



## Online TOEFL Preparation: An Analysis of Students' Motivation, Learning Challenges, and Score Improvement

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### Article Info

#### Article History:

Accepted 30 March 2024

Approved 8 June 2024

Published 15 September 2024

#### Keywords:

Online course, students' motivation, online course.

### Abstract

Online TOEFL preparation course has been very popular as it brings accessibility and flexibility to students. However, the effectiveness of these TOEFL preparation can be affected by some factors, namely students' motivation, challenges they faced in learning TOEFL online, and the score improvements in their overall TOEFL score. This research aims at evaluating students' motivation in participating in online TOEFL preparation course, evaluating what challenges students in the process of learning virtually, and evaluating the extent to which students' score improve after they have completed 6-hour online preparation course. This research employs explanatory sequential mixed-method design. The instruments utilized are questionnaire, interview, and pre-test and post-test. The result of this research highlights the students' motivation and challenges in learning TOEFL online and the extent to which their TOEFL scores improve. This study is hoped to add reference for future researchers to explore more about TOEFL preparation for wider participants and longer duration of preparation.

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**p-ISSN 2087-0108**

**e-ISSN 2502-4566**

## INTRODUCTION

Having good English skills has become an essential element for students who wish to pursue their education and for people who wish to work in professional settings. One of the examples is TOEFL score. Most universities have set a certain level of standard for students to achieve high score of TOEFL when they want to enrol to prestigious universities, apply for scholarships, earn a lot of certification programs, and graduate from universities. Besides, people who work are also urged to have basic English skills and fluency to have job promotion, secure work position, or develop their career to meet clients from other than Indonesia. These English skills can be tested through TOEFL test to measure how capable someone uses English language in academic and professional setting.

In order to prepare for the TOEFL test, students usually take online TOEFL preparation courses. TOEFL preparation courses can facilitate students to prepare themselves academically before they take part in TOEFL test. Thus, the score earned can meet the requirement the students need to have. According to Maharani and Putro (2021), by participating to an online TOEFL preparation course, students would be well-prepared in dealing with TOEFL tests as they could learn independently based on their own paces, review the lessons, and practice based on their needs. In other words, the existence of TOEFL preparation courses facilitate students to improve students' English skills to meet the minimum standard they need to provide academically and professionally.

In fact, however, the effectiveness of these preparation courses is affected by some factors, namely students' motivation, what difficulties students deal with during the online learning, and what improvement they earn at the end of the test. Basar et al. (2021) explain that an effective TOEFL preparation course does not solely depend on how capable the instructor teaches or delivers the materials to the learners, however, there are other factors that make these courses become effective including students' motivation

in learning and students' difficulties during the online learning process.

Many research have been previously conducted in accordance to students' motivation in learning TOEFL, the effectiveness of TOEFL preparation courses, and what students usually face in learning TOEFL. Sari (2019), Tarihoran et al. (2021), Shinta (2022), and Maghfiyah and Mushthoza (2024) believe that students' motivation holds a significant role in achieving high score in TOEFL test. When the students have motivation in learning and preparing for the TOEFL test, they are willing to spend more time to learn, read, and have more practice to sharpen their English skills. In contrast, when the students do the test unwillingly, they will not spare their time for learning, preparing for the test, and practicing similar TOEFL tests. Students who have motivation in learning will surely achieve higher than those who do not. Moreover, Maghfiyah and Mushthoza (2024) highlight that students' motivation in learning English for TOEFL preparation can also be affected by some factors namely the learning environment, lecturer's role, students' interests, students' mood, and job demands. When the students feel comfortable with the surrounding, s/he will be more focus in learning as it elevates his or her interests. Besides, having lecturers who always use fluent English in teaching facilitates students in getting accustomed to listening English.

