

## **AN ANALYSIS OF DIFFICULTIES IN ANSWERING STRUCTURE AND WRITTEN EXPRESSION OF TOEFL MADE BY ENGLISH STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITAS NEGERI PADANG**

**Titin Hajri<sup>1</sup>, Jufrizal<sup>2</sup>, and Delvi Wahyuni<sup>3</sup>**

English Department  
Faculty of Languages and Arts  
State University of Padang  
email: [titinhajri@gmail.com](mailto:titinhajri@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This study investigated the students' difficulties in answering structure and written expression of TOEFL by last year English department students of Universitas Negeri Padang. The aims of this study were to find the students' difficulties in answering structure and written expression of TOEFL and to find the reasons or causes of the students' mistakes. The participants of this study were 25 students. This descriptive study used two instruments in the research; structure sub-test and interview. This study used proportional stratified sampling to choose the sample. The study found that the last year English students of Universitas Negeri Padang had problems in 11 items among 18 items assessed. There were three 3 the most difficult items; negation, reduced form, and parallel structure items. The reasons behind the students' mistakes were ignorance, careless, dubious, oblivious and miscast. The first two reasons were the biggest causes of students' mistakes.

**Key words:** Students' Difficulty, Reasons of Mistakes, Structure and Written Expression Section, TOEFL.

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

TOEFL is an internationally accepted standard of English that measures the academic English proficiency of a non-native speaker of English (Fanani: 2016: 1). Students of Indonesia can check their English ability through TOEFL in a reliable institution and it will be internationally accepted. In the official account of TOEFL, ([www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org)) it is stated that more than 30 million people from all over the world have taken TOEFL to demonstrate their English-language proficiency.

There are some purposes of why many people and students take the TOEFL. First, many people take TOEFL in order to ensure their ability in English as a second or foreign language. Second reason is to pass the graduation requirements in the university. This requirement has become an obligation for the

<sup>1</sup> English ELTSP of English Department of FBS Universitas Negeri Padang graduated on March 2018

<sup>2</sup> Lecturer of English Department of FBS Universitas Negeri Padang

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer of English Department of FBS Universitas Negeri Padang



students who will pass the college study. Last reason is to apply for particular things for instance taking master/doctoral degree or applying particular jobs abroad and inside the country.

There are three types of TOEFL; they are Paper Based Test (PBT), Computer Based Test (CBT) and the internet Based Test (iBT). Then, in the State University of Padang, the students still take TOEFL PBT. Even though PBT is the most conventional one—uses paper—it still becomes favorite among the students. It is because TOEFL PBT is supposed as the easier and the cheapest one. Moreover, the local institutions or companies in Indonesia still accept the certificate of TOEFL PBT as long as the institutions which held TOEFL are legally reliable.

On TOEFL, there are several sections that are being examined; listening, speaking, grammar or structure, reading, and writing, depending on TOEFL type. TOEFL PBT has three sections, listening section, structure and written expression section, and reading section. On the section of structure and written expression, the knowledge of English grammar is being tested. Structure and grammar are two things different but they are similar and related each other.

Based on the researcher's observation, data score and simple interview, it is known that English students of UNP have to pass the TOEFL 450 score minimum for their final examination and 475 score for the graduation. However, based on the data at UPT Bahasa of Universitas Negeri Padang, structure and written expression section is one of the hardest sections for the students. Many students cannot finish their study in English Department, because they cannot pass TOEFL score. If they do not pass the TOEFL, their final exam would be suspended.

The students admit that structure and written expression is one of the hardest. This fact is really problematic because of three things: first is these students have learned English since the first semester; second is these students have passed the Grammar 1, 2, 3, 4 and Functional Grammar; and last is these students have conducted TOEFL for several times.

