

An Analysis of Errors Made by Test-Takers in the Structure and Written Expression Section of the TOEFL ITP

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis kesalahan tata bahasa yang dilakukan oleh dosen dari program studi non-Bahasa Inggris pada bagian *Structure and Written Expression TOEFL ITP*. Dengan desain deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini mengkaji jawaban 27 dosen Universitas Bunda Mulia terhadap 40 soal latihan yang dikerjakan dalam waktu 25 menit. Kesalahan diidentifikasi, diklasifikasikan berdasarkan topik tata bahasa, lalu diringkas menggunakan frekuensi dan persentase. Soal mencakup sebelas topik, dengan jumlah terbanyak pada kelas kata, frasa, dan klausa relatif. Temuan menunjukkan kesulitan pada tata bahasa tingkat kata maupun kalimat. Persentase kesalahan tertinggi pada butir soal terdapat pada satu soal agreement (88,89%), penggunaan preposisi (85,19%), dan pemilihan kata (85,19%). Peserta juga mengalami kesulitan pada konstruksi participial, klausa relatif, struktur kalimat, konstruksi paralel, appositive, perbandingan, modifier, dan urutan kata. Secara keseluruhan, paparan bahasa Inggris dalam pekerjaan tidak selalu menjamin penguasaan bentuk tata bahasa yang diujikan dalam TOEFL ITP, terutama ketika jawaban bergantung pada fungsi sintaktis, bukan hanya makna umum.

Kata kunci : kesalahan tata bahasa, TOEFL ITP, Structure and Written Expression, dosen non Bahasa Inggris

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed grammatical errors made by lecturers from non-English departments in the Structure and Written Expression section of the TOEFL ITP. Using a qualitative descriptive design, it examined responses to 40 practice-test items completed in 25 minutes by 27 lecturers at Bunda Mulia University. Errors were identified, classified by grammatical topic, and summarized using frequencies and percentages. The items covered eleven areas, with the largest numbers devoted to parts of speech, phrases, and relative clauses. The findings indicate difficulty across both word-level and sentence-level grammar. The highest reported item-level error rates were in an agreement item (88.89%), preposition use (85.19%), and word choice (85.19%). Participants also had difficulty with participial constructions, relative clauses, sentence structure, parallel construction, appositives, comparison, modifiers, and word order. Overall, the results suggest that professional exposure to English does not necessarily ensure control of the grammatical forms tested in TOEFL ITP, particularly when answers depend on syntactic function rather than general meaning.

Keywords: error analysis, TOEFL ITP, Structure and Written Expressions, non-English department lecturers

1. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English is classified as a foreign language rather than a second language. The distinction between these categories concerns the social contexts in which languages are used: a second language is commonly spoken within a community alongside its national

language, whereas a foreign language is not widely used in everyday communication. Larsen-Freeman and Long (2014) describe a second language as one acquired in an environment where it is spoken natively, while a foreign language is typically learned through

instruction in a context where it is not the native language.

Due to the fact that English is not an official language in Indonesia and is rarely used in daily interactions, learners may have limited opportunities to practise it, which can make accurate use more challenging. As a result, errors are a natural part of language learning. Nugroho and Benecia (2022) observe that learners make mistakes as they acquire a language and emphasize the importance of feedback in helping them recognize and learn from those mistakes.

Research suggests that English in Asian contexts serves purposes beyond its role as a medium of instruction (Dang, Nguyen, & Le, 2013). It is also regarded as a lingua franca (Baker, 2012) and as a resource associated with regional economic development (Hayes, 2017). Taken together, these perspectives indicate that English has a broad influence across the region: it supports education, facilitates intercultural communication, and may contribute to local economic growth.

Considering the importance of English, assessments are needed to evaluate learners' ability to communicate in international contexts. Canale and Swain (1980) conceptualize communicative competence as the integration of grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic knowledge that enables speakers to communicate appropriately and effectively. Proficiency assessments therefore seek to measure these dimensions and determine whether learners can communicate effectively in academic, professional, and social settings.

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a proficiency assessment designed to evaluate the English-language ability of individuals whose first language is not English. It is widely recognized internationally; Abboud and Hussein (2011, p. 111) report that TOEFL scores are accepted by more

than 5,000 colleges, universities, and licensing agencies in 90 countries. In Indonesia, many higher education institutions use TOEFL scores, particularly those from the paper-based test (PBT), as part of their admission or graduation requirements.

