

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN ACHIEVING OUTSTANDING TOEFL SCORE: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstrak

Seiring dengan meningkatnya pentingnya kemampuan bahasa Inggris untuk kesuksesan akademik dan profesional, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa dalam mempersiapkan dan mencapai skor TOEFL yang luar biasa. Secara khusus, penelitian ini menyelidiki narasi pribadi mahasiswa yang telah menjalani proses persiapan TOEFL, dengan fokus pada tantangan, strategi, dan refleksi mereka selama pengalaman tersebut. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya memahami pengalaman mahasiswa, terutama dalam konteks negara yang bukan penutur asli bahasa Inggris, di mana kemampuan bahasa Inggris menjadi faktor kunci dalam kemajuan pendidikan dan karir. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain penelitian naratif, yang melibatkan beberapa mahasiswa yang berhasil meraih skor TOEFL luar biasa. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, yang memungkinkan mahasiswa untuk berbagi cerita tentang perjalanan persiapan TOEFL mereka. Analisis dilakukan dengan menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi tema-tema yang berulang dalam narasi mahasiswa. Triangulasi data dan member checks digunakan untuk memastikan kepercayaan dan kredibilitas temuan. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa mahasiswa menghadapi berbagai tantangan, termasuk mengelola kecemasan ujian, menangani volume materi persiapan yang sangat banyak, dan tekanan untuk menyeimbangkan tanggung jawab akademik dengan persiapan ujian. Namun, mereka menggunakan berbagai strategi untuk mengatasi tantangan ini, seperti menyusun jadwal belajar yang jelas, menggunakan materi belajar yang beragam, dan terlibat dalam kelompok belajar dengan teman sekelas. Strategi-strategi ini membantu mereka tidak hanya meningkatkan skor mereka tetapi juga memperoleh pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang proses pembelajaran mereka sendiri. Mahasiswa merefleksikan bagaimana pengalaman ini membentuk identitas akademik mereka dan mempersiapkan mereka untuk tantangan di masa depan dalam kehidupan akademik dan profesional. Sebagai kesimpulan, penelitian ini memberikan wawasan berharga tentang pengalaman nyata mahasiswa dalam mempersiapkan ujian TOEFL, yang berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih luas mengenai bagaimana mahasiswa menghadapi ujian bahasa yang memiliki risiko tinggi. Penelitian ini juga menyoroti pentingnya strategi persiapan yang disesuaikan dan sistem dukungan dalam membantu mahasiswa meraih skor TOEFL yang luar biasa.

Kata Kunci: Penelitian Naratif, Pengalaman Siswa, Pencapaian, Nilai TOEFL Yang Sangat Tinggi.

Abstract

In light of the increasing importance of English proficiency for academic and professional success, this study explores students' experiences in preparing for and achieving outstanding TOEFL scores. Specifically, it investigates the personal narratives of students who have undergone the TOEFL preparation process, focusing on their challenges, strategies, and reflections on the experience. The research highlights the significance of understanding students' experiences, especially in a non-native English-speaking context, where such proficiency is a key factor in educational and career advancement. The study employed a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry design, involving several students who achieved exceptional TOEFL scores. The data were collected through in-depth interviews, allowing the students to share their stories about their TOEFL preparation journey. The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes in the students' narratives. Data triangulation and member checks were used to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. The findings reveal that students faced numerous challenges, including managing test anxiety, dealing with the overwhelming volume of preparation materials, and the pressure of balancing academic responsibilities with test preparation. However, they utilized various strategies to overcome these challenges, such as setting a clear study schedule, using diverse

study materials, and engaging in study groups with peers. These strategies helped them to not only improve their scores but also gain a deeper understanding of their own learning processes. The students reflected on how these experiences shaped their academic identity and prepared them for future challenges in their academic and professional lives. In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of students preparing for the TOEFL exam, contributing to a broader understanding of how students navigate high-stakes language assessments. It also highlights the importance of tailored preparation strategies and support systems in helping students achieve outstanding TOEFL scores. Further research in different educational settings could deepen our understanding of this phenomenon.

