

## **Students' Challenges and Approaches to Comprehending the TOEFL Reading Section**

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**Abstract.** The TOEFL Reading Section presents a number of challenges for students, ranging from advanced vocabulary to dense academic passages to time management pressures. This abstract presents both the general obstacles faced by students when attempting to comprehend TOEFL reading tasks and those particular approaches that they apply to overcome these difficulties. This is descriptive qualitative research. Twenty-two of 7<sup>th</sup> semesters in English language education study program who enrolled in the TOEFL preparation class batch 7 were selected purposively to be the respondents of this study. The instrument is in depth interview. Then the result of the interview was analyzed by **contextual Analysis**: Analyze how these themes emerge in different contexts or situations. Pay attention to nuances, such as differences between demographic groups, changes over time, or situational factors that might affect responses. The paper, based on the literature review and student feedback review, emphasizes strategic reading approaches-such as skimming, scanning, and making inferences-to enhance comprehension. Regular practice and resources outside of class, such as vocabulary-building tools and online reading comprehension exercises, are also emphasized. Results showed that students who have more actively practiced these strategies have increased their comprehension and time efficiency, and therefore did better on the TOEFL reading. This study emphasizes the importance of targeted instructional support in preparing students for the TOEFL in their acquisition of not only the requisite skills but also the self-confidence to succeed.

**Keywords:** TOEFL, Reading section, Students' Challenges and Tactics.

### **Introduction**

In higher education around the world, becoming more fluent in English has become essential. As a global language, English plays a vital role in promoting academic mobility, cross-cultural communication, and access to improved resources for both education and work (Abbas & Husain, 2022). For this reason, The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is a widely recognized standardized test used in higher education worldwide to assess students' English language skills. A key part of this test is the reading section, which evaluates students' comprehension abilities in English. However, many undergraduate students find this section particularly challenging. For non-native English speakers, the reading section is often seen as one of the most difficult parts of the TOEFL, making it a significant area of study. Many students struggle with core skills, such as identifying the main idea of a passage, a fundamental aspect of the reading section. These difficulties highlight the need for a deeper exploration of the challenges students encounter in this critical part of the test (Zhao & Xu, 2019).

A standardized exam called the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is used to assess non-native speakers' English language ability, especially for academic purposes. One of the more difficult sections of the TOEFL exam is the reading portion, which asks candidates to absorb lengthy academic texts, use their time wisely, and respond to questions that gauge various comprehension levels. When preparing for this section, students frequently encounter a number of unique obstacles, such as unfamiliar language, challenging sentence patterns, time limits, and comprehension issues with

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academic material. It takes a combination of vocabulary growth, test-taking strategies, and reading practice to overcome these obstacles.

Getting through new vocabulary in the TOEFL Reading portion is one of the biggest obstacles for test takers. Specialized or advanced words that pupils might not come across in regular language learning environments are frequently found in academic writings. The reading passages for the TOEFL cover a broad range of topics, each with its own collection of vocabulary, such as science, history, and the humanities. Students need to devote time to expanding their academic vocabulary in order to overcome this obstacle. Reading a range of materials outside of the standard ESL curriculum, like textbooks, academic journals, and articles, can aid in acquainting students with difficult vocabulary. Additionally, one important strategy to lessen the detrimental effects of foreign vocabulary on test performance is to practice figuring out word meanings from context clues.

For non-native English speakers, the TOEFL Reading section poses a number of difficulties, ranging from handling challenging vocabulary and complex sentences to time management and understanding academic material. More than simply proficiency in English is needed to succeed in this section; you also need to be able to read strategically, be conversant with academic books, and be able to analyze critically. Students can improve their performance on the TOEFL Reading section and conquer its various hurdles by practicing a lot, expanding their academic vocabulary, and learning time management techniques. According to Ali's 2023, noted that test takers faced significant challenges in the reading section due to limited vocabulary, making it difficult to comprehend the text. To address this, they employed a strategy involving the skim and scan technique to grasp the main idea and overall content of the text. Meanwhile, a 2021 study on enhancing TOEFL reading scores through note-taking strategies concluded that effective information organization skills are essential in maximizing students' success in answering TOEFL questions during the exam (Ikeda & Takeuchi, 2023).