The PBT assesses listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. However, this study focuses on errors in structure and written expression, an area that can pose difficulties for language learners. It aims to identify the grammatical structures that learners find problematic. This focus on grammatical difficulties in written English is also reflected in previous research examining the errors learners made.

To begin with, Tanihardjo (2012) investigated interlingual errors in students' argumentative essays, focusing on the types of errors produced and the factors that may have contributed to them. The participants were ten senior high school students who had limited exposure to English-speaking environments and occasional opportunities to use English in authentic contexts. Additionally, all participants had completed a TOEFL course and obtained paper-based TOEFL scores ranging from 500 to 550, indicating a relatively similar level of English proficiency. The results showed that the types of errors identified were omissions, additions, and misformations involving verbs, pronouns, singular and plural nouns, articles, and prepositions. Tanihardjo further suggested that the influence of Indonesian syntactic patterns on students' spoken English contributed to the errors in their essays.

Next, Tanihardjo (2016) examined students' understanding of English grammar as assessed in the structure and written expression section of the paper-based TOEFL (PBT). The study aimed to identify the most common question types in this section and the grammatical areas that posed difficulties for students. The

participants were sixth-semester students of the English Department at Bunda Mulia University and had completed all grammar courses and scored below 50 on the structure and written expression pre-test. The findings indicated that most test items focused on clauses and sentence-level structures. The five areas associated with the most frequent errors were noun phrases, participial phrases, adjective phrases, relative pronouns, and sentence structures. Error rates were highest for participial phrases (66.67%), followed by adjective phrases (57.14%) and noun phrases (51.79%). He further suggested that Indonesian grammar instruction, which places greater emphasis on forms and structures than on sentence construction, may contribute to students' difficulties with the PBT TOEFL section, which primarily assesses grammar at the sentence level.

Finally, Akmal et al. (2020) examined the difficulties EFL learners encountered in the structure and written expression sections of the TOEFL Prediction Test, as well as their perceptions of these challenges. Using purposive sampling, the researchers selected 15 seventh-semester students from the Department of English Language Education at Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry who had taken the test. They then conducted semi-structured interviews with six underachieving participants who had made the greatest number of errors to explore the factors underlying their difficulties. The findings indicated that students experienced particular challenges with determiners, conjunctions, adjective clauses, appositive phrases, and reduced clauses in the structure section. In the written expression section, the most difficult areas included adverbial connectors, subject-verb agreement, concessive clauses, relative clauses, and quantifiers. The study identified several factors that may have contributed to these difficulties, including limited practice, weak grammatical knowledge, restricted

vocabulary, inadequate time management, and low self-confidence.

Previous studies employed the same instrument to assess learners' knowledge of English grammatical structures. Their participants were students enrolled in English departments and were therefore likely to have received formal instruction in, and developed familiarity with, English grammatical rules. The present study differs in its focus on lecturers from non-English departments at Bunda Mulia University. In the course of their professional activities, these lecturers encounter English in contexts such as conducting research, consulting scholarly sources, and delivering presentations. Despite this exposure, they have not taken the TOEFL ITP or paper-based TOEFL (PBT). The study therefore seeks to identify the grammatical errors they make in the structure and written expression section.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Error analysis treats learners' errors as systematic evidence of their developing knowledge of a target language. Corder (1967) emphasized that such errors can reveal the learner's current language system and inform both research and teaching. Richards (1971) distinguished errors influenced by the first language from those arising through learners' developing understanding of target-language rules

Error analysis can be used to identify recurrent patterns in learners' language production and examine the linguistic difficulties these patterns may reflect. Richards (2014) also describes it as a systematic process of identifying, classifying, describing and interpreting learner errors to better understand learners' linguistic competence and the challenges they encounter in language learning.

The analysis followed several steps:

1. Error identification: Incorrect responses in the Structure and Written Expression sections of the ITP TOEFL were collected, recorded, and coded for analysis.
2. Error classification: The identified errors were categorized according to the grammatical features they involved.
3. Error description: Representative examples from each category were presented and examined. Each description explained the nature of the error, compared it with the appropriate form, and, where possible, identified the grammatical rule or pattern that participants appeared to misunderstand.
4. Frequency interpretation: The frequency of each error category was calculated to determine which grammatical features presented the greatest difficulty. These results were interpreted to provide insight into participants' grammatical competence and to identify areas that may warrant greater instructional attention.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to analyse grammatical errors made by participants in the Structure and Written Expression section of the ITP TOEFL test. The results are displayed in a table that shows the frequency of the categorized error, and describe each error that the respondents make.