Furthermore, some studies also underline the effectiveness of participating in TOEFL preparation courses. According to Hidayah and Nazriani (2021), Maharani and Putro (2021), Sailuddin (2022), and Aprilliandari and Sugiharto (2023), taking part in TOEFL preparation courses help the students to improve their English skills, specifically their reading and structures scores. Wijayanti et al. (2022) emphasize that reading habit has vital role for supporting their future especially in education and teaching practice. Students will be very well-prepared when they have joined the TOEFL preparation courses because they will understand what skills they need to improve more. For example, when someone needs to improve their skills in structure and s/he joins the preparation

course to sharpen his or her skills in structures. It works for the other components in TOEFL test. In addition, according to Muslimin (2014) as cited by Sailuddin (2022), having participated in intensive TOEFL preparation or coaching class, it was found that students increased their TOEFL score. Further, he mentioned that this increasing TOEFL score happened to not only low achiever students but also high achiever students. It shows that the existence of TOEFL preparation courses is very effective and beneficial for students to improve their English skills and scores.

Moreover, some research also underline the difficulties that students usually deal with in doing the TOEFL test. These factors hinder the students to achieve the highest score and sometimes make them reluctant to have regular practice. According to Hidayah and Nazriani (2021), Dahlan (2021), Jasrial et al. (2022), and Angraini et al. (2023), some factors that usually hinder students to achieve high score in TOEFL test are lack of vocabulary, a lot of deficiencies in grammar, complex English structures, slow reading speed, lack of understanding the reading questions, and listening abilities. This was supported by Sari et al. (2022) who propose that students usually need more time to read and understand texts. These factors usually become the obstacles for students to improve their TOEFL scores.

This current research shows some gaps from the existing literature found in previous researches. Most previous researches chose high school students and tertiary students, whereas this research tries to explore on people with different professions including tertiary student, lecturer, businessman, academic staff, and many more. The gap occurred between those studies and this present study needs to be explored deeper especially on greater number of respondents from various background and professions. Shortly, this study attempts to:

1. evaluate students' motivation in taking online TOEFL test and its preparation course,
2. evaluate what challenges or obstacles that usually hinder students in learning TOEFL,

3. evaluate how they improve their TOEFL score after participating in online TOEFL preparation course.

This research aims at providing valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and students about the effectiveness of TOEFL test and its preparation course to improve students' English skill for their academic and professional purposes.

## METHOD

This research used explanatory sequential mixed-method design. This research was conducted by using close-ended questionnaire, interview, pre-test and post-test. In answering the first research question, questionnaires and interview were employed. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Form, whereas the interview was done through Zoom meeting. The first questionnaire was about motivational factors such as their personal goals, academic requirements, or career aspiration whereas the interview dug deeper about their reasons in enrolling the TOEFL test. These two instruments were constructed by referring to the theory by Dornyei (2001). For the second research question, the questionnaire was about technical issues, time management, and content difficulty was distributed. Then, the interviews allowed participants to elaborate on specific challenges they encountered during the TOEFL preparation classes. These two instruments were constructed by referring to the theory proposed by Anderson (2010). Each questionnaire has 10 statements and each interview list consists of 10 questions. The results were analyzed qualitatively to get complex, wider, and more complete answers from the respondents.

In answering the third research question, pre-test and post-test were chosen. The pre-test and post-test were conducted by using third-party website namely [speakingpartner.id](https://speakingpartner.id). There were 14 participants employed for this research, divided into 9 female and 5 male, who came from various academic and professional background and different age group. The reason underlying on why these respondents were chosen were

because of their urgency and their motivation in applying for the TOEFL preparation and test. On the second day, they had two-hour listening courses coached by the instructor followed by another two-hour of structure courses on the following day. On the fourth day, they had reading courses followed by independent learning on the next day. Lastly, on the sixth day, all participants had to do the post-test by using the same third-party website.

In analyzing the data gained from questionnaire, the answers were listed and the most frequent answers were displayed. The data were then added by deeper information through interview. The data gained from interview was selected and shown from the most frequent answer and, if any, the contrast ones. The data gained from pre-test and post-test were analyzed by using SPSS.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part presents the research findings and discussions, as seen in the following.

