

The Validity of TOEFL as Entry and Exit College Requirements:

Students' perception

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Abstract—In many countries, including Indonesia, TOEFL test is used as entry as well as exit requirement for university education. TOEFL is chosen because it is the most well-known criterion reference test for foreign language learners. This paper aims to find out university students' perception regarding the obligation to take TOEFL as the exit college requirement. To answer the research question, we conducted a survey towards our university graduates. The respondents were 90 graduates of English Department Bina Nusantara University, batch 2016 and 2017. The data were taken from the questioner results regarding their perception towards the TOEFL as exit test requirement. The data then were processed quantitatively using SPSS program. Results revealed that students believed that TOEFL is necessary for entering professional life but not for continuing the study. The results of this study implied a reconsideration of using TOEFL for exit college requirements.

Keywords—TOEFL; admission test; test-taker perception; exit test

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has made it possible for students who want to pursue their education outside their home countries. Most international students come in English-speaking countries such as USA, Australia or United Kingdom to study in higher institutions. Because of this, universities in English speaking countries face a major challenge in identifying students who can meet their admission requirements and who are likely to succeed in completing their academic program [1]. In order to achieve these aims, the vast majority of these universities rely on standardized test (such as TOEFL and IELTS) for making decisions on the admission of the students and for predicting their academic success in the university [2].

TOEFL and IELTS are the two well-known are the most frequently used tests to measure the English proficiency of EFL (English for Foreign Language) and ESL (English as Second Language) learners who want to continue their education at higher institutions. Both tests are so popular that Leung et al. claim that they are "almost the household of professional circle" [3]. These tests measure the students' four skills in English, i.e. Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking. However, the emphasis, the way of scoring and the

purposes differ in these tests. The IELTS test measures academic and general language proficiency. The academic test is addressed for those willing to pursue their study at a post-secondary institution in an English-speaking country; while the general training test is for people willing to work, go to secondary school or migrate to English speaking countries. Moreover, IELTS is required for entering universities in the UK and other countries affiliated with Britain such as Australia and New Zealand. Meanwhile, Gu et al. mention that Educational Testing Service (ETS) created TOEFL test for measuring English proficiency of EFL/ESL students intending to continue their education at higher institutions in America and other English-speaking countries which adopt American standard [4]. Thus, TOEFL is only used to measure the ability of non-native speakers of English to use and understand English in an academic context [2]. TOEFL, however, is gaining more popularity because it is used by more than 85,000 academic institutions in 130 countries, which majority are located in the US [5].

One of the countries that apply TOEFL to measure the students' English proficiency is Indonesia, although English is not the main language of instruction in universities. Most universities, particularly private universities, in Indonesia adopt TOEFL test as the requirement for admission as well as for graduation. In other words, the candidates should pass or achieve a certain TOEFL score to be accepted as the students. TOEFL test's score is useful to make various decisions about the candidates because of the assumption that the test gives a positive impact on English instruction [6,7]. In addition, before graduating from university, students should also take another TOEFL test to measure their English proficiency and to prepare them for their future lives [8]. Shohamy mentioned that "when a language is tested in a higher institution as criteria of acceptance [and of graduation], the symbolic power of the test and the language is enhanced significantly presenting the society with an extremely powerful tool" [9].

The application of TOEFL as the entrance requirement to universities is widely accepted. However, the role of TOEFL as exit requirement is still questionable. As an entry test, TOEFL has a function to predict students' readiness to excel in academic setting. Meanwhile, as an exit test, TOEFL scores

show students' English proficiency after spending around four years in the university. However, this exit TOEFL does not really reflect what they need for their future life after university.

There have been numerous studies investigating TOEFL as a standardized test instrument to measure test taker's language proficiency. Nevertheless, these studies mostly focus on investigating the test's validity (such as content, construct or predictive validity), the content of tests and the students' test performance [10,11]. Meanwhile, studies which explore the test takers' perception are limited.

Test takers' perceptions are important because they will be able to provide information from different perspective which might help practitioners and stakeholders gain more understanding about language tests [12]. Moreover, Tsai & Tsou claimed that test takers' perceptions can provide evidence of tests' effectiveness [13]. Finally, Shohamy also argued that the investigation of the tests based on the test takers' experience is significant because it provides stakeholders, especially testers, with new understanding about tests and their meaning [9].

There are numerous studies regarding the test takers' perception. Some of them focused on the value of test preparation [14,15], the comparison between IELTS & TOEFL Suryaningsih the test delivery – computerized vs. non-computerized Noubandegani and relation between TOEFL and academic performance [12,16,17]. Nonetheless, studies on test takers' perception regarding the use of TOEFL as an exit requirement are relatively rare.

