

An Analysis of Students' Difficulties in the TOEFL Structure Section at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya

Khairul Nurhaliza^{1*}, Meristika Moetia²

^{1, 2} Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya.
Jl. Nasional Desa Padang Meurantee, Kabupaten Aceh Barat Daya, Aceh, Indonesia
khairulnurhalizaab@gmail.com

Abstract

While the TOEFL Structure section poses significant challenges for EFL learners, limited research explores how linguistic deficits and psychological factors interact during test performance in regional higher education contexts. This study explored the primary difficulties, contributing factors, test-taking strategies, and recommended solutions among eighth-semester English Education students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 purposively selected participants who scored below 68 in the TOEFL Structure section. The data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 12 Pro. The findings indicate that students struggled most with subject-verb agreement, tenses, conjunctions, determiners, and complex clauses. These difficulties were exacerbated by limited vocabulary, insufficient practice, time constraints, and test anxiety, leading students to rely on reactive strategies such as scanning and guessing. To overcome these hurdles, participants emphasized the need for self-directed practice alongside institutional support. Practically, the study highlights the necessity of transitioning from rote grammar memorization toward strategy-oriented instruction, diagnostic TOEFL practice, and time-management training within the university curriculum.

Keywords: Students' Difficulties, Structure Section, TOEFL.

Abstrak

Meskipun bagian Structure pada TOEFL memberikan tantangan yang signifikan bagi pembelajar EFL (English as a Foreign Language), masih sedikit penelitian yang mengeksplorasi bagaimana keterbatasan linguistik dan faktor psikologis saling berinteraksi selama pelaksanaan tes dalam konteks perguruan tinggi di daerah. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi kesulitan utama, faktor-faktor penyebab, strategi pengerjaan tes, serta solusi yang direkomendasikan di antara mahasiswa semester delapan Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya. Menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, wawancara terstruktur dilakukan terhadap 15 partisipan yang dipilih secara purposive dengan nilai di bawah 68 pada bagian Structure TOEFL. Data dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan NVivo 12 Pro. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa paling kesulitan dalam subject-verb agreement, tenses, kata sambung (conjunctions), determinan (determiners), dan klausa kompleks. Kesulitan-kesulitan ini diperparah oleh keterbatasan kosakata, kurangnya latihan, keterbatasan waktu, dan kecemasan saat tes, yang menyebabkan mahasiswa mengandalkan strategi reaktif seperti scanning dan menebak. Untuk mengatasi hambatan tersebut, para partisipan menekankan perlunya latihan mandiri di samping dukungan dari pihak institusi. Secara praktis, penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya bertransisi dari hafalan tata bahasa secara acak (rote memorization) menuju pengajaran yang berorientasi pada strategi, latihan TOEFL diagnostik, serta pelatihan manajemen waktu di dalam kurikulum universitas.

Kata kunci: Kesulitan Mahasiswa, Bagian Structure, TOEFL.

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✉ Corresponding author: Khairul Nurhaliza

Email Address: khairulnurhalizaab@gmail.com (Jl. Nasional Desa Padang Meurantee, Aceh Barat Daya, Aceh)

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INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency has become an important competency requirement for university students, given that English serves as the lingua franca in international scientific, academic, and professional communication. Indonesian students' attitudes toward learning English in the context of globalization tend to be positive, reflecting their awareness of the importance of English proficiency for future academic and career purposes Suwartono (2024). In response to this need, the Test of English as

a Foreign Language (TOEFL) has developed into the most internationally recognized instrument for measuring English language proficiency and is used by thousands of universities around the world. In Indonesia, TOEFL is considered a reasonable graduation requirement. However, a number of students have expressed concerns about the high minimum score standards set by institutions, which indicate a gap between academic demands and students' actual abilities in taking the test Anggraini, L. P., & Sari (2023). This situation is also the background for why research on students' difficulties in taking the TOEFL, especially the structure section, is very relevant and urgent to study, including in the English Education Study Program at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya.

Among the three main sections of the TOEFL, namely Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension, the structure section is known as the most challenging section for learners of English as a foreign language. This section tests formal English grammar proficiency, covering understanding of basic sentence patterns, subject-predicate agreement, parallel structure, clauses and phrases, and various complex grammatical constructions. Based on a preliminary study of the TOEFL test results at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya on October 10, 2025, it was found that the average score for the structure section was 34 out of 22 seventh-semester students who participated. Compared to the listening section, which had an average score of 42, and the reading section, which had an average score of 37, students scored lowest on the structure section. When viewed in relation to the standard TOEFL ITP section score range (Listening 31-68, Structure 31-68, and Reading 31-67), the students' performance in the structure section is still within the lower middle band. In contrast, the overall institutional graduation requirement specifies a total scaled score of 485, highlighting that low structure section performance directly hinders students from achieving the institutional passing standard. This fact explains that the difficulty in the structure section is not merely an individual problem but a systemic problem that requires in-depth study.

