The Analysis of Students' English Competence in the Grammar Section in the Paper-Based TOEFL: A Case Study at English Department in Bunda Mulia University

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Abstract

TOEFL is a standardized test used to measure non-native English speakers' proficiency. Even though the paper-based test (PBT) as well as the computer-based test (CBT) may seem obsolete and have progressively been replaced by the Internet-based Test (iBT), most universities and institutions still make use of PBT as a graduation requirement. There are three sections in PBT, namely listening comprehension, structure / written expression and reading comprehension. However, this study only aims to provide information on students' problems, particularly those in the grammar section in the PBT TOEFL. The study involved students of the Culture and English Department in Bunda Mulia University from semester 6 who are already finished with the whole grammar subjects: Grammar I – IV and whose scores in the structure / written expression section are below 50 in the pre-test. Two Random paper-based tests are opted for in the post-test, and therefore there are 80 questions in total. The purposes of this research are to find out (1) the most frequent types of questions to occur and (2) the mistakes students tend to make. The study is then expected to help both lecturers and students to have a clearer picture of types of questions in the PBT TOEFL structure / written expression and know how to overcome problems.

Keywords: *PBT TOEFL, structure / written expression, mistakes*

1. Introduction

In Indonesia, English functions as a foreign language but not a second language. Second Language (SL) and Foreign Language (FL) are different in regard to the use; SL is widely used among people and coexists with the national language, whereas FL is not broadly used among the speakers of the country. In other words, it has never been accepted as an official language to exist side by side with the national language.

The Test of English as a Foreign English, better known as TOEFL, is designed to measure the English proficiency of people whose native language is not English. TOEFL has been known as one of the most popular and widely accepted English-Language test in the world. In Indonesia, most universities

widely use TOEFL test, particularly PBT TOEFL as a graduation requirement and the required score ranges from one university to another.

English Testing Service (ETS) first introduced the Paper-based test (PBT) TOEFL in 1976. The components tested in the test cover listening comprehension, structure / written expression and reading comprehension. Later, the computer-based (cBT) TOEFL, which demonstrates communicative competence models, and includes more constructed-response tasks and direct measures of writing and speaking, was introduced in 1998. Few years later the more advanced TOEFL test, specifically an Internet-based version of the TOEFL test (iBT TOEFL) was devised and launched in 2005. The iBT TOEFL assesses all four language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) and emphasizes integrated skills to enable students to communicate in an academic setting and prepare them for academic coursework.

Despite the three components assessed in the PBT TOEFL, this study only focuses on the errors in the structure / written expression. The purposes of this study are to find out: (1) types of questions that are the most frequent to occur in the test, and (2) kinds of grammatical structure that still proves problematic for the students in the five most frequent errors.

2. Review of Related Review

Realizing the significance of grammar proficiency for correct use of the language, many teachers or researchers have carried out research to find out the methods, approaches and techniques in the teaching of grammar. Gewerhr (1998) states that grammaticality plays a major role; making the teaching of grammar essential to focus on in a language classroom. Many teachers have been teaching grammar using various approaches, but still, errors are present in the students' performance in terms of grammatical accuracy.

According to Hughes (2003), a test is a tool to obtain information on students' successful accomplishment of a course in a form of score, result or grade and to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, Harris (1969), Hughes (2003), McNamara (2006) asserted that there are types of tests based on the purpose of testing, namely: proficiency test, achievement test, diagnostic test,

and placement test. TOEFL test is a proficiency test that is designed to measure test takers' competence in a language which content is based on what candidates need to be able to perform.

3. Research Method

The participants involved in this research are the 6th semester students of the English Language and Culture Department in Bunda Mulia University who have completed the whole grammar subjects: Grammar I – IV and whose scores in the structure / written expression section are below 50 in the pre-test.

In the PBT TOEFL, the structure / written expression section is categorized into two subsections; the first 15 questions are incomplete sentences, and the last 25 are sentence correction, which make 40 in total. Two Random paper-based tests were administered in the post-test, and therefore there are 80 questions in total.

In Bunda Mulia University, it is a necessity that students get no less than 500 for the total paper-based test score, with the score of 50 for each section at the very least. The TOEFL scale ranges from 31 to 68 for structure / written expression section. In order to find out who still failed to get the minimum score, about 40 participants were assigned to do the pre-test, and surprisingly, the result showed there were 21 students who failed to get over 50.