A 2021 study examining the challenges and strategies encountered by non-English major students in tackling TOEFL reading comprehension questions identified three common obstacles: limited vocabulary, difficulty locating specific information in the text, and challenges in identifying features such as tone, purpose, or direction. Specific strategies were developed to address each of these challenges. Roberts' 2000 study found that students aim to improve their TOEFL scores through self-study, utilizing English books, TOEFL preparation materials, or guidebooks to familiarize themselves with the types of questions on the test. By drawing on their existing knowledge of different topics, students can enhance their understanding of the content. Therefore, to tackle these challenges, students often develop various strategies to help themselves overcome the difficulties they encounter. Strategies for approaching the TOEFL test are methods or steps adopted by test takers to improve their chances of success across different sections of the exam, including the Reading Section. These strategies aim to assist test takers in comprehending content, managing time efficiently, and answering questions accurately (Zalha et al., 2020). Having a strategy for the Reading Section is essential, as it enables test takers to handle challenging texts, avoid common errors, effectively manage their time, and more accurately identify correct answers.

Chen and Lu's (2024) study identified five strategies that test takers use to handle the TOEFL reading section, categorized into two main types: reading strategies and test-taking strategies. Reading strategies include techniques like skimming and scanning the

passage, using context to interpret unfamiliar words, and applying background knowledge. In contrast, test-taking strategies involve reviewing questions and prioritizing those considered easier. The study recommends further research to examine the effectiveness of specific strategies in enhancing EFL students' performance in the TOEFL reading section.

However, further research is needed to fully understand the background and effectiveness of these strategies. Therefore, studying the strategies used by students to address issues in the TOEFL reading section is essential.

This research also offers insights into students' preparedness for the TOEFL, which can support their planning for future studies or scholarships. Additionally, the findings can be used to track student progress, enhance educational programs, and guide students in their preparation for international academic opportunities. Beyond campus benefits, this research also has the potential to enrich academic literature on evaluating English language proficiency and students' preparation for English proficiency exams (Ahmed & Fahad, 2022).

In today's globalized world, proficiency in English has become a crucial requirement for success in both academic and professional environments. For non-native speakers, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) serves as a standardized assessment of English language skills, playing an essential role in the university admissions process. The urgency of taking the TOEFL cannot be overstated, as it not only opens doors to educational opportunities but also enhances students' chances of thriving in an increasingly competitive global landscape. **Research question:** What strategies are used to overcome the problems they face in the Reading Section of the TOEFL?

## **Material and Method**

### **Method**

This study was categorized as descriptive qualitative research. In this approach, open-ended interviews and questionnaires were utilized; interviews served as the primary data source, while questionnaires provided supplementary data. Questionnaires can be incorporated into qualitative research if they offer only descriptive data, as was done here, with in-depth interviews used for further exploration. According to Hesse-Biber (2016), qualitative researchers may use numerical data to illustrate key themes identified by respondents. Therefore, even though questionnaires yield numerical data, they can still be valuable in qualitative research for providing descriptive insights. This qualitative approach suited the objectives of descriptive research, allowing the researcher to investigate the specific challenges students encounter in mastering the TOEFL Prediction reading section and the strategies they apply to address these issues.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Results**

#### **The Students' Challenges in Comprehending Reading Section of TOEFL**

Many students encounter significant difficulties when attempting to comprehend the TOEFL Reading section. One of the primary challenges is the complexity of the academic language used in the passages. The texts are often dense, filled with specialized vocabulary, and structured in a way that requires a high level of reading proficiency. This can overwhelm students, particularly non-native English speakers, who may struggle to grasp the meaning of technical terms or abstract concepts.