King and Stanley (2006: 133) in their book state that an individual who studies English sentence structure and become skilful in speaking and listening but never become a competent writer is unlikely to make a good score on the Structure and Written Expression of TOEFL. According to ETS official website (2017), the 'Structure and Written Expression' (SWE) section contains sentences that test examinees' knowledge of important structural and grammatical elements of standard written English. There are forty questions on the grammar section (Philips, 2001: 195). 1- 15 questions are on structure's part (sentence completion), and 16-40 questions on written expression's part (error analysis). Sentence completion is about how the test-takers find the best answer to fill in the blank sentence to make it correct. Meanwhile, in error identification, the test-takers are asked to look for the error, the part of the sentences that is wrong.

Philips (2001: 197), Rogers (2011: 132) and King & Stanley (1996: 135) categorize the structure section into several topics or items in English. However, it can be concluded into ten main topics, they are:

- a. Subject - Verb agreement

Subject-verb agreement is the condition when subject and verb have to agree in number. It means both of them need to be singular or to be plural. The test-takers will be asked to identify the errors of agreement.

Example: ***Oxford University**, one of the largest universities in England, **has** more than 50.000 students.*

b. Verb-tense agreement

Verb-tense agreement means keeping tenses consistent within sentences. The tenses should not be changed unless there is a need to change because of the time or others. The test-takers will be asked to identify the inconsistent tenses in a clause or sentences.

Example: *Mark **finishes** his essay, **tidied** his room, and **went** out for supper.*

c. Word forms

Word forms are related to the actual forms of nouns, verbs, pronouns, adjective and adverbs. The test-takers will be given an incorrect form of the word and asked to identify the correct form.

Example: *Those roses are smell **real** sweet*

d. Reduced clauses

Reduced clauses refer to the shortening of a relative clause which modifies the subject of a sentence. Reduced relative clauses can modify the subject not the object. It can be in active and passive voice of sentence.

Example: *The athlete (**who is**) carrying the ball is Miraslove Klose.*

e. Connectors

Connectors are words which combine two words, phrases, clauses, and sentences together. The connectors here can be classified four types: preposition, conjunction and transition. The test takers will be asked to identify the correct use of connectors in words, phrases, clauses or sentences.

Example: ***Because** wanted to learn fast, the girl studied all the time.*

f. Gerunds and infinitive

Gerunds and infinitives are sometimes referred to as verb complements. A gerund is a noun made from a verb by adding “-ing”, while infinitive is the “to” form of the verb.

Example: *Paul avoids **using** chemicals on the vegetables he grows.*

g. Comparisons

A comparative expresses the degree of comparison by using adjectives and adverbs. It is also known as comparative and superlative. The test takers will be asked to identify the correct comparison to express the similarity of the different things in a sentence.

Example: *Big cars that use a lot of petrol are **less popular** now **than** twenty years ago.*

h. Clause-formation

Clause-formation can talk about format of dependent or independent clauses such as noun clause, adjective clause, adverb clause, negation clause, etc. The test takers will be asked to identify which clause is incorrect in a sentence

Example: *They ask Amanda **what does she say***

i. Parallel structure

Parallel structure is the use of the same grammatical structures for related ideas of equal importance. Related ideas of equal importance often occur in the form of list that are connected by conjunction, such as *and*, *but*, and *or*. The test takers will be asked to figure out errors in parallel structure.

Example: *He likes to swim, to play tennis, and riding horses.*

j. Redundancy

Redundancy is defined as the use of two or more words that say the same thing. The test-takers will be asked to identify the different words which have the same meaning.

Example: *He is a very fast, quick runner.*

Related to the causes of students' mistakes or errors, Richards (1974), classifies errors or mistakes, according to their causes, into two big categories;

- a. Inter-lingual errors: these errors are caused by mother tongue interference. These kinds of errors are influenced by the native languages which interfere with target language learning. In inter-lingual errors, some causes are
  - 1) Transfer errors (the tendency of the students to follow and repeat what are said by the teacher when learning process occurred)
  - 2) Simplification (the students who want to make the sentences more simple but the structure is not grammatically correct)
- b. Intra-lingual and developmental errors: this kind of errors occurs during the learning process of the second language at a stage when the learners have not really acquired the knowledge. In addition, errors or mistakes are also caused by the difficulty or the problem of language itself. The errors or mistakes caused by the target language itself like:
  - 1) false analogy,
  - 2) misanalysis (learners form a wrong hypothesis),
  - 3) incomplete rule application (this is the converse of overgeneralization or one might call it under generalization as the learners do not use all the rules),
  - 4) Exploiting redundancy (this error occurs by carrying considerable redundancy. This is shown throughout the system in the form of unnecessary morphology and double signaling),
  - 5) Overlooking co-occurrence restrictions (this error is caused by overlooking the exceptional rules),
  - 6) Hypercorrection or monitor overuse (this results from the learners' over cautious and strict observance of the rules),

