



## English Students' Difficulties with Parallel Structure in the Structure and Written Expression Section in TOEFL Test

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to investigate English students' difficulties with parallel structure in the TOEFL test. Descriptive research with a quantitative approach is used in this study. The subject of this research was English education students at Universitas Negeri Padang in the 2019 academic year. To collect data, the researcher conducted a grammar test. In this study, the data were analyzed in several steps, including classifying student responses as correct or incorrect, calculating student test scores, calculating the percentage of difficulty in each skill, and determining the level of difficulty in each question. The test result shows that the students face difficulties in answering TOEFL questions related to parallel structure in the structure and written expression section. It can be seen in the average student test score, which is 56. Parallel structure with comparison is the most difficult skill with a percentage of 46.3%. On top of that, skills related to parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions get a percentage of student difficulty of 45.6%, while skills related to parallel structure with paired conjunctions get a percentage of student difficulty of 41%. Based on the results of calculating the difficulty level of the questions, there are 2 questions in the difficult category, 21 questions in the medium category, and 7 questions in the easy category.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four skills that must be mastered in English. Many different types of English proficiency tests may be used to assess students' English abilities. TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is one of the most well-known in Indonesia. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) administers the TOEFL exam, which is intended to measure the English language proficiency of non-native speakers (Gear & Gear, 2006). Paper-based tests (PBT), computer-based

tests (CBT), internet-based tests (iBT), and institutional testing programs (ITP) are the four types of TOEFL exams.

Many universities in Indonesia require students who want to continue their study at a higher level to have a TOEFL score. For students in West Sumatera who want to continue their education at a higher level, such as from undergraduate to graduate school, the TOEFL exam is truly recommended. The test is also used for public purposes, such as applying for specific jobs in the country or overseas. In a limited context, the TOEFL is also used as a requirement for undergraduate thesis examinations at Universitas Negeri Padang.

Depending on the type of test taken, the TOEFL has several sections that are tested: listening, speaking, grammar or structure, reading, and writing. The listening comprehension section tests examinees' capability to comprehend spoken English in university settings. Speaking is a test that assesses examinees' ability to speak English effectively in the academic setting. The structure and written expression section is a test that measures the ability to recognize specific structural and grammatical elements in written English. The reading comprehension section is a test that measures the ability of examinees to read and comprehend academic content written in English. The writing section is a test that measures the ability of examinees to write in English in an academic setting.

Many students have difficulties answering the TOEFL test. One of its difficulties is the structure and written expression (Atmojo, 2018. Wright and Sukur (in Tilana et al., 2019) emphasize that the structure and written expression section is a major issue for students taking the TOEFL test. In the English Department at Universitas Negeri Padang, students in the 2019 academic year typically get all of the English skills and components. They have taken all grammar classes: basic grammar, intermediate grammar, advanced grammar, grammar for TOEFL, and functional grammar. Based on this fact, it can be inferred that the students are ready to take the TOEFL exam, specifically in the structure and written expression section. However, Universitas Negeri Padang English students admit that the second section of the TOEFL test is one of the most difficult ones (Hajri et al., 2018).

Reduced clauses, inverted subjects and verbs, subject/verb agreement, parallel structure, comparative and superlative, form of the verb, passive verbs, nouns, pronouns, and prepositions are some topics that tested in the structure and written expression section. The researcher observed ten previous studies related to student difficulties in the TOEFL structure and written expression section: Handayani, 2019; Akmal et al. 2020; Muhajir et al. 2018; Putra et al. 2020; Sari et al. 2022; Hajri et al. 2018; Fitri, 2017; Ananda, 2016; Tilana et al. 2019; and Yosintha et al. 2021. Based on the result of the researcher's observations on the findings of the ten previous studies, which aim to identify what topics or items students have difficulty answering in the in the structure and written expression section of the TOEFL test, it can be concluded that parallel structure is the most frequent topic students have problems in answering.

Parallel structure/Parallelism refers to the practice of placing similar sentence elements, such as words and phrases in the same grammatical form (Young, 2009). According to (Phillips, 2003), there are three skills related to parallel structure that must be mastered by the examinees in the TOEFL test; using parallel structure with coordinating conjunctions, using parallel structure with paired conjunctions, and using

parallel structure with comparisons. Phillips (2003) stated that the function of the coordinate conjunctions (and, but, or) is to link similar statements together. These conjunctions can connect nouns, verbs, adjectives, phrases, or clauses; they only have to connect the same structures. According to (Lingga, 2006), paired conjunctions "both...and, either...or, neither...nor, and not only... but also" are used in parallel structures. Paired conjunctions can function as clause markers or connecting words or phrases. He also stated that parallel structure can be used in the form of equative (e.g., as...as), comparative (e.g., -er...than / more...than), and other forms of comparison (e.g., similar...to and the same...as). As a result, it is crucial to conduct a study to investigate the difficulties encountered by students in the parallel structure of the TOEFL. The purpose of this research was to analyze English students' difficulties with parallel structure in the TOEFL structure and written expression section.

