ensure standardized administration and consistency across participants. Prior to the commencement of the assessment, the researcher provided clear and structured instructions regarding the objectives, procedures, and rules of the data collection process to minimize potential misunderstandings and procedural bias.

Subsequently, a set of 40 test items was distributed to the participants for completion. The assessment was administered under controlled conditions to promote uniformity in the testing environment and to reduce the influence of external variables on students' performance. Participants were allotted a total of 25 minutes to complete the test, a duration determined to reflect typical time constraints of TOEFL style assessments and to encourage efficient test-taking strategies. Upon completion, all answer sheets were systematically collected and checked for completeness to ensure data integrity. This structured procedure aimed to enhance the reliability of the data by maintaining consistency in test administration and by ensuring that all responses were obtained under comparable conditions.

Technique of Data Analysis

Data analysis techniques are a collection of methods and procedures used to organize, understand, and interpret data. The purpose of this data analysis was to find the score result from the test that have been carried out. To find out the category of students' ability in Structure and Written Expression, it is changed into percentage which can be seen in the following table. Based on the test result, students' ability were divided into some categories; excellent, good, fair, poor, and very poor (Riduwan, 2009).

Table 1: The Scale to Classify the Level of Percentage Ability in TOEFL

Frequency	Classification
81% - 100%	Excellent
61% - 80%	Good
41% - 60%	Fair
21% - 40%	Poor
0% - 20%	Very Poor

After the correct answer of the students already revealed, the next step was to categorize the student scores using the following formula below:

$$P = \frac{f}{N} \times 100\%$$

N

P = percentage

F = correct answers

N = total of item

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The structure and written expression test was administered on July 1, 2024, through an offline mode of data collection. Of the thirteen registered participants, three were unable to attend, resulting in a final sample of ten students. Prior to the administration of the test, the researcher provided standardized instructions to ensure that all participants understood the procedures and time constraints. Students were allocated 25 minutes to complete a total of 40 test items. The results of the structure section are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' Test Result in Structure Section

No	Correct Answer	Percentage	Incorrect Answer	Percentage
1	14	93%	1	7%
2	11	73%	4	27%
3	6	40%	9	60%
4	6	40%	9	60%
5	6	40%	9	60%
6	5	34%	10	66%
7	10	66%	5	34%
8	8	53%	7	47%
9	3	20%	12	80%
10	3	20%	12	80%
Average	5	34%	10	66%

Overall, the descriptive statistics indicate substantial variability in students' grammatical competence. Individual performance ranged from a high score of 93% (Student 1) to a low score of 20% (Students 9 and 10), reflecting a wide performance gap within the cohort. The mean accuracy rate was 34%, corresponding to an average of 5 correct responses out of 15 items, while the mean error rate reached 66%, suggesting that incorrect responses predominated across the sample.

In terms of score distribution, three students (Students 3, 4, and 5) clustered at the mid-level performance band with scores of 40%, indicating a moderate but still limited mastery of structural knowledge. The presence of two students at the lower extreme (20%) and only one student at the upper extreme (93%) suggests a positively skewed distribution, where high achievement was not representative of the group as a whole. This pattern implies that grammatical proficiency was unevenly developed among the participants.

Table 3: Students' Test Result in Written Expression Section

No	Correct Answer	Percentage	Incorrect Answer	Percentage
1	23	92%	2	8%
2	22	88%	3	12%
3	6	24%	19	76%
4	7	28%	18	72%
5	8	32%	17	68%
6	7	28%	18	72%
7	5	20%	20	80%
8	6	24%	19	76%
9	9	36%	16	64%
10	5	20%	20	80%
Average	10	40%	15	60%

Table 3 summarizes students' performance in the Written Expression section of the TOEFL prediction test. The results reveal pronounced variability in students' ability to identify grammatical and usage errors within sentence-level contexts. Individual accuracy rates ranged from a high of 92% (Student 1) and 88% (Student 2) to a low of 20% (Students 7 and 10), indicating a wide proficiency gap across the cohort.

The mean number of correct responses was 10 out of 25 items, corresponding to an average accuracy rate of 40% and an error rate of 60%. This finding suggests that, on average, students were more likely to select incorrect options than correct ones, reflecting considerable difficulty in detecting structural and grammatical inaccuracies embedded in complete sentences.

In terms of score distribution, two students (Students 1 and 2) demonstrated strong performance, approaching mastery of the tested constructs. In contrast, the majority of students clustered in the lower performance bands, with six students (Students 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) scoring below 32% accuracy. Students 7 and 10, in particular, obtained only 20% accuracy, indicating minimal sensitivity to grammatical violations. This pattern suggests a positively skewed distribution in which high achievement is limited to a small subset of participants and is not representative of overall group performance.