- 7) Overgeneralization or system-simplification (this error is caused by the misuse of words or grammatical rules)

## B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted by using descriptive research. The population of this study was the last year students of English Department of Universitas Negeri Padang that have already taken Grammar 1, 2, 3, 4 and Functional Grammar. This study used proportional stratified sampling to choose the sample. From 123 students, 25 students are chosen as the participant.

The researcher used two instruments in this research. The first instrument was a standardized test of structure and written expression of TOEFL taken from TOEFL books such as Bruce Rogers, Longman and Cambridge. Second is interview guideline to find the reasons or causes behind the students' mistakes in the structure section TOEFL test. The test consisted of two parts, sentence completion and error analysis, with 40 questions in total. There are 10 topics or 18 items assessed in the structure section test. The questions were distributed in four pages and the students have 30 minutes to finish their test. The second instrument was interview guideline as proposed by Arikunto (2009). The guideline used here was the guideline suggested by Gay (2009: 371). The semi-structured interview given after the researcher checked the students' answer sheets.

To collect the data, The data were collected through two ways; doing the structure test and having an interview. First the researcher asked the students to answer the test. Second, the researcher asked the reasons of students' mistakes using interview guideline. Then, when the data had been gotten, the researcher classifies the students' ability first by using some formula suggested by Arikunto (2009)

>Mean + 1,5SD -----A (Very High)  
 Mean + 0,5SD – mean + 0,5SD -----B (High)  
 Mean – 0,5SD – mean + 0,5SD -----C (Fair)  
 Mean – 1,5SD – mean 0,5SD -----D (Low)  
 <Mean – 1,5SD -----E (Very low)

Then, the researcher analysed the students' mistakes by finding the index difficulty of all items proposed by Arikunto (2009). The formula is:

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

Where : P = difficulty items

B = the number of students who answered correctly

JS = the total number of the students who followed the test

When the index difficulty gotten, the researcher classified them into three categories:

- a. Questions with p 0.00 – 0.29 are difficult questions
- b. Questions with p 0.30 – 0.69 are medium questions
- c. Questions with p 0.70 – 1.00 are easy questions

In analyzing the interview data, the writer transcribed the interview recording. Then, the answers of the interview were classified to be interpreted.

The researcher identified the similar reasons told by the students behind their own mistakes in answering the test.

### C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 1. Results

##### a. The Difficult Items for the students

Through 1000 point of questions, the data obtained are as follows.

Table 1. The incorrect answers found through structure sub-test

No	Structure topics	Questions with wrong answers				TOTAL
		1	2	3	4	
1	subject - verb agreement	4	8	20	9	41
2	verb - tense agreement	6	18	8	5	37
3	word forms	4	7	16	18	45
4	reduced forms	23	9	9	12	53
5	Connectors	3	20	1	4	28
6	Comparisons	2	11	5	4	22
7	gerund and infinitive	19	13	5	8	45
8	clause formation	5	22	0	19	46
9	parallel structure	14	19	3	14	50
10	Redundancy	6	11	7	23	47
<b>TOTAL</b>					<b>414</b>	

Based on the table above, it was known that there were 414 mistakes among 1000 questions. The topics that mostly students have incorrect answers were reduced forms and parallel structure. While least incorrect answers were connectors and comparisons. However, a topic was classified into one or two items, which had different skills assessed. In order to know the specific items with the index difficulty of which, here is the table:

Table 2: The index difficulty of each item

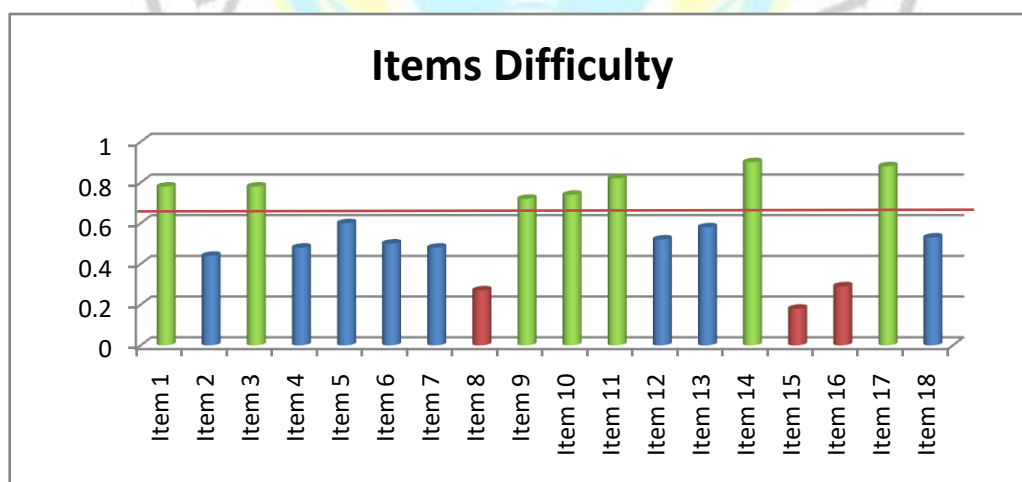
No	Structure topics	Items	NQ	ID
1	subject - verb agreement	The sentences has subject and verb agreement	2, 35	0, 78
		The verb is correct after a phrase / clause	8, 11	0,44
2	verb - tense agreement	Agreement in specific tense	23, 37	0,78
		Verb agreement between two clauses	28, 31	0,48
3	word forms	The function of the word based on its position	7, 18	0,60
		Singular and plural form of words	16, 21	0,50
4	reduced forms	Reduced adjective clause in active sentence	10, 34	0,48
		Reduced adjective clause in passive sentence	5, 12,	0,27
5	Connectors	Conjunctions	13, 17, 22, 24	0,72

6	Comparison	Comparatives	3, 19	0,74
		Superlatives	27, 33	0,82
7	gerund and infinitive	Infinitive	6, 36	0,52
		Gerund	25, 40	0,58
8	clause formation	Declarative format of sentences	1, 14	0,90
		Negation format of sentences	9, 15	0,18
9	parallel structure	Parallel in noun and noun phrase	4, 26, 32	0,29
		Parallel in verb	29	0,88
10	Redundancy	Useless repetition	20, 30, 38, 39	0,53

NQ = Number of Question      ID = Index Difficulty

From the table above, from 18 items assessed in the test, the item difficulty was vary, with the lowest was 0,18 and the highest was 0,9. Arikunto (2009) had suggested three categories of questions: easy, medium and difficult. The easy questions were in range of 0.00 – 0.29, the medium questions were 0.30 – 0.69, and the difficult questions were 0.70 – 1.00. Based on the table above, 7 items were categorized as easy questions, 8 items were categorized as medium questions, and 3 items were categorized as difficult questions.

Figure 1. Students' Item Difficulty



The items that were identified as problems for students were those with index difficulty below 0.70. The chart above revealed that there were 7 green items which were categorized as easy items, there were 8 blue items which were categorized as medium items, and there were 3 red items which were categorized as difficult items.

a. Easy items

Based on the chart, it was known that there were 7 items categorized as easy. The items were the format of declarative sentence, subject verb agreement, parallel in verb, agreement in specific tense,

conjunction words, comparative and superlatives. In item 14, as the highest or the easiest item, the index difficulty was 0.9, meaning that only 10% of students who could not answer the questions. Item 1 had 0.78 index difficulty, meaning that 23% of the students could not recognize the proper verb for a subject correctly. Item 3 (agreement in specific tense) had 0.78 index difficulty, meaning that 23% of the students who still had a problem in identifying the verb when the sentence had two or more clauses.

