

Constraints on Structure and Written Expressions of The TOEFL for Midwifery Students

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to identify the factors limiting Midwifery students' performance on the TOEFL, especially in the Structure and Written Expression sections. Qualitative research was conducted as a case study in two classes of a midwifery study program. Document analysis of 89 student response sheets and interviews with four students constituted the data. Brown (2004)'s difficulty index (IF) formula was used to analyze the quantitative data, while Miles and Huberman's interactive model (2004) was used to analyze the qualitative data. The findings showed that students' difficulties stemmed from three factors: inadequate vocabulary knowledge, insufficient TOEFL practice, and interference from their native language. In addition, the students' extrinsic motivation negatively affected both their learning and test performance.

Keywords: TOEFL, Constraints, Difficult

Introduction

The Acknowledgement of TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) to measure the non-native English speakers' proficiency with academic objectives has pulled numerous higher education institutions to utilize the quality of the graduates (Hayati & Kurniawan, 2022; Nimasari et al., 2019). TOEFL allows students to demonstrate their proficiency in English mastery. The vocabulary utilized in the TOEFL is the English usage in real world in University courses (Mufidah, 2012). It suggests that the TOEFL language is the same as the language used by teachers while engaging in instructional activities with learners while learning topics. As a result of completing this type of test, students may discover their English skills and gauge their grasp of acquiring English at the worldwide level. According to Hajri, Jufri, and Wahyuni (2018), there are several reasons why persons or learners receive the TOEFL. To begin, participants take the TOEFL to guarantee their skills in a second language. Second, they must complete the university graduation requirements, which indicates that the requirement has become one of the criteria



for students completing their undergraduate studies. Third, they must apply for specific things, such as pursuing a master's or doctorate or looking for certain employment either overseas or inside the nation.

Furthermore, there are three TOEFL variants: computer-based test (CBT), paper-based test (PBT), and internet-based test (IBT). There is a possibility that the university will additionally administer a TOEFL-like exam or a TOEFL prediction, for instance, through the language studies center or the language center. This type of TOEFL is provided internally by the institution and is exclusively used for institutional purposes to assess students' English ability (Noviyenty, 2018).

Todd and Shih (2013) classify two major categories of English proficiency usage in Southeast Asia into: English's expanding sphere and English's outer circle. Most Southeast Asian nations, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Myanmar accepted English as a foreign language (EFL), and their scores on international English tests were reasonably low. Countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and the Philippines, on the other hand, fall within the English outer circle, as evidenced by higher English proficiency test results, they have chosen to use English as their primary language. The TOEFL test was first offered in Indonesia by English Language System (ELS), a one-of-a-kind TOEFL testing institution known as Institutional TOEFL. Higher education institutions in Indonesia, like those in other Southeast Asian nations, have begun to seriously use English competency assessments. In a country where English is used as a foreign language (EFL), the usage of English proficiency tests, particularly the TOEFL, is widely widespread among both students and professors.

As a direct consequence, educational facilities have initiated the practice of including a minimum TOEFL score as one of the prerequisites for graduation. One of the requirements for graduation that many universities now include is a certain minimum score on the TOEFL exam. Some institutions of DIII Midwifery in Central Java have implemented similar requirements for students to get a TOEFL. Before graduating from respective universities, students must earn a minimum TOEFL score of 450. The TOEFL exam has three parts: hearing, structure and writing expression, and reading. The TOEFL preparation course was taken by 87 students from the two institutions, it was only 10 students scored more than 450. The average score was discovered from the Structure and Written Expressions section to be the lowest one, only 15.52. The other sections were the score of the Listening section, which was 25.5 and the score of the Reading section, which was 33.4. From the result, it can be seen that the Structure and Written Expressions section was, in some way, the hardest part to do for the students.

According to Hajri et al. (2018), the Structure and Written Expression section component is one of the most difficult parts for students. The understanding of English grammar is examined in the part of the Structure and Written Expression section. Structure and grammar are two distinct concepts, although they are also connected. Many students are unable to complete their studies in the English Department because they lack a TOEFL score. Their final test would be postponed if they did not pass the TOEFL. Structure and written expression are among the most difficult for learners (Tangelangi, 2020).