Discussion

This discussion examines students' performance in the Structure and Written Expression sections of the TOEFL test. All participants' results are analyzed to provide a comprehensive account of grammatical competence among seventh-semester students in the

English Education Department at Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin University. The study was conducted through an offline, paper-based multiple-choice test administered to a sample of ten students. The instrument consisted of 40 items to be completed within 25 minutes, divided into two components: the Structure section (Items 1-15) and the Written Expression section (Items 16-40).

Based on the classification criteria, overall performance across both sections fell predominantly within the “poor” category. In the Structure section, which assessed students’ ability to identify and apply correct grammatical forms within sentence-level contexts, the majority of students demonstrated limited mastery of core syntactic rules. This finding indicates persistent difficulty in constructing and recognizing grammatically accurate sentence patterns.

A closer qualitative examination of students’ incorrect responses reveals recurring grammatical problem areas. Most errors were concentrated in items related to subject-verb agreement, particularly in sentences involving complex noun phrases or intervening modifiers, where students frequently failed to identify the true grammatical subject. Tense and aspect usage also emerged as a dominant source of error, especially in distinguishing between simple past and present perfect forms in context-based items. Additionally, a substantial number of students demonstrated difficulty with clause structure, including the appropriate use of relative pronouns and subordinating conjunctions, leading to incomplete or syntactically ill-formed sentences.

Patterns of error further indicate challenges in recognizing parallel structures and correct word forms (e.g.; confusion between adjectives and adverbs in sentence completion tasks). These findings suggest that students relied heavily on surface-level cues rather than deeper syntactic analysis when selecting their answers.

Taken together, the quantitative results and qualitative error patterns imply that while a small proportion of students exhibited strong grammatical control, the majority struggled with foundational aspects of English sentence structure. This indicates a need for targeted instructional interventions focusing on agreement rules, tense consistency, and clause construction to strengthen students’ structural competence and reduce systematic errors in future assessments.

Similarly, performance in the Written Expression section, which required students to detect grammatical and usage errors embedded in complete sentences, was also categorized

as “poor.” A qualitative examination of response patterns indicates that students’ errors were systematic rather than random. The most frequent error types occurred in function-word usage, including articles (a, an, the), prepositions, and conjunctions. Students often failed to detect incorrect article selection in generic versus specific noun phrase contexts and misidentified prepositional collocations (e.g., interested on instead of interested in). These patterns suggest limited awareness of form–function relationships at the phrase level.

Tense and aspect mismatches also accounted for a substantial proportion of errors, particularly in sentences requiring sensitivity to temporal markers and discourse context, such as adverbials of time or resultative constructions. Many students demonstrated difficulty distinguishing between simple past and present perfect forms, leading them to overlook verb form inconsistencies embedded in otherwise grammatically acceptable sentences.

Another prominent pattern involved clause structure and sentence complementation. Errors frequently occurred in items testing the correct use of relative pronouns, subordinating conjunctions, and embedded clauses. Students often failed to recognize missing or redundant relative markers and incorrectly accepted sentences with incomplete or ill-formed subordinate clauses.

Overall, the findings indicate that students’ performance in the Written Expression section is characterized by limited metalinguistic awareness and difficulty in detecting structural violations in complex sentence environments. This underscores the need for instructional approaches that emphasize analytical reading of sentence structure, targeted practice on function words and clause-level grammar, and explicit training in identifying common TOEFL-style error patterns to improve grammatical sensitivity and accuracy.

These findings are consistent with Ubaedillah (2020), who similarly reported that average performance in both the Structure and Written Expression sections fell within the “poor” category, indicating systemic challenges in grammatical proficiency among EFL learners. However, the present results contrast with those of Munadian (2016), who found students’ performance to be within the “good” category, suggesting potential differences in instructional context, learner exposure, or assessment conditions.

In conclusion, the results indicate that seventh-semester students’ proficiency in the TOEFL Structure and Written Expression sections remains below the expected level, with average accuracy rates below 40%. This performance pattern reflects persistent difficulties in

both the recognition and application of fundamental grammatical rules, particularly in agreement, tense consistency, and clause construction. These findings underscore the need for targeted pedagogical interventions that emphasize syntactic awareness, form–function relationships, and analytical strategies for identifying grammatical errors in both isolated sentences and extended written contexts.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study shows that seventh-semester students of the English Education Department at Universitas Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin generally performed poorly in the TOEFL Structure and Written Expression sections. Most students had difficulty understanding and applying basic grammar rules, especially in subject–verb agreement, tense usage, and clause construction. These results indicate that students’ grammatical ability has not yet met the expected standard for TOEFL-level English. Therefore, it is suggested that lecturers provide more focused TOEFL-oriented grammar instruction, emphasizing common error patterns and guided practice using TOEFL-style questions. Students are also encouraged to practice independently by taking TOEFL prediction tests regularly and reviewing their grammatical mistakes. Future studies should involve more participants and examine the effects of targeted grammar instruction over a longer period of time.

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