

## **STUDENTS' ERROR ANALYSIS IN COMPLETING TOEFL READING SECTION AT IAIN PAREPARE**

**Wahyu Pradana T<sup>1</sup>, Kalsum<sup>2</sup>**

*Institut Agama Islam Negeri Parepare, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Malaysia<sup>2</sup>*

\*Corresponding Author: nitechster000@gmail.com

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study analyzed students' errors in completing the reading section of the TOEFL test at IAIN Parepare and identified the factors that influenced those errors. The research responded to the need to understand specific reading-test difficulties faced by English Education students, particularly because TOEFL scores are commonly used for academic requirements and language proficiency evaluation. A descriptive qualitative design was employed. The participants were 28 English Education students selected through random sampling. The instruments consisted of TOEFL reading-section documentation containing 50 items and an interview guide. The data were analyzed through reduction, display, conclusion drawing, and percentage calculation. The findings showed that students made errors across all TOEFL reading aspects: main idea questions (62.14%), definition from structural clues (58.93%), tone, purpose, and course questions (65.00%), implied detail questions (67.86%), transition questions (66.43%), stated detail questions (63.57%), unstated detail questions (69.64%), and pronoun reference questions (65.48%). The most dominant error appeared in unstated detail questions. Interview results indicated that time management, unfamiliar vocabulary, and lengthy reading passages were the major factors influencing students' errors. The study concludes that TOEFL reading preparation should strengthen vocabulary mastery, skimming-scanning skills, and timed reading practice.

**Keywords:** Error Analysis, Reading Section, Time Management, TOEFL, Vocabulary

### **INTRODUCTION**

English proficiency has become an important academic requirement for university students because English is widely used in scholarly communication, international mobility, and institutional graduation requirements. In Indonesia, students learn English from secondary education to higher education, yet many learners still experience difficulty when they must apply language knowledge in standardized proficiency tests. TOEFL is one of the most familiar tests used to measure English competence, and its result is often considered by universities, scholarship providers, and workplaces as evidence of language proficiency (Riza et al., 2020).

The TOEFL test requires test takers to understand several language skills and to respond to different types of questions within a strict time limit. In the paper-based TOEFL format,

reading comprehension is one of the important sections because it measures the ability to understand written information, identify explicit and implicit meanings, recognize references, and infer meaning from context. Zhuang (2008) explains that TOEFL differs from ordinary classroom tests because it requires test takers to process language items through a standardized assessment format. This condition makes TOEFL reading difficult for students who are not accustomed to long academic passages and time-bound multiple-choice items.

Previous studies have reported that students often face problems in TOEFL reading because of limited vocabulary, insufficient reading strategies, unfamiliar question types, and weak time management. Basri (2018) found that students made various errors in TOEFL reading comprehension, especially when they had to identify meanings and infer answers from passages. Fitria (2022) also stated that students' difficulty in TOEFL reading is influenced by internal factors, such as motivation, reading habits, and emotional condition, and external factors, such as time, technical problems, and test environment. These studies indicate that TOEFL reading errors are not random mistakes; they are connected with specific linguistic and non-linguistic factors.

Preliminary information from English Education students at IAIN Parepare showed that students faced several problems when completing TOEFL reading tasks. They had to answer more questions than in ordinary classroom exercises, they often misread questions, and they sometimes lost concentration when the passage was long. Students also needed to locate detailed information quickly while the time limit continued to pressure them. These problems may lead students to choose incorrect answers even when they have basic knowledge of English.

Based on this phenomenon, this study focused on students' errors in completing the reading section of the TOEFL test at IAIN Parepare. The study specifically addressed two research questions: what errors students made in completing the TOEFL reading section and what factors influenced those errors. The findings are expected to help lecturers and students identify the most problematic TOEFL reading aspects and design more targeted reading preparation activities.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study used a descriptive qualitative research design. The design was selected because the research aimed to describe the types of errors made by students in the TOEFL reading section and to explain the factors influencing those errors based on test documentation and

interview data. Qualitative analysis was used to interpret the meaning of the findings, while percentage calculation was used to present the frequency of errors in a clearer numerical form.

