Students’ Difficulties in Mastering Structure and Written Expression Of Paper-Based TOEFL

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Abstract

Obtaining a score of TOEFL higher than 500 has been proven difficult. Some studies showed that students had biggest problems in answering section two of PBT TOEFL. Therefore, this study was aimed at investigating difficulties encountered by advanced EFL learners in mastering structure and written expression tested in PBT TOEFL. The PBT TOEFL test, designed by ETS, was conducted to 25 advanced undergraduate students, selected by using a convenient sampling technique, at Syiah Kuala University. The test consisted of 40 multiple choice questions and the students completed it within 25 minutes. The result revealed that the students faced a serious problems with redundancy (48%), followed by verb form (53%), pronoun error (55%), plural (55%), WIAS (57%), parallelism (59%), article (60%), word order (61%), conjunction (62%), deleted word (71%), prepositional phrase (71%), word choice (73%), and part of speech (74%). It was concluded that redundancy was the most difficult aspect for the students. Hence, it is suggested that university lectures who teach structure pay more attention to this aspect.

Key Words : TOEFL, Structure and Written Expression, Redundancy, Verb Form

1. INTRODUCTION

English is considered essential to be mastered. In fact, it has been considered a primary international language for communication (Harmer, 2007, p. 1). Moreover, it has become a lingua franca which is the language used by two people whose first language are different from each other (Harmer, 2007). Furthermore, it is used significantly in many sectors, such as education, economy, business, etc. In some countries, it is utilized as a second language and in others as a foreign language.

Because of its significances, many English proficiency tests are created, one of which is TOEFL, which stands for Test of English as a Foreign Language. TOEFL is aimed at measuring English ability of speakers who do not speak English as a first or a second language (Phillips, 2001, p. 13). Since 1963, TOEFL has been used by scholarship selection committees of governments, universities, agencies, such as Fulbright, the Agency for International Development, AMIDEAST, and Latin
American Scholarship Programs as a standard assessment of the English ability of their candidate (Sharpe, 2012, p. 11). Besides, it is needed as an admission requirement for universities in the United States, Canada and other countries throughout the world.

In Indonesia, some universities demand TOEFL score report for a graduation requirement, one of which is Syiah Kuala University. As stated in Panduan Akademik Program Diploma, Sarjana, Profesi Magister/Spesialis, dan Doktor/Subspesialis Universitas Syiah Kuala (2016), the university makes a regulation for its students to have the minimum TOEFL score of 477 when enrolling the thesis examination. Hence, the students in Syiah Kuala University must take Paper-Based TOEFL (PBT TOEFL) prediction test at the language center of the university.

Nevertheless, there is a contradiction between the expectation and the reality. Very few students could obtain such score (477) (Ananda, 2016, p. 38), including English education department students. The data taken from the language center of Syiah Kuala University (2017) revealed that the average TOEFL score obtained by senior students at English department of Syiah Kuala University was 413. The fact they had studied English specifically for four years suggests that there is something wrong that needs to be observed. This shows there are a number of language aspects which has not been learned by the students during the teaching and learning process at the university.

The difficulties on aspects of listening comprehension sections have been investigated by some researchers (Freedle & Kostin, 1996; Mahlill, 2010; Rainy, Ikhsanudin, & Sumarni, 2014) and so have the difficulties on aspects of reading comprehension section (Freedle & Kostin, 1996; Putra, Kasim, & Mustafa, 2017). Only have a small number of researchers conducted on structure and written section. Therefore, the current research is aimed at finding out the difficulties faced by advanced EFL students on structure and written expression of Paper-Based TOEFL. The result will show what the students need to learn to improve their scores.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

Test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) is an examination to assess English proficiency of non-native speakers of English (Phillips, 2001, p. 13). Officially, TOEFL consists of three versions, i.e. computer-based TOEFL (CBT TOEFL), paper-based TOEFL (PBT TOEFL), and internet-based TOEFL (IBT TOEFL). It changes due to some experiments and research (ETS, 2004, p. 3).

The first is Paper-Based TOEFL (PBT TOEFL). It comprises three sections tested, i.e. listening comprehension (to assess English ability of non-native speakers to comprehend English spoken in North America), structure and written expression (to assess English ability of non-native speakers in recognizing grammatical and structural standard written English) and reading comprehension (to assess English ability of non-native speakers in comprehending English texts similar to those in North American universities or colleges) (Phillips, 2001).

In addition to three sections tested in PBT TOEFL, there is another section called Test of Written English (TWE) which could be taken separately in that test (ETS, 2006). The score ranges from 310 to 677 (Sharpe, 2004, p. 12). Because PBT
TOEFL was considered having some weaknesses in terms of communicative aspects, Computer-Based TOEFL (CBT TOEFL) was designed (Ananda, 2016, p. 39).

In its early development, CBT TOEFL had almost no differences from PBT TOEFL. Only in the format are they different, which is, while PBT TOEFL uses a paper, CBT TOEFL use the internet. Nevertheless, in the later development, CBT TOEFL put more emphasis on communicative aspects, so all language skills are incorporated, i.e. listening, reading, speaking and writing. The score CBT TOEFL had given crucial steps in improving the assessment by using an electronic technology, and because of that, IBT was created.