The post-tests, which were randomly chosen, followed a day after the pre-test was administered to 21 students to ensure that the pre-test did not wear the students down. To find out the most common types of questions in the structure / written expression part in the PBT TOEFL, the writer made use of two random tests. He then analyzed the whole questions, tally and categorized them into several types.

To answer the first question, that is to find types of questions that are the most frequent to occur in the test, the writer identified every question in the tests, and then categorized the questions in the PBT TOEFL into several groups that belong to the same types, and lastly, tally the questions in each category.

Lastly, to find out kinds of grammatical structure that still proves problematic for the students, the writer first collected answers from 21 students,

and then figured the percentage of errors of each question. The writer then categorized each group of identical questions, and figured the percentage of errors of each category (there are 20 groups).

4. Finding and Discussion

As the writer mentioned earlier, PBT TOEFL is still widely acceptable as the tool to measure students' capacity in English language in an academic setting. However, about half of the students, 21 students to be specific, still failed to achieve the minimum score of 50 in the structure / written expression section. The result shows that grammar still proves to be problematic to even students who are already finished with grammar subjects: Grammar I – IV.

4.1. Frequent errors

The writer discovered that there are so many types of grammatical structure in the two random paper-based tests, and further classified them into 20 topics: (1) compound sentence, (2) complex sentence, (3) noun phrase, (4) adjective phrase, (5) verbal phrase, (6) participial phrase, (7) appositive, (8) prepositional phrase, (9) relative pronoun, (10) preposition collocation with verb, (11) causative verbs, (12) conjunction, (13) negative opening, (14) passive construction, (15) comparative degree, (16) infinitive to, (17) gerund, (18) parallel construction, (19) word-choice, and (20) subject-object agreement.

Topic	Total
noun phrase	16
participial phrase	9
adjective phrase	9
relative pronoun	8
complex sentence	6
Conjunction	5
preposition collocation with verb	4
appositive	3
Gerund	3
passive construction	3
parallel construction	3
comparative degree	2
causative verbs	2

Infinitive to	1
negative opening	1
Prepositional phrase	1
verbal phrase (modifying adverb)	1
compound sentence	1
word choice	1
subject-object agreement	1
Total	80

Table 1. Type of the Most Frequent Questions

The result shows that the majority of questions deal with clauses or sentences. As Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan (1999) suggest, there are four components which form a hierarchical system in a language; that is, words form a phrase, phrases form a clause, and clauses form a sentence.

There are as many as 54 out of 80 questions from 10 groups which constitute a clause or sentence, namely: compound sentence, complex sentence, noun phrase, adjective phrase, verbal phrase, participial phrase, appositive, prepositional phrase, relative pronoun and conjunction. This implies that questions related to clauses or sentences are the most type occurring in the PBT TOEFL. However, the study is limited to only analyzing the five most frequent errors.

a) Noun Phrase

A noun phrase (NP) is a group word with a noun or indefinite pronoun as its head word.

The table shows that questions about noun phrase take the highest occurrence. There are 16 questions which appear to be the most frequent in the PBT TOEFL.

No.	Questions
1.	*Born in Texas in 1890, Katherine Anne Porter produced three collection* of short stories before publishing her well-known Ship of Fools in 1962.*
2.	*Associated with the Denishawn company from 1916 until 1923, Martha Graham developed a powerful, ---------- that was integral to the foundations of modern dance.*
	(A) expressively stylish *(C) stylishly expressive*
	(B) a style expressive *(D) expressive style*

3.	*According to most psychological studies, body language expresses a speaker's emotions and attitudes, and it also tends to affect the emotions and attitudes of the listen*.*
4.	*Today, modern textile mills can manufacture as much fabrics* in a few seconds as it once took workers to produce by hand.*

When talking about noun phrase, a noun is not the only matter to discuss, since either what modifies or what is modified is important. In the two tests, the writer spotted six variances in questions.

In question (1), the modifier must signify what it modifies. In the sentence, *three* as an adjective incorrectly modifies a singular noun *collection;* thus the correct one is that the noun should be in plural (i.e. *collections).*

In question (2), it is a question in the incomplete sentence section (part 1). It shows that since there is an article *a,* and adjectives*,* a singular noun is required. The noun *style* is modified by an article *a* as well as an adjective *powerful and expressive.*

In question (3), there is an article *the* as the modifier, thus a modified noun is essential (i.e. *listener*). To put it simply, should there be an article, a noun is compulsory.

In question (4), because *fabric* is an uncountable noun, it cannot be pluralized. Moreover, a modifier *much* demands an uncountable noun, making it impossible to go along with a plural noun.