A number of previous studies have documented the same problem in various Indonesian educational institutions. Mahmud (2014) confirmed that most test takers had difficulty answering the structure and written expression section due to their poor understanding of English grammar, particularly on the topic of sentence inversion. Akmal et al. (2020a) found that topics in the TOEFL structure section were a significant obstacle for English Education students, identifying factors such as lack of practice, poor grammar skills, limited vocabulary, time management issues, and low self-confidence. Slamet, J., & Sulistyaningsih (2021) observed that more than half of the questions were categorized as very difficult due to lack of TOEFL experience and time pressure. Additionally, Putra et al. (2020) revealed dominant errors in sentence structure, while Awwalia, L., & Rais (2025) identified gaps in adjective clauses, passive sentences, and test-taking strategies.

Although previous research has identified common difficulty factors such as weak grammar proficiency, limited vocabulary, lack of practice, time pressure, and low self-confidence in the TOEFL Structure section (Akmal et al., 2020a; Awwalia, L., & Rais, 2025; Mahmud, 2014; Putra et al., 2020; Slamet, J., & Sulistyaningsih, 2021), there is still limited empirical attention on senior students in the

English Language Education Program who have completed formal structure courses. Furthermore, research examining students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya remains rare, particularly considering their distinctive linguistic background where the majority are native speakers of Acehnese and Indonesian before learning English.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by focusing on identifying the specific difficulties students face in understanding the TOEFL structure section and the factors behind them. Specifically, the research question is: What difficulties do students encounter in the TOEFL structure section, and what factors contribute to them? By addressing this question, this study aims to contribute useful insights for developing targeted TOEFL instruction and supporting students in overcoming structural hurdles in higher education contexts.

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen (2007) defined qualitative research in the context of education as research that seeks to collect rich descriptive data in the form of words and narratives from participants, enabling researchers to understand the meaning and experiences of research subjects in depth in a natural context. In line with this view, Creswell (2014) emphasized that a qualitative approach is the right choice when researchers intend to explore and understand the meanings attributed by individuals or groups to a problem, so that the findings are not merely statistical but rich in context and perspective of the research subjects. This approach was chosen because this study not only sought to identify the types of difficulties students had in understanding the TOEFL structure, but also attempted to explore in depth the factors underlying these difficulties as experienced directly by students. The descriptive method was used because the purpose of this study was to describe the phenomenon of student difficulties as they were, without manipulating variables or testing specific hypotheses.

The instrument used in this study was semi-structured interviews, adapted from the interview protocol in Akmal et al. (2020a), who investigated similar TOEFL structure difficulties among Indonesian EFL learners. To ensure content validity and contextual suitability, the adapted interview guide was reviewed, refined, and approved through expert judgment by the research advisors prior to data collection. The interview guide consisted of exactly 14 core questions systematically organized into four distinct sections. The first two sections directly addressed the primary research questions by investigating students' difficulties encountered in the TOEFL Structure section and the underlying contributing factors behind these struggles. The subsequent two sections captured the behavioral and prospective aspects of the participants' experiences, specifically examining students' strategies when answering the test and the solutions students needed to overcome their academic hurdles.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique from a total population of 45 eighth-semester students in the English Education Study Program at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya. The inclusion criteria were: (1) having taken the institutional TOEFL test administered by

STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya, (2) scoring below 68 in the Structure section, and (3) having successfully passed Basic Structure, Intermediate Structure, and Advanced Structure courses. Based on these criteria, 15 participants were selected. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached at the 15th participant, as no new themes or patterns emerged from further responses. Prior to data collection, written informed consent was obtained from all participants, guaranteeing confidentiality and voluntary participation.

The selection of interviews as the main instrument related closely to Krashen (1982) Monitor theory, which explains that foreign language learners consciously monitor and correct their own language use; this condition made interviews an appropriate instrument, because through direct conversation, researchers could reveal how the monitoring process worked or was hindered when students encountered grammatical questions in the TOEFL structure section. Interviews also allowed researchers to explore further the strategies used by students, the obstacles they encountered, and the factors that they believed influenced their ability to understand the TOEFL structure section.