Another challenge is time management. The TOEFL Reading section typically includes multiple long passages, and students must answer a series of questions within a limited time. This can create pressure to read quickly, which may lead to misunderstandings or missing important details. Students often report difficulty in balancing speed with accuracy, as reading too fast might cause them to overlook key points while reading too slowly risks running out of time before completing all the questions. Additionally, the test includes different types of questions, such as inference, main idea, and detail-oriented queries. These require students to not only understand the content but also interpret the writer's intentions and the passage's broader context. Many students struggle with inference questions, which demand higher-order thinking and the ability to read between the lines, skills that are challenging to develop without extensive practice.

Lastly, students from diverse educational backgrounds may not be familiar with the topics covered in the reading passages, which can vary from biology to history or anthropology. This lack of background knowledge can make it harder to follow the flow of the passage or understand its relevance, further hindering comprehension. As a result, students often find themselves spending extra time trying to decode unfamiliar content, which detracts from their ability to focus on answering the questions correctly.

The following are the tactics used by Universitas Negeri Makassar English Language Education students:

**a. Reading the Questions before Reading the Text (22 of 22 students)**

All students, or 100% of the total students, reported that they applied the strategy of reading questions before reading the text. This suggests that this step is very common and may be considered effective in helping students understand the reading context better before answering TOEFL test questions. The finding above is in line with the results of interviews conducted by the researcher. This can be seen in the following interview results:

**(Student 1, 04/01/2024)**

*“...sedangkan untuk menjawab pertanyaan saya tipikal membaca soal terlebih dahulu lalu terjun ke teksnya, karena itu lebih memudahkan saya untuk mencerna poin pembahasan di teks yang disajikan.”*

[“...whereas to answer questions I typically read the question first and then jump in to the text, because that makes it easier for me to digest the discussion points in text presented”].

**(Student 9, 06/01/2024)**

*“...misal kayak pertanyaannya sulit, kayak bisa skip dulu kayak langsungki ke pertanyaan selanjutnya jadi kalau misalnya ada lebih banyak waktu dari pertanyaan selanjutnya bisa maki kembali untuk jawabki yang kayak menutup susah. Jadi saya baca dulu pertanyaan baru ke teksnya.”*

[“...For example, if it's a difficult question, maybe you can skip it first like go straight to the next question, so if there is more time, from the next question we can go back to the difficult question to answer. So, I read the question first and then go to the text”].

**(Student 18, 06/01/2024)**

*“...jadi, seperti itu saya menerapkan strategi membaca pertanyaan terlebih dahulu lalu baru saya membaca teksnya karena menurut saya ini merupakan metode yang sangat*

*membantu agar lebih efisien dan efektif, saya bisa memiliki gambaran lah kak sebelumnya tentang apa yang harus dicari dalam teks.”*

[“...so, like that I apply the strategy of reading the questions first and then I read the text because I think this is a very helpful method to be more efficient and effective, I can have an idea beforehand of what to look for in the text”].

It can be concluded that the strategy of reading questions first before reading the text in the Reading section of TOEFL is an effective approach to help students overcome difficulties in finding keywords or specific details in the text. The students applied the strategy in an effort to increase effectiveness and focus in their reading process. This method was found to help prioritise better, so as to identify relevant keywords from the question before starting to read. Knowing explicitly what to expect from the question can guide a more purposeful search for information in the text, reducing the chances of focusing too much on less relevant details. This strategy also increases efficiency, allowing students to find the necessary information quickly and reducing the risk of running out of time. By knowing what is expected of them before reading the text, students also feel more confident and less anxious in the face of the TOEFL exam. Thus, this strategy not only helps students in finding answers more efficiently, but also improves their overall understanding of the text they are reading.