The application of English certification test (such as TOEFL) as exit requirements have met with opposition in EFL countries such as in Taiwan. Zhang argued that universities and colleges are not cram schools so they do not advocate teaching to the test and they do not set English graduation thresholds [18]. Instead, students are required to take more English-related classes to enhance their proficiency [19]. On the contrary, Hsieh opined that the use of an exit test such as TOEFL as a condition of graduation has important consequences for students [20]. Moreover, exit tests can also represent one of the mechanisms to ensure accountability in education [21]. In summary, an exit test can serve two functions: to measure the students' abilities and knowledge and also as a judgment of whether or not they can move forward in their lives [12]. Thus, the exit language test can become the gatekeeper to their future [22].

The present study then is designed to find out the students' perception regarding the application of TOEFL test as an entry or exit test in the university. The perspective of the students as the benefactor of the university education can help educators and stakeholders to provide learning materials that can fulfill the students' needs inside and outside the university.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants for this study were ninety (90) fresh graduates of English Department, Binus University, Jakarta,

Indonesia. 38 graduates were from 2017 batch and 52 graduates were from 2016 batch.

B. Data Collection and Analysis

To get the data, the participants were given questionnaires regarding the use of TOEFL test in relation to the course subjects, the preparation of test and exit test requirements. The results of questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively to find out the students' perception regarding the final TOEFL test and its status as an exit test requirement.

III. STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

The results presented below are based on the students' responses to the questioner. The questioner consists of seven statements in five-Likert scale and one free answer question.

TABLE I. RELATION BETWEEN TOEFL AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Statements	SA	A	N	DA	SDA	Mean
TOEFL score reflect my ability in four English skills	27 %	37 %	33 %	3 %	0 %	3.87
TOEFL score is related to my GPA	6 %	17 %	40 %	20 %	17 %	2.76
College English subjects help me get good TOEFL scores	17 %	27 %	33 %	13 %	10 %	3.26
Taking preparation class help me get good TOEFL scores	20 %	56 %	17 %	7 %	0 %	3.9

For item number one that is: "TOEFL score reflect my ability in four English skills" as we can see in table 1, 3 % of the respondents disagreed, 37 % agreed and 27% of them strongly agreed with this statement, whilst 33% of them have neutral opinion. The mean score for this question is 3.87 indicating that they tend to agree with this statement. Based on this answer, we can infer that the students believe that TOEFL score they gained can reflect their proficiency in four English skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, what the students perceived might be different from what their actual competence are. As Fullilove found that the test takers' TOEFL scores did not really show the test takers' ability in English [23].

The second item: "TOEFL score is related to my GPA", was only agreed by 23 % by the respondents and 37% disagreed, while the other 40% did not give their opinion. The mean score for this statement is only 2.76, which is quite low. These figures indicate that the students did not believe that their TOEFL score was somehow related to their GPA. As we have known, TOEFL only measure the test takers' proficiency in English. Meanwhile, GPA reflects the overall academic performance of the students. In universities which English is used as the language of instruction, the proficiency in English might be beneficial for the students to excel in their study. The relation between English performance and academic performance (GPA) has been studied by Roche et al. who found positive relation between TOEFL and GPA scores [24]. Similarly, Sahragard et al. also claimed that if the student had a higher score in language proficiency test, most likely they had better GPA scores [25]. However, in Indonesia in which the

language of instruction is Indonesian, the proficiency in English cannot help much in the attainment of overall academic performance. The finding of this study is similar to Cho et al. who stated that only 3% of GPA score is explained by the students' TOEFL scores [22].

Item number three "College English subjects help me get good TOEFL score" got 44 % agree responses and 13 % disagree. The mean score for this statement is 3.26 meaning that the students were not quite sure that the English courses they got during their study help them improve their TOEFL scores. In general, regular academic English classes only provide general English courses, not specifically designed as a test preparation class. Yet, students are supposed to have adequate English competence after taking regular English classes to be able to score well in TOEFL test. The results for this statement support Green's study that compared between taking a preparation class for TOEFL test and regular academic class. Green found that regular academic class was focusing on both academic writing and test preparation but did not give much contribution to the TOEFL score [8].

Relating to the previous item, statement number four asked the students whether taking preparation class help them get a good TOEFL score. Surprisingly, most of the students (76%) either agreed or strongly agreed, and only 7 % disagreed. The mean score for this item is also 3.9. These figures indicate that the students did not feel confident in doing the test if they only relied on the regular academic classes. Hence, they needed to take a special TOEFL preparation class provided by other institutions beside English classes offered in the college to guarantee their success in the TOEFL test. This result is in line with Adam's [26] study who revealed that students feel more positive after attending a tutoring session. In the same way, tutoring is found to be an "effective" way to providing a reflective, dynamic mediation that is able to support students [27].

There are three items which specifically asked the students' opinion regarding the importance of TOEFL as exit requirement. The results are displayed in table 2 below.

