

Challenges of Taking TOEIC Test and How to Overcome: Perception of Indonesian Vocational Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to discover problems that Indonesian Vocational Students are having with the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) to improve TOEIC instruction. The participants were 18 students in school attending the TOEIC preparation course in the TOEIC course in October 2018. There were two steps in taking the data: (1) questionnaires on the listening and reading problems in the TOEIC test, and (2) interview on how they cope with the problems. The result shows that: 1) The majority of subjects had no experience in TOEIC and most of them did not have any preparation for the test; 2) Listening problems were at a high level in questionnaires 100% for the lack in vocabulary; 3) Reading problems were at a high level in questionnaires 100% for unknowing the meaning based on the context of the text; 4) The interview results showed that the students solve the problem in TOEIC test with learning by themselves, discuss with a partner and learning on the internet. The researchers recommend that the TOEIC course should include vocabulary building and be conducted frequently.

Keywords

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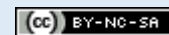
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The current English Language Test is one of the tendency topics among academics and workers in the world. The test is used to be one of the benchmarking considerations for both students and workers. Implementing an English language test at school or any institution is an effective strategy to improve the quality of English mastery. Most of the Indonesian schools use this test includes in Indonesian Vocational School. Vocational School students have fluctuating values in the TOEIC test. The TOEIC test is a benchmark for English language skills at their school. The TOEIC test does not only talk about work achievement but also about important abilities in the language. The researchers attempt to find the challenges on the TOEIC test and the solutions from the TOEIC test based on the perspective of the participants who belong to the Vocational High School students. The researchers took the participants randomly from lower achievers, middle achievers, and higher achievers. There were two majors from the participants: Accounting Major and Administration Office Major. The TOEIC itself can improve their English and motivate them to learn English. TOEIC test skill includes Listening Skill and Reading Skills. There are some steps in listening skills and reading skills that already had the rules.

TOEIC test has a reading and listening test. There are 100 questions for the reading test and the same with the listening test. In the reading test, the duration takes 75 minutes, including the four sub-tests. Meanwhile, the listening test takes time 45 minutes, including the three sub-tests. The listening test is the first test that carries out in the TOEIC, while the reading test is second. There are four sub-tests in the listening test. The first sub-test is listening comprehension with some pictures. This sub-test presents a picture in all its question items. The test takers are asked to listen to the statements and expected to choose the correct description based on the picture.

The second sub-test is listening to some questions from the audio and answer the multiple questions. The test-takers are asked to listen carefully to the question-answer it correctly. Meanwhile, the third and fourth sub-tests are listening to the brief conversation for several question items. In the third sub-test, the test-takers are expected to listen to the brief conversation and read the question. The test-takers then read the possible answer in the form of multiple-choice and choose the correct one. The fourth sub-test is listening to the short talks. In this section, the test-takers are asked to listen to several short talks and answer several questions for each short talk. The short talk for the test can be a report, discussion, announcement, or other functional talks.

Another sub-test is reading comprehension. There is reading comprehension in the fifth sub-test until the seventh sub-test. The fifth sub-test is incomplete sentences that consist of choosing the correct word or phrase. In the sixth sub-test, test-takers are faced with error recognition such as identifying the incorrect words. The seventh sub-test is for reading comprehension. In the seventh sub-test, test-takers cope with the various reading material include daily contexts such as letters, advertisements, notices. The test-takers must choose the correct answers based on what is stated or implied in the text.

From the TOEIC parts that have been explained above, there are two parts in the TOEIC test: listening and reading. Every part has the role to be conducted by test-takers. [TOEIC Examinee Handbook](#) (1996) also stated that the TOEIC test has a listening test and reading test. There are four listening parts and three reading parts that provide a variety of questions.

Many of the test takers have not clearly understood the TOEIC test format. Moreover, understanding of their English language skills is lacking in listening and reading. Many of the TOEIC teachings at the school are not recognized by the legally held TOEIC test. [Tokunaga](#) (2008) found that most test-takers did not have experience in doing TOEIC before the actual test. Similarly, Tian, as cited in [Cohen](#) (2009), reports that most test-takers do not understand the format of the test, and lack skills in reading and listening. Relating this issue, there have been problems in study reading and listening related to TOEIC. This research only highlights research that deals with problems encountered by Vocational School in Yogyakarta: listening and reading.

