

HEALTH POLYTECHNIC LECTURERS' COMMON ERRORS IN STRUCTURE AND WRITTEN EXPRESSION TESTS

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ABSTRACT

The opening of international classes in several Health Polytechnics of Ministry of Health brings about direct and indirect ramifications. One of them is the increasing demand for English competency among the lecturers, as shown by their TOEFL ITP scores. In this regard, Structure and Written Expression is deemed the most difficult section of the test, hindering the attainment of the required scores. Therefore, this study attempts to find out the difficulties faced by the lecturers of a Health Polytechnic of Ministry of Health in answering the Structure and Written Expression questions. This is a basic qualitative study, employing error analysis as the main approach to examine the questions and lecturers' answers in TOEFL ITP preparation programs. The results show that there are still difficulties in sentences containing dependent clauses as well as noun phrases and verb phrases. Also, Written Expression questions are deemed more difficult than those of Structure.

Keywords: health polytechnic, lecturer, structure, TOEFL ITP, written expression

INTRODUCTION

There have been continual efforts by higher education institutions to provide high-quality services for their students. Current developments have seen modern facilities, comfortable classrooms, and accessible learning spaces being developed and getting better. However, such things are only one side of the coin; the other half being the curriculum, materials, knowledge, and learning experience. As such, providing high-quality education is not merely about facilities, but also about those who provide the knowledge and learning experiences.

Both sides of the coin currently become the main focus of the Directorate General of Health Workers, i.e., the Directorate under the Ministry of Health of Indonesia that manages 38 Health Polytechnics in Indonesia. This is due to the global demand for healthcare workers (Liu et al., 2017) that needs to be fulfilled and that Indonesia has a great chance to contribute to the affairs. However, Indonesian health workers are lagging behind when it comes to working abroad. For instance, Commodore-Mensah et al. (2021) determine that foreign-born health care professionals in the United States are more likely from Southeast Asia than other regions in the world and yet in 2010-2018, 86.8% of Southeast Asian Registered Nurses were born in the Philippines. Even the Director General of Health Workers addressed the issue by stating that Indonesian health workers, nurses in particular, actually earn respect in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Japan for being patient and understanding (Eka, 2023) and that there is a huge demand that can only be met by around 10%. Apparently, the main problem for the relative absence of international presence is the lack of English skills (see Baharuddin et al., 2021; Rosanda et al., 2018).

To address the issues, the Directorate of Health Workers attempted to open international classes in selected Health Polytechnics. Naturally, such an optimistic undertaking creates certain implications and complications. For instance, the curricula have to be in line with the destination countries' requirements so that the graduates offer competencies and skills required for the real-life conditions in those countries. Additionally, international classes need to offer a learning environment that revolves around the use of English, which is insufficient in regular classes (Hardy et al., 2021). This is important considering English becomes the primary language in healthcare settings in destination countries such as Saudi Arabia (Almansour et al., 2023) and the lack of English competency would make it difficult to acquire credentials in some health occupations (Al Achkar et al., 2023). To create such an atmosphere, it is definite that the lecturers would also need to possess an advanced level of English, both in knowledge and skills.

There are certain expectations when it comes to being a lecturer. Tri Dharma of Higher Education, i.e., education, research, and community service, being the main duties, must also be followed by personal development and training that support the main ones. In this regard, the Directorate of Health Workers expects two-thirds of all lecturers in an institution to have the TOEFL ITP score of 475, a jump of required percentage for the key performance indicators "IKU." The use of TOEFL ITP itself as a language assessment is rather dilemmatic. On one hand, it is a widely-known and relatively affordable standardized test with a rather easy way to interpret the score and estimate the takers' English competency. On the other, the test could only measure a limited range of English proficiency, having only three sections (see Taufiq et al., 2018) and may not be suitable for certain situations implying higher stakes than the test is intended (Golubovich et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the new requirements are implemented with results that remain to be seen. As such, the next step to support the notion is identifying common difficulties faced by the lecturers in answering the test, the outcome of which could become the basis for focused test preparation.