Keywords: *Narrative Inquiry, Students' Experiences, Achievement, Outstanding TOEFL Score.*

INTRODUCTION

The need to master English is absolutely very crucial. Functioning as international language for communication, people are expected to know English either for daily communication or for public use. The functions of English as a major tool for communication have been globally recognized. English is important not only in education, but also in other public sectors in which people are interacting. English is used widely in the world and studied as a foreign language or as a second language in several countries (Erdem-Keklik, 2011; Sindhedkar, 2012) .

One of the types of language testing is TOEFL, which stands for ‘Test of English as a Foreign Language’. This test is highly recognized as a standard language testing in English language and had been “internationally recognized and respected” (Warfield et al., 2013, p. 196). The grade of the TOEFL is mostly used as indicator in academic life around the world. For example, when students want to continue their study to foreign countries, the university asks the applicants to submit their TOEFL grade as indicator of their English language proficiency. Studying in foreign countries definitely demands high English proficiency level that can be seen from the TOEFL grade.

In today’s globalized world, English proficiency is increasingly recognized as a vital skill, especially for students aiming to pursue higher education abroad or engage in international careers. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) serves as a prominent and widely accepted standardized assessment to evaluate non-native English speakers’ ability to use and understand English in an academic setting. An outstanding TOEFL score is often a prerequisite for admission to prestigious universities and scholarship programs, as well as a competitive advantage in the global job market.

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a major indicator of non-native speakers’ English ability. It is used worldwide to measure the English language aptitude of students who apply to universities and colleges in countries where English is the language of instruction. Scores on the TOEFL are required by more than 4,400 universities and colleges around the world at the graduate and undergraduate levels (Abraham, 1990).

High-level English language skills are essential in an international academic environment. These skills allow one to adapt to different speech styles and language types and convey information clearly and accurately. International academic environments often consist of people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. High English proficiency will allow you to understand the speech of English speakers with different accents and dialects, especially British, American, Australian and other accents. A high level of English proficiency allow students to speak and write in formal and informal situations and develop an appropriate academic communication style.

Students' English language fluency can have a significant impact on their ability to communicate and interact in an international academic environment. Communication skills affect various aspects of student life, especially in relation to studying and interacting with fellow students, lecturers and staff in an international campus environment. A good command of the English language helps international students adapt to their new academic environment and facilitates social interactions with fellow students, faculty, and the host community (Gomes, 2020).

(Test of English as a Foreign Language) TOEFL scores can be used to evaluate a person's English language skills and as a reference in academic or professional purposes (Rifiyanti et al., 2023). Uysal (2010) states that, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is widely used around the world and plays an important and critical role in the lives of many people because it is often used to make important

decisions about test takers such as academic or professional goals. Studying TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is beneficial because it opens up opportunities for students to study abroad. Many government and private institutions offer scholarships to high school students who want to study or undergraduate students who want to take a master's degree abroad, with the requirement that they can master English well. Sufficient scores on the TOEFL and IELTS determine this. Currently, an international standardized proficiency test is used to measure English language proficiency. Two of these tests include the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), each with different scoring measurements (Zebedeus & Sihotang, 2015). Study abroad requires not only being able to speak English fluently.

The TOEFL is universally required of international students seeking admission to many graduate programs in the United States. The purpose of the study by Ayers and Quattlebaum (1992) was to determine the relationship of success of Asian students in a Master's degree program in engineering, as measured by GPA, to scores obtained on the TOEFL and the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). The subjects for this study consisted of 67 Asian students (60 males and 7 females) who received the Master of Science in an area of engineering at Tennessee Technological University. The students were from India or native Chinese speakers. All students completed the TOEFL and the Verbal (GREY), Quantitative (GREQ), and Analytical (GREA) sections of the GRE prior to admission to the institution. The results of the study were presented for the total group. Descriptive statistics and Pearson Product-Moment Correlations between all variables were computed. Application of the t-test indicated there were no significant differences between males and females (Ayers & Quattlebaum, 1992).

According to Spencer (2020), professional competence can be defined as a set of knowledge, skills and behaviours that are relevant to job tasks and that support success in the job. In an increasingly connected globalised world, English has become a highly sought-after skill by employers due to its role in communication across countries and cultures. As the need to communicate with colleagues and customers from different parts of the world increases, the ability to speak and write in English is becoming increasingly important. Therefore, multinational companies often favour applicants who have good English language skills, especially those that can be proven through international standardised tests such as TOEFL.