**METHOD**

Descriptive research with a quantitative approach was used in this study. This aimed to describe the difficulties faced by students in answering questions related to the parallel structure on the TOEFL test. The population in this study were English education students in the 2019 academic year at Universitas Negeri Padang. The population was selected because they had taken all grammar classes. The English education students in the 2019 academic year are divided into five classes. The classes are K1, K2, K3, K4, and K5. The number of English education students in the 2019 academic year is 160 students. The details are as follows:

**Table 1.** Details of the Population

Classes	Number of Students
K1	28
K2	32
K3	33
K4	31
K5	36
Total	160

In this study, simple random sampling was used as a sampling technique. The research applied this sampling technique because the number of students in each class differs. As a result, the researcher randomly selected 29 students of English education students in the 2019 academic year. The researcher used a grammar test as an instrument in this study. The researcher only tested questions related to parallel structure in the structure and written expression section in the TOEFL. The questions used in this study were taken from TOEFL books such as Longman, Barron, Kaplan TOEFL, Delta's Key to the TOEFL Test, and TOEFL Grammar. The total questions of the test are 30 questions. This test aimed to find out what skills in the parallel structure were difficult for English education students in the 2019 academic year to answer. The data in this study were analyzed in several steps. *First*, the researcher categorized each student's responses as correct or incorrect. *Second*, the researcher calculated the score of each student from the test using the formula by Triana (2020). The formula is as follows:

$$\text{Student score} = \frac{\text{Number of items answered correctly by student}}{\text{Number of items}} \times 100$$

Then, to determine which skill was the most difficult for students, the researcher divided the question items by their type and calculated the percentage of difficulties in the three skills: the use of parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions, paired conjunctions, and comparisons. The percentage used the formula by Qonaatun (2019). The formula is as follows:

$$P = \frac{f}{N} \times 100\%$$

- P = Percentage
- f = Frequency of the students who answer the item incorrectly
- N = Number of samples which is observed
- 100 = Permanent number

Finally, to calculate the difficulty level of each item, the researcher used the difficulty index formula by Kurniawan (2021). The formula is as follows:

$$P = \frac{B}{N}$$

- P = Item difficulty index
- B = The number of participants who answered correctly
- N = The total number of test participants

The range of scores from the above equation is 0 – 1. The interpretation of the index of difficulty is classified as follows:

**Table 2.** Interpretation of item difficulty index

Difficulty Index	Difficulty Criteria
0.00 – 0.29	Difficult
0.30 – 0.70	Medium
0.71 – 1.00	Easy

(Kurniawan, 2021)

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

***Students' Test Results***

After the students completed the grammar test via Google Forms, the researcher calculated the students' test results. The following were the results of the student grammar test.

**Table 3.** Students' test result

No.	Students' Score	Frequency
1	77	3
2	70	4
3	67	3
4	63	5
5	60	2
6	57	2
7	43	3
8	37	3
9	33	1
10	30	1
11	27	1
12	23	1
<b>Mean</b>		<b>56</b>

Based on table 2, there were 3 students who scored 77 for answering 23 of 30 questions correctly. Then, 4 students scored 70 for answering 21 questions correctly. In addition, 3 students answered 20 questions correctly with the score of 67, while 5 students answered 19 questions correctly with the score of 63. Furthermore, 2 students received a score of 60 for correctly answering 18 questions and 2 students received a score of 57 for correctly answering 17 questions. In conclusion, 10 students scored below 50 with correct answers ranging from 17 to 7. The mean score for all students on the grammar test was 56.

***Skills of Parallel Structures that Students Found Most Difficult***

To identify which skills the students found most difficult, the researcher grouped the questions based on their type. As a result, the author used Qonaatun's (2019) formula to calculate the percentage of difficulty for each skill. The analysis below shows the students' difficulties based on three skills: parallel structure with comparisons, parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions, and parallel structure with paired/correlative conjunctions.