All in all, the questions associated with noun phrases are about articles, adjectives which must modify nouns, a quantifier modifying countable or uncountable noun.

b) Participial Phrase

Participial phrase is a word group consisting of a present participle (also known as an -ing form) or past participle (also known as an -en form), plus any modifiers, objects, and complements. When participial phrase becomes a part of a sentence, a sentence must be a complex sentence, in which there is one independent clause and one (or more) dependent clause.

Participial Phrase is the category which takes the second highest occurrence. The result shows there are 9 occurrences in the test.

No.	Questions
1.	*The first explorer ---------- California by land was Jedediah Strong Smith, a trapper who crossed the southwestern desserts of the United States in 1826.* *(A) that he reached* *(C) reaching* *(B) reached* *(D) reaching it*
2.	*The first building employing steel skeleton construction, ----------* *(A) Chicago, Illinois, the home of the Home Insurance Company Building completed in 1885.* *(B) The Home Insurance Company Building in Chicago, Illinois, was completed in 1885.* *(C) Because the Home Insurance Company Building in Chicago, Illinois, was completed in 1885.* *(D) The Home Insurance Company Building in Chicago, Illinois, in 1885.*
3.	*Quassar, faint celestial objects resembling stars, are perhaps the most distant objects know*.*

The participial phrase is a technique that is always used as an adjective phrase to modify a noun or pronoun, adding description to the sentence. In the two tests, the writer discerns that there are four kinds of questions related to this phrase.

In question (1), there are 3 dependent clauses and 1 independent clause: *The first explorer reached California, Jedidah Strong Smith was trapper,* and *a trapper crossed the southwestern desserts of the United States in 1826* as dependent clauses, and *The first explorer was Jedidah Strong Smith* as an independent clause. As there is already an independent clause, only a dependent clause with the use of relative pronoun *who* is allowed to modify the noun *the first explorer.* However, relative pronoun *who* can be reduced into what is called participial phrase, thereby replaced by a participial phrase *reaching.*

In question (2), the answer is (B). The sentence is introduced by a phrase *The first building employing steel skeleton construction,* therefore the noun *The Home Insurance Company Building in Chicago, Illinois,* must be a noun which corresponds to building. In addition, a sentence must have a subject and a predicate. Thus, option (B) is the correct one since it has an independent clause while option (D) only has a noun phrase without a predicate.

In question (3), passive construction must be used, because it is about inanimate objects. In addition, there is already an independent clause (i.e. *Quassar are perhaps the most distant objects*). As a consequence, the verb *known* must replace the verb *know*.

To sum up, participial phrases that are derived from adjective clauses may appear right after the noun being modified, or in the initial position of a sentence, or even at the end of a sentence.

c) Adjective Phrase

Adjective phrase is a word group with an adjective as its head. This adjective may be accompanied by modifiers, determiners, and/or qualifiers. Adjective phrases modify nouns. They may be attributive (appearing before the noun) or predicative (appearing after a linking verb), but not all adjectives can be used in both positions.

Adjective phrase is the category taking a relatively high occurrence in the two tests as well. In this category, the writer found nine occurrences.

No.	Questions
1.	*Although the pecan tree is chiefly value* for its fruit, its wood is used extensively for flooring, furniture, boxes and crates.*
2.	*Faults in the Earth's crust are most evidently* in sedimentary formations, where they interrupt previously continuous layers*

Even though adjectives phrases appear to be one of the most frequent questions in the two tests, there seem to have been only two patterns spotted.

In question (1), an adjective is required as to modify an adverb *chiefly*. In other words, an adjective phrase *chiefly valuable* must have an adjective *valuable* as its head. Moreover, the adjective phrase *chiefly valuable* functions as predicative since there is a linking verb *is*.

Question (2) is quite similar to question (1) with regards to the adjective phrase functioning as a predicative, and thus, *most evident* is the correct one to modify the faults in the earth's crust. Moreover, there is a quantifier *most* which should go along with an adjective.

All in all, when it is about an adjective or adjective phrase, it is something that cannot stand by itself, and thus a noun or nouns is required. In addition, both an adjective and a verb is required to go with an adverb, as in *chiefly valuable* (adverb-adjective).

d) Relative pronoun

A relative pronoun is a pronoun that introduces a relative clause. It is called a "relative" pronoun because it "relates" to the word that its relative clause modifies.

The writer discovered that this category comes as the next most frequent questions in the PBT TOEFL, in which there are 8 instances in total.