### **b. Making Notes or Summaries While Reading the TOEFL Test (6 of 22 students)**

A total of 6 students, or around 28.57% of the total students, used the strategy of A total of 6 students, accounting for approximately 28.57% of the participants, utilized the strategy of taking notes or summarizing while reading the TOEFL test. Although this number is relatively small, it indicates that some students recognize the importance of summarizing key information as a means to enhance their understanding and retention of the material. This finding aligns with the results from interviews conducted by the researcher, as illustrated in the following interview excerpts:

#### **(Student 18, 06/01/2024)**

*“...lalu saya juga biasanya membuat catatan atau ringkasan saat membaca tes TOEFL, kalau setelah TOEFL biasanya saya ada catatan-catatan seperti kosakata baru yang saya lihat pas ujian dan pola bahasanya juga beda-beda kak. Ini mempermudah saya sih.”*

[“...Then I also usually make notes or summaries when reading the TOEFL test, if after the TOEFL I usually have notes such as new vocabulary that I saw during the exam and the language patterns are also different. This makes it easier for me”].

#### **(Student 6, 06/01/2024)**

*“...iye kak, kan kalau misalnya dipaham mi pertanyaannya, langsung mki cariki poin poinnya terus dicatat.”*

[“...Yes sis, and if I have understood the question, I immediately look for the points and note them down”].

In conclusion, taking notes or summarizing while reading the TOEFL test proves to be an effective strategy for addressing difficulties in comprehending the language or writing style presented in the reading section. When students implement this approach, they actively engage with the material by extracting key information from the text and articulating it in the form of notes or summaries. This not only allows them to process the information more thoroughly but also helps them recognize common sentence structures, keyword usage, and paragraph organization found in the TOEFL test.

Furthermore, the act of note-taking or summarizing enhances students' analytical skills, enabling them to view the text from various angles and pinpoint significant elements. Additionally, the notes or summaries serve as valuable resources for students when they need to revisit specific information, aiding their memory of the content and offering useful references when responding to test questions. Thus, this strategy not only enhances students' comprehension of the material but also assists them in overcoming challenges related to understanding the language or writing style used in the TOEFL reading section.

**c. Preparing before the Test by Familiarizing with English Texts (22 out of 22 students)**

All students, representing 100% of the participants, indicated that they prepared for the exam by becoming acquainted with English texts. This demonstrates a common practice among students, who acknowledge the importance of enhancing their English comprehension through exposure to and familiarity with texts prior to the test. This finding is consistent with the results obtained from the interviews conducted by the researcher, as shown in the following interview excerpts:

**(Student 6, 06/01/2024)**

*“...kalau saya sih sebelum ujian lebih banyak latihan latihan soal TOEFL, kan banyak tuh sekarang buku-buku TOEFL yang dijual terus banyak juga latihan-latihan soal TOEFL di internet atau di website, website itu nah saya biasanya mengerjakan lewat situs dulu yang gratisan terus juga untuk nambah kosakatanya.”*

[“...for me, before the test, I practice more TOEFL questions first, there are many TOEFL books on sale now and there are also many TOEFL practice on the internet or on the website, on the website I usually work through it first which is free, and also increase the vocabulary”].

**(Student 19, 06/01/2024)**

*“...iya kak, memang di reading section sendiri saya mempersiapkan diri biasanya dengan membaca teks-teks dan artikel, seperti artikel-artikel bahasa inggris. Jadi banyak tambahan kata-kata baru yang biasanya saya dapat.”*

[“...Yes, in the reading section itself I prepare myself usually by reading texts and articles, such as English articles. So, I usually get a lot of new words”].

It can be concluded that students find value in the strategy of preparing for the test by developing a habit of reading English texts. This practice is highly effective for addressing challenges related to recognizing unfamiliar words or phrases in the TOEFL test. By regularly engaging with English texts before the exam, students become more accustomed to the diverse vocabulary that may appear in the TOEFL reading section. This not only aids them in identifying unfamiliar terms but also enhances their overall vocabulary. Additionally, this familiarity helps students comprehend the context in which words are used, allowing them to interpret their meanings more accurately. With increased exposure to unfamiliar words, students also gain confidence and experience reduced anxiety when approaching the TOEFL test. Overall, this strategy not only addresses specific challenges in identifying unknown words or phrases but also contributes to improved overall English proficiency, which is essential for success in the TOEFL exam.