The research was conducted at UPT Bahasa IAIN Parepare, located on Jl. Amal Bakti, Soreang. The participants were 28 students of the English Education Department who were selected through random sampling. The sample was considered relevant because English Education students commonly need TOEFL preparation and TOEFL scores for academic requirements.

The research instruments were TOEFL reading-section documentation and an interview guide. The reading documentation consisted of 50 TOEFL reading items. The documentation was used to identify students' wrong answers and classify the errors based on TOEFL reading-question types. The interview guide was used to obtain supporting information about the factors that caused students to experience difficulty when answering the reading section.

The data collection procedures consisted of checking the TOEFL reading answer documentation, identifying wrong answers, classifying the errors, and interviewing selected respondents. The analysis followed three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Abdussamad et al., 2021; Meadows, 2003; Mezmir, 2020). The percentage of each error type was calculated by dividing the frequency of wrong answers by the number of possible answers in the relevant item category and multiplying the result by 100.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Students' Errors in the TOEFL Reading Section

The analysis showed that the students made errors in all eight TOEFL reading-question categories. The error distribution indicates that the students' difficulty was not limited to one question type. Instead, the reading section created several layers of difficulty, including understanding the main idea, identifying stated and unstated details, recognizing implied meaning, determining tone and purpose, finding pronoun references, recognizing transitions, and interpreting definitions from structural clues.

**Table 1.** Frequency of Students' Errors in the TOEFL Reading Section

No.	Error type	Item numbers	Frequency	Percentage
1	Answering main idea questions	1, 11, 20, 31, 39	87	62.14%
2	Finding definition from structural clues	2, 4, 8, 13, 14, 16, 21, 22, 26, 30, 32, 33, 36, 37, 41, 42, 44, 46	297	58.93%
3	Determining tone, purpose, and course	3, 19, 28, 38, 43	91	65.00%
4	Answering implied detail questions	5, 17	38	67.86%

5	Answering transition questions	6, 7, 9, 10, 24, 25, 27, 40, 45, 50	186	66.43%
6	Answering stated detail questions	12, 18, 29, 35, 47	89	63.57%
7	Answering unstated detail questions	15, 49	39	69.64%
8	Finding pronoun references	23, 34, 48	55	65.48%

*Source:* Processed from students' TOEFL reading answer documentation.

The highest percentage appeared in answering unstated detail questions, with an error rate of 69.64%. This finding means that students had serious difficulty identifying information that was not explicitly stated in the passage. Unstated detail questions require students to compare each option with the information in the text and eliminate statements that are directly supported by the passage. This process is more complex than merely finding a sentence with similar wording.

The second-highest percentage was found in answering implied detail questions, with an error rate of 67.86%. This result indicates that many students had difficulty drawing conclusions from information that was indirectly expressed. Implied detail questions require inference, contextual reading, and careful interpretation. The error rate in this category shows that students tended to depend on visible wording in the text rather than infer meaning from the relationship among sentences.

Errors in answering transition questions reached 66.43%. This category measures students' ability to understand the logical connection between ideas, such as addition, contrast, cause, result, and sequence. The high percentage indicates that students still needed stronger discourse-level comprehension. When students do not understand transition markers and paragraph relationships, they may fail to identify the function of sentences within the passage.

Errors in finding pronoun references reached 65.48%, while errors in determining tone, purpose, and course reached 65.00%. Pronoun reference questions require students to trace the noun or noun phrase represented by a pronoun. Tone, purpose, and course questions require students to understand the author's intention and the possible academic field of the passage. These two categories show that TOEFL reading competence requires both textual accuracy and broader comprehension of rhetorical meaning.

Errors in stated detail questions reached 63.57%, and errors in main idea questions reached 62.14%. These categories are often considered basic reading-comprehension tasks, but the students still made many errors. Stated detail questions require accurate information retrieval, while main idea questions require students to identify the central point of a paragraph or whole passage. The findings suggest that students still needed systematic practice in locating keywords, distinguishing main ideas from supporting details, and avoiding distractor options.