No.	Questions
1.	*Mango trees, ---------- densely covered with glossy leaves and bear small fragrant flowers, grow rapidly and can attain heights of up to 90 feet.* *(A) whose*　　　　　　　　*(C) are when* *(B) which are*　　　　　　*(D) which*
2.	*Mahalia Jackson, ---------- combined powerful vitality with great dignity, was one of the best-known gospel singers in the United States.* *(A) it was her singing*　　　*(C) who sang* *(B) which songs*　　　　　*(D) whose singing*

There are five relative pronouns: *who, whom, whose, which,* and *that. Who* (subject) and *whom* (object) are generally only for people. *Whose* is for possession. *Which* is for things. *That* can be used for things and people only in defining relative clauses (clauses that are essential to the sentence and do not simply add extra information). Also, relative pronouns are used whenever a sentence is complex, in which there is one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses.

In question (1), the subject of the verb is the mango trees, thereby demanding a relative pronoun *which*. However, the option (d) is not necessarily the right answer, because the noun (mango trees*)* appears to be the subject of a sentence, which requires a passive construction. In other words, the mango trees are affected by the action of the verb (i.e. mango trees are densely covered). As a

result, a combination of both a relative pronoun *which* goes with a plural verb *are* (option B).

In question (2), as it is about possession, a relative pronoun *whose* is essential. Here, the phrase *whose singing combined powerful vitality with great dignity* is only additional information.

e) Complex Sentence

A complex sentence is defined as a sentence that contains an independent clause and at least one dependent clause. The sentence is connected by a subordinate conjunction, such as: *because, while, when, after, before, since, that, etc.* However, a complex sentence comes after a simple sentence. A sentence must be complete by itself, and contain a subject and predicate, conveying a statement, question, exclamation, or command.

In this category, the writer found six instances in the two tests as the type of questions which often take place.

No.	Questions
1.	*Any critic, teacher, librarian, or poet who hopes to broaden poetry's audience faces the difficult challenge of persuading skeptical readers _____.* *(A) that poetry is important today* *(C) to be important poetry today* *(B) for poetry to be important today* *(D) poetry that is important today*
2.	*Because it was so closely related to communication, _____ art form to develop.* *(A) drawing was probably the earliest* *(C) early drawing probably* *(B) draw early was probably* *(D) the earliest draw*

The result shows that questions having relevance to complex sentence most often deal with the basic notion of a sentence, that is to say, a sentence must have an independent clause, in which, it must have a subject and a predicate.

In question (1), a subordinate conjunction *that* is required to give more information on what is hard to persuade skeptical readers.

In question (2), it is clear that it is a complex sentence, since there is a subordinate conjunction *because*. Nevertheless, the sentence is not yet complete

and cannot stand by itself, as it misses an independent clause. It clearly shows that option (a) is the correct answer; there is a subject *drawing* and a linking verb *was.*

4.2. Problematic Questions

In this session, the writer wants to discover problematic types of questions in the five most frequent questions in the PBT TOEFL. The results turn out that the majority of questions relates to the sentence construction.

Types of questions	Percentage of correct answers
participial phrase	33,33
adjective phrase	42,86
noun phrase	48,21
relative pronoun	48,81
complex sentence	68,25

Table 2. The Most Major Errors in 5 Most Frequent Categories

In table 2, it clearly shows the participial phrase takes the most error; students with 66,67% made mistakes in this category. On the other hand, in the category of relative pronoun, the students seem to have done better; they knew how to combine clauses with relative pronoun.

Next, in the category of noun and adjective phrases, the students appear to have problems as well; they still made mistakes in the category of adjective phrase with 47,14% and category of noun phrase with 41,79%.

The last, although complex sentence is also part of sentence construction, the students still managed to deal with the problem pretty well. Sorts of questions in this group are mostly about constructing an independent clause, with a dependent clause provided.

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

From the results shown, the writer concludes that students have done better when answering questions not related to sentence construction. However, when the questions are associated with sentence construction, they seem to have difficulty.

The reason which contributes to this situation to happen might come from the focus of the teaching of grammar. In Indonesia, when it comes to teaching grammar, many teachers generally aim for forms or structures. The teaching of tenses, for example, only focuses on the forms, but not on the sentence construction. In the grammar tests, the students eventually apply their knowledge in the fill-in the blank questions or even multiple choice questions. In other words, the centre of teaching is not in the production in the form of essays, but only structures. The teaching of structures and sentence construction should be inseparable, since in the end, students have to apply vast knowledge in the production, such as essays.

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