Like CBT TOEFL, IBT TOEFL tested the four language skills. The score range from 0 to 120 (Sharpe, 2004, p. 12). There is another version of TOEFL, called Institutional TOEFL (ITP TOEFL), an unofficial paper-based test which is almost similar to PBT TOEFL in all aspects, such as in the length, format, and difficulty (Sharpe, 2004, p. 12). One of their differences is ITP TOEFL does not consist of Test of Written English (TWE).

2.2 Structure and Written Expression of PBT TOEFL

The Structure and written expression section is the multiple-choice type of questions which consists of 40 items, but divided into two parts, i.e. part A for structure, and part B for written expression. Structure aims at finding out words or phrases that complete the sentence of the questions asked. It contains 15 questions. Written expression tests students to recognize the incorrect words or phrases which has been underlined. Each item has to be completed within no more than 40 seconds or 25 minutes for all questions.

2.3 Aspect of Structure in PBT TOEFL

According to Hilke & Wadden (1997), there are five aspects of structure in PBT TOEFL. Following explains those aspects with their percentage of appearances in PBT TOEFL.

a. WIAS (What is a sentence) (53%). It is based on the premise that a clause consists of only one subject and one verb.

b. Word choice (20%). It tests students to choose the correct word or phrase appropriate to the sentence.

c. Word order (12%). It requires students to choose the appropriate word order in a sentence.

d. Verb form (9%). It concerns with the verb form aspects based on the English tenses.

e. Parallelism (1%). It means choosing the parallel structure in the sentence.

2.4 Aspects of Written Expression in PBT TOEFL

According to Hilke & Wadden (1997, pp. 21–34), there are eleven aspects tested on this section. Following explains those aspects with their percentage of appearance in PBT TOEFL.

a. Part of speech (27%). It is defined as the class of word which consists of noun, verb, adverb, adjective, pronoun, conjunction, preposition and interjection.

b. Plural (19%). It means more than one in terms of nouns.

c. Parallelism (10%). It appears much more in part B (10%) than in part A (1%).

d. Pronoun Errors (9%). Pronoun is used to substitute a noun either singular or plural.
e. Prepositional Errors (8%). It is considered one of the most difficult aspect in written expression part.

f. Verb form (7%). Like in part A, in part B, problems with verbs also concern with choosing correct verb forms in terms of its tenses.

g. Deleted Words (5%). It is a missing word that is needed to complete a sentence.

h. Word order (4%). This aspect appears more in part A (12%) than in part B.

i. Article (4%). Even though it appears in small percentage, article is considered the most difficult aspect in English grammar tests.

j. Conjunction (3%). It is a connector to join a part of speech with another part of speech, a clause with another clause, and a sentence with another sentence.

2.5 Previous Related Studies

There have been research studies which deal with the students’ mastery in terms of grammatical aspects such Ananda (2016) and Mayuasti (2015). Ananda (2015), using the grammatical aspects from Phillips (2001) found that problems with inversion is the most difficult (12%), followed by subject-verb agreement (10%), adverb clause connectors (7%), passives (6%), reduced adjective clauses (5%), parallel structure (5%), use of verbs (5%). In addition, based on the result of the questionnaire, the students viewed than that finding errors (part B) is more difficult than completing the sentences (part A).

Unlike Ananda (2016), Mayuasti (2015), compiled the grammatical aspects from TOEFL preparation books written by Sharpe (2005 & 2007), Sukur (2007), Walter (2008), and ETS Handbook (2010), found that auxiliary verbs (69%) was the most difficult one, followed by introductory verbal modifiers (54%), connectors (51%), modifiers (50%), point of view (46%), nouns (45%), word choices (44%), verbs (42%), parallel constructions (36%), pronouns and comparatives (34%), redundancy (32%), sentences and clauses (25%) and agreement (18). Moreover, based on the result of the questionnaire, Mayuasti found that lack of knowledge about the aspects of structure and written expression, lack of practice of the aspects, lack of vocabulary, and lack of reading skills are the causes of the difficulties.

Other research studies investigated grammatical mastery based on students’ perceptions such as (Abboud & Hussein, 2011, Hambali, 2008). In Hambali’s research (2008), it was found that the students had problems on identifying verbs, identifying the correct word order of subject and verb in noun clause, identifying words and derivation of their functions. Finally, Abboud and Hussein (2011), found that structure is more difficult than written expression. The students said that it was caused by long sentences (complex and compound sentence) that the students have to deal with in the structure part.

