

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE USE OF TOEFL PREPARATION ONLINE COURSE ON THE TEST PERFORMANCE: THE CASE OF TOEFL STRUCTURE AND WRITTEN EXPRESSION TEST

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate the use of an online TOEFL preparation course on the test performance. The research method used was a quantitative method which emphasized on the objective measurements and the statistical analysis of collected data. The data were collected from the result of the online TOEFL test course program and the questionnaire to gain information about the students' perception towards the use of online TOEFL preparation course on the test performance. The data were analyzed by using matched-test to compare the result between the pre-test and the post-test. In addition, the means and percentages were used to analyze the questionnaire data to describe the students' perception. The findings enrich the understanding on the use of TOEFL preparation program in improving TOEFL mastery on test performance.

Keywords: TOEFL preparation test, online TOEFL course, performance test

INTRODUCTION

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a test which uses as a standardized test to measure the English proficiency of non-native speakers. Generally, this test is as a requirement to enroll in universities in the countries where English is spoken as the first language. Many students of the non-native speaker of English take this test in order to accomplish the requirement, and sometimes a lot of students acquire the TOEFL to get a scholarship abroad with a particular standard. Most of the students think that study abroad is a gateway to get a better education opportunity. Generally, there is a standardized score that the students should be accomplished in order to be accepted in the university they apply or getting the scholarship for studying abroad. The standardized score is usually 550 or above. The students have to achieve that minimum score so that the students can win whether to study abroad or to win the scholarship. Getting focused on preparation for these instrumental tests has increasingly become a vital prerequisite. Hence some students take an intensive course to practice their skills in TOEFL.

By joining a program to study intensively about TOEFL is regarded as a preparation test for the students/test takers before they encounter the test. This type of preparation may entail, for instance, exposing the students to the kinds of item formats they will encounter, making certain that they know when to guess, and helping them learn to allocate their time appropriately (Mousavi, Arizavi, & Namdari, 2014). According to Powers (2012), the special preparation of this kind is generally regarded as desirable, as it presumably enables individuals to master the mechanics of test taking, thereby freeing them to focus on, and accurately demonstrate, the skills and abilities that are being assessed. Mousavi, Arizavi, and Namdari (2014) state that test developers, researchers, teachers, and students/test takers have always been concerned with the issue of the effect of test preparation on the learners' performance of TOEFL tests. In addition, Mousavi, Arizavi, and Namdari (2014) also

explain that researchers and test designers often highlight the merit of a test which can independently measure the underlying ability of test-takers regardless of how well they have prepared or crammed for the test. In other words, if preparing results in a higher test score regardless of whether the candidate's ability has increased, thus the construct validity of the test is questionable (Nguyen, 2007). From a practical standpoint, however, teachers and students/test takers often feel the vitality of test preparation before being tested.

Nowadays, in Indonesia, there is a TOEFL preparation online course. This online course has already more than 119.000 students almost all over Indonesia and Indonesian students who live abroad and are interested in learning TOEFL. In each class enrollment, there are a lot of students who apply to join this TOEFL preparation online course. It indicates that the need of Indonesian students to learn English is still high and this online course gives a positive impact on the students. This online course integrates social media such as Facebook, blog, and YouTube to support its learning program. Social Networking Sites (SNS) are able to be used as an educational tool for language learning. One of the common SNS which is employed as an educational tool is Facebook. Facebook has a feature that can create an online language learning environment that is Group Discussion feature. Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin (2010) state that the students consider online group discussion feature as an online learning environment can assist them to facilitate and support their language learning. Moreover, the students at a low level of proficiency feel more comfortable and less threatened when they participate in online discussion than face-to-face in class, which are mainly dominated by the high proficiency learners (Al-Hammody, 2014). Haverback (2009) investigates that the students feel more motivated while they are involved in online group discussions, and they are able to grasp a better understanding of the learning materials. It indicates that when the online learning environment can make the students feel more comfortable and confident in learning, they will be easier to understand the materials given and they can be more motivated to learn.