***Parallel Structure with Comparisons***

For this skill, the researcher provided five questions for the structure and five questions for the written expression part. Structure part questions were from 18 through 15, while written expression part questions were from 26 through 30. See the table below for more details:

**Table 4.** Percentage of difficulty in parallel structure with comparisons

No.	Question Number	Number of students who answered incorrectly	Percentage of student difficulty per question	Percentage of difficulty in parallel structure with comparisons
1.	Questions 11	18	62%	
2.	Questions 12	8	28%	
3.	Questions 13	13	45%	
4.	Questions 14	9	31%	
5.	Questions 15	19	66%	46.3%
6.	Questions 26	23	79%	
7.	Questions 27	11	38%	
8.	Questions 28	18	62%	
9.	Questions 29	9	31%	
10.	Questions 30	6	21%	

Based on the calculation above, 23 students (79%) answered incorrectly on question number 26. Then, 19 students (66%) answered question number 15 incorrectly. Questions 11 and 28 had the same number of mistakes; 18 students (62%) failed to identify the correct answer in each question. In addition, there were 13 students (45%) who answered incorrectly in question number 13 and 11 students (38%) in question number 27. The percentage for questions 14 and 29 was also the same: nine students (31%). Only eight students (28%) answered incorrectly in question number 12. Finally, question 30 had the fewest incorrect answers, with six students (21%). Based on the calculation above, the total difficulty percentage for the ten questions in this skill is 46.3%.

#### *Parallel Structure with Coordinate Conjunctions*

The researcher provided ten questions for the skills related to parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions: questions 1 through 5 for the structure part and questions 16 through 20 for the written expression part. See the table below for more details.

**Table 5.** Percentage of difficulty in parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions

No.	Question Number	Number of students who answered incorrectly	Percentage of student difficulty per question	Percentage of difficulty in parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions
1.	Questions 1	19	66%	
2.	Questions 2	4	14%	
3.	Questions 3	14	48%	
4.	Questions 4	11	38%	
5.	Questions 5	19	66%	45.6%
6.	Questions 16	15	52%	
7.	Questions 17	5	17%	
8.	Questions 18	12	41%	
9.	Questions 19	15	52%	
10.	Questions 20	18	62%	

The percentage for questions 1 and 5 was the same: 19 students (66%) were unable to choose the correct answers to complete the sentences. Then, 18 students (62%) answered question number 20 incorrectly. On questions 16 and 19, 15 students (52%) answered them incorrectly. In addition, question number 3 has 14 incorrect answers (48%). Furthermore, 12 students (41%) answered question 18 incorrectly, while 11 students (38%) answered question 4 incorrectly. However, only five students (17%) out of 29 answered incorrectly on question 17. This question indicated that nearly all students can identify the incorrect element that is not parallel to the others. Question 2, on the other hand, had only four students' mistakes (14%). Based on the calculation of the percentage of difficulty in this skill, the student's difficulty level is 45.6%.

*Parallel Structure with Paired Conjunctions*

For this skill, the researcher provided ten questions: questions 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 for the structural section and questions 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25 for the written expression section. See the table below for more details.

**Table 6.** Percentage of difficulty in parallel structure with paired conjunctions

No.	Question Number	Number of students who answered incorrectly	Percentage of student difficulty per question	Percentage of difficulty in parallel structure with paired conjunctions
1.	Questions 6	12	41%	
2.	Questions 7	15	52%	
3.	Questions 8	6	21%	
4.	Questions 9	5	17%	
5.	Questions 10	7	24%	41%
6.	Questions 21	9	31%	
7.	Questions 22	20	69%	
8.	Questions 23	24	83%	
9.	Questions 24	11	38%	
10.	Questions 25	10	34%	

There were 24 students (83%) who answered question number 23 incorrectly. Then followed question number 22, which had an error percentage of 20 students (69%). In addition, 15 students (52%) made a mistake on question number 7, and 12 students (41%) made a mistake on question 6. Question numbers 24 and 25 have the same percentage: 11 students (38%). Furthermore, nine students (31%) were unable to identify the incorrect sentence element on question 21. Then, 7 students (24%) made a mistake on question number 10, and 6 students (21%) made a mistake on question 8. In conclusion, there were 5 students (17%) who answered question number 9 incorrectly. Based on the calculation above, the total difficulty percentage for the ten questions in this skill is 41%.

So, the most difficult skill of parallel structure for students is the skill related to parallel structure with comparisons, with a percentage of 46.3%,

***Students' Difficulties in Identifying Parallel Structure***

The item difficulty index formula was applied by the researcher to determine students' difficulties in identifying the parallel structure of each question item. The researcher divided the number of respondents who answered a particular question correctly by the total number of respondents. The results are divided into three categories: difficult, medium, and easy. The table below presents the results of the index of difficulty calculation.

