

# AN ANALYSIS OF LEARNING STRATEGIES IN PREPARING FOR THE TOFL TEST OF SIXTH SEMESTER STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY HKBP NOMMENSEN PEMATANG SIANTAR

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## Abstract

This research aimed to described the strategies used by sixth semester students of the English Education Study Program at HKBP Nommensen University, Pematangsiantar, in preparing themselves for the TOEFL test, to see the effectiveness of the strategies used, the obstacles faced in the preparation process, and the correlation described from the strategies used with the scores obtained by students. This research was based on the theory of learning strategies proposed by Cohen and Chamot & O'Malley, which divides learning strategies into three categories, namely metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective. This research used descriptive qualitative method, with 30 sixth-semester PIA-2 class students at HKBP Nommensen University, Pematangsiantar as the research subjects. Data were collected using an analysis and interactive model proposed by Miles & Huberman, which included data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study indicated that students use various metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, evaluation, and time management) as the most dominant strategies, followed by cognitive strategies (practice questions, studying grammar, and reading authentic texts), as well as socio-affective strategies (group discussions, asking for tutor help, and managing anxiety). These strategies had proven effective in improving students' readiness to face the TOEFL test, although their effectiveness varies depending on the consistency and discipline of students in applying them. The main obstacles faced by the students included limited time, difficulty understanding grammar, excessive anxiety before the test, and limited access to learning resources. The conclusion of this research confirms that implementing appropriate, planned, and consistent learning strategies could help students improved their TOEFL preparation and confidence. Using a combination of these three strategies will also help students achieve good scores. However, these strategies need to be tailored to each student's individual circumstances to achieved optimal results.

**Keywords:** *learning strategies, TOEFL, students*

## INTRODUCTION

English was a language that is used by every country, an important language, and must be taught in every country. Crystal (2000, p. 1) as cited by Damanik & Thamrin (2024), stated that English was a global language that has been used all over the world. He stated that English played an important role in international communication, education, and technology. English was also one part of the field of study that played an important role to be taught and learned because in learning and understanding. English it was not only to be able or fluent in communicating in English, but in learning English one was also required in terms of listening, writing and even reading in English. In the era of the globalization, English had become one of the languages that someone had to master in school, college, and even in business and work. Richards & Rodgers (1986, p. 1) as cited by Sulistyorin (2021) emphasized the importance of teaching English as an international language that had been taught widely in improved countries. Harmer (2007, p. 13) as cited by M.M. Siahaan (2020) stated that English served as the main means of global communication and expanded access to information and employment opportunities; therefore, knowing English could be a wider opportunity for a person to find out outside information and expand opportunities in finding a job. Richard and Rodgers (2001, p. 3) as cited by Izzah et al., (2021) also emphasized that learning English was one of the important fields of study in achieving one's success in the academic world and

in increasing social mobility in an increasingly advanced world, and increasingly prioritizing the use of English as an international language. By looking at these opinions, English language skills became an important factor for people to achieve global standard mastery communication in the academic world and social mobility. Along with the explanation above, with the increasing importance of one's knowledge in English, a tool was needed to measure the level of mastery of English objectively. One of the tools in measuring the level of mastery that was often used, even also used internationally in measuring English language skills, was the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). This TOEFL test was created to assess a person's ability in several English skills, such as listening, reading, and speaking, which were key in educational institutions and employment. Philips (2001, p. 13) as cited by (Ginting et al., 2023) stated that this test was used to assess the English language skills of those who wanted to continue their education in universities that required students to speak English, besides that, Sharpe in his book *Barron's TOEFL IBT* (2006, p. 13) as cited by (Zuraida et al., 2023) revealed that the TOEFL test provided a comprehensive measurement of English language skills needed as a key function of success in the academic environment. That way, success in the TOEFL test was one indicator of a student's readiness when they wanted to pursue education abroad.