Then, item 17 (parallel in verb) had index difficulty 0.88, it meant there were only 12% of students who could not point out the same pattern of verb in the sentences. Item 9 which assessed conjunction words, 28% students were still had problems in categorizing a proper conjunction based on the function and position because the index difficulty was 0.72. Last, the item of comparative and superlative (id 0.74 and 0.82) showed that 26% and 18% of the students who still had problems with the comparison topic.

b. Medium items

The items that were classified as medium were the verb agreement after particular phrase or clause, verb agreement between two clauses, word forms, reduced adjective clause in active sentences, gerund and infinitive, and redundancy. From the verb problems, it was known that 56% and 52% of the students could not answer the questions correctly because the index difficulties of the questions were 0.44 and 0.48. Word forms which consisted of two items showed that the index difficulty were 0.60 and 0.50, which meant 40% and 50% of the students still were not able to analyze words based on the function, position, and forms.

Related to the problems of gerund and infinitive, 48% and 42% of the students felt difficult in identifying the proper words for the sentences, which were supported by the number of index difficulty (0.52 and 0.52). Last, 47% of students still had problems in identifying the repetition word in a sentence proved by the index difficulty 0.53. The students were not able yet to recognize the redundancy word and focus to other words.

c. Difficult items

The chart above depicted that there were three problems that categorized as difficult; negation format in a sentence, reduced adjective in passive, and parallel in noun phrase. First, in item 15 (the format of negation) as the most difficult items in the test, 89% of the students had problems with this format because the index difficulty was so low, 0.18. Next, in item 8, 78% of students were not able to identify the proper reduced form in passive sentence with id 0.27. Last, 71% students had problems with parallel structure due to lack of knowledge in recognizing words based on the position in the sentences with the id 0.29.

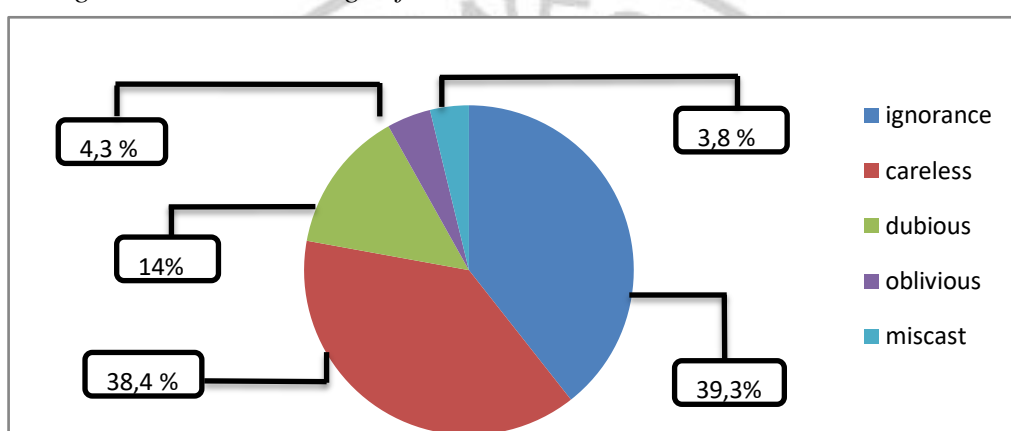


### b. The reasons behind the students' mistakes

There were 5 reasons identified as the causes of the students' mistakes; ignorance, careless, dubious, oblivious and miscast. Ignorance and careless became the two biggest reasons on why many students could not answer the questions correctly.

Based on the students' answer of the test, there were 414 mistakes found. 163 mistakes were caused by ignorance, 159 mistakes were caused by careless, 58 mistakes were caused by dubious, 18 mistakes were caused by oblivious, and 16 mistakes were caused by miscast. The chart below shows the percentage of the students' reasons of their mistakes

Figure 2. The Percentage of the causes or reasons behind the mistakes



#### 1. Ignorance

Based on the interview, ignorance was found in several major items; reduced form, negation format, parallel structure, word forms and redundancy. From the chart, it was known that 39,3% students' mistakes caused of ignorance in which the students did not know the rules, the format, the word form, and others. It means around 40% students who answered the test incorrectly do not have well comprehension toward the material assessed in structure section of TOEFL.