Individuals who want to achieve greatness in academic and professional fields should take the TOEFL. This is a non-profit educational and assessment organization established in the United States (managed by ETS). Further, the TOEFL demonstrates its adaptability by adopting numerous forms, including examinations based on paper, assessments based on computers, and assessments based on the internet. The TOEFL, a thorough assessment instrument, evaluates all essential language competencies, and use of a multidimensional method that ensure a comprehensive evaluation of an individual's language aptitude. TOEFL is a globally recognized and acknowledged credential (De Jong & Benigno, 2017). According to Goulbovich et al. (2018), it has been used to assess academic English competency by over 11,500 institutions in over 160 countries.

However, attaining a high TOEFL score is a challenging endeavor for many learners. It demands not only linguistic competence but also effective learning strategies, sustained motivation, and psychological resilience. Each learner's journey towards TOEFL success is unique and influenced by various personal, social, and contextual factors. These include access to learning resources, instructional support, cultural attitudes towards language learning, and individual cognitive and emotional responses to the test preparation process.

Mahmud (2014) found that the main problems of the students in answering the TOEFL test were due to several conflicting reasons, such as fewer basic skills, less practice, less motivation, and students' individual differences such as age and social-status. Halim (2008) explored that Generally, the students encountered difficulties in answering TOEFL questions and it is because of bias. Cultural bias in TOEFL questions can be found mostly in the oral mode of the questions and some parts of the reading section. The element of culture in the language used in TOEFL questions that contain bias are conversational implicatures, idiomatic expression, metaphors, proverbs, slang, some registers and problems with deixis (to some extent) concluded that time management, missing keywords, unfamiliar vocabulary and getting caught up in details are common TOEFL reading difficulties .

The most effective and commonly known learning strategies that have been researched are: keyword (Pressley, Levin, & Delaney, 1982); semantic processing (Beck, McKeown, & Omanson, 1987); and contextual (Sternberg, 1987). All three have relevance to the TOEFL, but two in particular—keyword and contextual—have specific consequences when used in relation to the test and how preparation courses should be taught. Thus, when students come across unknown vocabulary in a listening or reading context, they can use these strategies to aid their comprehension of difficult words. These strategies help students learn more effectively by teaching them how to monitor their own performance while learning and how to overcome problems when they arise. Seeing as learners have the most trouble with vocabulary (Krahsen, 1989; Nation, 1990), the contextual and keyword strategies become especially important for the TOEFL, which presents a wide range of difficult vocabulary in complex situations to learners. The specific uses of vocabulary in all sections of the TOEFL present problems to learners. Consequently, by learning how to take advantage of the keyword and context strategies, learners can fully understand the meaning of the sentences they hear and read on the test.

Students may have specific target scores required for their academic programs, jobs, or visas. Preparation classes focus on helping students achieve these specific goals. For students who have previously taken the TOEFL but did not achieve their desired scores, preparation classes offer a structured approach to improve their performance. Over all, students are motivated to take TOEFL preparation classes due to a combination of academic, professional, personal, and social reasons. These classes provide the structured learning environment, resources, and support needed to achieve their goals and succeed on the TOEFL.

The term motivation has been defined in various ways by different researchers. According to Harmer (2001), motivation is considered an "internal factor" that compels an individual to take action. Arno described motivation as the condition in which a person initiates, maintains, and guides behaviors until they achieve their goal. Wlodkowski (2008) offered a more specific definition, describing motivation as the process that encourages and generates behavior, provides direction or purpose, and leads to the selection of particular behaviors. Similarly, Parsons, Hinson, and Brown (2001) emphasized that motivation is a crucial component in the learning process, suggesting that both learning and motivation are equally important for achieving goals. Learning imparts new knowledge and skills, while motivation drives us to engage in the learning process.

Consequently, understanding the lived experiences of Indonesian students who successfully achieve outstanding TOEFL scores is crucial. Their narratives can shed light on the personal, academic, and socio-cultural dynamics that contribute to their success, and can inform better teaching practices and policy interventions. This study aims to fill the gap by exploring these students' unique stories through a narrative inquiry approach, providing

insights that extend beyond quantitative score reports to the qualitative essence of their learning journeys.