### Students' Motivation in Taking Online TOEFL Preparation Course and Test

In finding the students' motivation in taking online TOEFL preparation course and test, questionnaire and interview were utilized. The result showed that students were motivated in joining the online TOEFL preparation and test because they wanted to increase their academic competence. Some of the respondents mentioned that they felt curious to figure out their English capabilities and skills so that they could improve and upgrade their skills. One of the respondents stated that it was an obligation for individuals to possess English language skills. It aimed at providing positive influences on every aspect in life. Besides, he also mentioned that in the academic field, having English skill is beneficial for integrating with any academic fields. Some of them also wish to prepare for the scholarship in prestigious universities or even abroad. One of them stated,

*"I wish to prepare for my LPDP (Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education) scholarship from Kemenag, therefore, I need to upgrade my skill in English. As I think that my English skill lacks of structure and reading mastery, therefore, I have to boost my TOEFL score through the help from this TOEFL preparation course. I consider it is more effective rather than doing the independent learning."*

In other words, students are willing to participate in such online TOEFL courses because they believe that having their English skill increased will help their academic issue such as getting the scholarship abroad, being accepted in prestigious universities, and many more.

Furthermore, some students highlighted the importance of having high TOEFL score because it helps them to advance their career and obtain more chances in working or learning abroad. One of them stated,

*"I want to gain more opportunities in studying and working abroad. I also wish to advance my job position. As great desire requires a lot of efforts, therefore, I am willing to take this opportunity to apply in this online TOEFL preparation course."*

Having basic English skill enables more available opportunities for these participants to study or work abroad. In other words, this skill helps these participants to expand chances which they might not get unless they have these English skills. Besides, some participants believed that getting high TOEFL score can advance their career or job position in their workplaces.

### Challenges Students Encounter in Learning TOEFL Online

In learning TOEFL online, students also encounter some obstacles they have to get rid of. Based on the data gained through questionnaire and interview, there were some obstacles that students encountered when they learn TOEFL online. These problems were divided into technical issues, time management, and lack of skills. Most participants mentioned that technical issues such as low internet bandwidth, slow loading time, sudden software updates, or other internet failure became the main challenge that they dealt with in having online TOEFL preparation and test. A participant said that

internet signal had been one of the main obstacles in online TOEFL training as it was sometimes unstable which forces them as users to leave the online platform unwillingly. Since all online teaching and learning process requires internet connection, it mainly affects students' TOEFL learning processes. Another participant added,

*"Some technical issues I encountered during the online TOEFL learning were the unstable internet connection and sudden software updates which make me unable to keep up with the instructor during the course."*

Shortly, when the students had difficulties in accessing the online TOEFL course due to unstable internet connection, it became obstacle for them to maximize their opportunities in studying virtually. Besides, it also reduced their time in practicing and completing their tasks.

Furthermore, time management becomes another challenge for the participants. As most of the participants were workers, they had to manage their time to work, to study, and to do the house chores or tasks. Therefore, some participants had to make a list of priority which could help them in prioritizing which tasks they needed to complete first. It included their study sessions, review time, work, and practice too.

In addition, another challenge that most participants considered as obstacles during the online TOEFL preparation course and test was their lack of skill. It included the lack of ability or skills in listening, reading, and structure and written expression. Six out of fourteen participants agreed that listening comprehension became one of the most difficult component in TOEFL. There were a few reasons underlying why listening comprehension became one of the most challenging component during TOEFL test. First, not all people are familiar with British and Australian accent. These two accents are considered hard compared to American accent. One of the participant mentioned,

*"I cannot understand and pay attention to specific details when it comes to long conversation, specifically when there is a conversation between speakers from different accents with different pace of speaking. It makes me hard to get the important information."*

In listening section, participants cannot understand with the speaking speed, and they had to understand the information conveyed during the conversation. They could not repeat the questions and the conversation over and over gain. Thus, they have to listen carefully, think fast, and choose the right answer. Besides, they had limited time to find the answer or they would miss the following questions during the test.