#### 2. Careless

The chart above showed that careless was the second biggest factor that caused the students' mistakes. From 414 total mistakes, 38,4% mistakes caused by the careless factor. It meant that around 38% of students who gave the wrong answers were not careful in reading the questions.

#### 3. Dubious

Dubious were found mostly in the items of subject-verb agreement, comparisons, and parallel structure. From the chart, it was known that dubious happened for 14% of the mistakes, meaning that 14% students felt doubt while answering the test.

#### 4. Oblivious

In the chart, oblivious were found for 4,3% mistakes from the total 414 mistakes. It showed that around 4% of students who answered the questions had forgotten some of the rules, the format, or the form of the

words. In the explanation above, oblivious were found in some topics such as connectors, word form, gerund, and sentences' format.

#### 5. Miscast

Miscast became the least factor behind the students' mistakes. In the chart, only 3,8% of mistakes caused by miscasting. It means that less than 4% of the students who answered the test incorrectly who were choosing the answers differently with their intention.

## 2. Discussion

As it is proposed by Arikunto (2009), the students could be categorized into 5 level (very good – very low). Based on these classifications, students in a low level were higher than students in the good level. It shows many English students do not have a good comprehension in grammar. The students do not really acquire the items or topics assessed in structure section of TOEFL. The fact also emphasizes that students, no matter they are English students and learn English every day, cannot guarantee that they will have a good score in TOEFL. The subjects of Grammar 1, 2, 3, 4, and Functional Grammar, are only the obligation for English students to pass the exam and go to the next semester. At least, with these subjects, the English students are able to listen and speak in English or are able to read and write in English even though the rules are not applied well. This opinion is supported by King and Stanley (2006: 133) that state, an individual who studies English sentence structure and become skillful in speaking and listening but never become a competent writer is unlikely to make a good score on the Structure and Written Expression of TOEFL.

Among 10 main topics or 18 items assessed in structure and written expression sub-test, three items were categorized as difficult items; format of negation, reduced clauses and parallel structure. Most of the students' gave two answers; first, they did not know the rules because they never learned the material before; second, they have learned it but they forgot it. It can be true because it has been more than a year for the students since their last grammar subject. The students also do not practice or relearn the lessons when they have got the score for their grammar subjects. Therefore, students forget the lessons when they are taking TOEFL test today. This also support the explanation of Winkel (1996: 447) who states that forgetfulness is inability to dig what has been noticed, processed, and inserted into mind. It might happen because of some factors such as lack of practice, interference of materials they learn in other courses after structure courses, and lack of interest. It can happen because it was not used for a long time.

However, the main reasons why the items becomes difficult were, first the students do not have a well understanding about the sentences' structure, format; second the students do not have a well understanding about the form of the words. In negation, students have more problems in passive voice than active voice. The students are confused with the difference of passive and active voice. The students also cannot identify the context and the usage of negative word correctly. These problems appear because of two reasons; first they do not know the format and rule of negation; second they are not familiar

with the sentence format. Therefore, the students generalize it into declarative sentence (active voice) because it is the form that is more familiar with them. Similar with item in reduced form, the students cannot detect whether the sentences are active or passive. Finally, because of the inabilities above, the students generalize the words and sentences into the form that they are familiar with (Richards, 1971).

Last in parallel, the students cannot identify the proper form of words needed because their inability to distinguish the difference of each word. The students feel confused with the difference of the adjective and noun, not with verb, because the words are slightly different (Roger: 2011, 180). The students feel common to use the same word to express different things in Indonesia and there is no need to change the word. In verb, it is easy to be recognized because the identical ending which ease the students to understand. In Indonesia, some words used in verb are also different with noun such as “*Aku makan nasi goreng*” with “*Aku menggoreng nasi*”. Therefore students are easy to recognize verb but hard to recognize noun and adjective. This explanation is strengthened by Richard (1971) and Brown (in Khansir: 2004) who state that errors are caused by inter-lingual and interference factor (the influence of mother language).