Efforts to examine the difficulties surrounding TOEFL ITP test have been made for certain categories of test takers. Most studies focus on university students considering the increasing need for English competency tests as required by universities or places of employment. There are studies that focus on each TOEFL ITP section, i.e., Listening Comprehension (Alzana, 2022; Fitariana et al., 2021; Pasariibu et al., 2023; Ulminarika, 2023; Yuniarti & Pratiwi, 2022), Structure and Written Expression (Bulan et al., 2023; Putra et al., 2020; Ubaedillah, 2020), and Reading Comprehension (Asrida & Fitrawati, 2019; Febriani et al., 2019; Gustin, 2023; Hidayah & Nazriani, 2021; Meladina & Dasril, 2021), in addition to those focusing on the overall test (Hikmahyanti, 2017; Rahman et al., 2021). Overall, these studies consistently highlight Structure and Written Expression as the most difficult section of TOEFL ITP.

As for the examination of lecturers' difficulties, the available literature is fairly limited, with a heavy focus on the mapping of the score (Pane et al., 2024; Susyla et al., 2021) and overall difficulties (Fajri et al., 2021). Despite this, a critical disparity persists: no study has applied systematic inductive error analysis to dissect specific linguistic categories (word, phrase, and clause levels) causing lecturers' errors, nor compared the differing difficulty between Structure and Written Expression. Additionally, this study examines errors from a specific group of lecturers, which offers a unique context, driven by international class mandates and TOEFL ITP score thresholds, i.e., 475 for two-thirds of the staff.

It is therefore the aim of this research to examine the difficulties faced by the lecturers of a Health Polytechnic under the Directorate of Health Workers, Ministry of Health. This study attempts to answer two questions: (1) What are the most common linguistic difficulties faced by Health Polytechnic lecturers when answering TOEFL ITP-like Structure and Written Expression questions? and (2) How does the difficulty differ between Written Expression questions and Structure questions for the lecturers?

As the research questions suggest, the study focuses on the Structure and Written Expression section, considering the results of relevant studies and the recent results of TOEFL ITP test in the institution. The term “TOEFL ITP-Like” is used in this article because the data in the form of test items/questions and the answers were not from the official TOEFL ITP tests, as it is practically impossible to retain the detailed information from ETS. Instead, the data were gathered from the Weekly TOEFL ITP Exercise program that spanned over nine weeks and also from the answers in Grammar Reinforcement meetings. Both programs were Language Development Unit’s effort in preparation for the aforementioned recent TOEFL ITP test. Nevertheless, the questions used in the exercises were adopted from multiple sources, including ETS’ official releases. Therefore, the level of difficulty was on par with the authentic materials.

METHOD

This study employs a basic qualitative research design, as it attempts to identify recurring themes or patterns (Ary et al., 2013). The research design is centered on error analysis to identify and categorize difficulties faced by Health Polytechnic lecturers in TOEFL-ITP like Structure and Written Expression questions. Using established frameworks by Ellis et al., (1997), it focuses on recurring patterns in test performance through inductive categorization, allowing categories to emerge from the data instead of from predetermined ones.

The research was conducted at Poltekkes Kemenkes Yogyakarta, specifically within the Language Development Unit’s test preparation programs, which included Weekly TOEFL ITP Exercises over nine weeks and Grammar Reinforcement meetings. These settings provided a naturalistic context for lecturers preparing for institutional TOEFL ITP requirements, involving participants whose attendance fluctuated per session.

Research data consist of lecturers’ responses to 50 TOEFL ITP-like questions (25 Structure and 25 Written Expression), sourced from official ETS releases and comparable materials to match the authentic level of difficulty. The research instrument was these multiple-choice questions themselves, mainly using Google Form, featuring one correct answer and three distractors for each question.

Data collection occurred without intrusion during the preparation programs, by compiling raw answer spreadsheets from exercises and meetings without additional interventions. This technique was chosen to ensure ethical access to real-time performance without disclosing participants’ identities.

The research procedure adopted the process described by Ellis et al. (1997), which has four steps: identification, description, explanation, and evaluation. In identification, the lecturers’ answers to the 50 questions were compiled. Overall, there were 93 individuals participating in the programs. The next step was to develop categories inductively. Description stage is where the questions were categorized based on their supposed correct answers. In categorizing the questions, the focus of the questions was also considered, meaning that two similar questions with similar correct answers may end up in different categories if the distractors focus on different linguistic aspects.

To draw the statistics for the explanation, the number of correct answers and total participants were then collected and calculated to determine the percentage of correct answers for each question, which subsequently could show the difficulty level of each category. Afterwards, there was another categorization based on whether the question was Structure or Written Expression in order to make a comparison between both types of questions. The stage of evaluation may take different kinds of approach; this study compared the results with relevant literature offering parallel categorizations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

One feature of TOEFL ITP test that arguably makes it popular is the familiar format of multiple-choice questions. All 140 questions have four choices, i.e., one correct answer and three distractors, meaning that statistically, without considering the content of a question and the test taker’s knowledge, the probability of choosing the correct answer is one in four, or 25%. Structure and Written Expression, as the name suggests, is divided into two types of questions. Structure offers fill-in-the-blanks questions, while Written Expression questions show sentences with four underlined words or phrases, one of which needs to be changed for the sentence to be correct.

