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## Investigating Students' Readiness on TOEFL Reading Comprehension: A Case on Senior High School

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**Abstract.** This research investigates the level of reading comprehension and TOEFL readiness among 27 twelfth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar. Grounded in the Interactive Reading Model proposed by Shin and Crandall (2014) and recent metacognitive and self-regulated learning theories, the study employs a mixed-method approach using a 25-item TOEFL-style multiple-choice test and a 27-item structured questionnaire. Findings revealed that a significant majority of students (59.3%) demonstrated low to very low proficiency, scoring 40 or below. Participants struggled specifically with higher-order cognitive skills, such as interpreting implied information, making inferences, and understanding unfamiliar vocabulary in context. Furthermore, the questionnaire results highlighted a critical gap between awareness and preparation: while 100% of students acknowledged the importance of TOEFL for their academic and career advancement, 88.9% reported having never received formal TOEFL-related training or simulations within their institution. The study underscores an urgent need for targeted instructional interventions, including explicit metacognitive strategy training (e.g., skimming, scanning, and predicting) and increased institutional support. By identifying these gaps, the research aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), aiming to equip EFL learners with the essential academic English skills required for higher education and global communication.

**Keywords:** TOEFL Reading, Reading Strategies, EFL Students, Metacognitive Awareness, Senior High School.

### 1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is widely recognized as a fundamental skill in academic language learning, particularly for students preparing for standardized tests such as

the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). As one of the core sections of the TOEFL exam, the reading component assesses a student's ability to understand and analyze complex academic texts, make inferences, and derive meaning from both explicit and implicit information. However, for many high school students, especially those in non-native English environments such as Indonesia, this section presents significant challenges. This study focuses on 12th-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar and seeks to investigate the strategies they use to comprehend texts in the TOEFL Reading section, with the broader goal of improving their test performance and academic reading proficiency. Moving beyond older theoretical models, this research is grounded in the Interactive Reading Model proposed by Shin and Crandall (2014), which posits that effective reading involves a simultaneous integration of bottom-up processes such as word recognition and decoding and top-down processes, including the use of background knowledge, prediction, and contextual interpretation (Simanjuntak et al., 2025).

In addition, this study draws from recent metacognitive and self-regulated learning theories, which emphasize the importance of students taking conscious control over their reading processes by planning how to approach a text, monitoring their comprehension as they read, and evaluating their understanding afterward. Such frameworks suggest that strategic readers are better equipped to manage the cognitive demands of high-stakes tests like the TOEFL. Supporting this theoretical foundation, research by Wahyuningsih et al (2024) has shown that many Indonesian students face persistent difficulties in interpreting inferential questions, dealing with limited vocabulary, and identifying unstated details within passages factors that significantly affect their reading scores (Samiei and Ebadi, 2021; Hezam et al., 2022).

In response, this study examines how specific strategies, including skimming for general meaning, scanning for specific details, contextual guessing of unfamiliar vocabulary, and top-down processing, are used by students to overcome these difficulties. To further contextualize the analysis, a questionnaire was developed to assess students' general knowledge about TOEFL preparation. This instrument explores their familiarity with the structure of the TOEFL test, the purpose and content of each section particularly reading as well as their prior exposure to test-taking strategies and training. The responses provide insight into students' metacognitive awareness and readiness, offering a valuable perspective on the relationship between strategic knowledge and reading performance.

Ultimately, this study aims not only to identify the reading strategies most used and most effective among senior high school students but also to highlight the importance of strategic awareness in test preparation. By integrating current theoretical models with empirical observations from the local school context, this research contributes to the development of more informed, effective, and pedagogically relevant approaches to teaching reading comprehension for TOEFL readiness in Indonesian secondary education.