Moreover, the medium items such as verb agreement, reduced in active sentences, singular and plural and gerund and infinitive, the students understand the materials but not fully comprehend it. Some of the students also forgot the material while they are answering the test. When the students do not remember the lesson, means that the students did not have practice before they take the test. The students also did not relearn the material since their last grammar class. This explanation is reinforced by Woodworth in Winkel (1996: 454).

Furthermore, it is equally important to note that there are some topics that not difficult but many students have the mistakes because of careless, dubious, and miscast factors such as subject-verb agreement, verb – tense agreement, connectors, comparisons, and redundancy. The topics are actually not really hard for the students because they had known them in many listening and reading materials and used them in daily speaking. However, the students do not do the test carefully and they fill it in hurry.

Normally, structure section is given 25 minutes to fill the test. It shapes the students’ mind that they have to finish the test quickly before the time is up. In fact, the researcher has given 30 minutes to finish the test, but mostly the students finish it around 20 minutes. It showed how the students did the test in hurry. Expectedly, the students did not read the questions carefully and did not pay attention toward all components of the sentences (Antony’s research finding; 2014). The statement is supported by King and Stanley (2006: 133) who identify that many students fail in grammar section of TOEFL because of their time management.

In short, many students still had problems with items assessed in TOEFL structure test. From 10 topics or 18 items assessed, 11 of them are still become problems for the students. There are 5 reasons found behind the students’

mistakes: ignorance, careless, dubious, oblivious, and miscast. The difficult items such as negation, reduced and parallel structure were mostly caused by ignorance and oblivious. While medium and easy items mostly caused by careless, dubious, and miscast. However, the main causes of the students mistake comes from the internal side of the students such as less practice and did the test in hurry.

## **D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

### **a. Conclusion**

This study was conducted to last year students of English Department who had learned Grammar 1, 2, 3, 4 and Functional Grammar and had taken TOEFL test several times. Through the findings and discussion in chapter IV, it was found that

- a. Students had 3 difficult items in answering the structure test; negation, reduced form, and parallel structure. The cause of the difficulty was students had no understanding or comprehension about the structure, rules or the form of the words.
- b. There were 8 medium items found which were mostly caused by dubious and oblivious factors in which the students did not practice or relearn the material that they had learned before.
- c. There were 7 easy items found which were mostly caused by careless and miscast factors in which the students did not read the questions carefully and did the test in hurry

Based on the findings and discussion above, it was concluded that

- a. The items become easy for English students because they find and use the materials in daily academic life; therefore, the students have a well comprehension in items, they are; subject – verb agreement, verb – tense agreement, comparison, conjunctions and declarative sentences
- b. The items become difficult for English students because the items are less likely used in daily academic life such as negation, reduced form, parallel structure and gerund and infinitives

Many English students still confused about the part of speech so that many of them could not identified a word based on its function and position such as in items word forms, redundancy and parallel structure.

### **b. Suggestion**

Taking TOEFL is a must for English students and they are expected to have a high TOEFL score. However, many students take TOEFL several times because they cannot pass the score. The students do not realize that they cannot pass it may be caused by small reason, careless for instance. Based on the finding of the research, there are some suggestions offered:

1. It is really recommended for the English students to practice more and be careful in answering the test. The students need to add reading materials and relearn the grammar materials. TOEFL should not be a difficult thing to do because the students have learned English since the first semester; they learn listening speaking reading and writing in English. It is something pathetic when English students cannot reach

the minimum score given for their final examination and graduation. The students are expected to have a high score of TOEFL. Therefore, to minimize the mistakes, the students cannot put their hope in the material gotten when they learn grammar, but they need to read a lot to add the vocabulary and find new knowledge.

2. It is suggested for English lecturer to explain the grammar material deeply. It is because there are some topics that are hard for the students—reduced form and negation format. The students might say they never learn it before, but it also has the possibility in which the students have learned it but they do not understand it well. Therefore, a deep and clear explanation will help the students in understanding the material better.

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