In this study, the term “experiences” encompasses a broad range of factors that shape how students prepare for and ultimately perform on the TOEFL. These experiences include the strategies students use during their preparation, the challenges they face, the emotional and psychological aspects of their journey, as well as the support systems that influence their success. Preparation strategies are key to success, and they vary widely among individuals. Some students focus on practicing test questions, while others may engage in intensive language immersion or structured study sessions. These strategies are often influenced by students' learning styles and their ability to manage time effectively .

Moreover, students often encounter various challenges during their preparation process. These challenges may include difficulties in understanding certain sections of the test, such as listening comprehension or reading passages that involve complex vocabulary. Other students struggle with test anxiety or may find it difficult to stay focused during long preparation sessions. It is crucial to understand how students cope with these challenges and how these obstacles shape their experience. Emotional and psychological factors, such as stress, self-doubt, and motivation, play an integral role in determining students' performance on the test. As Wahyudi (2022) argues, the emotional state of a student significantly influences their ability to concentrate, retain information, and perform under pressure .

The use of narrative inquiry in this study allows for a deeper exploration of these individual stories and the subjective nature of students' experiences. Narrative inquiry is particularly well-suited to understanding how personal and contextual factors influence language learners. By focusing on the personal narratives of students, this research will capture a holistic view of the TOEFL preparation process, revealing the underlying motivations, strategies, and emotions that drive students toward achieving an outstanding score. This approach contrasts with quantitative studies that primarily focus on test outcomes rather than the lived experiences of test-takers .

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that explores how individuals make sense of their experiences through the stories they tell about themselves. It focuses on understanding the subjective experiences of participants, providing a deeper look at the meanings they assign to various events in their lives. In the context of your research, narrative inquiry allows for the exploration of how students perceive their preparation for the TOEFL and the strategies they employ to achieve an outstanding score. Through this approach, researchers gather personal stories from students, analyzing the challenges they face, the coping mechanisms they use, and the emotional and motivational factors that influence their success. Narrative inquiry is particularly useful for examining the complex and individualized nature of language learning, as it reveals insights into personal growth, learning strategies, and emotional experiences that are not easily captured through other methods. This method also emphasizes the relationship between the researcher and participant, as both engage in co-creating the stories, making it an ideal approach for understanding personal narratives of achievement in high-stakes tests like TOEFL .

Understanding the personal experiences of students who have successfully achieved an outstanding TOEFL score will provide valuable insights into the factors contributing to high performance in standardized language assessments. This research aims to offer a comprehensive view of how students' preparation strategies, emotional states, and coping mechanisms interplay to help them reach their goals. As such, the findings of this study could inform more effective TOEFL preparation strategies and help future test-takers understand what contributes to their success.

RESEARCH METHOD

The methodology used in this study is qualitative. Creswell & Poth assert that qualitative research addresses a research problem by examining an issue and gaining a thorough comprehension of a primary occurrence. The main notion, idea, or procedure investigated in qualitative research is known as a "central phenomenon". This approach is chosen because the researcher tries to explore and make meaning of students' reflection and experiences in achieving their outstanding TOEFL score, which makes it written in more word-based data rather than the statistical one.

Concerning the approach chosen, this study itself applies narrative inquiry as its research design which the term "narrative" takes on point. Experts have proposed some definitions related to what "narrative" is. Squire et al. define narrative as a set of signs that may involve verbal or other sounds, visuals, writing, acting, building, or making elements that convey meaning. Cobley even states that narrative is intertwined with "story" and "plot". It also has sequence, space, and time. Fludernik adds that narrative allows readers to immerse themselves in a new world and the life of the character by reading a story, which is a depiction of a conceivable universe in a linguistic and/or visual medium that concentrates on the experience of the character.

When it comes to narrative research or inquiry, according to Creswell, it is a method that focuses on researching a single subject, collects data through the telling of stories, reports personal experiences, and discusses the significance of those events for the individual. Based on Clandinin and Connely, narrative inquiry is a collaborative effort between researchers and participants with the aim of gaining insights into the personal and human factors of experience over time. It also takes account the connection between a person's experience and their culture.