In this online course, the students are given weekly assignments related to TOEFL such as listening, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. For the first six months, the exercises given are about the structure and written expression. This online course program sets to learn structure and written expression at the first phase of the learning process. It is assumed that the students should have a deep understanding of the structure as the basic level of a language then they can move to another session. The exercises are given weekly. It aims to make the students familiar with the TOEFL questions especially in structure and written expression section. This exercise given in this online course is considered as the preparation before they take the TOEFL test. By enrolling this program, the students are expected to get the higher score and meet the demand of the scholarship's requirement.

This research will focus on how this TOEFL preparation online course program assists the students in mastering the English grammar in order to gain their score in structure and written expression section. It is considered that grammar is a basic knowledge of a language that students have to become proficient at before they comprehend other language skills. Grammar in each language has its pattern. If the students want to comprehend language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, they should have a deep understanding of the structure of the grammar. This is the reason why the founder of the preparation test program has set the materials from the very basic level that is structure and written expression. The preparation program may give a good influence to the students or the test-takers in improving their score in TOEFL.

Messick (1982) (as cited in Powers, 2012) provides an insightful, logical analysis of the ways in which special test preparation may impact validity; there appears to have been little empirical research to demonstrate how such practices may affect, for example, the relationship of test scores to other relevant measures. Most of the research of test preparation has focused on the extent to which these practices cause spurious test score improvement (Mousavi, Arizavi & Nambari, 2014). However, although relatively rare, researchers have also examined, in both a logical and empirical manner, the

effects of test preparation on the empirical relationships of test scores to other indicators of developed ability. The impact of special preparation on test validity is a relevant consideration. Though the assumption is sometimes made that preparation can serve only to adulterate the construct validity and impair the predictive power of a test, some kinds of special preparation may, by reducing irrelevant sources of test difficulty, actually improve both construct validity and predictive validity (Farnsworth, 2013; Hayes & Read, 2004).

Based on the stated issues, this research aims to examine the effect of test preparation on test performance and to investigate the students' perceptions of the use of TOEFL preparation online course on the test performance in the case of TOEFL structure and written expression test. By knowing their perceptions, it can help the teachers to motivate the students in enhancing their English skills.

METHODS

This research employs a quantitative research to gain insights into students' perceptions who use of online TOEFL preparation course on the test performance in the case of TOEFL structure and written expression test. It is done by investigating students through the survey using an online questionnaire and matched-test. The result is used to identify the effect of test preparation on test performance through a comparison of test performance from the same group (pre-test and post-test). Matched t-tests are employed for the mean score comparison. The procedure for the matched t-test is similar to the independent samples (Hatch & Farhady, 1982). It should be noted that the finding in this research ought to be interpreted with caution since the number of test takers is admittedly small for making generalizations, as maintained by Camilli and Shepard (1994); McNamara and Roever (2006). The test taker chosen in this research is the students who are active in class and joined both the pre-test and post-test. Hence, the researcher finds 20 samples of students who are doing the TOEFL preparation courses in an online course for the purpose of improving their structure and written expression score in TOEFL. Those students will be tested by pre-test and post-test that are conducted in order to investigate the effect of the preparation test program on the task performance.

The questionnaire is distributed via online using Google Form. There are 505 students of this TOEFL preparation online course participated in this survey. The instrument employed in this survey is an adapted questionnaire from Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin (2010) about students' perception in an online learning environment. The questionnaire consists of 16 items, but it is modified to suit the research. The questionnaire used in this survey consists of two sections. The first section solicits demographic information of students, students' educational level, their gender, and the frequency of time that the students used to access this online course. The second section explores the students' perception of learning English through an online course. This questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert-type scale, in which responses are ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' The items in the questionnaire cover the aspects of the students' improvement of English language skills, students' motivation, and perception toward English language learning through an online course. For the analysis of the demographic data, frequencies and percentage are used while the percentage is employed to describe the students' perceptions of the use of TOEFL preparation online course.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section is aimed to answer the research questions addressed in the research and discuss the findings of the research. Table 1 describes the demography of the participants of the research. This table describes the proportion of the participants based on their gender, age, occupation, student level, and length of learning time at the online course.