To answer the research questions, this section is divided into two main parts. The first part recognizes the difficulties seen from a linguistic standpoint, showing the tabulation of data following three levels of linguistic units, which are then divided further into subcategories following the inductive classification. The second part reveals the differences in results between Structure and Written Expression questions by showing the respondent data of each question, and what can be concluded from the tabulation.

Difficulties Based on Linguistic Categories

Table 1 below shows the categorization of test items into linguistic levels of words, phrases, and clauses. The names of the category were subsequently capitalized to differentiate with general terms. The category with the largest number of questions is Main Clause. Having more than 60% of correct answers, this category can actually be divided into three smaller groups with different focus: Subject-Verb Agreements, Tenses, and Expletives.

Table 1.
Linguistic Categories of the Questions

Linguistic Level	Categories	Accuracy Percentage	Difficulty Rank
Clause	Main Clause	61.8	6
	Adjective Clause	62.7	7
	Adverb Clause	25	1
Phrase	Verb Phrase	47.4	3
	Noun Phrase	32	2
	Adverb Phrase	75	10
Word	Noun	48.1	4
	Adjective	64.7	9
	Adverb	57.5	5
	Preposition	63.8	8
	Article	85.3	11

Out of the three subcategories, S-V Agreements becomes the easiest one with 63% of correct answers, somewhat in line with studies by Sugeng (2016). Interestingly, English subject-verb agreement appears to be more problematic for Arabic (Hussain, 2019) and Thai natives (Kampookaew, 2020). Questions focusing on tenses are considered slightly more difficult with 61% accuracy, but expletives are proven to be even more challenging with a 56.7% correct answer ratio. Expletives as a category has no parallel comparison, but studies by Amiri & Puteh (2017) and Ibrahim & Ibrahim (2020) do show that general understanding of tenses is better than that of subject-verb agreement. Overall, considering the number of questions and the percentage, it appears that main clauses are relatively understandable by the lecturers. However, the same



assumption cannot be applied to dependent clauses. As seen in the table, Adverb Clause is considered the most difficult category in terms of its correct answer ratio. The following test item illustrates such an instance.

- (1) Beginning in the Middle Ages, composers of Western music used a system of notating their compositions _____ be performed by musicians.
(a. will; b. that; c. so they could; d. and when to)

The Structure question shown by datum (1) above shows an incomplete adverbial clause of purpose. It appears that the clause needs a subordinating conjunction, a subject, and perhaps an auxiliary verb, as the infinitive “be” does not naturally occur as a sole auxiliary verb. This question shows the complex structure of dependent clauses with the need for a conjunction in addition to other elements that constitute a clause. A study by Fajri et al. (2021) does indeed reveal that 53% of lecturers find it difficult to determine connectors in adverb clauses. Another study by Bulan et al. (2023) also shows that questions with multiple-clause sentences are proven to be problematic. This presumed lack of knowledge at the clausal level is interestingly reverberated at the phrasal level. The following questions show the most difficult ones from Noun and Verb Phrase categories, respectively.

- (2) _____ of large mammals once dominated the North American prairies: the American bison and the pronghorn antelope. (a. There are two species; b. With two species; c. Two species are; d. Two Species)
- (3) One of the biological functions of rubber in plants is to help them healing after they are damaged by covering wounds to help stop the bleeding.

Datum (2) above shows an incomplete noun phrase that functions as a subject. At first glance, test takers may not realize which one is the subject and the verb, especially with two distractors that provide verbs. This confusion is proven by the answers, as the majority (65%) picked option “a. There are two species.” Yet, the most-selected choice will create a run-on sentence. As such, the correct choice would be the one completing the noun phrase instead, which is “d. Two Species.” The issue of noun phrase perhaps has something to do with its frequent use as a subject (Richards & Schmidt, 2013), which is documented in studies by Purinanda & Sutrisno (2022b) and Cahyani et al. (2015). Also at the phrasal level, datum (3), having less than half the lecturers answer the question correctly, shows the intricacy of verb-verb construction. This is due to the inconsistency of the main verbs (Purinanda & Sutrisno, 2022a) that may be followed by either an infinitive with or without “to” as well as an “-ing” form, as if each verb has its own rule. Nevertheless, there are patterns of verbs followed by which form of verb that can be observed. Knowledge of such pattern is essential for frequently-used verbs. In this instance, “help” should be followed by an infinitive, either with or without “to.”