Interviews were conducted directly with the participants from 27 April 2026 to 4 May 2026 using an audio recorder to capture responses and a checklist to guide key themes. The collected audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The data were then analyzed thematically following the six-phase framework by Braun & Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), specifically NVivo 12 Pro, was utilized to execute the transcription management, coding procedures, and thematic visualization, yielding comprehensive insights into the primary grammatical challenges and contributing factors.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis process

Interview process

This study involved 15 English Department students from STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya who had taken the TOEFL test. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the students' difficulties with the TOEFL structure section, factors contributing to these difficulties, students' strategies for answering TOEFL questions, and potential solutions for overcoming difficulties in the structure section of the TOEFL.

Table 1. Overview of Interview Participants, Duration, and Word Count

Participant Names	Duration of Interview (in Minutes)	Amount of Words
Participant 1	08:30	1049
Participant 2	11:05	1174
Participant 3	09:10	1117
Participant 4	13:06	1436
Participant 5	06:21	929
Participant 6	07:46	961
Participant 7	07:00	953

Participant 8	07:22	947
Participant 9	07:43	867
Participant 10	10:05	1043
Participant 11	10:41	1223
Participant 12	08:18	931
Participant 13	07:20	923
Participant 14	07:53	988
Participant 15	09:22	974
Total	02:11:42	15515

The total duration of all interviews was 2 hours 11 minutes 42 seconds, and the total number of words in all transcripts was 15.515 words. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants, their real names are withheld. Withholding real names is an ethical step in research, ensuring that the data remains anonymous and replaced with participant codes.

Overview of themes

To better understand the students' difficulties with the TOEFL structure section, participants' responses were systematically analyzed and organized into four main themes: (1) student difficulties, (2) contributing factors, (3) student strategies, and (4) students' need for solutions.

Table 2. Main themes, sub-themes, and codes

Main themes	Sub-themes	Codes	References (coded statements / coding frequency)	Total References
Theme 1 Student Difficulties (RQ1)	Sentence Structure	Subject-verb agreement Grammar and tenses Conjunction Determiner Clause	56	59
	Choosing answer	Similar words	3	
Theme 2 Contributing Factors (RQ2)	Weak in knowledge	Weak in basic vocabulary Lack of practice English	18	46
	Lack of self-confidence	Low Self-Confidence Anxiety	21	
	Time Constraints	Run out of time	7	
Theme 3 Student Strategies	Reading Text Strategy	Scanning questions Eliminate the different answer technique	12	42
	Choose random answers	Guess random answer Use intuition in choosing answers	23	
	Using memorize	Trying to remember the material	7	
Theme 4 Students need solutions	Self Support	Need more TOEFL practice	18	29
	Teacher Support	Frequent TOEFL material in class	11	

Making a new TOEFL class

A total of 59 statements in the first theme, Student Difficulties, indicated that students' difficulties with the TOEFL Structure section were the most prominent finding. This primary theme was followed by factors contributing to these difficulties with 46 statements, test-taking strategies with 42 statements, and solutions needed with 29 statements.

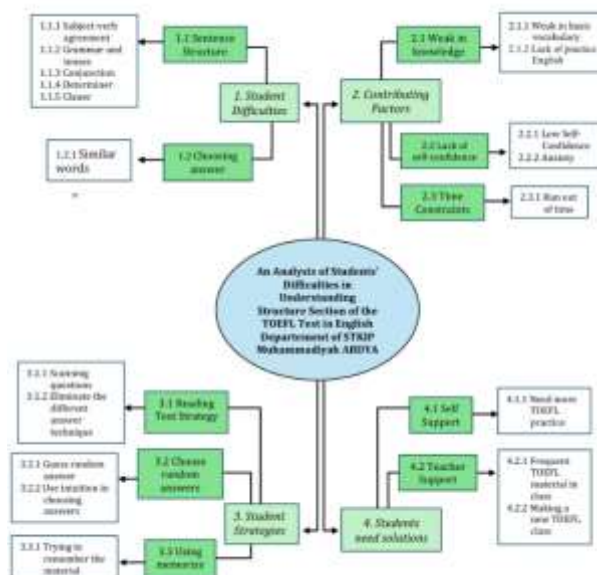


Figure 1. Concept map of main themes, sub-themes, and codes

Student Difficulties (Research Question 1)

The focus of this section was to explore students' difficulties in understanding the structure section of the TOEFL test. The findings were categorized into 2 sub-themes and 6 codes, with a total of 59 statements obtained from the participants.