Listening skill is the ability to listen carefully and thoroughly together with answering questions from the Listening skill. According to [Krashen](#) (1985) and [Hamouda](#) (2013), "listening skill is an important element in understandable obtaining input. Learning won't occur if there isn't any input." Some of the students in Indonesian schools are still not familiar with this listening skill, out of internal and external problems they will find the difficulties to observe this listening skill.

Reading is an important part of understanding as test-takers. Reading includes grammar which is quite complicated. According to [Saaristo](#) (2015), Grammar is the heart of language: grammar and its role in language learning among Finnish university students. It means that grammar is a foundation in language as a structure and reading is a key to understand a language. The test-takers of English should understand the structure and vocabularies related to the TOEIC test.

Based on the overarching aims, the researchers are interested to know the challenges students do encounter when taking the TOEIC test and how they do cope with problems in the TOEIC test at Vocational High School. By finding out where students have challenges, the result of this research can be suggestions for the future TOEIC course for the solutions. Therefore, the improvement of students' achievement can be influenced by the suitability between learning style and teaching strategies ([Grace](#), 2015). Moreover, [Damrongpanit & Reungtragu](#) (2013) found that different conditions between teachers' teaching styles and students' learning styles showed different achievements among 3000 students in ninth grade. The qualified teachers convey the material based on the learning situation in the classroom. This way strongly supports both students' learning style and teachers' teaching style and produce consistent learning. This investigation was intended to answer these research questions: 1) What challenges do students encounter when Taking TOEIC Test? and 2) How do they cope with the problems of Taking the TOEIC Test?

Method

This qualitative study followed an exploratory interpretive paradigm to understand participants' perceptions of the TOEIC test and to explore their awareness of what caused their lack of performance in the TOEIC test. This study used qualitatively to complete detailed descriptions or to reveal all phenomena (holistic context). Furthermore, this study is also

meant to identify students' readiness to answer the TOEIC test. The findings are organized based on two research questions.

There are 18 students who involved in this research. They are XII grades in the first semester with different majors. The first major in Accounting, the other is Office Administration. All of them are females at 15-16 years old.

The research instruments are questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires consist of 5 parts, those are: 1) Experiences of the students in TOEIC Test, 2) Students' Preparation in TOEIC Test, 3) Question of Listening Skills, 4) Question of Reading Skills, 5) Students' Opinion of Preparation in TOEIC Test. The interview has 1 until 9 questions (flexibility asking) and inferred in 4 points, those are: 1) Students' perception on difficulties of vocabularies, 2) Students' perception on difficulties of grammar, 3) Students' perception on the short time, 4) Students' perception on learning by searching on the internet.

The questionnaires were distributed among the participants after they conducted the TOEIC Test in October 10th, 2018. They were asked to answer the question based on their experiences and feeling. The administration of the questionnaires took respectively 5 – 10 minutes. After all of them were done, some students were taken to be interviewed regarding the TOEIC Test. The questionnaires were used to support the data collection of this research. The supporting data was obtained by carrying out collecting the data through questionnaires. After collecting the data, the data were analyzed and compared with the result of the interview.

Results

Students' TOEIC Experience

Based on the result of the questionnaire *The TOEIC Experience of Students* showed that 17 students never take the TOEIC test. Moreover, the students do not know the format of the TOEIC test. It can be inferred that 17 students have no good preparation for the TOEIC test. There is one student who had well preparation on the TOEIC test including knowing the format of the test and has taken the TOEIC test before.

Problems in Listening Test

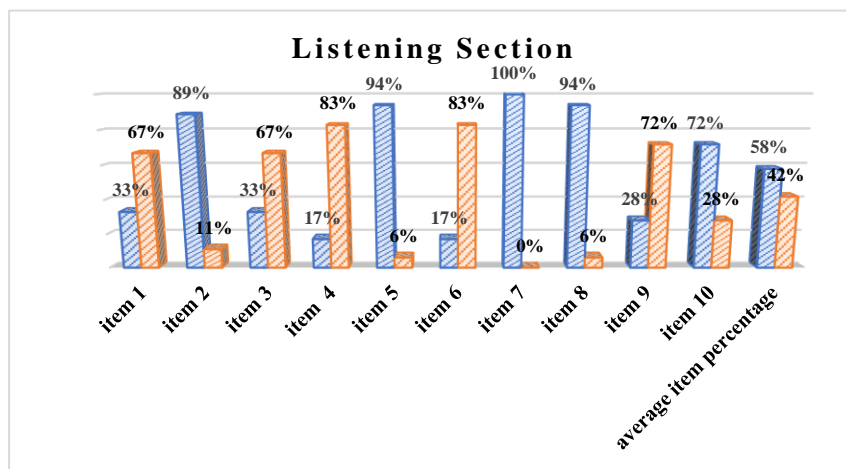


Diagram 1. The Problems in Listening Test

Diagram 1 indicated that the students' vocabularies are the prominent problem in listening TOEIC test. The other difficulties that influence one another are unfamiliar voices with 94% and the limitation time with to recheck the answer 94%.