Table 1 Demographic Data

	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	109	22
	Female	396	78
	Total	505	100
Occupation	Student	224	44,3
	Worker/Employee	162	32,1
	Teacher	59	11,7
	Others	60	11,9
	Total	505	100
Student Level	Senior High School Student	15	3
	Undergraduate Student	207	41
	Graduate Student	207	41
	Doctoral Student	10	2
	Others	66	13
	Total	505	100
	Daily Learning Time for TOEFL Preparation Online Course	Do not use	12
Below 1 hour		180	35,6
1-2 hours		215	42,6
3-5 hours		79	15,6
6-10 hours		13	2,6
11-15 hours		2	0,4
16-20 hours		1	0,2
Above 20 hours		3	0,6
Total		505	100

The results and findings are presented in two sections. The first section is aimed to answer the first research question proposed in this research. It presents the results of both the pre-test and post-test of the students and the second section is proposed to resolve the second research question addressed in this research. The second section presents the students' perception of the use of TOEFL preparation online course on the test performance in the case of TOEFL structure and written expression test which will be divided into three parts to address confidence, motivation, and attitude of the students in TOEFL preparation online course.

The first section is about the effect of test preparation on test performance in the case of structure and written expression. The analysis of raw scores shows an effect of preparation of TOEFL on the performance of the TOEFL structures and written expression test for both pre-test and post-test of the test takers. The hypothesis is the preparation program of TOEFL test cannot improve the performance of the TOEFL structures and written expression test.

From Table 2, the mean gained from pre-test (X_1) is 19, and the mean obtained from the post-test is 19,95. To investigate the results from pre-test and post-test from the same students by comparing the two means, it can use the matched t-test to compare their performance on the prediction tests.

Table 2 Correct Score of Structure and Written Expression of TOEFL Test

Ss	Pre-Test	Post-Test	D	D ²
1	25	26	1	1
2	22	18	-4	16

Table 2 Correct Score of Structure and Written Expression of TOEFL Test (Continued)

	Ss	Pre-Test	Post-Test	D	D2
	3	34	33	-1	1
	4	10	12	2	4
	5	19	22	3	9
	6	16	12	-4	16
	7	15	12	-3	9
	8	19	22	3	9
	9	15	12	-3	9
	10	23	23	0	0
	11	26	27	1	1
	12	13	26	13	169
	13	8	14	6	36
	14	15	21	6	36
	15	29	27	-2	4
	16	21	21	0	0
	17	30	28	-2	4
	18	6	12	6	36
	19	21	18	-3	9
	20	13	13	0	0
Total	20	380	399	19	369

$$S_D = \frac{S_D}{\sqrt{n}}$$

$$S_D = \frac{\sqrt{\sum D^2 - (1/n)(\sum D)^2}}{n-1}$$

$$S_D = \frac{\sqrt{369 - (1/20)(361)}}{20-1}$$

$$= \frac{\sqrt{350,95}}{19}$$

$$= \sqrt{18,47}$$

$$= 4,3$$

It obtains the standard error of differences between two means.

$$S_{\bar{d}} = \frac{SD}{\sqrt{n}}$$

$$= \frac{4,3}{\sqrt{20}}$$

$$= \frac{4,3}{4,47}$$

$$= 0,96$$

Based on the result above, now it gets the denominator. All the need to do is dividing the difference that is found between the correct score of pre-test and post-test in structure and written expression by the denominator to obtain the *t* value.

$$t = \frac{\bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2}{S_{\bar{d}}}$$

$$= \frac{19 - 19,95}{0,96}$$

$$= \frac{-0,95}{0,96}$$

$$= -0,99$$

The observed t value of -0,99 in the t -distribution table needs at least a value of 1,73 before it is safely rejected the null hypothesis at 0,5 level of significance. t_{critic} is higher than $t_{observed}$; it means that it can reject the null hypothesis. So, the preparation program of TOEFL test can help the students to improve the performance of the TOEFL in structures and written expression test. In this preparation program, as Powers (2012) states that the special preparation of this kind is generally regarded as desirable, as it presumably enables individuals to master the mechanics of test taking, thereby freeing them to focus on, and accurately demonstrate, the skills and abilities that are being assessed. Besides it can help the students to improve their score, this kind of program also makes students familiar with types of TOEFL questions, so the students have nothing to worry about in encountering the TOEFL test.

The second section is discussing the students' perceptions of the use of TOEFL preparation online course. Table 3 reports data concerning on the responses of the respondents about their opinion of learning English grammar through TOEFL preparation online course.