All participants reported difficulties with grammatical components, including subject–verb agreement, tense and grammar, conjunctions, determiners, and clauses. When asked about their difficulties in the structure section, one student stated:

"In my opinion, this section is more difficult than listening or reading because I really have to understand grammar and the rules of English sentence structure." (Participant 5, personal communication, 00:00:34)

In addition to core grammar rules, participants reported confusion when encountering similar-looking answer choices. One student described this obstacle:

"To be honest, when I was working on the structure part, it was really difficult... it was hard to distinguish between the sentences, which were almost identical." (Participant 2, personal communication, 00:00:17)

Overall, the data under Theme 1 show that students' main difficulties in the TOEFL structure section pertain to mastering specific grammatical concepts and distinguishing between similar answer options.

Contributing Factors (Research Question 2)

This section reports the factors contributing to students' difficulties with the TOEFL structure section. The findings were categorized into three sub-themes and five codes, yielding a total of 46 statements.

Participants identified several factors exacerbating their difficulties, including weak basic vocabulary, limited English practice, low self-confidence, anxiety, and time constraints. Regarding vocabulary and practice, two participants noted:

“Honestly, it is very difficult because some sentences I cannot understand their meaning due to a lack of vocabulary.” (Participant 12, personal communication, 00:00:14)

“It feels difficult because in the structure section I did not study before the test, and I did not often practice answering TOEFL.” (Participant 2, personal communication, 00:03:16)

Furthermore, participants described experiencing low self-confidence and anxiety during the test.

One student commented:

“Yes, I feel not confident because my understanding is lacking. So, the answer I want to fill in when taking the TOEFL test in the Structure section makes me hesitate whether my answer choice is correct or not.” (Participant 3, personal communication, 00:06:09)

Time pressure also contributed to their test struggles, as expressed by Participant 9:

“Because when taking the TOEFL, the time is short and there are many questions.” (Participant 9, personal communication, 00:00:16)

Overall, the data indicate that students' structural difficulties were influenced by a combination of limited vocabulary, lack of prior practice, low self-confidence, test anxiety, and strict time constraints.

Student Strategies

This section presents the strategies used by students when answering the Structure section. The findings were categorized into three sub-themes and five codes, based on 42 statements.

Participants reported using various approaches, such as scanning words, attempting to recall memorized grammar rules, and guessing answers. Regarding scanning surrounding words, one participant explained:

“It's a scanning technique. For example, when we are stuck and don't know anymore which one is correct, we scan the words before or after each sentence to see if it is correct.” (Participant 4, personal communication, 00:04:18)

When encountering unfamiliar items, participants also relied on memory retrieval or random guessing. Participant 6 described both approaches:

“Sometimes I also try to remember the grammar material that I have learned... When filling in the questions, sometimes I will guess. I choose to guess the answer to that question because I don't remember the answer to the question at all.” (Participant 6, personal communication, 00:02:09; 00:02:34)

Overall, the findings show that students relied on scanning nearby words, recalling previously learned rules, and random guessing when completing the TOEFL Structure section.

Students need solutions

This section covers students' perceptions regarding the solutions needed to overcome their difficulties in the TOEFL Structure section. The findings were categorized into two sub-themes and three codes, totaling 29 statements.

Participants identified two main sources of support: self-directed practice and institutional/instructor support. Regarding self-support, participants noted the necessity of repeated practice and online study:

“We need to practice more with TOEFL questions to understand what it looks like... Practice by frequently repeating TOEFL questions that have been given and practice TOEFL questions on the internet that we can search for ourselves.” (Participant 4 & Participant 11, personal communication, 00:10:50 & 00:10:28)

Regarding teacher and institutional support, Participant 14 expressed:

“In my opinion, lecturers or the study program can provide more TOEFL practice, then conduct a special structure class and detailed discussion of questions so that students are more prepared to face the TOEFL exam.” (Participant 14, personal communication, 00:07:35)

Overall, Theme 4 highlights that students identified both independent practice and structured instructional support, such as dedicated Structure classes and detailed discussions as the key solutions for addressing their difficulties.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical insights into the multifaceted challenges faced by English Department students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya when taking the TOEFL Structure section. To offer a comprehensive explanation of the findings, this section synthesizes the linguistic, psychological, and contextual factors according to the four main themes that emerged from the data, explicitly contrasting the findings with existing literature and highlighting the study's theoretical and practical contributions.

Student Difficulties (RQ1)

The findings confirm that students experience substantial difficulties with specific English syntax rules, particularly subject–verb agreement, tenses, conjunctions, determiners, and clauses. These results support prior research by Akmal et al. (2020a), Akmal et al. (2020b), and Mutmainnatussafiyyah, S., Sakkir, G. (2025), which demonstrated that core grammatical competence remains the most critical hurdle for L2 learners in standardized English tests.