The 40 test items of the structure and written expressions were completely adopted from ITP TOEFL practice test, which was officially issued and administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS), and the time assigned was 25 minutes. The data are collected from the participants' answers in the structure and written expression section of the ITP TOEFL test. The number of correct

answers were then converted using the table of score conversion, which range from 20 to 68.

The participants were 27 lecturers randomly selected from non-English departments at Bunda Mulia University. In their professional roles, they had encountered English in various contexts, including conducting research, consulting English-language sources, and delivering presentations.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The TOEFL ITP's structure and written expressions section tested a wide variety of grammatical structures, which the author further categorized into eleven topics: part of speech; phrases; relative clauses; sentences; agreement; parallel construction; word choice; appositives; comparison; modifier; and word order. Additionally, it is shown that part of speech has the most questions (9), followed by phrases (6), relative clauses (6), sentences (5), and agreement (5). The categories of grammar tested appear to be somewhat similar to those in Tanihardjo (2016).

No.	Categories	Total
1	Part of speech	9
2	Phrases	6
3	Relative Clauses	6
4	Sentences	5
5	Agreement	5
6	Parallel Construction	3
7	Word choice	2
8	Appositives	1
9	Comparison	1
10	Modifier	1
11	Word Order	1

Part of Speech

Part of speech is the grammatical classification of words according to their syntactic purpose and distribution within a sentence (Celce-Murcia, M., Larsen-Freeman, D., & William, H. A., 1999). Every component of speech has a distinct function, such as naming entities (nouns), expressing actions or states (verbs), or modifying other components (adjectives and adverbs). Analyzing sentence structure and spotting grammatical mistakes, especially those involving improper word forms or incorrect modification, require an understanding of parts of speech. When learners of a second language employs a term whose form does not correspond with its grammatical function in the sentence, even when the intended meaning is already clear, part-of-speech errors frequently arise.

According to Corder's (1967) Error Analysis theory, part-of-speech errors reflect learners' developing interlanguage rather than random mistakes. These errors arise as learners form and test hypotheses about the target language, often resulting in the misuse of word forms that do not match their grammatical functions. Such errors are commonly caused by intralingual transfer, especially overgeneralization of morphological patterns, limited knowledge of derivational forms, and, in some cases, first language interference.

The questions related to part of speech in the structure and written expressions section are classified into several grammatical categories, namely adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, nouns, prepositions, and verbs which make the most questions and the most problematic to learners.

One of the error sub-categories show that learners struggle to distinguish between adjectives, adverbs, and nouns derived from the same root (as shown in questions 19, 23 and 40). The problem is not vocabulary meaning but morphological function, where learners have to decide which form is grammatically correct to fit the sentence. This is particularly problematic because academic English relies heavily on accurate derivational morphology.

Moreover, prepositions are notoriously difficult (this is shown by the error percentage by 85,19% each), because they are idiomatic and language-specific. Learners often rely on literal translation from their first language, where equivalent prepositions may exist but are used differently.

Next, errors related to the presence of preposition for certain verb show that Many learners assume that verbs related to description or discussion require a preposition (as shown in question 28). This overgeneralization leads to systematic misuse, especially in academic contexts where verbs like *depict*, *discuss*, *emphasize* are common and strictly transitive.

Finally, the error related to the application of conjunction take the error percentage of 77,78 (as shown in question 35). This reflects a syntactic misunderstanding, not just a vocabulary issue.

In the TOEFL Structure and Written Expression section, part-of-speech errors tend to be one of the most frequent questions, because the test emphasizes the correct relationship