Indonesia itself had also conducted this test as a measuring tool for the ability of a student who would continue their education to higher education, and for students, it was also required to take the TOEFL test as a condition for graduation in college, and this test had to be attended by all students who would graduate. Likewise, students at the University HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar who required all students who would to graduate had to take the TOEFL test as one of the graduation requirements. For sixth-semester students at the University HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, there was a TOEFL course also in the requirements to graduate from the sixth semester. This TOEFL test was a compulsory course attended by all sixth-semester students as a means of measuring their ability to understand English. For sixth-semester students, facing the TOEFL test was one of the challenges that was quite difficult for them, especially in the listening, reading, and structure sections, due to a lack of vocabulary, understanding of grammar, and lack of practice—internal factors such as anxiety so that their anxiety hindered them in understanding and mastering each test item. Students were also less effective in managing their time in working on their test question, they spent more time answering difficult questions so that they lacked time in answering the next questions, so students needed to prepare themselves for the test by planning a good and effective preparation strategy so that they could easily get the satisfactory scores. With a high TOEFL score, it was a good achievement in learning English and could also be a great opportunity for students and job applicants who required applicants to show TOEFL test results.

To get maximum test results, students had to be careful in planning a strategy that would help doing the test. Strategy was one of the factors that had to be prepared by students who wanted to take the TOEFL test, and was one of the opportunities for students to achieve maximum score results. That way students had to be careful in preparing a strategy in taking the TOEFL test, students were required to had an effective strategy in increasing their knowledge in English. Brown (2004, p. 113) as cited by Amaliah (2021) argued that a foreign language learning strategy was one of the tactics or actions that students could use in helping the language learning process. The right strategy could accelerate the achievement of language competence, especially in the TOEFL test Oxford (1990, p. 8) as cited by Munzaki (2018), stated that with the right strategy design, students easily managed effective study time, understood the items, and were able to answer a test at hand. Cohen (1998, p. 5) as cited by (Hindayati et al., 2021) also emphasized that an effective strategy came from the awareness of the students themselves, who would know their strengths and weaknesses in dealing with various types of TOEFL questions. In this case, Chamot and O'Malley (1994, p. 61) as cited by Nisa, F (2020) categorized strategies into three, namely metacognitive strategies (planning and monitoring), cognitive strategies (direct activity on learning materials), and question-effective strategies (social interaction and emotional management). The three types of strategies were relevant to be applied in TOEFL test preparation.

Careful preparation of strategies will showed how much students understood English and their ability to apply their knowledge in the academic field. But even of sixth-semester at University HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar admitted that they did not had a systematic learning strategy in facing TOEFL. They often found it difficult to understand the structure of the questions, especially in the listening and structure sections, and felt that the preparation time was too short before the prediction TOEFL test. This has an impact on the low TOEFL score obtained and caused students to not pass the selection of advanced programs or overseas scholarships. This phenomenon showed that students' learning strategies were still not directed, and there were not many studies that explored how students prepared themselves in real terms for the TOEFL test, especially from the aspect of individual strategies and challenges. Thus, based on these problems, the researcher conducted to examine of the

preparation strategies of sixth-semester students at the University HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, who will took the TOEFL test in the even semester at 2024/2025 academic year, the type of TOEFL test used in University HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar was Paper-Based Test.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Analysis**

Analysis was the process of describing or examining in depth a problem or object of study to understand its structure, the relationship between its parts, and its meaning as a whole. In the context of this research, analysis referred to the assessment of learning strategies used by students in preparing for the TOEFL test. Creswell (2014, p. 183-185) as cited by (Farig et al., 2022) stated that analysis was a process that involved breaking down data to find patterns, themes, and meanings, which helped a study understand the context and relationships between variables in the study.

### **Strategy**

A strategy was a systematic plan or approach designed to achieve a specific goal. In an educational context, strategies were ways or techniques used by individuals to learn effectively. Strategies in this study referred to the tactics that students employ to improve their English language skills. Mayer (2011, p. 30-32) as cited by (Lubis et al., 2024) stated that a strategy was a systematic plan to achieve learning objectives. he asserted that effective strategies could improve understanding and retention of information.