This study also contributes to the achievement of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable access to quality learning opportunities. Enhancing students' reading comprehension and TOEFL readiness aligns with this goal by equipping learners with essential academic English skills needed for higher education and global communication. By identifying gaps in students' strategic awareness and preparation, this study supports the development of more accessible and effective instructional practices, thereby promoting educational quality and lifelong learning opportunities, particularly in EFL contexts such as Indonesia.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language)**

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized test designed to evaluate the English proficiency of non-native speakers, particularly in academic settings (Herman et al., 2024). Among its available formats, the Paper-Based Test (PBT) remains one of the most used in various educational institutions, especially in regions where internet access for the iBT version is limited. The PBT version consists of three major components: Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression (Grammar), and Reading Comprehension.

The Listening Comprehension section evaluates the learner's ability to understand spoken English, including both short and long conversations, played only once. This section contains 50 multiple-choice questions and typically lasts 30–40 minutes. The Structure and Written Expression section measures students' understanding of English grammar and their ability to recognize correct sentence structures; it consists of 40 questions to be answered in 25 minutes. The Reading Comprehension section is the longest, requiring students to answer 50 questions based on several academic reading passages within 55 minutes (Rumahorbo et al., 2024).

The TOEFL Reading section presents unique challenges because it goes beyond literal understanding. Students must analyse complex academic texts, identify main ideas, distinguish between factual and implied information, and interpret vocabulary in context (Juanda et al., 2025). These skills require a high level of cognitive processing and the use of effective reading strategies. The total PBT score is calculated by converting raw scores from each section into scaled scores using a standardized ETS conversion table. The sum of the scaled scores is then divided by three and multiplied by ten to produce the final TOEFL score. Understanding this scoring mechanism is important, as it reflects how each section contributes equally to the overall assessment of English proficiency.

### **2.2. Reading Comprehension in the TOEFL Context**

Reading comprehension is a cognitively demanding activity, particularly in the context of second language acquisition (Herman et al., 2025). It involves the ability to decode and process written text, draw logical inferences, understand syntactic

and lexical structures, and apply background knowledge. In TOEFL Reading, students are expected to manage long and complex academic passages within a strict time limit, requiring them to apply both fast-reading and deep-processing strategies. According to Grabe and Stoller (2017), reading comprehension involves two simultaneous processes: bottom-up processing, which focuses on decoding language units (words, phrases, syntax), and top-down processing, which draws on the reader's prior knowledge, expectations, and contextual understanding (Habók & Magyar, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022; Damanik et al., 2025).

Recent studies have emphasized the relevance of the Interactive Reading Model, proposed by Shin and Crandall (2014), in helping students cope with TOEFL reading challenges. This model integrates both top-down and bottom-up approaches, allowing readers to alternate flexibly between decoding the linguistic features of a text and interpreting its overall meaning. Such a model reflects the real behavior of competent readers, who rely on their lexical and grammatical knowledge as well as their inferencing abilities and background knowledge. The application of this model is crucial in TOEFL contexts, where students are confronted with unfamiliar topics and complex rhetorical structures. To perform well, learners must employ strategies that help them locate specific information (e.g., scanning), grasp the main idea quickly (e.g., skimming), and deduce the meaning of unknown vocabulary using context clues.

### **2.3. Reading Strategies and Learner Challenges**

Reading comprehension success in TOEFL is strongly linked to the use of effective reading strategies. As Graham et al (2020) notes, strategic readers are those who are aware of their reading behaviour and can regulate it accordingly (Mosalli et al., 2022; Wathoni et al., 2022). These metacognitive strategies include setting reading goals, previewing questions before reading, monitoring comprehension during reading, and evaluating the effectiveness of one's strategy afterward. Other commonly reported strategies are skimming for general meaning, scanning for specific facts, rereading difficult sections, and making inferences (Yapp et al., 2023). Mokhtari et al (2018) suggest that the more strategically a student reads, the higher the likelihood of successful comprehension and test performance.