The participants also had difficulties in achieving high TOEFL score because they lacked skills in structure and written expression. Structure and written expression consist of complex elements which cannot be mastered within a week. A participant stated,

*"I always have difficulty to identify and correct grammatical errors shown in sentences during the test. For example when I have to choose the correct tenses or structure which might require deep understanding and great analytical skills."*

Identifying the sentence structure and find the grammatical errors in sentences during the test are not easy to do. In other words, those who are not familiar with English grammar might find that structure and written expression as a hard component. Furthermore, lack of vocabulary also underlined the reason on why students cannot achieve high score especially in reading comprehension. Although they have gotten used to reading English texts or information through Instagram or other social media, they still face difficulties in understanding some content in the reading comprehension. One of the participants mentioned that the reading comprehension on the TOEFL test used complex vocabulary which was too hard for them to understand the text in limited time.

### **How Students' TOEFL Score Improves After Online Preparation Course**

In order to answer how students' TOEFL scores improve after they have completed a six-hour online preparation course, pre-test and post-test were suitably utilized. When the participants had finished doing the pre-test, they had listening course on the second day, structures and written expression course on the third day, and followed by reading course on the fourth day. The net day

they had to learn independently to prepare for the post-test on the sixth day. Further, SPSS was used to analyze the result gained from pre-test and post-test.

Generally, there were two requirements to fulfil before conducting the experimental analysis namely test of normality and test of homogeneity. In brief, the result showed that the data gained for this study were in a normal distribution and the data were homogeneous. Then, paired t-test can be proceed in the next step.

**Table 1.** Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test	408.5	14	42.455	11.347
	Post-test	453.8	14	48.356	12.924

From Table 1, it clearly showed that the mean score for the pre-test was less than the score of the post-test. It means that there was difference mean score between pre-test and post-test and its learning objective from these two tests. Further, in conducting the paired samples correlation, the correlation score gained was 0.291 while the significance score was 0.312. As the significance score was higher than 0.05, it means that there was no correlation found between the variable of pre-test and post-test.

The next step was analysing the paired sample test. From the paired sample test, the result showed that there was significant difference of mean score from the learning outcomes for the pre-test and post-test. In measuring any improvement for the learning result, N-gain score was essential to be conducted. Having analyzed the N-gain score, it showed that the N-gain score was 57.35%. This score used Hake (1999) interpretation scoring table as follows.

**Table 2.** N-gain Interpretation Score

Percentage	Interpretation
< 40	Ineffective
40 – 55	Less effective
56 – 75	Moderately effective
>76	Effective

Based from Hake's interpretation score, the score of N-gain obtained was 47.35 meaning that the treatment was less effective because this score was between 40% and 55%. In fact, the students' overall TOEFL score can be concluded as showing improvement although they were not all significant.

These findings display some similarities with some studies conducted by previous researchers. Roberts (2002), Mardiyah (2024), Aprilliandari and Sugiharto (2023) propose that students who took part in TOEFL preparation course had the desire from themselves to upgrade their self-competence. Having inadequate self-competence in English might raise insecurities. Students will feel inconfident and unskillful in learning something new. Further, Aprilliandari and Sugiharto (2023) add that students who wish to learn TOEFL has the curiosity to figure out their competence especially in English. In contrast, other than the previous researchers, Suherman and Kertawijaya (2023) and Karjo and Ronaldo (2019) highlight that students who take TOEFL preparation are willing to spare their time in it because of some reasons other than their self-competence. These reasons vary between upgrading their career, securing job position, earning overseas scholarship, and many more. These push them forward to learn TOEFL and achieve high score in the test. Thus, this urges them to have a lot of practices and participates in TOEFL preparation before taking the TOEFL test.

In learning TOEFL through online platform, students dealt with some challenges and obstacles. They were technical issues, time management, lack of skills in listening, reading, structure and written expression. This finding is

identical with some studies conducted by Clarin and Baluyos (2022), Zakiyah et al. (2024) who agreed that technical issues such as poor internet connection has the ability to disturb the learning process done virtually. As virtual and online learning requires stable internet connection, they really depend on internet connection to facilitate their learning. When students have unstable internet connection, they will be unable to deliver what problems they have during classes, miss the important information delivered by the instructor, and be unable to download or retrieve materials used for the TOEFL courses. Besides, Clarin and Baluyos (2022) add that home distraction like the loud noise from the outside or phone calls might also becomes the obstacles in learning TOEFL via online because it disrupts students' focus in learning and doing the TOEFL test..