Types	Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
Adjective	19. There are thousands* kinds of inks used both in the printing industry and in the manufacture of ballpoint and fountain pens for writing	thousand / thousands (noun) + of (preposition)	37,04
Adjective	23. One of the most significance* political movements since the Second World War ended has been the breaking up of former colonial empires into independent nations	Significant	48,15
Adjective	40. the canoe designed by North American Indians was very suitable for use on inland waters, for it was easily portable and had amply* storage space.	Ample	85,19
Adverb	37. Searching for alternate forms of energy does not necessary* mean the abandonment of fossil fuels as an energy source.	necessarily	88,89
Conjunction	35. The favoured habitat of the junco, a small sparrow, is a mixed or coniferous forest, despite* it is often noted in fields, thickets, and city parks.	although / though / even though	77,78
Noun	31. The long* of time a battery maintains its useful life while idle depends on many factors of quality of construction, cell size, cell type, and storage temperature.	Length	55,56
Preposition	38. Hurricanes consist at* high-velocity winds blowing circularly around a low-pressure center known as the eye of the storm.	of	85,19
Preposition	39. United States civil rights activist Medgar Evers was a leader in the struggle to gain equal rights to* African Americans in his home state, Mississippi.	for	85,19
Verb	28. The novels of Amy Tan depict of* tension between mothers and daughters as well as conflicts experienced by many Chinese immigrants to the United States.	Depict (a transitive verb and does not require a preposition)	66,67

between grammatical form and syntactic function rather than meaning alone. Test-takers often focus on lexical meaning and do not notice whether a word's grammatical category fits its position in the sentence, especially in structurally complex items. In addition, the frequent use of similar word-family forms increases confusion, resulting in part-of-speech errors that reflect learners' developing interlanguage.

Phrases

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), a phrase is a syntactically organized group of words structured around a head element that functions as a single grammatical unit within a sentence but lacks the subject-finite verb configuration necessary to form an independent clause. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) observe that learners frequently struggle with phrases when learning a second language because proper phrase construction necessitates understanding of word order, head-modifier relationships, and grammatical agreement, all of which vary between languages. Because of this, learners frequently make phrase-level mistakes in their language, which is a reflection of their growing grammatical proficiency.

The questions related to phrases in the structure and written expressions section are categorized into two grammatical areas, namely noun, and participial phrases, which make the second most questions. In the noun phrase sub-category, the test-takers did quite well, but not in the participial one, where the error percentage take more than 40%.

Items 1, 4, and 15 fall between 22% and 37%, which is relatively moderate. These results suggest that learners have a basic grasp of noun phrases, but their knowledge is incomplete. Some of the test-takers still find it difficult to understand the fixed academic collocations (e.g. *the basis for*). Even though the error rate is quite low, about one-third of students still fail, indicating uncertainty about recognizing when a noun phrase is required rather than a verb phrase, or distinguishing gerunds as nouns from infinitives or clauses (item 1).

Next, participial items show the highest error percentages (items 14, 25 and 32). This pattern strongly suggests that participial constructions are a major weakness. Learners struggle with: reduced clauses (*made primarily from...*), choosing between past vs present participles (*established* vs *establishing*), and understanding logical subject control (who is doing the action). Additionally, items 14 and 25 are examples of dangling modifier questions. They serve as an example of a typical dangling participle issue. Learners often fail to recognize that the participial phrase must logically modify the subject that follows. The error suggests difficulty in linking the participial phrase to its implicit subject, a result of incomplete understanding of how reduced clauses function adjectivally rather than independently.

Overall, these errors occur because test-taker often overgeneralize full sentence patterns, struggle to suppress explicit subjects, and have limited exposure to reduced constructions in

Types	Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
Noun	1. _____ of classical ballet in the United States began around 1830. a. to teaching b. is teaching c. it was taught d. the teaching	d. the teaching	37,04
Noun	4. Comparative anatomy is _____ classification of both plants and animals. a. the basis for b. for basics c. the basis that d. the basically	a. the basis for	22,22
Noun	15. Boise became _____ of the state of Idaho in 1864. a. as the capital b. the capital c. to be the capital d. the capital was	b. the capital	29,63
Participial	14. _____ primarily from a plant oils, perfumes were used in ancient times as incense in religious rites, in medicines, and later for adornment. a. made them b. they made c. made d. by making	c. made	77,78
Participial	25. Establishing* outside Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1976, the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge contains more than 9,000 acres of forests, prairies, marshes, and lakes.	established	40,74
Participial	32. Leather is dried under natural or controlled humidity conditions, prepared* it for subsequent softening and finishing operations.	preparing	62,96

academic English. The questions are problematic precisely because they test whether learners can interpret participial phrases as structural reductions, not complete clauses.

Relative clauses

According to Azar & Hagen (2016), a relative clause is a dependent clause that modifies a noun or noun phrase by giving more information about it. It is typically introduced by a relative pronoun (such as *who*, *whom*, *which*, *that*, *whose*) or a relative adverb (*where*, *when*, *why*). A relative clause comes after a noun, describes, identifies or gives extra information about the noun and cannot stand alone as a complete sentence.

Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
6. Despite its fishlike form, the whale is ____ and will drown if submerged too long. a. an animal breathes air that b. an animal that breathes air c. an animal breathes air d. that an animal breathes air	b. an animal that breathes air	22,22
9. Mars, the so-called red planet, is actually coloured red by iron oxide and other impurities ____ the whole surface. a. that cover b. in which are covered c. that they cover d. and covered	a. that cover	48,15
10. The 1903 film <i>The Great Train Robbery</i> was the first significant film in which the classic western story's formula of crime and retribution _____. a. was used b. to be used c. used d. had used	a. was used	62,96
17. The original Welland Canal, opened which* in 1829, was neither deep enough nor wide enough for modern ships.	Which was opened	37,04
20. A gene is a biological unit of information who* directs the activity of a cell or organism during its lifetime.	which	29,63
26. Most animals have salivary glands what* resemble those in humans.	which	55,56

The error percentages, which range from 22.22% to 62.96%, show that learners have uneven control of relative clause structures. The lowest error rate (question 6) suggests that learners generally understand basic restrictive relative clauses when the structure is simple and familiar. However, as sentence structures become more complex, error rates increase, indicating growing difficulty with clause integration.

The moderate to high error rates in questions 9 and 10 show that learners have

difficulty understanding how relative pronouns work in a sentence. Many students struggle when the relative pronoun acts as the subject of the clause or when they must choose the correct verb tense. The very high error rate in question 10 especially suggests that learners find passive forms inside relative clauses confusing. Instead of focusing on grammatical structure, they often choose answers that seem to make sense in meaning but are grammatically incorrect.

Finally, errors in questions 17, 20, and 26 show that learners are often confused about the difference between full relative clauses and reduced relative clauses, and they sometimes choose the wrong relative pronouns such as *who*, *which*, or *what*.

Overall, the data show that learners understand relative clauses only partly, and their accuracy drops when the sentence structure becomes more complex. This indicates some of the test-takes still fail to understand how relative pronouns work, how relative clauses can be reduced, and how verbs function inside relative clauses.

Sentences

A sentence is a basic unit of language that expresses a complete meaning. In modern grammar, a sentence is understood not only as a grammatical structure but also as a unit of communication that connects form, meaning, and use. Modern grammar theories, such as Usage-Based Grammar and Construction Grammar, explain that sentences are learned through repeated exposure to language and are stored as patterns that carry both structure and meaning (Tomasello, 2003; Goldberg, 2005).

Based on their structure, sentences are commonly classified into simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. A simple sentence contains one independent clause and represents the most basic sentence pattern.

Furthermore, a compound sentence joins two or more independent clauses using coordination, and shows how ideas of equal importance are linked. Next, a complex sentence includes an independent clause and one or more dependent clauses, which reflect more advanced language use. Finally, a compound-complex sentence combines both coordination and subordination and shows a higher level of grammatical development.

Types	Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
Simple	3. Long before the advent of written literature, _____ their myths and stories in oral poems told by successive generations. a. people recorded b. recording people c. people's recordings d. people who recorded	a. people recorded	33,33
Complex	2. Mason bees are solitary bees, which means _____ in colonies like honeybees or bumblebees. a. do not live b. when they do not live c. that they do not live d. that do not live	c. that they do not live	33,33
Complex	4. Although legend has it that the Pilgrims first set foot in America or Plymouth Rock in 1620, _____ documentary evidence confirming this. a. no b. still is no c. there is no d. but no	c. there is no	44,44
Complex	9. Clouds _____ in warm air rises, cools, and condenses. a. when form water vapor b. form when water vapor c. form vapor water when d. vapor form when water	b. form when water vapor	37,04
Complex	11. When played in certain ways, the bassoon can produce comical sounds, _____ it is sometimes referred to as the clown of the orchestra. a. or b. that c. so d. whether	c. so	33,33

The error percentages in the data indicate a moderate but consistent level of difficulty across both simple and complex sentence structures, with error rates ranging from 33.33% to 44.44%. This suggests that learners have not yet fully mastered English sentence construction, especially at the level of how clauses are formed and connected. Interestingly, the simple sentence item produces an error rate similar to those of complex sentences, indicating that learners sometimes fail to recognize when a straightforward subject-verb structure is required and instead choose unnecessarily complex options.