It is highly unlikely that a person will achieve a high score on the TOEFL Structure and Written Expression test if they learn the structure of English sentences



and improve their proficiency in speaking and hearing but never improve their proficiency in writing (McKinley & Thompson, 2018). The ETS official website's 'Structure and Written Expression' (SWE) section contains sentences designed to measure examinees' mastery of major structural and grammatical aspects of standard written English. These sentences can be found in the 'Structure and Written Expression' (SWE) section. In the section on grammar, there are a total of forty questions. 1- 15 questions concern the structure (sentence completion), and 16-40 questions concern the written language (error analysis). The goal of the sentence completion portion of an examination is to determine how well candidates select the suitable response to "fill in the blank" in a sentence so that it reads correctly. Examinees, on the other hand, are prompted to search for the error, or the inaccurate component of the phrases, in the error recognition portion of the test (Philips, 2001).

Meanwhile, Richards (1971) divides errors or mistakes into two broad categories based on the causes. The first type of interlingual mistake is induced by the mother tongue. These forms of errors, which impede target language learning, are influenced by native languages. Transfer errors, in which students try to mimic and imitate what the instructor says while they are in the process of learning, are one cause of interlingual errors. Another cause of interlingual errors is simplification (the students who want to make the sentences simpler but the structure is not grammatically correct). The second type of error is one that occurs within the language itself and results from developmental processes. When students have not mastered the material to its full extent during the process of learning a second language, they are prone to making this kind of error. Language difficulties or issues are another factor that can contribute to blunders or mistakes. Mistakes or errors that can be caused by the target language include things like false analogy, misanalysis, insufficient rule application, exploiting redundancy, ignoring co-occurrence constraints, hypercorrection or monitor overuse, overgeneralization or system-simplifying, and so on.

Research on TOEFL learning research, in general, has been done by previous researchers. Therefore, this research study is important to be mapped in order for researchers to find a position that is different from previous research. The first research is by Yosintha et al. (2021). The goal of this study was to examine students' language and non-linguistic restrictions when taking the TOEFL Structure and Written Expression test. The research design that the researchers used in this study is a qualitative case study conducted at two institutions in Magelang, Central Java, Indonesia. The data included document analysis of forty-two participants, and the researcher's analyzed the forty-two TOEFL answer sheets and interviews with four students. The difficulty index (IF) formula and the interactive model were utilized by the researchers to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Based on the results and discussions above, students taking the TOEFL Structure and Written There is a possibility that both linguistic and non-linguistic issues will arise during the expression test. The active-passive verb structure, the use of double comparatives, and pronoun-noun agreement were the three linguistic restrictions. Their performance on the test was also affected by factors that were not linguistic in nature, such as unpleasant learning experiences in the past and a lack of exposure to the L2 itself.



In addition, Slamet & Sulistyarningsih (2021) carried out a study to investigate the types of questions that were challenging on the TOEFL-like examination and to identify the challenges that the students faced when answering the questions on the TOEFL-like Structure and Written Expression section. Students from STKIP PGRI Sidoarjo's batch five of the Master of English Education (S2 MPBI) program participated in this study. These students had previously taken a placement test that was comparable to the TOEFL in order to enroll in the Master of English Education program. This inquiry likewise used a descriptive qualitative technique. This investigation uncovered the first problem, which was a lack of forethought on anyone's part. Second, there is a vocabulary gap among the student body. Third, the fact that the students were taking an exam similar to the TOEFL for the first time contributed to the difficulty rating of the test. Finally, there was a limit on the amount of time we had. was carried out in order to investigate the types of questions that were difficult in TOEFL-like and to find out the difficulties that the students had in responding to the TOEFL-like Structure and Written Expression section. Participants in this study were students from STKIP PGRI Sidoarjo's batch five Master of English Education (S2 MPBI) program. These students were required to take a placement test similar to the TOEFL in order to enroll in the master's program. In addition, the descriptive qualitative method was utilized throughout the course of this investigation. This investigation uncovered a number of problems, the first of which was a failure to adequately plan ahead. Second, there is a vocabulary gap among the student body. Third, the fact that the students were taking an exam similar to the TOEFL for the very first time meant that the test was considered to be difficult. At long last, there was a time constraint imposed.