Both categories of Noun and Verb Phrase inadvertently reveal a similar issue in the use of verb groups. This kind of error is proven to be a common occurrence, having the highest percentage of error in Sugeng's (2016) study, which highlights the generalization process as the main cause. With that in mind, it was probable that in datum (2), the lecturers made the assumption of using expletive construction, dismissing the existence of the main verb, which is not an isolated case within the EFL context (Rifiyanti & Dewi, 2022). According to Phillips (2004), constituents such as participles, appositions, and objects of preposition, could confuse test takers in finding the subject and its verb. Therefore, what is supposed to be a regular subject with the verb “dominated,” may be confused as a subject for an expletive sentence. As for datum (3) the generalization process may explain why they did not consider other forms of the verb “healing” as the correct choice following the verb “help.” Perhaps, the lecturers were unaware of such differences in verb forms following certain verbs, and subsequently generalized all of them into one single rule.

This study also highlights the issue regarding the category ranked fourth, Noun. Considered the most difficult category at the word level, this category can be divided into several smaller subgroups, namely Uncountable-Countable Noun, Gerund, and Pronoun. Several questions with around 35% accuracy involve uncountable nouns that were made as if having characteristics of countable nouns, e.g., pluralization. For instance, the uncountable noun “equipment” was made plural in form, and the singular noun “phenomenon” was made into incorrect form “a phenomena” to confuse the test takers. Additionally, a question about pronouns has a subject of “cats” and test takers need to determine its pronoun equivalence. The test item has 55% accuracy, resonating the previous notion of confusion in finding the subject and its verb. Issues regarding the use of nouns can also be found in another context. For instance, Kampookaew (2020) highlights how nouns becomes the word-level category with the most errors in EFL university students’ writings. Sharing similar results, Ibrahim & Ibrahim (2020) put the category into the second-highest category of errors.

Structure vs. Written Expression

Despite having the same multiple-choice format, one could argue that Structure and Written Expression offer different challenges to test takers. Both require the test takers to employ their utmost knowledge of English grammar, but more so for Written Expression questions. This is due to the nature of the questions where a process of elimination may be necessary to determine the error words or phrases, i.e., the correct answer. Thus, complete understanding of standard written English conventions is necessary.

To illustrate such a notion, in the question shown in datum (3), for instance, the test taker needs to know “one of” construction, preposition, verb-verb construction, and gerund in addition to the relationship between parts of speech. Compared to Structure questions, there appear to be differences in the strategies in answering the questions. The following table shows the respondents’ answers of each question.

Table 2.
Respondent Data by the Two Main Categories

No.	Structure Questions				No.	Written Expression Questions			
	Code	Part.	Corr.	Percent		Code	Part.	Corr.	Percent
1	w1-1	64	47	73.4	1	w1-10	64	38	59.4
2	w1-2	64	41	64.1	2	w2-9	34	13	38.2
3	w2-2	34	28	82.4	3	w3-7	14	7	50.0
4	p3-1	23	10	43.5	4	p1-4	23	12	52.2
5	w2-3	34	27	79.4	5	w2-6	34	15	44.1
6	w1-3	64	39	60.9	6	p1-2	23	14	60.9
7	w1-4	64	45	70.3	7	w3-8	14	5	35.7
8	w3-2	14	7	50.0	8	p2-18	20	18	90.0
9	p1-1	23	21	91.3	9	w2-8	34	16	47.1
10	p3-2	23	6	26.1	10	p2-14	20	15	75.0
11	w3-1	14	9	64.3	11	w1-6	64	22	34.4
12	w3-5	14	7	50.0	12	w1-9	64	25	39.1
13	p2-15	20	5	25.0	13	w3-10	14	9	64.3
14	p2-13	20	12	60.0	14	p2-20	20	12	60.0
15	p2-17	20	13	65.0	15	p3-4	23	7	30.4
16	p3-7	23	11	47.8	16	w1-7	64	42	65.6
17	w3-3	14	8	57.1	17	w2-10	34	19	55.9
18	p1-3	23	9	39.1	18	w2-7	34	17	50.0
19	p2-19	20	1	5.0	19	w3-9	14	10	71.4
20	p3-6	23	8	34.8	20	p2-12	20	17	85.0
21	w2-4	34	29	85.3	21	p3-5	23	8	34.8
22	p3-3	23	9	39.1	22	w1-8	64	34	53.1
23	p2-11	20	6	30.0	23	w3-6	14	11	78.6
24	w1-5	64	48	75.0	24	p2-16	20	12	60.0
25	w2-1	34	20	58.8	25	p3-8	23	12	52.2
		Total		61.3			Total		52.9