The use of narrative inquiry in teaching and learning, according to Latta and Kim, has substantial ramifications for classroom pedagogy since it encourages students to see their classroom experiences from a variety of perspectives. According to Lawler, narrative inquiry is employed as an "interpretative device" to comprehend the students and their experiences. The aim of this study is to investigate, explore, and make meaning of students' experiences in achieving outstanding TOEFL score to feeling when they prepare it, challenges, solution they have to overcome the obstacles faced, and the reflection as well as future direction for next period of implementation, hence this research methodology design is chosen. Therefore, the researcher tries to make meaning of the findings of those experiences in past, present, and future direction toward it.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings' discussions. Along with the students' narratives, some statements on the relationship among theories or other studies are given to provide context for the findings. It is divided into three sections that correspond to the three research questions concerning the students' experiences in achieving outstanding TOEFL score.

A. First Experiences in preparing outstanding TOEFL score

The section provides the students' fruitful experiences with the problems they had during learning English and the TOEFL preparatin. It specifically refers to the first research question. It was then divided into two portions. These are "Journey Begins" and "Ultimate Weapon". They discuss the narratives in having experiences in preparing TOEFL test and having alternative activity.

1. Journey Begins

The findings from the study on students' experiences in preparing for the TOEFL exam highlight several key challenges and supportive factors that influence their learning journey.

These factors include emotional struggles, lack of detail, and family support.

In the process of learning English and preparing for the TOEFL exam, several factors come into play that can significantly influence a student's experience and performance. One such factor is the emotional struggles encountered during this journey. Preparing for an exam as significant as TOEFL can cause anxiety, stress, and feelings of uncertainty. These emotional challenges can hinder a student's focus and motivation, ultimately impacting their performance. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, the emotional state of a learner plays a crucial role in language acquisition, as negative emotions can impede the intake of new language input. This aligns with research by MacIntyre and Gardner, who argue that anxiety is one of the most significant factors affecting second language learning performance.

Another challenge faced by many students is the lack of detail in the materials provided by schools during their learning process. In formal education, students may sometimes be exposed to learning materials that are not sufficiently detailed, leaving gaps in their understanding. According to Krashen, detailed and comprehensible input is essential for effective language learning. Without a deep understanding of the material, learners may struggle to internalize the language and apply it effectively, especially in high-stakes situations like TOEFL preparation. Research by Swain supports this, indicating that learners need rich, varied input to fully grasp a language's intricacies.

On the other hand, family support can be a positive factor that aids students in their learning process. Many students receive encouragement from their families, which can foster motivation and a positive attitude toward learning. This support aligns with Vygotsky's social interactionist theory, which emphasizes the role of social support systems, including family, in the cognitive development of learners. Vygotsky's work highlights the role of "scaffolding," where parents and family members help the learner by providing support that encourages independence. When families actively support a student's educational journey, it can help reduce emotional struggles and enhance learning outcomes. Recent studies, such as those by Pomerantz et al. (2007), show that family support positively influences academic achievement and well-being.

2. Ultimate Weapon

When preparing for the TOEFL exam, students often turn to self-help materials as a means to supplement their learning. These materials, such as books, apps, online resources, and practice tests, provide learners with additional opportunities to reinforce their language skills outside of formal education. According to Zimmerman (2002), students who engage in self-regulated learning by utilizing these materials tend to show higher levels of achievement. Self-help materials allow learners to tailor their study to their specific needs, reinforcing the areas where they require the most improvement, such as vocabulary, grammar, or reading comprehension.

In addition to independent resources, discussion with friends also plays an essential role in language learning. Conversing with peers not only allows students to practice their spoken English, but it also reinforces their understanding of new concepts. Vygotsky's social interactionist theory (1978) emphasizes the importance of social interactions in cognitive development, suggesting that dialogue with others promotes deeper learning. In a study by Dörnyei and Csizér (2005), it was found that peer discussions contribute significantly to the development of communicative competence, which is crucial for the TOEFL exam's speaking and writing sections. Furthermore, discussing exam strategies and sharing experiences can help reduce anxiety and provide moral support.

A well-structured study strategy is critical for success in TOEFL preparation. Effective study strategies involve setting clear goals, breaking down complex tasks into manageable

sections, and maintaining a consistent study schedule. Cognitive learning theories, including Anderson's work on cognitive skill acquisition (1982), highlight the importance of systematic planning and focused practice. Students who develop an organized study plan and adhere to it tend to perform better on standardized tests like the TOEFL. Additionally, research by Weinstein et al. (2011) shows that students who actively manage their learning process through organized strategies achieve higher academic success.