Problem in Reading Test

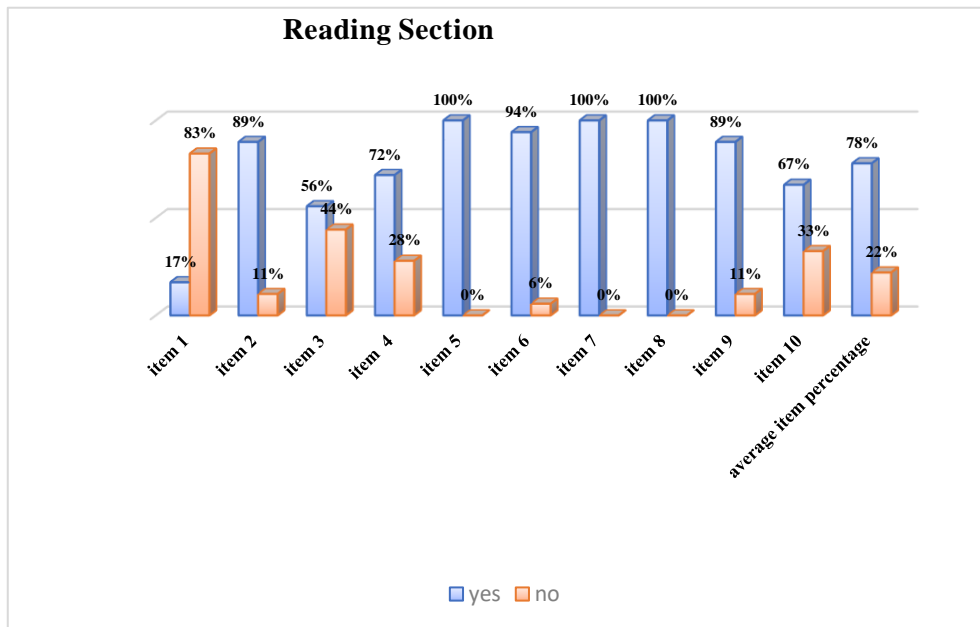


Diagram 2. The problem in Reading Test

Diagram 2 described that vocabulary is still a crucial problem for students with a percentage of 100. Equivalent problems in reading are the difficulties to answer and understanding the problem with percentages of all of them 100.

Opinions on TOEIC Preparation Course

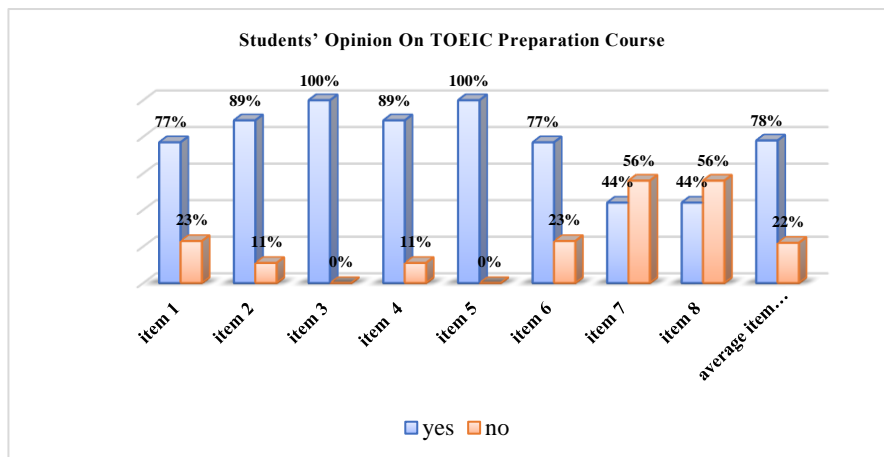


Diagram 3. Students' Opinion on TOEIC Preparation

Diagram 3 showed that the students' opinions on the TOEIC preparation course done after the TOEIC test. An evaluation of students' opinions on the TOEIC preparation course indicates the two highest opinions on the TOEIC preparation course: the TOEIC test improved the vocabulary with 100% and listening skill with 100%.