**d. M Skimming and Scanning Techniques (22 out of 22 students)**

All students, or 100% of the total students, reported that they *used skimming and scanning techniques in reading the long text. It can be seen that students often adopt*

*skimming and scanning techniques in dealing with the reading section of the TOEFL because it is very supportive of efficiency and success in answering questions with long reading texts with limited time.* The finding above is in line with the results of interviews conducted by researcher. This can be seen in the following interview results:

**(Student 1, 04/01/2024)**

*"Okay... menurut saya strategi yang cukup membantu untuk mengatasi masalah yang sering saya hadapi di reading section pada test TOEFL itu dengan cara melakukan dua Teknik, yaitu Teknik Skimming dan Scanning, saya pribadi lebih sering membaca soal sebelum terjun ke teksnya, nah untuk Teknik pertama yaitu skimming, dia itukan Teknik membaca cepat nah cara ini sering saya terapkan karena menurut saya teknik ini cocok untuk saya yang tidak terlalu suka berlama-lama membaca teks panjang sehingga mudah mendapatkan ide pokoknya."*

[“...Okay... I think the strategy that is quite helpful to overcome the problems that I often face in the reading section of TOEFL test is by doing two techniques, namely skimming and scanning techniques, I personally read the questions more often before jumping into the text, now for the first techniques, namely skimming, it is a fast reading technique, now this method I often apply because I think this technique is suitable for me who does not really like to linger reading long texts so that it is easy to get the main idea”].

**(Student 2, 04/01/2024)**

*“...kalau strategi yang saya gunakan pertama yaitu membaca pertanyaannya, lalu dari pertanyaan, baru mencari pernyataan di dalam teks, jadi tekniknya seperti scanning, ini sangat membantu dalam hal waktu untuk mencari ide pokok bacaan yang panjang itu.”*

[“...if the strategy I use first to read the question, the from the question, then look for statements in the text, so the technique is like scanning, this is very helpful in terms of time to find the main idea of the long reading passage”].

It can be concluded that the skimming and scanning techniques are highly effective methods for addressing difficulties in locating key information or the main idea within a text. First, skimming enables students to quickly obtain a general overview of the reading material, assisting them in identifying the author's main idea and purpose. This initial understanding is crucial before delving into the questions. Second, the scanning technique helps students locate specific information required to answer the questions.

By using these techniques, students can avoid spending unnecessary time on irrelevant details. Improved reading speed is also crucial for managing lengthy and intricate texts. This strategy not only enhances efficiency but also boosts students' confidence when dealing with academic English texts, effectively preparing them for the challenges presented in the TOEFL reading section, which assesses both comprehension and response speed.

## Discussions

In the field of education, a strategy refers to a plan that outlines how to utilize existing resources and facilities to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of learning (Deak & Santoso, 2022). For those preparing for the TOEFL test, strategies are the methods or steps employed to improve their chances of success across various components of the test, including the Reading Section. These strategies aim to assist test takers in comprehending the material, managing their time, and answering questions more effectively (Zang, 2021). Having a strategy while approaching the Reading Section

of the TOEFL is crucial, as it enables test takers to use their time wisely, navigate complex texts, avoid common pitfalls, and more accurately identify the correct answers.

The researcher identified that students commonly used the strategy of reviewing the questions prior to reading the text. Kim and Park (2021) noted that this approach facilitates the identification of where specific information can be located within the text, as well as its intended purpose or direction. This strategy was the most frequently employed by the students, with all 22 participants, representing 100% of the total, indicating its use. The widespread adoption of the strategy "Reading questions before reading the text" by all students highlights a collective preference for this method in addressing the TOEFL Reading Section. This technique proves effective in aiding students to overcome challenges related to locating keywords or specific details in the text. By implementing this strategy, students aimed to enhance their focus and efficiency during the reading process. Furthermore, it enabled them to prioritize effectively, allowing them to pinpoint relevant keywords from the questions before commencing their reading.