TABLE II. THE BENEFIT OF EXIT TOEFL

Statements	SA	A	N	DA	SDA	Mean
TOEFL is necessary as a graduation requirement	34 %	30 %	23 %	10 %	3 %	3.82
TOEFL is important for my future career	23 %	37 %	33 %	7 %	0 %	3.76
TOEFL is important for my future academic success	27 %	23 %	40 %	10 %	0 %	3.66

The fourth statement: "TOEFL is necessary as a graduation requirement" obtained 34 % strongly agree and 30 % agree responses. Meanwhile, the other 13 % either disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean score for this item is 3.82. From these figures, it can be interpreted that students tend to agree that TOEFL is used as the requirement for exiting college. They believe that TOEFL scores can reflect their English competence and therefore they are qualified to graduate from university. One of the university graduate qualifications is the

mastery of foreign language, especially English. Thus, the participants agree to take TOEFL test as an exit college test to qualify for graduation. Language tests can affect both educational and social lives of the students [9,28]. In terms of social lives, tests influence students' behavior and attitudes. Therefore, they agreed to take the test due to the importance of tests results towards their future [9].

The fifth statement that is: "TOEFL is important for my future career", corroborates the previous statement's results. This item was agreed by 60 % and disagreed by only 7 %, and the mean score for this item is 3.76. These figures indicate the students believed taking TOEFL test and gaining good scores can help them prepare for their future. Nowadays, the mastery of English has been a compulsory requirement for job seekers. The mastery of English can be measured by the TOEFL scores gained by graduates who will be entering the professional life. As a consequence, graduates who have better English proficiency will be likely to gain employment success [29]. Dooley also asserted that language test results have become one of the important aspects in creating opportunities for test takers [30]. Moreover, Hseih claimed that possessing an acceptable level of English proficiency is an advantage for new university graduates when seeking employment [20].

The last item: "TOEFL is important for my future academic success" was only agreed by 50 % of the respondents. 40 % of them neither agreed nor disagreed, but 10 % disagreed. The mean score is only 3.66. After graduating from undergraduate (S-1) level, students have the option to continue their study to the graduate (S-2) or master level. To continue their education to the next level they need to take TOEFL test to ensure their eligibility for the graduate level. However, only a few students who wanted to pursue further education. Most of them prefer to enter the professional life either by becoming employees or opening their own businesses. As Hseih mentioned, an English certificate is not only beneficial for job hunting but also leads to better opportunities for promotion or higher salaries [20]. Nevertheless, not all businesses require proficiency in English language in the workplace. Similarly, not many students need to take English proficiency test to continue their study in the next level.

The last question: "What are your reasons for taking TOEFL test?" asked the students to provide their own reasons. The results are shown in the figure below.

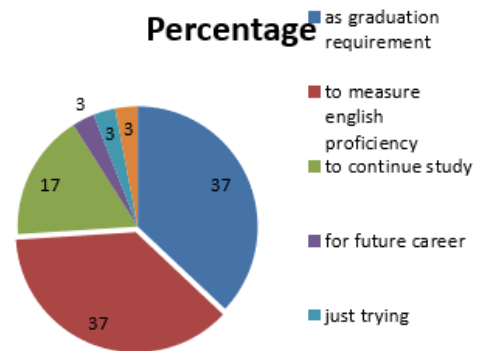


Fig. 1. Reasons for Taking TOEFL.

Figure 1 shows that the two most chosen reasons for taking TOEFL test before finishing their study are as graduation requirement and for measuring their English proficiency. Students should take TOEFL before finishing their study; otherwise they could not graduate from the university. In this case, students have no choice other than taking the test. The second reason that the students chose was to measure their own English proficiency. For this reason, the students realized that taking TOEFL test is necessary for them. 17 % of the students thought that TOEFL test is necessary for continuing their study. Meanwhile, the last 9 % were divided equally for future career, just for knowing their ability and just necessary without giving further explanation.

IV. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study is to find out students' perception regarding the obligation of taking TOEFL as a graduation requirement.

The results of the questionnaires revealed that in general, students did not agree that their final TOEFL reflects their GPA but they agreed that TOEFL scores reflect their English proficiency. Similarly, they tended to disagree that regular academic English courses help them get good TOEFL scores, thus they needed to take TOEFL preparation classes outside the campus. Regarding the obligation to take TOEFL as a graduation requirement, most of the participants agree because it can help them in their future career. However, another purpose of taking TOEFL, i.e. for continuing study in the next level was only chosen by half of the participants.

There are several implications that can be derived as a result of this study. First, the TOEFL can be used as the entry test for admission to the university. However, it cannot be applied as the sole indicator for an admission decision, except in the departments in which English will become the language of instruction. A minimum score requirement should be set depending on how much English language is needed during their study in the university.

The next implication is that the obligation to take TOEFL as college exit requirement should be revisited. It is true that English competency is required for a university graduate, yet the purposes for taking TOEFL before graduation vary for each graduate. TOEFL is intended for those who want to pursue the academic path, meanwhile not all the students want to continue their study in the next level. Some of them will directly enter the professional life after graduation. Some businesses only require an intermediate level of English proficiency, while the other half does not require English in the workplace [20]. The implication here is that the standard of test scores can be varied as a graduation requirement depending on the students' need. Another option is by applying other English proficiency tests such as TOEIC or GEPT to suit the necessities of the graduates.

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