### **Learning Strategies**

Strategies were techniques or ways used by students in strengthening understanding and mastery of a material or lesson, in the context of English, in preparing for the TOEFL test. These strategies could include cognitive strategies (such as memorizing vocabulary and practicing questions), metacognitive strategies (such as planning time in learning and self-evaluation), and social strategies (such as discussing with friends or even teachers). TOEFL test. According to Oxford (1990, p. 1-3) as cited by Munzaki (2018) language learning strategies consisted of cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective strategies. In this study, the focus was on learning strategies applied by students in facing the TOEFL.

### **Preparation**

Preparation referred to the whole process that students underwent before taking the TOEFL test. This preparation included student learning resources, student study time management, following special training, and an independent learning activity that aimed to increase student confidence in taking the TOEFL test. Smith (2005, p. 45-47) as cited by (Manaf et al., 2020) stated that good preparation included mastery of material, time management, and structured practice. Effective preparation could improve students' confidence and performance in the exam.

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

TOEFL was an international standardized test that aimed to measure a person's level of understanding of English as a foreign language. This test included four skills that exist in English, such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Philips (2001, p. 13) as cited by Hikmah (2024) satated that this test was used to assess the English language skills of those who wanted to continue their education in universities that required students to speak English, In the context of this research, TOEFL was a measuring tool and evaluation language that could be used to see the extent to which students' strategies and preparation had an impact on their TOEFL test results.

## **METHOD**

This study applied a descriptive qualitative design since the data were in the form of spoken utterances rather than numbers. The purpose of this method was to describe and interpret conversational implicatures as they occurred naturally in communication without statistical calculation. The subject of this research was The Ellen DeGeneres Talk Show episode featuring Barack Obama, chosen because it contains authentic and spontaneous conversational exchanges between the host and the guest. The object of the research was the utterances in the talk show that contained conversational implicatures, either generalized or particularized. In this study, the researcher acted as the main instrument, while supporting instruments included transcripts, video recordings, and a laptop to help collect and analyze the data. The data collection technique used was documentation. The researcher

downloaded and repeatedly watched the episode, transcribed the conversation, and then identified utterances that indicated implicatures. The technique of analyzing data was based on Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature. The researcher followed the steps of Miles and Huberman's model, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting only the relevant utterances; data display consisted of organizing them into tables for clarity; and conclusion drawing was carried out by interpreting whether the implicatures were generalized or particularized.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In this section, the researcher presents the overall findings of the study, along with the results of the analysis that the researcher distributed to 30 students at University HKBP Nommensen in Pematangsiantar as they prepared for the TOEFL test. In this section, the researcher connects the findings with relevant theories and previous research findings:

- a. Based on the data analysis presented in the previous section, among the three strategies discussed, the most dominant strategy used by students is the metacognitive strategy. In the questionnaires responses, students predominantly gave positive feedback on this strategy, followed by the cognitive strategy and the social-affective strategy. In the metacognitive analysis results, most students predominantly engage in planning to create a systematic and organized learning process. Students also show positive responses in scheduling their studies and were able to conduct self-evaluations of their learning process, followed by the cognitive strategy, which predominantly receives positive responses in the areas of vocabulary memorization, repeated practice of questions, and regularly reading articles in English. Meanwhile, social-affective strategies were relatively less prominent, due to the highly varied responses from students. However, the dominant positive responses were in addressing student anxiety and support from the environment in preparing for the TOEFL test.
- b. By looking at the relationship between the strategies used by students and the scores they obtained, it can be seen that students who used a balanced combination of these three strategies obtained higher scores than other students, who only dominated their responses with one type of strategy without combining it with other strategies.
- c. By examining the questionnaires results and their correlation with the scores obtained by the students, it was found that the majority of students tend to use consistent and varied learning strategies. Respondents with high scores were found to use a combination of all three strategies while maintaining the consistency of their learning. Meanwhile, respondents with lower scores did not use an effective combination of strategies and had irregular study schedules. The results indicate that the effective strategies used by students in preparing for the TORFL test were a combination of metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies.
- d. From the questionnaires analysis, some common obstacles faced by students in preparing for the TOEFL exam include limited study time due to busy class schedules and other activities, difficulty understanding fast-paced listening passages, limited academic vocabulary, excessive anxiety before the exam, and limited access to quality TOEFL practice resources. Students with lower TOEFL scores generally report difficulties in maintaining consistent study motivation and feel less confident when doing practice exercises, especially in the listening and reading sections. These challenges affect the quality of their preparation and ultimately impact the exam results they achieve.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this research were related to the learning strategy theory presented by Cohen (1998) and Chamot & O'Malley (1994), which states that effective learning strategies were those that use a combination of three strategies, namely metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies. Cohen stated that successful language learners typically had a high level of self-awareness in their learning process, were able to plan effective learning steps, monitor their learning performance, and evaluate the results achieved during the learning process. These components were part of the metacognitive strategy, which was found to be the most dominant in this research. Meanwhile, Chamot & O'Malley emphasize that the cognitive strategies are effective when practicing repetitive exercises, applying material in real-world contexts, and managing learning resources that support the learning process. The findings of this research provide empirical evidence that combining these learning strategies could produce better performance in preparing for the TOEFL test. Research conducted by Pramesti (2023) also supports this statement, where in her study, students were also very active in using metacognitive strategies and



showed better results in the TOEFL reading section. In line with the findings of Fitria (2024), who showed in her research that mastering skimming and scanning techniques in cognitive strategies can improve students' reading accuracy and speed on TOEFL test questions. Management *et al.* (2022) also found that social support and motivation can increase students' confidence in taking the TOEFL test. In this study, the researcher also presented the results of an analysis of the TOEFL scores of the respondents. From the data obtained, the students achieved varying scores, with the lowest score being 40 and the highest being 78. The analysis revealed that the varying scores were due to the different strategies used by the students. When examining the strategies, students who used all three strategies achieved the highest and best scores, while those with lower scores did so because they did not combine the strategies effectively and did not prepare adequately for the TOEFL test. Based on the findings of the above researcher, this study provides a clear picture of the learning strategies used by sixth-semester students at University HKBP Nommensen in Pematangsiantar to prepare for the TOEFL test, along with the correlation between the strategies used by students and the scores they achieved. Through a qualitative descriptive analysis of 15 questionnaires, it was found that the three learning strategies—metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective—were used in varying proportions, with the metacognitive strategy receiving the most dominant positive responses. The data on the scores obtained by the students showed that students who applied planned, focused, and diverse learning strategies tended to achieve better results compared to students who relied on only one type of strategy and lacked consistency in their learning planning.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis conducted by researcher on 30 sixth semester students at University HKBP Nommensen in Pematangsiantar, researcher can conclude that the dominant students used the three learning strategy categories proposed by Cohen (1998) and Chamot & O'Malley (1990), the three strategies as; metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social-affective strategies, with the intensity they use vary greatly. In metacognitive strategies, students dominantly use strategies by the organizing a regular learning plan, evaluating the learning progress that had been applied, all of which unconsciously students had shown self-awareness in preparing for the TOEFL test. In cognitive strategies, students apply it by the processing the material to be studied, conducting a simulation test with practice questions in strengthening understanding of the test material. While social-affective strategies help students in overcoming students' anxiety in facing the TOEFL test, as well as a support from the people closest to students. Although its use is relatively low compared to the other two strategies. This finding shows a tendency that students who consistently apply learning strategies with these three strategies. The most dominant strategy used by the students is the metacognitive strategy followed by the cognitive strategies occupying the second position and the last is the social-affective strategy. This also showed the view of learning strategy theory that the effectiveness of preparation depends not only on the amount of study time, but also on the quality and diversity of strategies used.

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