In a nutshell, a research study by Hajri et al. (2018) investigated the students' difficulties in answering the second section of TOEFL from students of the English department from the previous year of Universitas Negeri Padang. The goals of this study were to identify students' difficulties with TOEFL structure and written expression, as well as the reasons or causes of their errors. Twenty-five students took part in this study. Two instruments were used in this descriptive study: a structural sub-test and an interview. The sample for this study was selected using proportionate stratified sampling. The survey discovered that 11 of the 18 items tested were problematic for the previous year's English students at Universitas Negeri Padang. Negation, reduced form, and parallel structure were the three most difficult items. The students' errors were caused by ignorance, carelessness, doubt, obliviousness, and miscasting. The first two factors accounted for the majority of student errors. Referring to previous research studies related to TOEFL, no one has conducted research on the difficulties faced by Student Midwifery in the TOEFL in the Structure and Written Expression section. We believed that it was very important to conduct a thorough study on the constraints challenged by the students in answering correctly in the second section of the TOEFL. We wanted to know what factors caused the students to answer the questions incorrectly. We did assume that linguistic factors might be taking place firstly; however, there was also a possibility that non-linguistic factors might also have a role in it. Therefore, we constructed the following research question: What factors affect the students of Midwifery in answering the TOEFL in the Structure and Written Expression section?



Method

The purpose of the research was to determine the factors that prevent midwifery students from performing well on the TOEFL's Structure and Written Expression component. The method of research known as qualitative research was used for this study. The procedures of qualitative research produce text rather than numbers as the data to be analyzed; this is because the goals of qualitative research are tied to the understanding of various aspects of social life. Because of this, we are able to highlight the research for a few different rationales. The first step is to investigate and describe the phenomenon in the natural environment in which it occurs. Second, it gives us the ability to ascertain the cause and consequence of what we discover. In addition, a case study can recognize repercussions in genuine and real-world contexts and can identify the factors that contributed to both the causes and the outcomes. (Cohen et al., 2017).

The subjects in this research were 89 students from two classes majoring in the Midwifery program. Class A consisted of 44 students, and class B consisted of 45 students. These students participated in a TOEFL Preparation Course in the academic year of 2022. To select research subjects, a convenience sampling technique was used, which chose everyone who was readily available and eager to participate in the study.

We collected both qualitative and quantitative data for this investigation. A document analysis technique was used to gather the quantitative data. The documents were created using the TOEFL questions and answers. We conducted an in-depth interview with four students who had the lowest average scores in the Structure and Written Expression portion to collect qualitative data. The interview was conducted using the Zoom Meeting program. Each participant was interviewed separately for about 15-20 minutes. The questions were open-ended and focused on the reasons of mistakes. Open-ended questions allow participants to express lengthy and detailed comments and ideas (Creswell, 2003).

Brown (2004) proposed the following difficulty index (IF) algorithm for analyzing quantitative data:

$$IF = \frac{\text{The number of students who correctly answered the item}}{\text{Total number of students that responded to that item}}$$

Following that, we classified each item's difficulty into three categories: challenging, medium, and easy. The classification was based on Brown's rule (2004) as follows:

Table 1. The Category of Difficulty Level

Levels of Difficulty	IF Ranges
Easy	> 0.85
Medium	0.15 – 0.85
Difficult	< 0.15

We interviewed four students who obtained the lowest four scores in the Structure and Written Expression part after examining the quantitative data. The interview



results were then qualitatively evaluated using Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model (2014). This model has three stages: data reduction, data display, and deriving and verifying conclusions. We reduced the raw data in the data reduction stage to those that could help us answer the study question. To make it easier to understand the data, we displayed it in phrases and charts at the data display step. Finally, such data were validated throughout the developing and verifying conclusions stage.

Ethical Consideration

Because the researchers need the participants' ratings and personal opinions for this examination, we made sure to obtain permission before beginning the study. The researchers promised the participants not only that their data would be kept private, but also that the information they provided would not be connected to them personally. In this particular scenario, pseudonyms were utilized for both of the data collection methods.

Findings and Discussion

To answer the research question, we write this section by focusing on two issues in the Structure and Written Expression of the TOEFL. Those issues are 1) linguistic factors and 2) non-linguistic factors causing students' difficulty in answering the second section of the TOEFL.

Linguistic factors Causing Students' Difficulty in Answering the TOEFL in Structure and Written Expression Section

First, we analyzed the answers of the Structure and Written Expression section of the TOEFL from the students. Each test item was calculated and categorized using the IF number. Out of the 40 questions, it was found that not a single question was categorized as "Easy". Meanwhile, there were 37 questions that were included in the "Medium" category, and only 3 questions belonged as "Difficult".

