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## STRATEGY PREFERENCE IN LISTENING: A PROFILE OF EFL STUDENTS TO ANSWER TOEFL TEST

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### ABSTRACT

Measuring students' English ability in most universities would be counted from their passing grade on the Test of English as A Foreign Language (TOEFL). Listening to natives is considered a complicated section to answer among the three sections. Thus, EFL learners should focus on attainment strategies to answer the TOEFL preparation test. The current study examines students' profile of attainment strategy use and how usage of this strategy differs by gender. The sixth English semester students, faculty of education at Universitas Islam Malang, were required to fill out the questionnaire of strategies used to answer the TOEFL. Utilizing the descriptive and independent t-test, the findings reveal that students deployed the strategies at a moderate level. Further, female students used all the strategies more often and significantly differently than their counterparts. This implies that the use of strategies could ease them in obtaining good scores in listening.

**Key Words:** TOEFL strategies profile; listening; gender

### ABSTRAK

Mengukur ketrampilan bahasa Inggris mahasiswa di sebagian besar universitas akan dihitung dari nilai kelulusan mereka pada tes TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Diantara ketiga bagian pada tes TOEFL, tes pada bagian I (Listening) dianggap sebagai tes yang sulit untuk dijawab. Sehingga, mahasiswa diharapkan bisa fokus dan bisa menggunakan strategi tepat ketika menjawab tes TOEFL. Penelitian ini ditujukan untuk mengetahui bagaimana profil penggunaan strategi menjawab tes TOEFL dan mengidentifikasi perbedaan penggunaan oleh mahasiswa laki-laki dan perempuan. Mahasiswa semester enam jurusan Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Fakultas Pendidikan, Universitas Islam Malang dilibatkan dalam penelitian ini dan mereka diminta mengisi kuesioner strategi menjawab tes TOEFL. Dengan menggunakan analisis dan Uji T-tes, temuan menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa menggunakan strategi dalam kategori sedang. Hasil selanjutnya mengindikasikan bahwa mahasiswa perempuan sering menggunakan strategi dan berbeda secara signifikan dari mahasiswa laki-laki. Hal ini berarti bahwa penggunaan strategi dapat memudahkan mahasiswa tersebut untuk mendapatkan nilai bagus.

**Kata Kunci:** profil strategi TOEFL; menyimak; gender

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## INTRODUCTION

“Test of English as A Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a test to measure the English proficiency of nonnative speakers of English” (Phillips: 2004). As it says, by joining the TOEFL test, students could be categorized as successful or not successful English learners. Furthermore, universities, institutions, scholarship programs, or even secondary levels put this test as a passing requirement for graduation. Specifically, the TOEFL conducted at Universitas Islam Malang is regulated as a Paper-Based TOEFL Test and labeled as TOEFL Preparation or Test of English Proficiency (TEP). As its name, the test and the treatments were held in offline meetings several years ago. However, during the Covid pandemic, all activities for TEP have been arranged virtually. The test application used Safe Exam Browser (SEB), and the treatments were in the form of synchronous learning.

Related to the online learning situation, different language learners would likely face some constraints for the supporting environment and media, even direct touch from the instructors (Jonsdottir et al., 2021). They further argue that this condition leads to such barriers, although the online system is a ‘flexible schedule’ setting. Thus, Universitas Islam Malang adapts the

online system to facilitate the students to take the TOEFL preparation test. Although it is conducted virtually, the TOEFL preparation program has adapted the paper-based test and consists of some sections of listening, structure and written expression, and reading (Phillips: 2004). Further, each section has a different total of questions and time allotment. Section 1 (listening) consists of 50 questions, section 2 (structure and written expression) has 40 items, reading (section 3) focuses on 50 questions. All sections are arranged with learning strategies to comprehend the English context and the questions easily.

However, among the three sections, listening is considered as a difficult section that students need some ‘strategy training’ when they get the aural input from natives (Madina, 2016). Moreover, most students face a challenge to focus on the listening text as it is only played once (Silviyanti, Rahmadhani, & Samad, 2020). “Listening performance is the invisible, inaudible process of internalizing meaning from the auditory signals being transmitted to the ear and brain (Brown, 2004, p. 118).