In general, learners make mistakes in questions about simple and complex sentences because they do not clearly identify the main part of the sentence,

especially the subject and the verb. In simple sentences, learners sometimes choose word groups or verb forms that cannot function as the main verb, even though the meaning seems clear. On the other hand, in complex sentences, learners often get confused by different clause types, such as noun clauses, relative clauses, and adverbial clauses, and they choose connectors like *that*, *when*, or *but* without understanding their exact function (as shown in question 2). When a sentence begins with a subordinate clause, learners may also forget that the sentence still needs a complete main clause, which then leads to incomplete or incorrect answers (as shown in question 5). In addition, learners may have trouble with word order in sentences that contain more than one clause (as shown in question 7). Overall, these mistakes happen because learners often focus more on meaning than on form, assuming that a sentence is correct as long as it is understandable.

Overall, the error percentages show a clear gap between learners' understanding of meaning and their control of grammar. Many learners appear to choose answers based on familiar words or what feels right, rather than carefully analyzing the structure of the sentence. This becomes a serious problem in standardized tests, where wrong options are intentionally designed to trap students who have only partial grammatical knowledge, and where even small errors lead to incorrect answers. Therefore, the findings suggest a strong need for more explicit instruction on sentence structure, particularly in identifying clause boundaries, understanding how connectors work, and knowing when a sentence requires a simple structure versus a complex one.

Agreement

Agreement, also called concord, means that words in a sentence must match in grammar, especially the subject and the verb in terms of number and

person. In TOEFL ITP tests, agreement is often tested in long or complex sentences, which makes it harder for learners to choose the correct verb form. From a functional grammar point of view, agreement helps make sentences clear and easy to understand (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Studies in second language learning show that agreement errors usually come from influence of the first language, overuse of certain rules, and difficulty processing complex sentence structures (Ellis, 1994).

Types	Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
Det-noun	12. In modern societies, _____ authorized body such as a legislature or a court makes the law. a. some b. some of c. some the d. for some	a. some	77,78
Det-noun	16. Soybeans contain a rich concentrations* of phytoestrogens, estrogenlike molecules derived from plants	concentration	44,44
Det-noun	30. A basic premise of humanism is that people are rational beings who possesses* the capacity for truth and goodness.	possess	59,26
Det-noun	33. Of all the organized, independent city* in Texas, Laredo, founded in 1755, is the oldest.	cities	88,89
Subject-verb	36. By studying modern coral reefs, geologists and biologists hope to understand mechanism* of formation, migration, and entrapment of petroleum in ancient reefs.	The mechanism	77,78

The error percentages in the determiner–noun and subject–verb agreement category are generally high, ranging from 44.44% to 88.89%, indicating that this area is particularly problematic for learners. The highest error rate appears in question 33 (88.89%), where learners failed to recognize the required plural noun form (*cities*) after the determiner *all*. This suggests limited awareness of determiner–noun agreement rules, especially when plural markers are separated from the noun by intervening modifiers. Similarly, the high error rate in question 12 (77.78%) indicates difficulty selecting an appropriate determiner (*some*) to modify a singular count noun, likely because learners associate *some* mainly with plural or uncountable nouns and overlook its use with singular nouns in formal contexts.

The moderate to high error rates in questions 16 (44.44%) and 30 (59.26%)

show that learners are confused about singular and plural nouns and how they affect verb forms. In question 16, test-takers likely focused on the plural word *soybeans* instead of the main noun *concentration*, which caused the agreement error. Similarly, in question 30, the plural subject *beings* was followed by a singular verb (*possesses*), possibly because learners were influenced by the singular phrase *a basic premise* or because they tend to overuse third-person singular verbs.

The error in question 36 (77,78%) shows test-takers were highly influenced by their first language, since the article *the* does not have any equivalence in Indonesian. In English, the article *the* is a definite article and its main function is to show that the *mechanism* refers to something that is specific by situation.

Parallel Construction

Parallel constructions, also known as parallelism, refer to the use of the same grammatical form for words, phrases, or clauses that are joined in a sentence. This structure helps make sentences clearer and easier to understand by showing that ideas have equal importance (Quirk et al., 1985). They further explain that the function of parallelism is to improve clarity and readability, reduce ambiguity, create emphasis and rhythm, and signal logical relationships.