The analysis of interviews data revealed that students' perception still difficult about TOEIC test, where measure the abilities of English in an Indonesian school. Four main topics will be dealt with the process of coding and categorize the data in students' perceptions. The first is Students' perception of difficulties of vocabulary, the second is Students' perception of difficulties of grammar, the third Students' perception on the short time, and the fourth is Students' perception of a study by grouping and searching on the internet.

Students' perception of difficulties of vocabularies.

TOEIC test is pertinent to vocabulary in daily life. In many cases, students still translate English into their mother tongue to make them understand deeply about meaning. Some participants below illustrate the perception of difficulties of understanding the vocabularies, which refers to the TOEIC test as Indonesian vocational students.

"In my viewpoint, the main problem as a test-taker of TOEIC test is unfamiliar about the meaning of vocabularies. I need more time to understand the meaning to answer the questions and that is not easy at all".

(Cornelia/Accounting Major/Middle Achiever)

From the statement above, it can be seen if the vocabulary is one of the difficulties in the TOEIC test based on students' perceptions. As test-takers, the students feel that it is difficult to understand the meaning with a short time. It is obvious that Vocabulary, as one of the knowledge areas in language, plays a great role for learners in acquiring a language (Cameron, 2001).

Students' perception of difficulties of grammar.

Grammar cannot be separated from a language because grammar is a crucial thing for arranging a sentence. Based on students' perception of difficulties in grammar, there are some problems related to the grammar in the TOEIC test.

"Language tests cannot be separated from existing patterns of grammar. What my own experience when answering the questions on the TOEIC test when I did not understand how the sentence pattern was and I had to answer it in the right grammar arrangement. That is a difficult thing for me".

(Nuraini/Administration Major/Middle Achiever)

Seeing the students' perception of grammar, there are similarities statements in answering the questions. It shows up because they have the same difficulties in answering the TOEIC test as a test-taker. The point of difficulties is about grammar. Based on students' perception, the grammar includes the difficult thing in the TOEIC test as a test-taker. Bitchener, Stuart, & Denise (2005) stated that grammatical error that occurred very frequently in the writing of ESL (English Second Language) learners is the use of the preposition. Thus, grammar is an element that often shows up in the exercises of ESL.

Students' perception on the short time (duration).

Management time is important to accomplish work or a test such as the TOEIC test. Using appropriate time, make the test-taker can answer the questions accurately. One of the challenges that students face in the TOEIC test is allocation time correctly. Part of them illustrates in the statements below about the difficulty in allocating time.

"Talk about the time, I have no much time in answering TOEIC test. I spent the whole time to understand each question although I cannot answer the part of the test. I tried my best".

(Ananda/Administration Major/Lower Achiever)

All of the statements on Students' perception of the short time show that using the time appropriately is a big influence for the test-taker in answering the questions. There is no additional time in the TOEIC test, make them to hard think how to manage the time correctly. [Misra & McKean](#) (2000) in a study showed that there is a relation between time management, stress reduction, and increased academic success. In this way, if the students use time appropriately, they will get good feedback for their academics such as the TOEIC test.

Students' perception on learning by searching on the internet.

The Internet has millions of information about academics. One of the information is about Tests such as the TOEIC test. Practice, reliability, simplicity already attached on the internet. It has a positive impact and negative impact. Students' perception below describes that the internet has a positive impact on them.

"I searched for the TOEIC test on the internet. I learn by myself what the TOEIC test is. Doing individually makes me understand step by step until I can do exercise online about the TOEIC test but sometimes I discuss it with my friend".

(Nurusmawati/Accounting Major/Higher Achiever)

Learning on the internet of TOEIC test, make the test-takers feel easy because they as students need practice directly to make them more understanding rather than just in theory. Meanwhile, based on [Bao's](#) (2002) surveys in 1998 and 2001, its findings showed that the internet continues to be an important component of library services in today and tomorrow's library. Thus, the internet is one of the elements for doing the people's need including as the students.