In the Indonesian high school context, research has identified significant barriers to reading proficiency among EFL learners. Wahyuningsih et al (2024) found that students often struggle with inference-based questions, interpreting unstated details, and understanding unfamiliar vocabulary (Wanzek et al., 2016; Supakorn & Panplum, 2022; Suhandra & Azis, 2026). These weaknesses are compounded by a lack of awareness about reading strategies and limited practice with academic texts. Similar findings are echoed by Li et al (2024), who argue that EFL students worldwide tend to be overwhelmed by text complexity, time pressure, and unfamiliar content all of which are typical features of the TOEFL Reading section. In addition, many students have insufficient exposure to authentic TOEFL materials, leading to anxiety and poor time management during the actual test.

These challenges highlight the urgent need for strategy-based instruction in TOEFL reading preparation. Nguyen & Nguyen (2024) demonstrated that learners who receive explicit instruction in reading strategies outperform those who only practice answering questions without understanding the rationale behind the strategies (Sukarno et al., 2024). Wongdaeng & Higgins (2023) further argue that teaching students to combine metacognitive awareness with practical techniques—such as identifying the structure of a text, predicting answers, and eliminating incorrect choices—can lead to significant improvements in reading comprehension scores. Recent studies also show that strategy-based instruction significantly improves TOEFL reading performance and learner motivation (Meladina & Dasril, 2021; Filderman et al., 2022; Meylinda & Erviana, 2025).

#### **2.4. Strategic Awareness Through Questionnaire**

Understanding how students perceive and apply reading strategies is essential for improving TOEFL outcomes. In this study, a structured questionnaire was designed to assess students' general awareness and readiness for TOEFL preparation, specifically focusing on the Reading section. The questionnaire aims to measure students' familiarity with the TOEFL format, their knowledge of question types, their previous experiences with test preparation, and their reported use of strategies such as skimming, scanning, and contextual guessing. According to Bouknify (2023), students with high strategic awareness tend to perform better in reading tasks, as they are more capable of adapting their approach based on task demands and time constraints.

Moreover, the questionnaire serves as a diagnostic tool to identify gaps in students' understanding of TOEFL reading demands. Responses can reveal whether students are approaching the test passively simply relying on intuition or actively engaging with the text using intentional strategies. This kind of data is invaluable for teachers and curriculum developers who aim to design instructional programs that not only improve reading skills but also foster autonomy and critical thinking in test-taking situations. The integration of questionnaire results with reading performance also allows researchers to explore the correlation between strategic knowledge and actual comprehension success.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

This study was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar in May 2025. The participants were 27 twelfth-grade students (aged 16–18 years) from a single class. All students were Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners who had studied English throughout their high school education but had no formal experience with TOEFL preparation programs. Participation was voluntary, and parental or guardian consent was obtained in compliance with school policy and ethical considerations.

## 3.2. Instruments

### 3.2.1. Reading Comprehension Test

To evaluate students' comprehension skills in the context of TOEFL reading, a 25-item multiple-choice test was developed and administered. The test focused on essential sub-skills commonly found in the TOEFL Reading section, such as identifying main ideas, making inferences, interpreting vocabulary in context, and recognizing unstated information. Each item was constructed to reflect authentic TOEFL-style passages, with four answer choices and only one correct option.

The construction of the test was grounded in the Interactive Reading Model proposed by Shin and Crandall (2014), which emphasizes the integration of bottom-up and top-down processing. This model recognizes that skilled readers simultaneously decode linguistic elements (words, syntax) and draw on prior knowledge and context to construct meaning. By adopting this approach, the test aimed to measure not only literal understanding but also the inferential and interpretive abilities required for academic reading tasks.

In addition, the test implicitly addressed metacognitive strategy use, which plays a significant role in reading comprehension. As noted by Anderson (2020), effective readers are strategic; they set goals, monitor their understanding, and adjust their approach based on the difficulty of the text. Although the test was not explicitly designed to measure strategy use, student performance on complex items indirectly reflected their ability to manage comprehension under cognitive pressure.