The lowest error percentage was found in finding definitions from structural clues, with an error rate of 58.93%. Although this was the lowest category, it still showed that more than half of the possible responses were wrong. This result indicates that students had not fully mastered contextual vocabulary strategies. They often needed to interpret unfamiliar vocabulary through punctuation, apposition, examples, contrast markers, or surrounding phrases. This finding is consistent with Basri (2018), who reported that TOEFL reading errors often appear when students must infer meaning from context.

### Factors Influencing Students' Errors

Interview data revealed three main factors that influenced students' errors in the TOEFL reading section: time management, unfamiliar vocabulary, and long reading passages. These factors were mutually connected. Long passages increased the time needed to understand the text, unfamiliar vocabulary slowed comprehension, and limited time pressured students to answer questions without sufficient checking.

**Table 2.** Factors Influencing Students' TOEFL Reading Errors

No.	Factor	Description of influence
1	Time management	Students needed too much time to read passages and answer questions, especially when they reread the text to find details.
2	Unfamiliar vocabulary	Students encountered academic words or topic-specific vocabulary that they rarely used in daily communication.
3	Long reading passages	Lengthy passages reduced concentration and forced students to return repeatedly to the text while answering several related questions.

*Source:* Processed from interview data.

Time management became a dominant factor because students had to process long passages and answer many questions within a limited period. Several respondents reported that they needed about five to ten minutes to read and answer one reading passage. This condition is problematic because TOEFL reading requires rapid comprehension. When students spend too much time on one passage, they have less time for later items and may answer hurriedly. This finding supports Lubis et al. (2019), who found that weak time management is one of the factors that makes TOEFL questions difficult for students.

Unfamiliar vocabulary also influenced students' errors. Students reported that they often found words that they had never seen or rarely used before. In TOEFL reading passages, vocabulary may come from academic topics, such as science, history, social studies, and culture. Limited vocabulary mastery makes students unable to understand the main message of the passage and unable to infer meanings accurately. Sesriyani (2019) similarly found that insufficient English vocabulary makes students struggle to understand ideas and information in TOEFL reading texts.

The third factor was the length of the reading passages. Students stated that long passages made them lose concentration and caused them to return to earlier sentences repeatedly. TOEFL reading passages often contain several paragraphs followed by several questions. When students cannot remember the content of the passage, they must reread the text and spend additional time. This problem can increase errors in unstated detail, implied detail, and transition questions because those question types require students to understand relationships among ideas rather than merely locate isolated words.

The findings imply that TOEFL reading preparation should not only provide more exercises but also train students to use reading strategies. Students need to practice skimming to identify general ideas, scanning to locate specific information, and contextual guessing to infer unfamiliar vocabulary. Siahian and Pangaribuan (2022) argue that skimming and scanning can help readers obtain information quickly and use time efficiently. In this study, these strategies are particularly relevant because the highest error categories required students to process implied, unstated, and relational information under time pressure.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concluded that English Education students at IAIN Parepare made errors in all TOEFL reading-question categories. The errors included main idea questions, definition from structural clues, tone, purpose, and course questions, implied detail questions, transition questions, stated detail questions, unstated detail questions, and pronoun reference questions. The most dominant error was found in unstated detail questions, followed by implied detail and transition questions. These results show that students had greater difficulty with questions that required inference, elimination, and comprehension of relationships among ideas.

The study also found that the students' errors were influenced by time management, unfamiliar vocabulary, and long reading passages. These factors were closely related because limited vocabulary and lengthy passages increased the time needed to understand the text, while limited time increased the possibility of choosing wrong answers. The implication of this study is that TOEFL reading instruction should prioritize timed reading practice, vocabulary expansion, contextual guessing, skimming, and scanning. Lecturers are encouraged to provide regular TOEFL-like reading exercises so students become familiar with question types and learn to manage time more effectively. Future researchers may expand this study by involving larger samples, comparing proficiency levels, or testing specific strategies to reduce errors in the most problematic TOEFL reading categories.

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