Listening to English as a foreign language, students need to implement the learning strategies so that they can easily comprehend and get the main

idea (Klatzky, 1980; Cahyono & Widiati, 2011: 16), moreover, relate with their background knowledge to guess the meaning from the aural texts (O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989). Brown (2007: 312) also states that one of the principles in teaching listening is to "encourage the development of listening strategies". Thus, the learning strategies deployment is essential to cope with the problems while listening.

Listening requires the *micro-skills* (Brown, 2007) of realizing the pattern structure, stressed words, rhetorical aspect of the words and word structure, predicting and guessing the words or topic, generalizing and differentiating the literal meaning and cohesion, and using the nonverbal clues to comprehend the aural texts. Listening ability refers to attaining language points that students get on the TOEFL preparation. It relates to understanding the context from the recording that is further used in communication and interaction with others (Cambridge Assessment English, 2020).

Concerning listening to TOEFL, to gain a good score from the test, students must apply their knowledge about English and use appropriate strategies (Nurhayati & Nehe, 2016). The TOEFL book by Phillips (2004) has provided clear facilities and a division

of strategy to be implemented while taking the test. Brown (2007:312) suggests in one of the principles of teaching listening that the process of learning should facilitate learners with the strategies attainment so that students, like foreign language learners, could succeed. Further, language learners need to focus on identifying the keywords, guessing for meaning, predicting for the context, and so forth.

Numerous studies have investigated the TOEFL strategy deployments in the test time both for all and each section. However, during the Pandemic Covid, there are still few studies on the online TOEFL program adapted to the Paper-Based TOEFL test. Thus, the current study is formulated to investigate the following questions: 1) What is the profile of strategies used by students to answer the listening section in the TOEFL preparation test?; 2) Is there any significant difference in the use of listening strategies in the TOEFL preparation test by female and male students?.

### **Virtual Meetings and Test**

The online meetings are also described as 'distance learning' and virtual education'. Both instructors and students are not gathered in the physical surroundings and are connected to the internet setting (Keegan, 1988 cited in Hassan et al.,

2014). Thus, physical learning experiences are limited due to the online network. Further, Hassan et al. argue that an online system will be beneficial for shy and 'self-esteem' students to express their ideas using a virtual setting. For TOEFL preparation, the students have been regulated to join the virtual meetings using some platforms. Thus, they are also trained to be familiar with and adapt the use of strategies in doing the test.

The Foreign Language Development Center (FLDC) Unisma has sequenced the activities of the TOEFL Preparation Test or labeled it as the Test of English Proficiency. The test is addressed to all students, and the certificate is used to measure their English and as a pre-requisite document before graduation time. It was conducted through face-to-face class meetings and used a Paper-based test for several years. However, since the Pandemic situation, the test and the treatments have been made to virtual settings. The test has used the Safe Exam Browser (SEB) application, and the meetings have been regulated virtually for an hour and a half in six days. The use of the application is aimed to ensure a more secured 'e-assessment' for the test. As it limits other functions of computers connected to the Internet, the students are hoped

not to access some sources while doing the test (Piendl & Ashford, 2010).

### **Longman TOEFL**

TOEFL is one of the tests to measure foreign language learners' English. Higher education students need to take the TOEFL test to know their English ability. Universitas Islam Malang annually holds the TEP program for all seventh-semester students, and it is a paper-based test form. Joining the TEP, the students obtain the sequenced activities from attending pretest, treatments, and posttest sessions. The obtained score in the pretest is known as the initial ability. In opposite, the posttest score is the measurement of their success. The students will be categorized passed if they achieve a minimum of 450 for non-English students and 500 for English department students.