To ensure clarity and validity, the reading test was reviewed by two English language lecturers, who evaluated its relevance to TOEFL objectives and its appropriateness for the students' proficiency level. The test results were then analysed to gain insights into the students' current reading abilities and potential areas for instructional focus in TOEFL preparation.

### 3.2.2. TOEFL Preparation Questionnaire

To gain insights into students' general awareness, motivation, and readiness for TOEFL preparation, a 27-item questionnaire was designed and administered. The first section contained 10 structured multiple-choice questions that focused on key areas such as students' prior exposure to the TOEFL test, their perception of its importance for academic success, frequency of English study outside the classroom, and their willingness to participate in future preparation programs.

This questionnaire was conceptually grounded in the work of Bouknify (2023), who emphasize the role of metacognitive awareness in language learning. According to them, students who are more conscious of their learning processes such as knowing why and how to prepare for TOEFL are better able to regulate their strategies and sustain motivation. Therefore, several items were designed to assess students'

awareness of the TOEFL format, including whether they had experienced any TOEFL simulations or previously taken the test.

In addition, students' motivational orientation was assessed using questions such as "What is your main goal in learning TOEFL?" and "If your school offered a free TOEFL preparation course, would you attend?" These items reflect the influence of Nguyen & Nguyen (2024), who demonstrated that explicit training and motivational support increase learners' willingness to engage in test preparation activities. Their research underlines that students are more likely to commit to TOEFL readiness when they perceive the training as relevant, accessible, and connected to their academic goals. The questions were written in clear, accessible language in Bahasa Indonesia, and most items used 3–4 response choices to simplify selection and encourage honest answers. By combining data from this questionnaire with students' test results, the researchers aimed to identify how attitudes, knowledge, and motivation correlate with actual performance and inform future instructional design.

### 3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection was conducted in a single day within the students' regular classroom environment to ensure comfort and minimize disruption to their learning schedule. First, students completed a 25-item multiple-choice reading comprehension test under standardized, timed conditions, with a time limit of 55 minutes. Immediately after the test, they were given a 27-item TOEFL preparation questionnaire, which took approximately 30–40 minutes to complete. Both instruments were administered consecutively in a controlled setting, and all responses were collected anonymously. The data obtained were used solely for academic research purposes and handled with strict confidentiality to protect participants' privacy.

## 4. Result and Discussion

### 4.1. Reading Comprehension Test Results

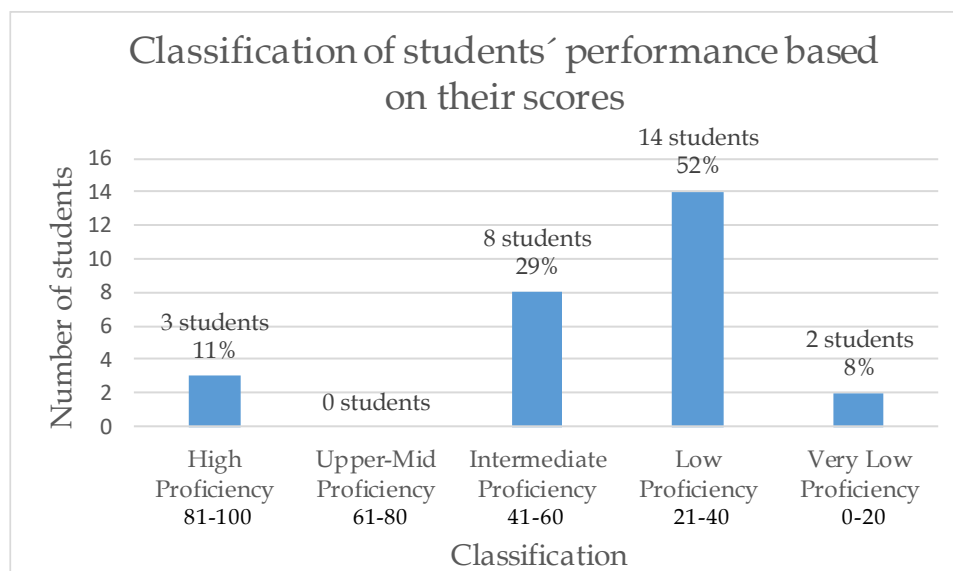
The TOEFL style reading comprehension test administered to 27 twelfth-grade students yielded a wide range of scores, indicating substantial variation in reading proficiency. Table 1 shows the student's TOEFL Reading Comprehension score