The result of finding in relation to the lack of reading skills goes the same with the previous research conducted by Clarin and Baluyos (2022), Anggraini et al. (2023), Maulana and Lubis (2022), Friska (2022), and Girsang et al. (2019). Based on these researchers, they underline that what makes students unable to achieve high score in TOEFL especially in reading comprehension are students' lack of vocabulary mastery. Reading comprehension consists of various topics with a wide range vocabularies used. Therefore, when students have inadequate vocabulary mastery, it will be hard for them to answer the questions correctly during the TOEFL preparation and TOEFL test. Besides, students cannot predict what the topic of the reading comprehension will be, thus, they need to prepare themselves by reading general text and improve their vocabulary mastery to familiarize themselves. Liu (2018) as cited by Fitria (2021) further adds that the most essential part to do the reading comprehension in TOEFL relies on students' high level of vocabulary mastery. It is because in reading comprehension in TOEFL test, students have to find the story theme and main idea of the whole text, highlight the specific information from the text, identify references, and also understand the meaning of some difficult words. Thus, it needs adequate vocabulary mastery to be

able to answer the reading comprehension correctly.

In addition, Putra (2020), and Anggraini et al. (2023) emphasize that many students also consider structure and written expression as one of the obstacles in TOEFL test. As structure consists of complex tenses and grammatical components, this TOEFL component is sometimes considered as challenging and intimidating. It is quite impossible for those students to acquire structure mastery in limited time. Putra (2020) further adds that structure needs regular practice so that students would be familiar in it as these structure problems consist of word choices, passive verbs, parallelism, subject verb agreement, verb form, and word orders. Therefore, this structure complexity needs regular practice so that the structure familiarity or mastery can be improved over time.

Furthermore, some researchers also mention some challenges that might disrupt the online TOEFL preparation and test, namely lack of strategy and concentration, low reading pace, and low reading interests. According to Hidayah and Nazriani (2021), and Girsang et al. (2019), students' fear usually affects them in spending more time to find the answer in specific section. Besides, students' reading pace also influences how they finish reading. In other words, the time that should be for written expression might be wasted on reading, which means that their reading pace spends more time than it should be.

Lastly, students' overall TOEFL scores were improved although some made significant improvement. Elder and Loughlin (2003), Tukan and Supriani (2021), and Sailuddin (2022) underline any there is at least slight to significant improvement found between pre-test and post-test. They believe that this online TOEFL preparation course shows significant effect on students in general aspects. In contrast, based on a research by Maharani and Putro (2021), when students have completely done the TOEFL preparation course, it is hoped that their TOEFL score will significantly improve. However, in their research they mention that students' TOEFL scores decreased after they completed the TOEFL preparation and done the TOEFL

test. Further, they underline that it was caused by the lack of speaker quality which made their concentration unstable.

## CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that most participants decided to take online TOEFL preparation mainly because they were interested in applying for overseas scholarship and preparing for their academic matters in near future. Besides, those who apply for TOEFL preparation also wish to have career promotion and secure their job position whereas some other participants believe that it is fundamental for them to upgrade their skills and self-competence through learning TOEFL. Students will feel confident when they know that their self-competence has improved which can be seen from the result of their post-test compared to the pre-test result. During the process of learning TOEFL online, students sometimes had difficulties in dealing with unstable internet connection, low vocabulary mastery, lacks of listening skills and structure mastery, bad time management, and low reading pace. Unstable internet connection usually forces the participants to leave the website or the online platform unwillingly, leaving the participants miss the important information from the instructors and waste time when they do the TOEFL test. A few other obstacles they usually encounter, namely lack of listening skills and structure mastery, low vocabulary mastery, and low reading pace. This research is suggested to be one of additional references for educators to provide and prepare TOEFL preparation to be one of the standard English lessons for high school students and tertiary students. Another suggestion is delivered to the policymakers to make TOEFL as an English standard lessons with different components. Therefore, students will be more aware in learning TOEFL to prepare for their future including master degree or overseas scholarship. The last suggestion is dedicated to students to be more aware of the importance of studying TOEFL.

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