However, this study extends previous work by revealing that even senior students who have completed all foundational and advanced grammar courses continue to exhibit surface-level errors under testing conditions. Specifically, building upon the findings of Akmal et al. (2020b) regarding specific grammatical errors, the participants in this study struggled when subject-verb agreement was obscured by intervening prepositional phrases or when inverted sentence structures appeared. Furthermore, the difficulty in distinguishing between visually or phonologically similar answer choices highlights that students' difficulties stem not only from a lack of rule memorization, but also from an inability to apply structural analysis during time-sensitive tasks.

Contributing Factors (RQ2)

The data indicate that students' structural difficulties do not occur in isolation; rather, they are accompanied by psychological and contextual constraints, including weak basic vocabulary, lack of test-specific practice, low self-confidence, anxiety, and tight time limits.

While previous studies (e.g., Ali, 2023; Pratiwi et al, 2021) identified general test anxiety among EFL learners, the current findings differ slightly by illustrating how non-linguistic factors interact dynamically with linguistic deficits. Limited basic vocabulary appears to hinder initial sentence comprehension, which may increase test-taking hesitation. In line with Morena (2018) and Masrai, A., & Milton, J. (2018), foreign language anxiety is associated with reduced test performance. However, rather than making definitive causal claims, the empirical data suggest that a lack of prior exposure to TOEFL-style items appears to heighten situational anxiety, which in turn may impair students' cognitive processing capacity when analyzing complex sentence structures under time pressure.

Student Strategies

Regarding test-taking behavior, the findings show that students relied heavily on reactive and surface-level strategies, such as scanning surrounding words, attempting to recall memorized rules, and random guessing. These results support the findings of Bulan et al. (2023), who reported that test-takers frequently resort to guessing when facing unfamiliar grammatical structures or time constraints.

This study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating a notable gap between classroom achievement and strategic test readiness. Even students with satisfactory grades in regular coursework defaulted to intuitive guessing under pressure. This behavior suggests that without explicit instruction in strategic test-taking techniques, such as systematically identifying core sentence constituents and eliminating distractor choices, students remain dependent on memory retrieval, which often fails when encountering complex TOEFL structures.

Students Need Solutions

In terms of prospective solutions, participants highlighted the necessity of combining self-directed learning with structured institutional support. On an individual level, students recognized the value of repeated practice and online study. This finding supports Yulina's (2025) learner autonomy framework, emphasizing that active engagement in self-regulated practice is essential for L2 development.

On an institutional level, participants expressed a strong desire for lecturer-led interventions, including dedicated TOEFL Structure courses and item-by-item analysis. This perspective aligns with Song (2016), who argued that targeted coaching and structured instructional support significantly enhance language learners' academic readiness. Thus, sustainable improvement requires a balanced synergy between autonomous student practice and systematic curricular support.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study offers meaningful contributions to both the theoretical literature and pedagogical practice in the field of EFL assessment. Theoretically, the findings contribute to L2 testing literature by

offering an integrated perspective on L2 test performance within regional Indonesian higher education contexts, demonstrating that TOEFL Structure performance is not governed solely by isolated grammatical knowledge, but rather by an interconnected dynamic where vocabulary constraints and situational test anxiety interact with cognitive rule application. Practically, for educators and curriculum planners, these insights emphasize the necessity of shifting from traditional, rule-memorization grammar instruction toward task-based and strategy-oriented teaching. By integrating diagnostic TOEFL practice, sentence-deconstruction techniques, and time-management training directly into the university curriculum, institutions can effectively help bridge the gap between students' classroom grammar knowledge and their actual performance on standardized tests.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that senior English Education students at STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya face significant challenges in the TOEFL Structure section, primarily involving subject–verb agreement, tenses, conjunctions, determiners, and complex clauses. These difficulties stem from an interplay of weak vocabulary foundations, limited test-specific practice, time constraints, and test anxiety, which lead students to rely on reactive strategies such as scanning and guessing rather than structural analysis.

The findings emphasize the need to shift university grammar instruction from rote rule memorization to strategy-based and diagnostic TOEFL training. Practically, integrating targeted sentence-deconstruction techniques and simulated test practice into the curriculum can help bridge the gap between students' classroom knowledge and standardized test performance.

However, this study is contextualized within a single institution with a specific qualitative focus. Future research could extend these findings by employing mixed-methods approaches, incorporating larger participant cohorts across multiple regional institutions, and analyzing actual test item error patterns to provide a broader perspective on TOEFL performance dynamics.

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