Second, we continued our analysis on the three questions, which were categorized in the "Difficult" category. The first one was a multiple-choice question (number 12) which can be seen below:

- | |
|---|
| 12. The New England states have had ____ serious earthquakes since the Ice Age.
A. None.
B. Not any.
C. Not.
D. No. |
|---|

Here, the students were asked to answer the negative idea in a sentence. Although all choices seemed to be correct as their meanings were all in the form of a negative idea, when we see it structurally, the correct answer for this question is (D) No, as "No" is always followed by a noun. However, most of them failed to answer this question correctly. The distribution of the answers from both classes can be seen in the following figures:



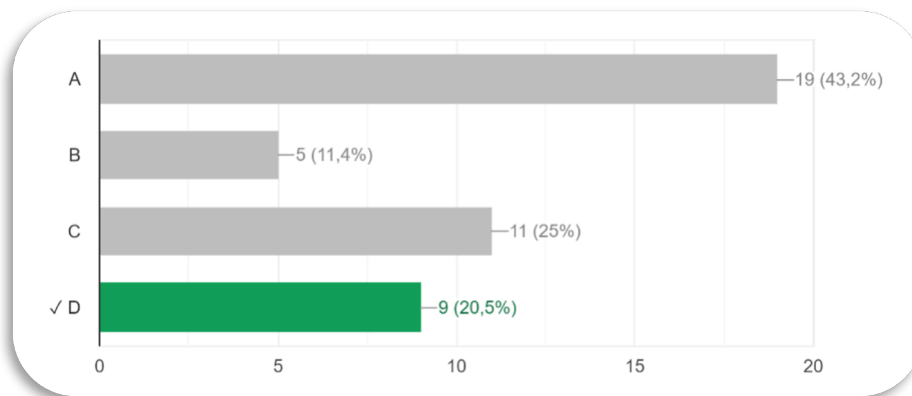


Figure 1. The Answers' Distribution of Number 12 from Class A

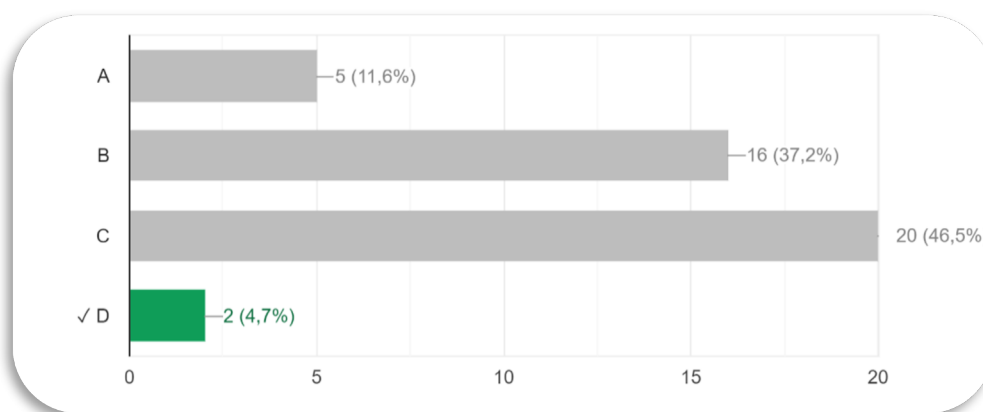


Figure 2. The Answers' Distribution of Number 12 from Class B

From the figures above, we can see that only 11 from 87 students, with 9 from class A and 2 from class B answered the question correctly. The difficulty index for this question is only 0.125. Thus, this question is categorized in the “Difficult” category.

The next hardest question to answer was number 27, which was in the second part of the Structure and Written Expression section. The following figure is the question:

27. The thread used in knitting may be woolen yarn, cotton, or synthetic fabric threads
such rayon.
A B C
D

It can be seen that the correct answer for this question is D (such). The word “such” must always be added “as” to introduce an example that is mentioned (rayon is the example of synthetic fabric thread). The answers' distribution from class A and B can be seen in these figures:

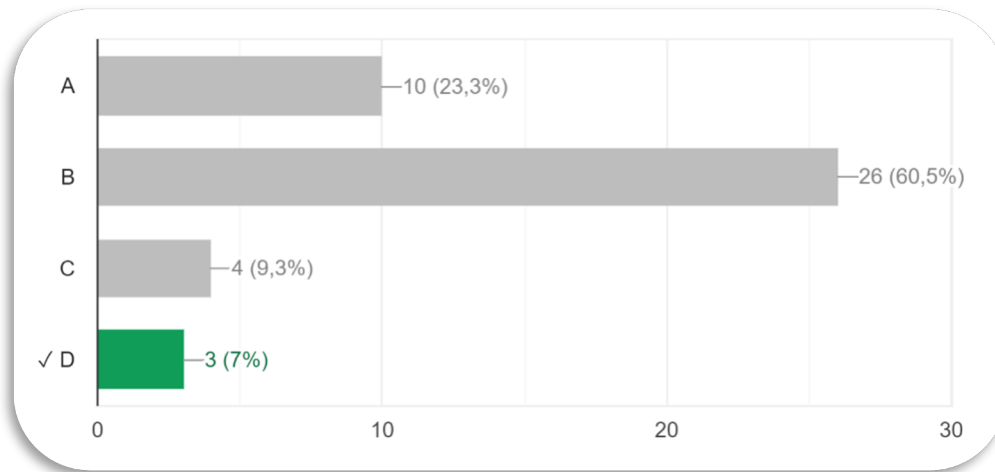


Figure 4. The Answers' Distribution of Number 27 from Class A

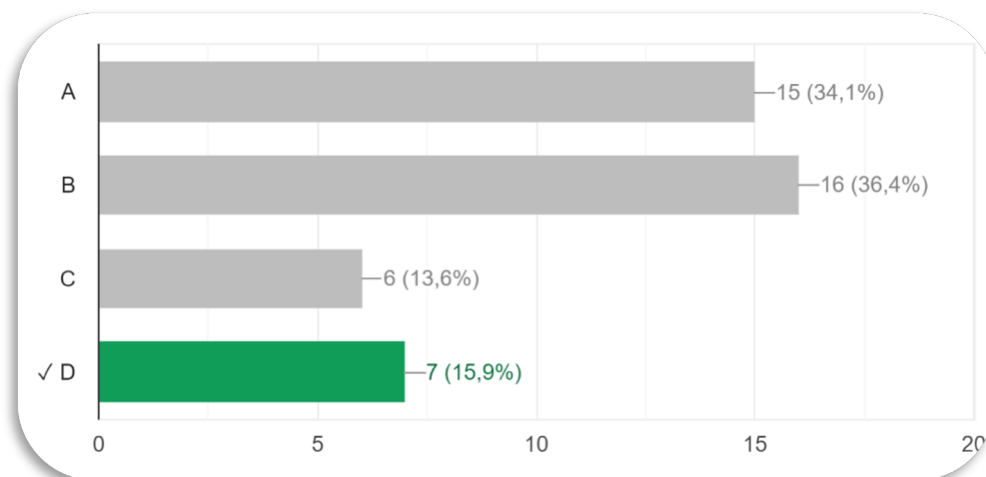


Figure 4. The Answers' Distribution of Number 27 from Class B

Here, the figures show that most students answered the question either A (in) or B (maybe) instead of the correct answer. Only 10 students with 3 from class A and 7 from class B answered it correctly. This is the most difficult question for the students to answer as the difficulty index is the lowest one, only 0.113.

The last question that is categorized in the "Difficult" category was from number 13. This question was about dealing with the plural form of a noun. The question can be seen in the following:

31. The coastline of Maine is marked by thousand of island and inlets.
 A B C D

The answer to this question is C (thousand) which should be changed to thousands for the correct form. The noun in C (thousand) must be in the form of a plural noun since there is no number or quantity before it. Unfortunately, the students did not manage to answer this question correctly. The distribution of the answers can be seen in the following figures:

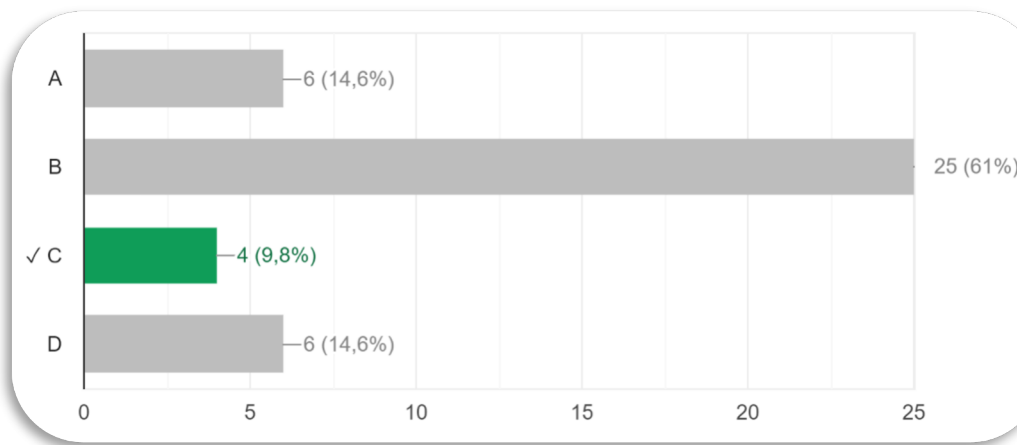


Figure 5. The Answers' Distribution of Number 31 from Class A

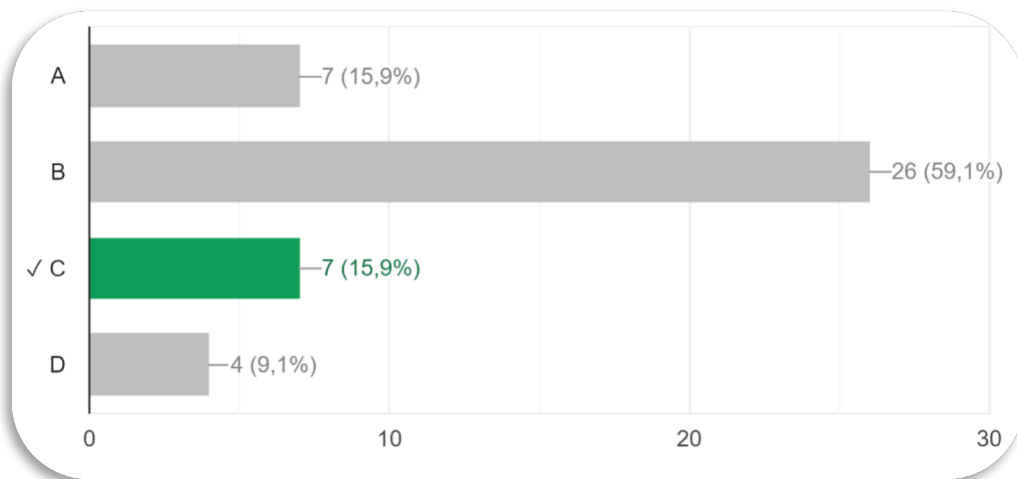


Figure 6. The Answers' Distribution of Number 31 from Class B

That the question could only be answered by 11 students, with 4 from class A and 7 from class B, the difficulty index is 0.125. Interestingly, more than half of the students answered this question B (is marked). This led the researchers to do further analysis on the constraints of answering the questions, which were categorized as "Difficult".

With 3 questions about a negative idea in a sentence, dealing with the plural form of a noun, and word usage in the "Difficult" category, we tried to figure out the constraints affecting the students' choice in answering those questions. We then analyzed the interview results from 4 students who were in the bottom four. We found out that the students' linguistic constraints were basically affected by (1) lack of vocabulary mastery, (2) insufficient TOEFL practices, and (3) the interference of the first language.

First, the lack of vocabulary mastery causes trouble for students to understanding the meaning of the question (Hampp et al., 2021). It was indeed that some questions used vocabularies that midwifery students rarely faced. Some of the students admitted that they did not really know the meaning of certain words such as



“knitting, woollen yard, and inlets”. In a review session, many times did we tell them that Structure and Written Expression questions could be answered by ignoring the meaning of unfamiliar vocabularies as long as the formula is known. However, one of the students said,

“Sometimes I honestly do not understand the meaning of some words. When you explained it to us in the practice, I can understand it but when it comes to the individual practice, I find it difficult” (Student A)

Other students also mainly said that lack of vocabulary mastery was the most-stated problem in doing the Structure and Written Expression session, especially in Part B. When we asked them why they still insisted on translating each word, a student said:

“It is just happening Sir; my brain is always trying to translate each word, and I become confused after that because I do not know the meaning.” (Student B)

Most of teachers admit that lack of vocabulary mastery is a major problem for the TOEFL takers (Akmal et al., 2020; Fitria, 2021; Samad et al., 2017). Not only affecting the second section of the TOEFL, but the limited vocabulary knowledge of students also causes problems when doing the listening and reading sections. A study which was done in IAIN Kediri reveals that there is a significant correlation between vocabulary knowledge and the TOEFL (Anam, 2019). Thus, overcoming students’ lack of vocabulary mastery must be done.