**Table 1. Student's TOEFL Reading Comprehension Score**

Student's Initial	Score
FP	44
DS	44
SM	56
AS	40
GS	16
A	40
R	32

N	32
MS	44
RN	40
JS	28
YS	16
KS	24
MP	44
YS	32
TS	48
YS	88
CS	96
JS	100
MS	40
CN	28
T	28
RS	32
PS	40
HP	20
FS	36
CP	28

The test was scored out of 100, and students' scores ranged from a low of 16 to a perfect score of 100. Figure 1 shows the classification of students' performance based on their test scores.



**Figure 1. Classification of students' performance based on their test scores**

The score range adapted based on reading assessment principles discussed by Brown (2004), Grabe & Stoller (2011), and Wolf and Farnsworth (2013).

These results show that the majority of students (59.3%) fall into the low to very low proficiency categories, scoring 40 or below. Only three students (11.1%) demonstrated high proficiency (scores above 80), with one student achieving a perfect score of 100. Meanwhile, no student scored within the 61–80 range, highlighting a noticeable proficiency gap between the strongest and the rest of the class.

The test was designed to measure a variety of sub-skills commonly assessed in TOEFL Reading, including main idea recognition, inferencing, vocabulary in context, and identifying implied information. Students with higher scores appeared to navigate inferential questions more effectively, demonstrating the ability to synthesize information and make logical deductions—skills emphasized by Shin and Crandall's (2014) Interactive Reading Model. In contrast, students with lower scores tended to struggle particularly with inferencing and recognizing unstated information, suggesting reliance on surface-level reading.

Additionally, the wide performance gap indicates inconsistent application of metacognitive reading strategies. As Graham et al (2020) posits, effective readers actively monitor comprehension, manage their pace, and revise strategies when faced with difficulty. The lower-scoring students likely lacked these strategic approaches, as evidenced by frequent incorrect selections on items requiring synthesis or inference. These findings reinforce the need for structured reading instruction that emphasizes higher-order comprehension skills and equips students with strategic reading behaviours. Embedding TOEFL reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and question mapping into classroom practice may help narrow the proficiency gap and enhance test readiness across a broader student population.

#### **4.2. TOEFL Preparation Questionnaire Results**

Based on the responses of 27 twelfth-grade students, the questionnaire revealed several key findings regarding students' awareness, perception, and experience related to TOEFL preparation.

First, when asked about their familiarity with the TOEFL test, only 3.7% of students reported that they understood TOEFL well. The majority (59.3%) had heard the term TOEFL but admitted they did not fully understand what it entailed, while 37% stated that they had never heard of it at all. This suggests a general lack of detailed awareness, despite the growing importance of TOEFL as a global standard for academic English proficiency.

In terms of perceived importance, 55.6% of students considered TOEFL to be "important" for their future academic or professional opportunities, and 44.4% regarded it as "very important." These results indicate that while conceptual knowledge of TOEFL is limited, students nonetheless recognize its significance for

higher education and career prospects. Despite this awareness, most students (88.9%) reported that their school had never conducted any TOEFL simulation or training, while only 11.1% said they had participated in such an activity, and even that was irregular or informal. This gap between perceived importance and institutional support reflects a lack of structured preparation opportunities, a concern also raised by Zhang et al (2022), who stress that metacognitive awareness must be supported by programmatic implementation to be effective.