Recently, the program has been shifted to online sessions during the Pandemic Covid. The program starts by giving an overview of the TEP and test application, followed by having pretest, treatments, and posttest. The treatments are intended to train the students to select and maintain good test strategies. There are three sections covered in the test: listening, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. However, the current study focuses on the listening section

and is adapted from Longman TOEFL by Phillips (2004) offers some strategies as follows:

- Part A
  - Focusing on the last line. Part A is a short dialogue between two people, and it has two lines of conversation. This type of strategy suggests that students are getting the idea more on the second line that the answers are most often (but not always) found in the second speaker.
  - Choosing answers with synonyms. While students are concerned about the second line of a short conversation, they should find the keywords' synonyms or restatements in the second/last line of the dialogue.
  - Avoiding similar sounds. These similar sounds refer to some distractions. If students do not listen and identify the spoken words, they probably choose the sound they think is the best answer.
- Part B & Part C
  - Before listening. Students should anticipate the topics and anticipate the questions by looking at the options of answers.

- While listening. Students are required to determine the topic, draw conclusions about *who*, *what*, *when*, or *where*, and listen for the answers in order.

### Some Difficulties in Listening

Listening to English as a foreign language would create some challenges for some learners as they are required to comprehend and obtain the messages. On some occasions, they will have difficulties with different speech rates, intonations, and limited knowledge of English and its vocabs. Milliner & Dimoski (2021) addressed their study to investigate the Metacognitive Strategies for lower-proficient learners in Japan. They found that some EFL learners obtain difficulties for different speakers' accents and intonation. Thus, they enhanced the learners with explicit training and materials for listening activities. They found out the strategy-based instruction could benefit their EFL students to comprehend the aural passages and their "self-efficacy" and self-independence.

Other factors refer to students' familiarity with the English natives and content. Being accustomed to the language and its content will ease them comprehending the aural texts. Chou (2012) has revealed that by using 'visual

aids' and having a well-understanding of the course content, the students could tackle some difficulties on the native sources.

### Relevant Previous Studies

A lot of studies have investigated and focused on the TOEFL. One of them is Madina (2016) entitled *The Effect of Metacognitive Strategy on Improving TOEFL Listening Performance of Senior Students in the "Noon Regular" English Department of Mataram University*. She focused on knowing the effect of metacognitive strategy training on the students listening in TOEFL. Taking the subject of seventh-semester students and applied purposive sampling, there were 40 students enrolled in the experimental and control group. The experimental group received five meetings using Cognitive Academic Language Learning (CALLA). Utilizing the T-test to analyze the pretest and posttest and the questionnaire from the Metacognitive Awareness Language Questionnaire (MLAQ), it was found that there was a significant effect on the use of Metacognitive strategies.

The second study was conducted by Nurhayati and Nehe (2016), who focused on describing the types of TOEFL questions that the students in all sections mostly face, the strategies implemented, and the score

by the eighth-semester students in STKIP Setia Budhi Rangkasbitung. The result of utilizing the instruments of questionnaire, test, and interview showed that understanding idiom in listening, the question of noun forms in structure and written expressions, and reference question in reading are the most complicated questions. Meanwhile, the strategy deployment was used in various ways, and the TOEFL score was low.

Next, Silviyanti, Rahmadhani, and Samad (2020) investigated the use of strategies in answering the TOEFL test through the use of interview, questionnaire, and test score as the instruments similarly. Having the purposive sampling technique, 30 English major students at Universitas Syiah Kuala, Banda Aceh were chosen. This study found that the students deployed the strategies for answering parts B and C in the majority and more complicated parts than part A. In terms of listening section part A, Razmalia and Dani (2017) found that the students sometimes deployed the strategies to get the answers.

It is undeniable that some factors are affecting the TOEFL scores. The preceding paragraphs have presented the use of strategies in doing the test. Meanwhile, the terms of gender would also correlate to the result. Bacon's

study (1992b) in Macaro and Cohen (2007, p. 172) found differences in the use of strategy deployment by males and females. Further, females applied more often on the 'comprehension monitoring' than males as they translated the listening to their first language to comprehend the different texts. However, the distinguished use was slightly different between the two groups. In a similar line, Vandergrift (1997b) in Macaro and Cohen (2007, p. 172) also revealed the result that the use of strategies was insignificantly different by both groups. Another study also revealed that female students tend to use more strategies than males. However, the attainment of strategies was not significantly different between the two groups of gender (Hidayanti & Umamah, 2019).