Table 3 Enhancing Students' Confidence in Learning English Grammar via Online Course

No	Items	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean
1	This online TOEFL preparation course enhances my confidence to master English grammar.	0,20%	1,00%	20,40%	66,50%	11,90%	3,99
2	This online TOEFL preparation course enhances my confidence to get a good score in structure and written expression session.	0,60%	0,80%	11,90%	68,70%	18%	3,88

Table 3 indicates that 78,4% of EFL students (the aggregated result of 'agree' and 'strongly agree') agree that they more feel confident to master English grammar after joining this TOEFL preparation online course (mean score = 4,01). Moreover, 86,7% of the students believe that they have gained confidence in obtaining a good score in structure and written expression session (mean score = 3,88).

Table 4 Enhancing Students' Motivation via FB Group

No	Items	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean
1	Online TOEFL preparation course makes me understand the benefits of learning English for real life usage.	0,20%	1%	10,50%	64,60%	23,80%	4,09
2	Learning through online TOEFL preparation course makes learning English more interesting.	0,40%	0,60%	18,50%	58,80%	21,70%	3,99
3	Online TOEFL preparation course motivates me to learn English more.	0,20%	0,40%	6,10%	60,20%	33,10%	4,24
4	I join this online course to gain my TOEFL score.	2,60%	0,20%	14,70%	41,40%	41,20%	4,19

As can be seen in Table 4, the majority of the students believe that by joining this online TOEFL preparation course can enhance their motivation in learning English. Hence 88,4% of the students (the aggregated result of 'agree' and 'strongly agree') agree that TOEFL preparation online course makes them understand the benefits of learning English for real-life usage (mean score = 4,09), while 80,5% agree that it is more interesting to learn English through this online course (mean score = 3,99). Moreover, 93,3% of the students believe that TOEFL preparation online course motivates them to learn English more (mean score = 4,24). And 82,6% of the students agree that they join this online course is to gain their TOEFL score (mean score = 4,19).

Table 5 Students' Attitudes of Learning English through Online Course

No	Items	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean
1	I have positive attitudes of learning English through this online course.	0,20%	1%	20,40%	66,50%	11,90%	3,89
2	The use of online TOEFL preparation course helps me study English grammar more effectively.	0,40%	2%	14,50%	63,20%	20%	3,99
3	The use of online TOEFL preparation course helps me master grammar competence.	0%	1%	15,60%	66,20%	17%	3,97
4	The use of online TOEFL preparation course helps me to learn more grammar.	0,80%	0,40%	6,50%	64,60%	27,70%	4,17

The findings of the research in Table 5 reveal that students generally have a positive attitude towards TOEFL preparation online course. 86,6% of the students state that they have positive attitudes towards learning English via online course (mean score = 3,89). 83,2% of the students believe that this online course helps them to study English grammar more effectively (mean score = 3,99), while 84,2% agree that it can help them in mastering grammar competence (mean score = 3,97). Moreover, 92,4% of the students consider that this online course is able to help them in learning grammar (mean score = 4,17).

Based on the results of the survey, the students believe after joining TOEFL preparation online course, their confidence, motivation, and attitude in understanding English grammar which focuses on the structure and written expression materials have improved. The findings of this research are also in line with the results reported by the previous research (Haverback, 2009; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010) in which this online course can encourage students' motivation in learning English. Based on the support statement that the use of TOEFL preparation online course can assist the students to gain their competence in English before they take the TOEFL test. It can be assumed that this online course can be used as learning media to gain students' confidence in learning English grammar. According to Haverback (2009), students are motivated to be involved in an online course. The majority of the students agree that TOEFL preparation online course is useful to support their learning in mastery the TOEFL skills and it can create a good learning environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Online TOEFL preparation course assists the students to be more acquainted with the types of TOEFL questions. This online course can help the students to prepare themselves in encountering the TOEFL test and to overcome their anxiety in a test. The positive attitudes are showed by the students in this online learning environment to learn English, particularly TOEFL skills that can encourage and support them to create an effective learning environment. According to the results, such TOEFL preparation program will be beneficial for the low level of proficiency of students who want to take a TOEFL test since this kind of program is able to aid them to acquire the targeted score. Moreover, this online learning environment can create a non-threatening atmosphere in which such a learning environment can increase students' confidence and motivation to get over their inhibitions and to ease their learning.

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