**Table 7.** The index of difficulty calculation for each question item

No.	Number of question Items	Number of students who answered correctly	Index of difficulty	Difficulty criteria
1.	Questions 1	10	0.34	Medium
2.	Questions 2	25	0.86	Easy
3.	Questions 3	15	0.52	Medium
4.	Questions 4	18	0.62	Medium
5.	Questions 5	10	0.34	Medium
6.	Questions 6	17	0.59	Medium
7.	Questions 7	14	0.48	Medium
8.	Questions 8	23	0.79	Easy
9.	Questions 9	24	0.83	Easy
10.	Questions 10	22	0.76	Easy
11.	Questions 11	11	0.38	Medium
12.	Questions 12	21	0.72	Easy
13.	Questions 13	16	0.55	Medium
14.	Questions 14	20	0.69	Medium
15.	Questions 15	10	0.34	Medium
16.	Questions 16	14	0.48	Medium
17.	Questions 17	24	0.83	Easy
18.	Questions 18	17	0.59	Medium
19.	Questions 19	14	0.48	Medium
20.	Questions 20	11	0.38	Medium
21.	Questions 21	20	0.69	Medium
22.	Questions 22	9	0.31	Medium
23.	Questions 23	5	0.17	Difficult
24.	Questions 24	18	0.62	Medium
25.	Questions 25	19	0.66	Medium
26.	Questions 26	6	0.21	Difficult
27.	Questions 27	18	0.62	Medium
28.	Questions 28	11	0.38	Medium
29.	Questions 29	20	0.69	Medium
30.	Questions 30	23	0.79	Easy



Table 16 reveals that there are 2 question items in the difficult category, with the item difficulty index ranging between 0.17 – 0.24. Then, the medium category contains 21 question items, with the item difficulty index ranging between 0.31 – 0.69. Finally, there are 7 questions in the easy category, with the item difficulty index ranging between 0.72 – 0.86. It may be concluded that question 23, with the difficulty level of 0.17, is the most difficult item in this test. Aside from that, question 2 is the easiest item in this test, with the difficulty level of 0.86.

### ***Students' Difficulties with Parallel Structure in The Structure and Written Expression Section in TOEFL Test***

This part describes the students' difficulties with parallel structure in the structure and written expression section of the TOEFL test. As mentioned before, the concept of parallel structure is to put sentence elements together. The researcher outlines the difficulties encountered by the English students in the parallel structure in the structure and written expression section below.

To begin with, many students have difficulty in identifying sentence elements in the form of a verb that is parallel to other verbs in a sentence. It can be seen in the analysis of question 20. The verb *fried* is clearly a past tense verb and is not parallel to the verbs *broil, bake, and roast*. The verb *fried* should be changed to *fry* to provide parallelism with the previous verbs. Only 11 students correctly identified the incorrect element in question 20. The student must recognize changes in the form of verbs or tenses in a sentence.

Furthermore, many students have difficulties distinguishing between the forms of a word in a noun and an adverb. In the analysis of question 7, the sentence requires a noun that is parallel to the noun *heredity*. Twelve students thought that *heredity* was an adverb. As a result, they choose option (B) *environmentally* over (C) *environment*. Students need to be aware of the differences between the noun and adverb forms of a word.

In addition, some students have difficulty identifying an adjective that is similar to other adjectives in a sentence. It can be seen in the analysis of question 18. *Anthropology* is a noun and is not parallel with adjectives *biological, geological, and archaeological*. To provide parallelism with other adjectives, *anthropology* should be changed to *anthropological*. Almost half of the students struggled to discover the error in question 18. As a result, the students must understand the distinction between the adjective and noun forms of a word.

Many students also do not know the correct pair of conjunctions. It can be seen in the analysis of questions 6 and 9. As previously discussed, the pair of the conjunction *neither* is *nor*. However, there are still students who choose options that start with *or* rather than *nor* or other options that don't start with *nor*. The students need to remember the correct pair of conjunctions (such as *both...and, either...or, neither...nor, and not only...but also*) in order to minimize mistakes in answering questions.

Lastly, some students cannot identify which element is compared or equated with another element. It can be seen in the analysis of question 28. The phrases *for the waterwheel* and *the windmill* are not parallel and they are connected by *the same ... as ...*. To provide parallelism to the phrase being compared, *for the waterwheel*

should be changed to *the waterwheel*. Of the 29 students, only 11 could identify errors in question 28. It is important for students to know which elements are being compared in a sentence related to parallel structure with comparisons.