The researcher also discovered that students employed the strategy of taking notes or summarizing while reading the TOEFL test. Specifically, 6 students, approximately 28.57% of the total, reported using this approach. According to Al-Amri and Al-Enezi (2023), the note-taking technique is an effective skill for organizing information, enabling students to optimize their efforts in responding to TOEFL questions during the exam. This strategy of making notes or summaries while engaging with the TOEFL test proves to be beneficial in addressing challenges related to understanding the language and writing style present in the reading section. By utilizing this method, students actively engage with the material, extracting key information from the text and translating it into notes or summaries. As a result, they deepen their comprehension of the material and become more adept at recognizing common sentence structures, keyword usage, and paragraph formats found in the TOEFL test. Additionally, the act of taking notes or summarizing enhances students' analytical skills, allowing them to approach the text from various angles and identify significant elements.

The researcher also noted a consistent finding among all 22 students, highlighting that they prepared for the test by engaging with English texts, which is a fundamental and widely accepted practice among language learners. Lee and Lee (2022) reported that students aim to enhance their TOEFL scores through self-study using English materials, TOEFL preparation books, or guidebooks that provide insight into the types of questions on the TOEFL test. It can be concluded that students benefit from the strategy of preparing for the test by developing a habit of reading English texts. This approach is an effective method for overcoming challenges related to unfamiliar words or phrases in the TOEFL exam. By regularly reading English texts prior to the test, students become more acquainted with the diverse vocabulary that may appear in the TOEFL reading section. This not only aids them in recognizing unfamiliar terms but also broadens their overall vocabulary. Additionally, this exposure helps students grasp the context in which these words are used, enabling them to interpret their meanings more accurately.

Finally, the students utilized Skimming and Scanning Techniques to address their reading challenges. All students, or 100% of those surveyed, indicated that they employed these techniques when reading lengthy texts. Skimming and scanning are strategies that students use while tackling the TOEFL reading section (Ali, 2023). Skimming involves quickly glancing over a passage to grasp its overall content, allowing students to identify key ideas and main points without having to read every single word (Ali, 2023). This method is particularly effective for managing time efficiently, especially given the extensive nature of the TOEFL reading section. In contrast, scanning requires

students to search for specific information in the text, such as dates, names, or keywords pertinent to the questions (Chen & Koda, 2013). It can be concluded that the skimming and scanning techniques serve as valuable strategies for overcoming difficulties in locating the main information or central ideas in a text. First, skimming enables students to quickly gain a general understanding of the reading material, aiding them in identifying the author's main idea and purpose, which is crucial for forming an initial comprehension before addressing the questions. Second, the scanning technique helps students locate specific information required to answer the questions, allowing them to avoid spending time on irrelevant details.

## Conclusion

As the findings about the students' challenges in TOEFL reading session, many students encounter significant difficulties when attempting to comprehend the TOEFL Reading section. One of the primary challenges is the complexity of the academic language used in the passages. The texts are often dense, filled with specialized vocabulary, and structured in a way that requires a high level of reading proficiency. This can overwhelm students, particularly non-native English speakers, who may struggle to grasp the meaning of technical terms or abstract concepts. A variety of strategies are employed to assist students in overcoming their challenges. These strategies include reading the questions before engaging with the text, taking notes or summarizing while reading the TOEFL, and employing skimming and scanning techniques, as well as preparing in advance by familiarizing themselves with English texts. The positive feedback from students regarding these strategies highlights the importance of fostering both comprehensive and in-depth reading skills. Based on the findings from surveys and interviews, it is essential to continually develop learning strategies that enhance students' performance on the TOEFL exam while simultaneously improving their overall reading abilities. Therefore, implementing a responsive and adaptable learning approach will significantly enhance students' reading skills, ultimately producing graduates who are well-prepared to meet the demands of English in various academic and professional settings.

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