When asked about their experience taking an actual TOEFL test, 55.6% said they had never taken the test and had no intention to do so soon. This suggests that although students may recognize TOEFL's importance, they may still feel unprepared, anxious, or unsure about how to begin preparing highlighting the need for schools to provide more accessible and motivating entry points to test readiness programs.

#### **4.3. Analysis of Students' Needs in TOEFL Reading Preparation**

The analysis of students' reading test performance and questionnaire responses provides clear insights into their learning needs in preparing for TOEFL reading comprehension. Three key areas of need emerge: cognitive skills, metacognitive strategy training, and institutional support.

First, the TOEFL reading comprehension scores reflect a strong need for cognitive skill development, particularly in inferencing, vocabulary in context, and identifying implied information. With 81.5% of students scoring below the intermediate level (i.e., under 60), it is evident that most learners struggle with processing academic texts that demand analytical reading. As Wolf and Farnsworth (2013) note, reading proficiency in high-stakes tests like TOEFL involves not just decoding words, but integrating information and drawing logical conclusions across longer passages. Therefore, direct instruction in text structure, inference-making, and analytical comprehension is urgently required.

Second, the results point to limited use of metacognitive strategies among students. According to Acar-Erdol & Akin-Arikan (2022), effective readers consciously plan their approach, monitor their understanding, and adjust strategies when comprehension breaks down. The performance gap between high- and low-scoring students in this study suggests that lower performers lacked these monitoring skills. Questionnaire results further reinforce this, as many students reported unfamiliarity with TOEFL tasks and no experience with structured preparation indicating a lack of strategic reading behaviors. Thus, students need training in metacognitive strategies such as previewing, questioning, predicting, summarizing, and reviewing. Third, the questionnaire highlights a significant institutional gap. Although 100% of students either acknowledged TOEFL's importance or recognized its relevance to future education, 88.9% had never received any TOEFL-related training or practice in school. This finding emphasizes a strong need for systematic and sustained TOEFL preparation programs. As Bouknify (2023) argue, raising

students' awareness must be accompanied by structured implementation, including practice tests, strategy workshops, and guided feedback sessions.

Moreover, the fact that more than half of the students (55.6%) had never taken and did not plan to take the TOEFL test also signals a motivational and accessibility issue. This means that students are more likely to engage when preparation activities are authentic, goal-oriented, and connected to their aspirations. This suggests that schools need to provide not only cognitive and strategic instruction, but also motivational scaffolding such as simulations, peer discussion, and achievable goal-setting to build student confidence and engagement. In summary, the students' needs in TOEFL reading preparation encompass three interrelated domains: enhancing reading skills for academic texts, developing metacognitive strategies for independent comprehension, and creating school-based support systems to enable effective, consistent preparation. Addressing these needs is essential for equipping students to succeed in standardized English proficiency tests and to navigate English-medium academic environments confidently.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study show that most twelfth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar demonstrate limited reading comprehension skills in the context of the TOEFL test. More than 80% of participants fell into the low to very low proficiency categories, struggling particularly with inferencing, identifying implied meanings, and understanding vocabulary in context—skills crucial for TOEFL success. These weaknesses indicate a reliance on surface-level reading strategies and a lack of deeper cognitive processing, as highlighted in Shin and Crandall's Interactive Reading Model and Anderson's perspective on strategic reading.

In addition, the questionnaire findings reveal that although students generally perceive TOEFL as important for their academic and career goals, their actual readiness remains low. Most students lack exposure to structured TOEFL preparation, including strategy training and simulation tests, indicating a gap between awareness and practical readiness. Therefore, schools should implement targeted interventions, such as explicit instruction in reading strategies, regular TOEFL practice sessions, and structured preparation programs to enhance students' performance and confidence.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, involving only 27 students from a single class, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data collection was conducted over a short period, preventing deeper longitudinal analysis of students' progress. Future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples and to examine the long-term impact of strategy-based TOEFL instruction.

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