Lastly, enrolling in an additional course specifically designed for TOEFL preparation can offer targeted support and guidance. These courses often provide structured learning, practice exams, and personalized feedback, all of which contribute to better preparedness. Research by Pomerantz et al. (2007) shows that structured external support plays an important role in students' academic achievement. A focused TOEFL prep course provides learners with an opportunity to practice under test conditions, learn time-management skills, and receive expert feedback on their progress, which can significantly enhance their performance on the exam.

B. Having experiences in achieving outstanding TOEFL score.

The section provides the students' fruitful experiences in achieving outstanding TOEFL score. It specifically refers to the second research question. It was then divided into two portions. These are "It's time!" and "Like a New Warrior". They discuss the narratives in having experiences in achieving outstanding TOEFL score and emotional response and personal evaluation.

1. It's the time!

(One of the key factors contributing to success during the TOEFL exam is a well-developed test strategy. A strategic approach includes time management, understanding the test format, and prioritizing certain sections based on individual strengths and weaknesses. According to Anderson (1982), test-takers who employ well-planned strategies, such as allocating specific time for each section and pacing themselves, are more likely to complete the test efficiently and accurately. Additionally, strategies like skimming passages in the reading section or noting down key ideas in the writing section help optimize performance.

Another challenge students face during the TOEFL exam is nervousness. Anxiety is a common emotional response to high-stakes testing, and it can negatively affect concentration and performance. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), test anxiety is one of the most significant barriers to success in language testing. They argue that anxiety can interfere with cognitive processes, making it harder for students to recall information and respond effectively. Research by Horwitz et al. (1986) suggests that students who manage their test anxiety through relaxation techniques, deep breathing, or positive self-talk perform better under pressure. Therefore, managing nervousness during the test is crucial for optimizing performance.

2. Like a New Warrior

Once the TOEFL exam is over, the way students react to their results is critical in shaping their future actions. Result reaction refers to the emotional response to the test scores. Some students may feel relief and satisfaction if they meet or exceed their goals, while others may experience disappointment or frustration. According to Pomerantz et al. (2007), how individuals react to achievement outcomes is often influenced by their expectations and the perceived support they received during their preparation. Students with positive result reactions are more likely to stay motivated and continue improving their skills, whereas those with negative reactions may experience a drop in confidence.

Following the release of TOEFL results, self-reflection is an important process for students to evaluate their performance. Reflecting on what worked well and what could have been improved allows learners to make adjustments for future language learning or testing

experiences. Self-reflection has been shown to enhance metacognitive skills, which are crucial for self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002). By reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses, students can develop more effective strategies for future tests or language use.

Lastly, personal achievement refers to the sense of accomplishment students feel after completing the TOEFL test, regardless of the score achieved. Even if the test results fall short of expectations, the process of preparing for and taking the TOEFL can lead to a greater sense of self-efficacy and personal growth. According to Bandura (1997), personal achievement fosters a sense of self-confidence and is essential for motivation. Achieving a goal, such as completing the TOEFL, contributes to students' broader sense of success in language learning, which can motivate them to continue advancing their skills.

C. Students' Reflexion and Direction on their TOEFL Achievement and Learning.

1. Evolution

Personal Growth is an essential aspect of learning, especially after significant experiences like preparing for and taking the TOEFL. It refers to the development of personal skills, emotional resilience, and cognitive abilities. According to Bandura (1997), personal growth is closely tied to self-efficacy, which enhances motivation and goal-setting. By reflecting on the efforts made throughout the preparation and testing process, students develop a deeper understanding of their abilities, which fosters a growth mindset and prepares them for future challenges.

The meaning of effort is another significant factor that influences future direction. Students who view their effort as integral to their success are more likely to continue working hard and improving. Research by Dweck (2006) on mindset theory highlights the importance of perceiving effort as a path to mastery. Individuals with a "growth mindset" see effort as an essential component of success, whereas those with a "fixed mindset" may believe that intelligence is innate and avoid challenges. Understanding the value of effort can encourage continued improvement, particularly in academic and language learning contexts.