Discussion

Based on the questionnaires and the result of the interviews, there are relations between the challenges faced by students and the solutions that have been made related to this TOEIC test. The listening test questionnaire result has a high percentage. The highest percentage of the listening problem is the lack of vocabulary. It has 100% for the highest. Similarly, with the lack of vocabulary, the reading test questionnaire result has three kinds of the highest problems. Those are lack of vocabulary has 100%, difficult to understand the question has 100% and unable to answer the questions have 100%. Based on the questionnaires' result, it shows that there are several problems in the TOEIC test in students' perceptions. There are a lack of vocabulary, difficulty in understanding the questions in the TOEIC test, unfamiliar voices in the listening section. [Chapman & Newfields](#) (2008) and [Childs](#) (1995) have criticized the use and structure of the original TOEIC of listening and reading. [Chapman & Newfields](#) (2008) discuss various issues with the new listening and reading TOEIC. Specifically, regarding reading, [Chapman & Newfields](#) (2008) suggest that gap-fill and multiple-choice methods of testing reading do not match the authentic ways in which people read texts. Thus, because of the many gaps in the TOEIC teaching method towards students causes the low of students' experience in identifying and analyzing the questions of listening and reading

sections including vocabularies and grammar. Moreover, the school carries out very few exercises of TOEIC test for their students that are only one or two times in one semester.

In the interview, the results showed that they learn by themselves, searching on the internet and discuss with their partners are the solutions in facing the TOEIC test. According to [Kvale \(1996\)](#), an interview is "a conversation, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the (life-world) of the interviewee" with respect to interpretation of the meanings of the 'described phenomena'. Thus, an interview is a dialog between 2 people or more that have specific topics and purposes. In the interview results, researchers interviewed 4 students from 2 different majors. Each department is represented by 2 students, majoring in accounting and office administration. The researchers asked questions ranging from 9-10 with the same questions to each student. The results of the interview can be concluded that the TOEIC test has various challenges. The challenges are vocabulary, unknown words, limited time to work, and lack of understanding of the TOEIC test itself. From these problems, the researchers found the solutions about how the students should face these difficulties, including self-study, learning with friends, learning with teachers, learning through the internet and discussion. Thus, the TOEIC test should not only discuss the score but also discuss about how the students learn certain strategies in understanding the TOEIC test.

Therefore, a better learning strategy for Vocational School students is to obtain them learning English as a language and the important four abilities: speaking, listening, reading and writing rather than only giving them a test that is held once in 3 years. To answer the mentioned problems, [Sewell \(2005\)](#) suggest more TOEIC vocabulary training for test-takers to be one of the solutions and teacher should provide students with guidelines and technique for doing the test ([Tokunaga, 2008](#)). On the other hand, exercise intensively the TOEIC test can make the students realize how important the steps of training and its impact toward facing of TOEIC test. Based on this research question, there is problem-solving for the students in facing the TOEIC test. One of the problem solving is the students need more exercise before doing the TOEIC test. Exercise specifically will help students in identifying vocabulary and grammar. To overcome this problem, more exercise should be conducted under teacher or administrator control regularly and properly ([Carney, 2016](#)).

Conclusion

In this study, the researchers found the challenges faced by students in facing the TOEIC test and how the solutions to all the problems found in researching the vocational high school. For the next study, it can examine the holding of data using a questionnaire in the form of open-ended questions for this TOEIC test on test-takers.

In this part, the researchers conclude that the challenges faced by students have their own prespective solutions. It was stated that the data had shown steady progress from knowledge in preparation for TOEIC tests, familiar with the TOEIC test format, problems in Listening skills and also Reading skills as well as any solutions for students in dealing with TOEIC tests. In the interview itself, challenges and problem solving were faced by students. The TOEIC test is one of the tests that improve students' English patterns. It is shown from the way students find solutions to the problem of taking TOEIC tests through. The first is Students' perception on difficulties of vocabularies, the second is Students' perception on difficulties of grammar, the third Students' perception on the short time (duration), and the fourth is Students' perception on learning by grouping and searching on the internet.

Based on the data in this research, students' learning process greatly affect their understanding and scores in the TOEIC test. The data had shown that students gradually recognized their weaknesses in the process of learning. Therefore, they can formulate the pattern in mastering English by their interpretation. The learning process for TOEIC started from identifying vocabulary, understanding sentence structure, doing reading comprehension, and trying out the exercises with particular time allocation. All of these things will be executed in the TOEIC test with predetermined time allocation. Thus, this process should be employed so that the future TOEIC test will not only talks about scores but also about how the student can learn correctly and comfortably. This way surely encourages students' habit of learning.

There are several important implications of this research for some parties. The researchers identified that this research will give some advantages to any academic stakeholders especially students and teachers. The students will be introduced about the TOEIC test, the form and how to solve the problem in the TOEIC Test. Meanwhile, the teacher will obtain more information about the difficulties or problems faced by the students in the TOEIC Test. Considering there are several limitations in this research, it is open for other researchers to conduct further research related to this matter using more open-ended instruments.

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