## METHOD

### Research Design

The research design utilized the quantitative approach with descriptive and Independent t-test. The descriptive analysis was intended to know the strategies used in listening for TOEFL. Meanwhile, the independent t-test was used to gain the differences in the use of strategies by a different gender.

### Research Participants

This research was conducted in Universitas Islam Malang. More specifically, it was addressed to the English Department students, Faculty of Education. The population was the English students in the sixth semester who are taking TOEFL class. This semester the students must take the TOEFL class facilitated by the Foreign Language Development Center (FLDC), and the certificate would be the required document before they graduate. TOEFL is a prediction test labeled as the Test of English Proficiency (TEP) conducted by FLDC Universitas Islam Malang. However, the test items and the sources were adapted from TOEFL.

### Data collection and analysis

The data was attained from the questionnaire about the strategies in listening TOEFL (Phillips, 2004). After the students obtained the online TOEFL preparation test, they were required to fill out the strategy questionnaire via Google form. This questionnaire is specifically referred to in the listening section. There were 9 strategy items addressed to Part A, Part B, and Part C in the listening section. Part A was concerned with items number 1, number 2, and number 3. Meanwhile, Part B and C were put on numbers 4, 5,

6, 7, 8, 9, which comprised pre and whilst listening.

Using SPSS 20 for the statistical program, the first data analysis used descriptive analysis to gain the profile of the learning strategies on listening for TOEFL. Further to interpreting the profile use, it shows high if the mean score of use is between 3.45 and 5.00, medium if it is between 2.45 and 3.44, and low if it is between 1.00 and 2.44 (Oxford, 1990). Then the result was also analyzed using a T-test to see whether there is a significant difference in the use of learning strategies by male and female students.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **Research Problem 1: How intensively do the students implement the use of strategies in answering the TOEFL preparation test?**

The following table shows the profile of students on how frequently they deployed the use of strategies in gaining the answers from the online Test of English Proficiency. Among 9 strategies, most of the students deployed strategy 9 at a higher rank, followed by strategy 1, strategy 3, and strategy 4. In opposite, they are concerned about strategy 6 at the lowest level of use. This implies that they focus on looking at answers and guessing the topics while listening to parts B and C,

and sometimes getting the idea from the second line and avoiding the similar sounds of words for Part A. In contrast, they rarely focused on listening to the first line of the conversation or talk. Overall, the finding shows that the intensity of strategies was at a moderate level; thus, this implies that the students sometimes deployed the strategies to answer the TOEFL preparation test.

Table 1. The frequency of use of strategies for answering TEP

Strategy Item	Mean	Frequency of Use	Rank of Use
Strategy 1	2.72	Moderate	2
Strategy 2	2.50	Moderate	4
Strategy 3	2.53	Moderate	3
Strategy 4	2.53	Moderate	3
Strategy 5	2.43	Low	5
Strategy 6	2.11	Low	8
Strategy 7	2.24	Low	7
Strategy 8	2.31	Low	6
Strategy 9	2.69	Moderate	1
Overall	2.45	Moderate	

### **Research Problem 2: Is there any significant difference in the use of strategies for answering TOEFL preparation tests by female and male students?**

Having been analyzed using SPSS 20, the attached is Table 2, which presents the information of the different strategy deployment by male and female students. Females gain a higher mean for all strategy attainment in

doing the test than males. The highest difference is in strategy 2, highlighting the keywords and their synonyms to determine the answers for Part A. Meanwhile, male learners used to get the main point of the topic for Part B and Part C. This finding implies that female students applied the strategies significantly different and effectively to get the intended score.