3. METHODS

Since the investigation used numerical data in explaining the result, a quantitative research method was recommended to be used in this study. In addition, the quantitative research method is chosen because this study utilized statistical analysis to obtain its finding. Specifically, it used a descriptive quantitative method to describe the students’ difficulties in mastering section two of PBT TOEFL.
Pertaining to the method that the researcher used to obtain the data in this study, a test was employed as a research instrument. The test was taken from TOEFL Preparation Kit, which is designed by Educational Testing Service (ETS), an institution which administers the official TOEFL. According to TOEFL Preparation Kit (2000, p. 4), the tests from its book were taken from actual TOEFL test which had been tested to test takers. It is a multiple choice question which consists of four possible answers for each question. There are three sections of the test, i.e. listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. However, for the purpose of this study, the writer only used structure and written expression section.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

This study was conducted from November 13, 2017 to January 15, 2018 at English Department of Teacher Training and Education Faculty, Syiah Kuala University. The sample of this study was the advanced EFL learners, i.e. the fourth year or more students at the English Department. There were 25 participants in this study.

4.1.1 The Result from Structure in PBT TOEFL

The following chart presents the percentage of difficulty in aspects of structure in PBT TOEFL Test.

![Figure 4.1 Percentage of Difficulty in Aspect of Structure in PBT TOEFL](image)

From Figure 4.1, it was revealed that in structure part, from five grammatical aspects, verb form was the lowest percentage (29%) that students could answer the questions correctly, so that aspect was the hardest one for the student. It also showed that word choice, which 73% of participants could answer correctly, was the least difficult one for the students.

4.1.2 The Result from Written Expression in PBT TOEFL

The following chart presents the percentage of difficulty in aspects of written expression in PBT TOEFL.
Based on Figure 4.2, it showed that the hardest grammatical aspect for the students was redundancy which less than 50% participants answered the questions incorrectly. Students obtained average percentage (50% - 60%) on other grammatical aspects (pronoun errors, plural, verb form, article, parallelism, word order, deleted word, and prepositional phrase). Part of speech which almost 74% participants could answer the questions correctly was the least complicated aspect for the students.

4.2 Discussion

This study revealed that in part A students encountered the biggest problem in answering verb form (29%) which referred to items number 18. The reason that causes students to encounter problems with verb forms is because of the fact that verbs have a variety of forms related to tenses (Pyle, 1995). In PBT TOEFL, the inconsistent use of the verb tenses can make students confused to answer questions about that aspect.

In part B, students encountered the biggest problem in answering redundancy (48%) which referred to items number 20, 38, and 38 (12%). It is reasonable that students faced a serious problem in redundancy. The students are often unaware of repeatedly unnecessary information in PBT TOEFL (Gear & Gear, 2002, p. 277).

This study also revealed some other interesting findings. Problems with prepositions, which Gallagher (2000), Rogers (2011) & Swan (2005) considered one of the most difficult aspects, had the different result in this study. This study showed that students had no significant problems with the prepositions. In fact, it was one of the easiest aspects found in this study. It could be concluded that for advanced EFL learners, problems with preposition was not significant problems.

This study also showed an unexpected result in problems with articles. Swan (2005, p. 61) says that article usages are one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar, especially for students whose native languages do not have articles. On the contrary, this study showed that students had no significant problems with articles. In fact, this grammatical aspect was categorized ‘fair’ in term of the index of
difficulty level (60%). Articles might be difficult for some level students, but it was fair for advanced learners.

In addition to unexpected findings, there were also some expected results in the current study. One of the findings was related to part of speech. Part of speech is considered one of the Basic English grammars, so students should not have meaningful problems with it. In line with that, the result of this study supported that part of speech was the easiest grammatical aspect for students.

Furthermore, this study had either differences or similarities with other previous related studies. For instance, in Ananda’s study (2016), inversion was the most difficult aspect in answering section two of PBT TOEFL. This study which did not specifically include inversion in one of its grammatical aspects found that verb form and redundancy were the most problematic problem for the students. Unlike in Ananda’s study, the finding in this study had parallelism with Hambali’s study (2008). In Hambali study, he found that ‘identifying verb’ was the most difficult grammatical aspects for the students.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

From the result of the test, it could be concluded that the most problematic one for the students for structure was verb form (29%), and for written expression was redundancy (48%).

Based on the results of the study, the writer could give some suggestions related to students’ difficulties in answering section two of PBT TOEFL. First, in order to obtain a good score in section two of PBT TOEFL, it was recommended that students recognize and understand all grammatical aspects contained in structure and written expression section. Second, as this study had found that ‘redundancy’ and ‘verb form’ were some most difficult aspects in structure and written expression section of PBT TOEFL, students were expected to study harder on those aspects.

In terms of redundancy aspect, it was suggested that students concentrate while answering questions about that aspect. In addition, Gear (Gear & Gear, 2002)(2002, p. 277) suggests that students pay attention to either two words or combinations of words which have the same meaning in part B. In terms of verb form aspect, it was recommended that students comprehend the variety of verbs and their usage based English tenses as most of the problems with verb form in PBT TOEFL were related to the tenses.

Furthermore, it was suggested for lectures who teach grammar or structure to intensively teach redundancy and verb forms as the most problematic grammatical aspects for the students. Finally, the writer encouraged other researchers to conduct further related studies which involved a larger number of participants so that the study could apply to a wider population and more detail grammatical aspects contained in section two of PBT TOEFL so that the study could give more detail result.

REFERENCES