### ***Discussion***

In this study, the researcher took 29 English education students in the 2019 academic year at Universitas Negeri Padang as a sample. Based on the student test results, 77 was the highest score, while 23 was the lowest. Only 3 students got 77 and 4 students got 70. In addition, 3 students received 67, and 5 students received 63. Furthermore, 2 students got 60, and 2 other students got 57. In conclusion, 10 students scored less than 50. The mean score of all students on the grammar test was 56. This indicated that the students faced difficulties answering TOEFL questions regarding parallel structure in the structure and written expression section.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, (Phillips, 2003) states that there are three skills related to parallel structure that must be mastered by the examinees in the structure and written expression section of the TOEFL test; using parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions, using parallel structure with paired conjunctions, and using parallel structure with comparisons. As a result, there are three types of questions tested in the test: the use of a parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions, the use of a parallel structure with paired conjunctions, and the use of a parallel structure with comparisons. The findings show that parallel structure with comparisons is the most difficult skill for students to answer. The total difficulty percentage for this skill is 46.3%. After that, parallel structure with coordinated conjunctions has a student difficulty level of 45%. Finally, the parallel structure with paired conjunction receives the lowest percentage of student difficulty, which is 41%. However, the numerical difference between the three skills above is not large.

This contrasts with the findings of the research that was conducted by Mayaki (2019) entitled "Parallel Structure Errors Made by Students: A Descriptive Quantitative Research in Eight Semesters at English Study Program of IAIN Curup." The findings in her research show that the parallel structure in the use of the coordinated conjunction has the highest number of errors with a percentage of 67.74%. Then, parallel structure in the use of the comparison is in second place with an error percentage of 63.26%, and parallel structure in the use of the paired conjunction with an error percentage of 60.39% is in third place.

The difficulty students have in identifying parallel elements in the coordinate conjunction is due to their inability to identify the form of words needed in a sentence to form parallels. In question number 7, many students thought that the word *heredity* was an adverb. In fact, *heredity* is a noun. This difficulty was also found in the research conducted by Sari et al. (2022). In their research, 27 students did not know that the word *history* is a noun and it is not parallel with the adjectives *religious* and *ceremonial*. In order to be parallel, the word *history* needs to be changed to *historical*. In their study, Akmal et al. (2020) stated that students' difficulties with parallel structures were caused because they did not understand the concept of parallel structures. Students do not realize that they must build sentences with the same structure.

The difficulty encounter by the students in answering questions related to parallel structure with paired conjunctions is that they do not know the correct pair of certain conjunctions. Then, students also have difficulty identifying which elements (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, clauses, or phrases) are connected by this conjunction. Question 23 is a question about paired conjunctions: *either...or*, which is in the difficult category because only 5 students out of 29 could identify the error element that is not parallel with the other elements. In their research, Ariska et al. (2017) found that 18 out of 20 students also had difficulty answering questions related to the parallel structure in the use of paired conjunctions. According to Baugh (1993), in Ayuningsih et al. (2020), the same grammatical form should come after a correlative conjunction such as *both...and*, *either...or*, *neither...nor*, and *not only... but also*. When the word *both* uses in a sentence, it means that there will be two things that are being emphasized. Therefore, the second thing that comes after *and* needs to be in the same structure or form as the word that comes after *both* (Ayuningsih et al., 2020).

The last type of question is the use of a parallel structure with comparisons such as *as...as*, *-er...than*, *more...than*, *similar...to*, and *the same...as*. Based on the calculation of the percentage of difficulty in this type/skill, the total difficulty percentage for the ten questions in this skill is 46.3%. Parallel structure with comparisons is the skill that has the highest percentage compared to the two previous skills. It is obvious that students have the most difficulty with the skill related to parallel structure with comparisons. Based on the findings of the study, the students face difficulties determining the correct element to be equivalent to other elements in a sentence. The concept of a parallel structure is to make elements of a sentence such as words and phrases in the same grammatical form or pattern.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it is feasible to conclude that English education students in the 2019 academic year have difficulty answering TOEFL questions regarding parallel structure in the structure and written expression segment. It is evident from the average student test score of 56. Based on the results of calculating the difficulty level of the questions, there are 2 items in the difficult category, 21 items in the medium category, and 7 items in the easy category. Based on the calculation of the percentage of students' difficulty level in the three skills tested, parallel structure with comparison is the most difficult skill with a percentage of 46.3%. On the other hand, skills related to parallel structure with coordinate conjunctions get a percentage of student difficulty of 45.6%, while skills related to parallel structure with paired conjunctions get a percentage of student difficulty of 41%. Based on those percentages, It can be stated that almost half of English education students have difficulty identifying the correct elements in order to achieve parallelism with other elements in the sentence. This means that students are still confused about the use of parallel structures in a sentence. Based on the results of this study, it would be crucial if other researchers may do a study related to the reasons for students' problems in parallel structure, particularly in the structure and written expression section of the TOEFL test

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