Table 2: The difference in the use of strategies of answering TOEFL preparation test by the female (N=62) and male learners (N=12)

Strategy item	Groups	Mean (S.D)	Mean Difference
Strategy 1	Female	2.71 (.52)	.29
	Male	2.42 (.79)	
Strategy 2	Female	2.47 (.70)	.47
	Male	2.00 (.74)	
Strategy 3	Female	2.37 (.81)	.12
	Male	2.25 (.75)	
Strategy 4	Female	2.52 (.70)	.35
	Male	2.17 (.58)	
Strategy 5	Female	2.37 (.68)	.20
	Male	2.17 (.58)	
Strategy 6	Female	1.66 (.72)	.24
	Male	1.42 (.90)	
Strategy 7	Female	2.16 (.66)	.41
	Male	1.75 (.75)	
Strategy 8	Female	2.23 (.61)	.31
	Male	1.92 (.79)	
Strategy 9	Female	2.73 (.45)	.31
	Male	2.42 (.67)	

## Discussion

As presented in the preceding section, the research results reveal that the English students deployed the learning strategies at a moderate level for overall strategies. The females account for a higher mean for all strategies than their counterparts. Thus,

the students prefer to use the TOEFL preparation test strategies.

The first finding shows that the students used the strategies at the “sometimes” level of use. In particular use of Part A, the EFL learners tend to focus on the second line of the dialogue and avoid choosing similar words. The current result confirms the study from Razmalia and Dani (2017) that the students sometimes deployed the strategies to answer the listening section. In contrast, Nurhayati & Nehe (2017) revealed that the EFL learners got Idiomatic expressions as the most difficult questions, and they seldom used the strategies in answering the listening section.

Moreover, the students attained and highly focused on using strategy item 9, which refers to focusing on the option of the answers while listening to a long conversation and talk, followed by the use of strategy 4 for Part B & C. This implies that listening to natives, the students highlighted the keywords or guessed the answers by looking at the answer choices. Beforehand, they tried to guess the topic and questions. On the contrary, they seldom realized about focusing on the first line of speakers when they answered the questions for Part B and C in the listening section.

The result of moderate use is also not in line with the study conducted by Silviyanti, Rahmadhani, and Samad (2020), who found that their students attained more strategies on Part B and C than Part A. The reasons were that the first two parts have the most difficult questions that they need to apply the strategies. The possible reasons being at this moderate level could be the lack of awareness on the strategy attainment by the students. Then they also need to be given more time to practice the listening from natives so that they are familiar with different contexts.

Concerning the distinguished use of strategies, while answering the TOEFL preparation test, females deployed them more significantly than the males. For Part A, female students employed and focused more on finding the clues and synonyms to get the answers on short dialogues. Meanwhile, they were concerned about getting the main idea and determining the topic while listening to the aural passages in the TOEFL preparation test for Part B and C. However, the current result does not confirm the previous related study from Hidayanti and Umamah (2019). They found no significant difference in the use of strategies in listening by the two groups of gender. Further, female learners were likely to feel more aware of accounting

for the strategy choice and often use them to cope with listening to English natives (Hidayanti, Suhartoyo, & Kurniasih, 2020).

In short, the present study indicates that the students sometimes deployed the strategies of answering the tests. The most frequently used strategy was put on whilst listening activity to focus on the answers. Besides, it is obviously presented that EFL female learners obtained a higher mean for all strategy choices, and it was significantly different from males. Females tend to concern about the use of strategies on doing the test. The probable reasons for the moderate level of strategy use are due to the limited time and the signal barrier, so that the students could not maintain the focus on the use of strategies for each part. Besides, the different backgrounds of English vocabs affected the students' understanding of the passages.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

Being adapted to the online system, the program of TEP has been sequenced and set through the use of SEB for the test application. It ensures that the test-takers will not cheat and take advantage of using computer-adapted internet settings, and it is purposed to obtain more valid results. To investigate the use of strategy choices

while doing the test, the present study revealed that the students applied the strategies to answer the TOEFL Preparation test at a moderate level. The female students attained a higher mean than their counterparts.

While doing the listening test, the students focused most intensively on guessing the answers on the options and least frequently on getting the first line on Part B and C. In addition, female learners significantly deployed finding keywords on the second line of the short conversation in Part A. Conversely, males did not focus and select the strategies in all parts.

Concerning the test tool, as presented earlier, the students seem to get difficulties with the time allotment and the signal that they are difficult to manage the strategies. Thus, future research might ensure that the students are well-trained on the online TOEFL test to be familiar with the system and maintain the strategies. Meanwhile, the distinguished result between male and female learners suggests further research to gain balance participants for both females and males.

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