From the table, the raw respondent data are shown by each question. The code shows the activity from which the questions were answered and the numbering within each activity. The table also shows the total number of participants, which is divided by the number of correct answers, resulting in the percentage of correct answers. As mentioned beforehand, the number of participants fluctuated, having as high as 64 and as low as 14. The percentages also show that the questions offer various levels of difficulty, which reflects the actual test. In summation, it appears that, by percentage, Written Expression questions are indeed more challenging for the lecturers. To illustrate the difference, datum (4) and (5) were selected, having similar accuracy percentage with their respective types.

- (4) The onion is characterized by an edible bulb composed of leaves rich in sugar and a pungent oil, _____ the vegetable's strong taste. (a. which the source of; b. that the source is; c. the source of; d. of the source is)
- (5) The works of the author Herman Melville are literary creations of a high order, blending fact, fiction, adventure, and subtle symbolic.

Datum (4) is a Structure question resulting in 62% correct answers, while datum (5) represents Written Expression with 50% accuracy. It can be argued that the process of approximation is more possible to do in datum (4); to what degree depends on the test takers. Still, from the available choices, the most probable ones would be option “a. which the source of” or “c. the source of” and the majority of lecturers’ answers (92.9%) were indeed either one of



both. It is apparent that the focus is only on one structure, relative clause or its reduced form, represented best by the two options. However, the same approach may not be entirely applied to answer the question in datum (5), as the focus multiplies. To determine the correct answer, the test takers need the knowledge of noun phrase, adjective-noun relationship, and parallelism. Afterwards, it takes time to determine which options follow and violate the convention. The lack of approximation process is reflected by the answers to the question, which are more evenly distributed.

Apparently, the idea of Written Expression being more difficult than Structure is not an isolated case. The same sentiment is also brought up by several other studies, despite having university students as their participants instead of lecturers. Putra et al. (2020) determine that Written Expression is considered more difficult than Structure, becoming the causes the majority (63.35%) of incorrect answers. Studies by Misnawati & As'ari (2023) and Hampp et al. (2021) also reverberate the idea, although the number from which the conclusion was made was not explicitly stated. Comparing the difficulties between Structure and Written Expression in the Indonesian higher education context is proven to be an arduous task, as studies that thoroughly examine and separately categorize both types of questions are particularly limited.

CONCLUSION

The findings and discussion shed light on the Health Polytechnic lecturers' difficulties in Structure and Written Expression questions. The first key issue that needs to be acknowledged is in dependent clause and phrase levels, particularly adverb clauses (25% accuracy), noun phrases (32%), and verb phrases (47.4%), while main clauses and simpler word-level elements such as articles (85.3%) pose fewer challenges. These patterns stem from complexities in subordinating conjunctions, subject-verb identification, and verb-verb constructions, often worsened by overgeneralization of rules.

Written Expression questions are proved to be notably harder (52.9% accuracy) than Structure questions (61.3%), demanding deeper grammatical integration. After all, error elimination across multiple underlined parts, when compared to Structure's more focused fill-in-the-blank format, does need deeper levels of grammatical knowledge, including parallelism, modifiers, and reduced clause forms.

From the points above, there are certain educational and institutional implications to address. First, had an English training or test preparation program for the lecturers been deemed necessary, it needs to focus on structured and continual development. Starting from the basics, the program needs to offer step-by-step progression towards more complex concepts. Also, the program may not always focus on TOEFL ITP but instead on general English skills. Secondly, knowledge of English grammar, especially sentence structure and writing skills, is needed by the lecturers as part of their duties within Tri Dharma of Higher Education to conduct and publish research. Therefore, learning English provides long-term benefits not only for the sake of requirements and obligations, but also as a part of personal development. Finally, the increasing demand for lecturers' TOEFL ITP scores for key performance indicators and accreditation purposes means that this issue needs to be investigated further. These studies can act as a diagnosis, not only to advance TOEFL ITP scores, but as an integral part of personal development for high-quality practice of higher education.

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