The next part in the Structure and Written Expression of the TOEFL, the Part B, questions are about deciding which word is incorrect. Part B was mentioned many times by the students because of the difficulties in finding the incorrect word. It is also supported by the data that 2 of the 3 questions in the “difficulty” category were from the second section. The reason for their difficulty was mainly because of insufficient practices in TOEFL. Handayani (2019) states that unfamiliarity with the TOEFL practice is one of the factors that influence students’ difficulties in the Structure and Written Expression section. In fact, most of the students did not really have experience in doing the TOEFL. Moreover, almost half of them even never had any practice in TOEFL.

“I never had the TOEFL (test) before Sir. I only know that TOEFL is English.” (Student C)

Wang and Huang (2020) state that students only study the TOEFL only at the end of their study. This causes the teachers to provide TOEFL preparation course with limited amount of TOEFL practices. It is in line with what Putri and Syarif (2021) extended TOEFL courses are needed for students to improve students TOEFL scores. With this reality, it is important to keep students practicing on TOEFL before the real test.

The most challenging question in the structure and written expression segment was the absence of vocabulary and grammatical structure. Students become acquainted with taking vocabulary, grammatical structure, and word meanings literally, causing them to struggle with this component of the TOEFL test (Nurhayati, 2016). In structure and written expression comprehension, most



students employed bottom-up for specific information and top-down for inferred information and scenarios in line with the TOEFL technique. They read the complete phrases for structure and written language before answering the questions. They also avoided the harder questions in favour of answering the simpler ones. Due to the very limited time in the Structure and Written Expression section, most of the students also did not answer all of the questions. Additionally, a research study at Syiah Kuala University find that grammatical aspects such as redundancy, verb form, and article are generally the errors made by the students in doing the TOEFL (Muhajir & Gani, 2018).

The last linguistic factor is the interference of students' first language. They used their first language logic in trying to seek meaning from the questions. Tilana, Yunita, and Zahrida (2019) have done a similar study. Their findings reveal that the interference of the first language affect the students in terms of redundancy and ambiguity. It is in line with what we found as well. Students were confused when, for example, they tried to translate "no", "not", "none", and "not any" to match with the sentence in question number 12. Thus, lexical interference is really prominent as what Putra (2020) states that lexical interference more dominant in the process of learning a foreign language.

Non-linguistic Factors Causing Students' Difficulty in Answering the TOEFL in the Structure and Written Expression Section

We found out that motivation had an impact, especially extrinsic motivation, in doing the TOEFL. Extrinsic motivation, according to Ryan and Deci (2020), concerns behaviours done for something other than someone's inherent satisfaction. The Midwifery students' extrinsic motivation was driven by the need to pass the TOEFL with a minimum score of 450. This is because they did not have any other reasons for learning English other than to pass the TOEFL. Moreover, due to the lack of experience in learning English, they felt it was a useless thing to do as they felt complicated with the formula as well as the vocabulary of English. As a result, it distracted the students from the task of remembering the strategies for answering the TOEFL.

"It is already hard to remember the formula, plus I don't know the meaning of the words." (Student D)

These students were indicated as "learned helpless"; as Gilakjani, Leong, and Sabouri (2012) point out, learned helpless students see intelligence as something unchangeable and failure as important due to lack of ability. Thus, it is important for us as teachers to keep students in high motivation and never allow them to be unmotivated.

Conclusion

The results of the study show that there were three factors causing the difficulties for the Midwifery students: lack of vocabulary mastery, insufficient TOEFL practices, and the interference of the first language. These three factors were causing the students to have difficult times answering the TOEFL. Furthermore, the students' extrinsic motivation was proved to be the source of inadequate learning which resulted in both learning and test.



Because the TOEFL is frequently used in Indonesia to determine students' English ability, further research is required, particularly in the Structure and Written Expression component. The results of this study only present limited findings due to the limited students and study program. Other possible findings when applying a broader and wider scope with more data would help clarify and complete our findings. Overall, further research could be an advantage for the students, teachers, lecturers, and other researchers.

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