Normal	Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
	18. A lubricant minimizes the introduction of dirt, moisture, or other foreign materials between sliding surfaces, eliminates wear by keeping the surfaces apart, and prevention* corrosion.	Prevents	55,56
	21. Like landscapes in miniature, gardens are places to grow plants for pleasure and to provide beauty and relaxed*.	relaxation	55,56
	29. The symptoms of pneumonia, a lung infection, include high fever, chest pain, breathing difficult*, and coughing.	difficulty	66,67

The error percentages for these questions are relatively high, ranging from 55.56% to 66.67%, which indicates that many learners have difficulty with parallel constructions and word forms. In questions 18, 21 and 29, the sentences list

similar word classes in the list with one being different, but many learners failed to maintain parallel similar forms and instead accepted wrong word classes (e.g. *prevention* instead of *prevents*, *relaxed* instead of *relaxation*, and *difficult* instead of *difficulty*) in the sentence. This suggests that learners focused on meaning rather than grammatical structure and did not recognize that all items in the series must share the same verb form.

Overall, these findings suggest that test-takers struggle to identify and maintain parallel grammatical forms, especially when different word classes are involved. The errors are likely caused by overreliance on meaning, limited awareness of parallelism rules, and confusion among related word forms (noun vs. adjective).

Word Choice

Word choice refers to selecting words that are accurate, precise, and appropriate for the meaning, context, and style of a sentence or text. It affects clarity, tone, and readability, and is especially important in academic and formal writing (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
34. <i>There*</i> was in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903, that the first controlled flight of a powered, heavier-than-air craft took place.	It	77,78
39. The element potassium makes up less than one half percentage* of the human body.	one half percent	85,19

The error percentages for these items are very high, 77.78% for question 34 and 85.19% for question 39. In question 34, learners incorrectly selected *There* instead of *It* as the correct subject of the sentence. This error suggests difficulty with expletive constructions and formal sentence structure, where the subject must be properly identified to match the verb. Learners may have relied on surface meaning rather than grammatical structure, a common issue in complex sentences with inverted order.

In question 39, learners chose *one half percentage* instead of the correct phrase *one half percent*. This reflects confusion with collocation and lexical precision, as the word *percentage* is often incorrectly overgeneralized. High error rates suggest that learners understand the concept of quantity but struggle to select the grammatically and idiomatically correct expression.

All in all, in second language acquisition, errors in word choice often result from first-language influence, overgeneralization, or limited vocabulary, leading learners to select words that are semantically plausible but grammatically or contextually inappropriate (Ellis, 1994).

Appositive

Azar & Hagen (2016) define an appositive as a noun or noun phrase that is placed next to another noun to rename, explain, or give more information about it. Both the noun and the appositive refer to the same person or thing. An appositive helps identify or specify a noun more clearly, provide additional, non-essential information that enriches a sentence without changing its core meaning, or used to define terms, especially in textbooks and research writing.

Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
8. Portland, _____, is located primarily on two hilly peninsulas overlooking Casco Bay and its many islands. a. which Maine's largest city b. Maine's largest city where c. is Maine's largest city d. Maine's largest city	d. Maine's largest city	66,67

The error percentage for this item (66.67%) indicates a serious and systematic difficulty rather than a minor failure in test performance. With two-thirds of the test takers choosing an incorrect option, the data suggest that learners have not fully mastered appositive constructions, particularly non-restrictive appositives set off by commas.

The correct answer, "Maine's largest city," functions as a non-restrictive

appositive noun phrase that renames Portland. Many learners, however, appear to expect a clause rather than a noun phrase after the comma, which explains the attraction of distractors containing relative pronouns (which) or finite verbs (is). This pattern suggests confusion between appositives and relative clauses, a common issue in second-language grammar acquisition. Learners may assume that any information inserted between commas must be introduced by a relative pronoun or include a verb, leading them to reject a structurally correct but verb-less noun phrase.

Comparison

Comparison is used to show degree and relationship between things, such as similarity, difference, or extremes (Azar & Hagen, 2016). It works on a scale, where adjectives and adverbs can show different levels (for example, *big*, *bigger*, *biggest*). The positive form shows a basic level, the comparative form shows a difference between two items, and the superlative form shows the highest or lowest level in a group. From a grammatical structure perspective, comparison is expressed through word forms (such as *-er* and *-est*) or through function words like *more*, *most*, *as*, and *than*. These forms are part of sentence structure, not just vocabulary choices.

Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
13. The sense of smell functions chemically, ____ the sense of taste, but it is 10,000 times more sensitive. a. as does b. so have c. which as d. by which	a. as does	55,56

The high error rate (55.56%) in question 13 shows that many learners have difficulty with comparison structures in English, especially when the sentence uses a shortened form. The correct answer, *as does*, compares the sense of smell with the sense of taste without repeating the verb *functions chemically*. Many learners likely chose the wrong

options because they expected a complete sentence after the comma or focused on meaning instead of grammar.

Several factors may explain these errors. First, learners may not be familiar with this type of formal comparison, which is more common in written English than in everyday conversation. Second, their first language, that is Indonesian, does not use similar shortened comparison patterns, causing confusion to the learners. Finally, they might not have understood that comparison of this type requires similar use of auxiliary verb in the first clause.

Modifier

Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that add information to other elements in a sentence, usually nouns or verbs, to clarify or limit meaning (Quirk et al., 1985). Common modifiers include adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, and relative clauses. In grammar theory, correct modifier placement is essential because modifiers must appear close to the words they describe to avoid ambiguity (Swan, 2016). From a functional grammar perspective, modifiers help expand meaning and add detail in academic discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
24. Radar can determine the direction, distance, height, and speed of objects that are too much * far away for the human eye to see.	too	44,44

The error rate for this item is 44.44%, which indicates a moderate level of difficulty for learners. The error involves the incorrect use of the intensifier phrase *too much far*, whereas the correct form is simply *too far*. This suggests confusion in the use of degree modifiers and comparative structures. Learners may have overgeneralized the use of *too much*, which is commonly used with uncountable nouns (e.g., *too much water*), and incorrectly applied it to an adjective (*far*).

Another possible source of error is first-language influence, where similar intensifier patterns in Indonesian may exist, which then leads learners to combine multiple degree markers. Overall, the error percentage shows that while learners understand the meaning of excess or distance, they struggle with the correct grammatical form of modifiers, especially in fixed adjective constructions.

Word order

Word order refers to the typical arrangement of words in a sentence to form grammatical and meaningful structures. In English, the basic word order is Subject–Verb–Object (SVO), which plays a crucial role in identifying grammatical relationships because English relies more on word order than on inflection (Quirk et al., 1985). Functional grammar emphasizes that word order organizes information and highlights important elements in a sentence (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Normal	Questions	Expected answer	Error percentage (%)
27.	Used for making pottery, clay has two characteristics distinctive *; it can be moulded and it can be baked to form a brittle but otherwise durable material.	Distinctive characteristics	66,67

The error rate for question 27 is 66.67%, which is relatively high and indicates significant difficulty with modifier placement and noun phrase formation. The sentence requires the phrase *distinctive characteristics* to correctly modify *clay*. This error suggests that learners may not understand that the *characteristics* serves as a noun, which should be modified by *distinctive*, as the adjective.

Overall, the high error percentage indicates that learners struggle with constructing complete and grammatically accurate noun phrases, particularly when modifiers are involved in long or complex sentences.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that the 27 lecturers from non-English departments experienced difficulty across a range of grammatical structures in the TOEFL ITP Structure and Written Expression section. The errors suggest that their main challenge was applying grammatical rules to sentence contexts, particularly when they had to distinguish grammatical form and function, identify clause structure, or select a form that agreed with the rest of the sentence. The discussion highlights difficulties with parts of speech, prepositions, participial phrases, relative clauses, sentence structure, agreement, and parallel construction. Particularly high item-level error rates occurred in agreement, preposition use, word choice, appositives, and word order.

The results also suggest that understanding a sentence's general meaning did not always enable participants to identify its grammatically correct form. Some errors involved choosing a word that seemed semantically appropriate without checking its syntactic role, while others involved complex structures such as reduced clauses, relative clauses, and agreement across intervening phrases. Overall, the findings indicate that the participants' professional exposure to English did not necessarily ensure familiarity with the specific grammatical patterns assessed in this TOEFL section.

It can also be concluded that the previous study by Tanihardjo (2012), Tanihardjo (2016), and Akmal et al. (2020) and current study share similar results: difficulty with grammatical relationships inside sentences: choosing a word form that fits its syntactic role, recognizing how phrases modify nouns, connecting clauses correctly, and maintaining agreement. The repetition of these areas across essay writing and TOEFL-style tests suggests that such difficulties are not confined to one task type or one learner group.

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