Failure lessons are crucial for personal development, as they provide valuable insights into areas needing improvement. Failure, when approached positively, can be a powerful learning tool. According to Seligman (1991), individuals who embrace failure as a learning opportunity rather than a setback tend to develop greater resilience and a more optimistic outlook. Reflecting on failures allows learners to identify gaps in their knowledge or strategies, which can be used to refine their approach in future endeavors, particularly in testing or language learning.

Value change refers to the transformation in beliefs and priorities that can result from significant experiences like preparing for and completing the TOEFL. This process often involves reevaluating goals, time management practices, and attitudes toward learning. According to O'Keefe and Gergen (2010), major life events often prompt individuals to reassess their values and make changes in their behavior. The TOEFL preparation journey, with its challenges and rewards, can inspire students to prioritize long-term academic goals over immediate rewards, fostering a shift in values toward perseverance and sustained effort.

Lastly, confidence level plays a critical role in future endeavors. The level of confidence gained through completing the TOEFL can significantly influence students' future academic and professional decisions. Bandura (1997) argues that a high level of self-confidence, built through accomplishment and reflection, increases the likelihood of future success in challenging tasks. When students feel confident in their abilities, they are more likely to take on new challenges, pursue further academic opportunities, and feel equipped to handle future tests or responsibilities.

2. Catching up the World!

Career Vision refers to the long-term professional goals and aspirations a student has, particularly in the context of language proficiency and communication skills. For TOEFL test-takers, a clear career vision helps guide their educational and professional decisions, motivating them to acquire the necessary language skills to excel in global professional environments. According to research on career development, having a career vision can enhance motivation and persistence, especially in language learning (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). For students preparing for TOEFL, envisioning their future careers—whether in business, academia, or international relations—helps them understand the value of high TOEFL scores, which often play a crucial role in gaining employment opportunities, securing internships, and advancing in their chosen fields. A strong career vision encourages students to see the TOEFL as a stepping stone toward achieving professional goals, as language proficiency is a key skill in the global job market.

Academic Vision, on the other hand, focuses on the long-term educational goals students set, especially related to higher education and specialized study. For TOEFL test-takers, an academic vision is vital because it directs their focus toward achieving the necessary language proficiency to succeed in university-level courses, which often require strong English reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. According to Schunk (2001), academic vision is crucial in shaping motivation and self-regulation, which are key to succeeding in standardized tests like TOEFL. Students with a well-developed academic vision are more likely to set clear educational objectives, which might include attending prestigious universities or pursuing advanced degrees. This vision helps them remain focused on improving their English language proficiency, knowing that it is a critical component of their academic success. Furthermore, academic vision allows students to better handle the demands of TOEFL preparation by creating a framework for understanding the importance of mastering academic English for their future studies.

Both Career Vision and Academic Vision are aligned with TOEFL preparation, as they offer students a framework to stay motivated and focused on their goals. According to ETS (2018), standardized tests like TOEFL not only assess academic readiness but also predict success in academic and professional settings. By cultivating a clear career and academic vision, students are better prepared to achieve their goals and use their TOEFL results to open doors to further educational and career opportunities.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the experiences of students in preparing for and achieving an outstanding TOEFL score are explored. The findings indicate that students face significant emotional struggles, such as anxiety and self-doubt, which affect their overall learning experience. These struggles are often coupled with a lack of detail in the learning materials provided, which hinders their understanding and progress. Family support plays a crucial role in motivating students, offering emotional backing and encouragement throughout the preparation process.

To cope with the challenges they face, students turn to alternative learning activities, such as using self-help materials, engaging in discussions with friends, refining their study strategies, and enrolling in additional courses. Despite these efforts, students still experience nervousness and a lack of preparedness during the actual TOEFL exam. However, the strategies they have employed, especially those related to test-taking and study preparation, significantly contribute to their emotional response and self-evaluation after the exam.

Students' reflections on their TOEFL learning experience reveal personal growth, an increased understanding of the value of effort, and the lessons learned from failure. Their

experiences contribute to a greater sense of confidence and a shift in their academic and career visions, as they recognize the significance of their TOEFL achievements in shaping their future opportunities. As a result, this study emphasizes the importance of fostering a comprehensive support system for students, one that not only addresses academic needs but also promotes emotional resilience and personal development throughout their journey to achieving an outstanding TOEFL score.

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