



## A PORTRAIT OF TEACHERS IN TEACHING TOEFL READING

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to design a TOEFL preparation program for the Rhetorica Class of St. Paulus Minor Seminary Palembang, aimed at improving reading skills essential for post-high school education and English proficiency in today's disruptive era. The program, which lasted for 7 days, involved 27 seminarians and integrated lectures, exercises, tests, and discussions. It included pre- and post-tests to measure progress, along with a questionnaire to gather feedback. The reading skills targeted were main idea identification, text organization, direct and indirect question answering. Results showed a significant improvement, as evidenced by a higher score in the post-test compared to the pre-test. Inference statistics revealed a significance value of 0.005, indicating meaningful change. The questionnaire results confirmed that the program effectively supported TOEFL reading skills development. This study offers insights for improving TOEFL preparation programs in seminaries and similar institutions, emphasizing structured training methods to enhance reading skills and test-taking strategies. The originality of this research lies in its focus on seminarians and its empirical evidence of the positive impact of tailored, short-term TOEFL training on their English proficiency.

**Keywords:** *Reading skills, Main idea, Portrait, TOEFL, Teaching*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

St. Paulus Minor Seminary Palembang serves as an educational and formative institution for future priests within the Archdiocese of Palembang. The educational program at this seminary is comparable to high school education, with an additional year of advanced studies following the first three years of high school. The seminary offers a four-year curriculum: Gramatica for 10th grade, Syntaxis for 11th grade, Poecis for 12th grade, and Rhetorica, the advanced level for one year. According to Formatio's Handbook (2014), the seminary's vision focuses on the balanced development of seminarians in four key areas: Sanctitas (sanctity), Sanitas (sanity), Scientia (knowledge), and Socialitas (sociality). This vision aims to guide seminarians toward becoming mature human and Christian individuals in their response to God's calling.

Rhetorica, as the final stage in the formation process, is designed to further develop seminarians in these four areas. It is structured to prepare them for higher seminary education, which is more advanced than high school-level learning. As a result, there are significant differences between the high school curriculum and the expectations at the university level, requiring seminarians to achieve personal maturity and undergo optimal self-development to address the challenges of an ever-changing world.

Seminarians from Rhetorica class are required to be able to develop academically. One of the academic fields that need to be developed is English language skills, especially in dealing with the TOEFL later in college. The Test of English as a

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Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a well-developed test of English language skills.

The English language proficiency test, TOEFL, was initially introduced by the National Council of Testing English as a Foreign Language in 1963 and gradually developed throughout the 20th century (Brown, 2004). Over more than 30 years, the test has evolved in terms of form, format, and purpose, which has contributed to its credibility as a standardized test. Since its inception, the TOEFL format has undergone three significant changes, shifting from paper-based (Paper-Based Test) to computer-based (Computer-Based Test) and finally to internet-based testing (Internet-Based Test) (Hill & Liu, 2012).

In Indonesia, TOEFL is now a familiar term, often pronounced as /tofel/, /tufel/, or /toufel/. The test has become a common requirement for many educational and business institutions, and anyone wishing to join these institutions is expected to take the test. According to Liu (2014), over 8,000 institutions globally use TOEFL, and millions of people worldwide take the test. For example, students are typically required to achieve a certain TOEFL score before graduating from college to demonstrate their English proficiency. The primary purpose of TOEFL is to assess the English skills of non-native speakers (ETS, 2001; Benedick, 2021)

Given the significant role of TOEFL in society, various programs have been developed to improve English skills in preparation for the test, known as TOEFL Preparation Programs. These programs generally focus on three areas: 1) test-taking orientation to familiarize participants with test procedures, 2) coaching to help students become accustomed to test questions, and 3) cognitive skill training to enhance overall test-taking abilities (Anastasi, 1981).

TOEFL can be administered in two methods: paper-based and computer-assisted formats. The paper-based test consists of three sections: listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading

comprehension. The listening comprehension section includes 50 questions to be answered in 35 minutes, assessing the ability to understand spoken English through various recordings. The structure and written expression section comprises 40 multiple-choice questions to be completed in 25 minutes, testing grammar and sentence structure recognition. The reading comprehension section includes 50 questions to be completed in 55 minutes, focusing on understanding texts and identifying the main idea and word meanings.

Observations of Rhetorica students, along with interviews with English teachers, revealed that reading skills were a major challenge for students. Many students showed a lack of interest in reading during their high school years, which raised concerns about their ability to pass the TOEFL when pursuing university studies. This article focuses on exploring the implementation of the TOEFL reading preparation, the outcomes of the program, and students' personal feedback regarding the preparation.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Frameworks in Reading Instruction

A thorough understanding of reading comprehension in the context of TOEFL is grounded in key theoretical frameworks, particularly Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading (Marhaeni, 2016), which stresses the dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. This theory supports teaching approaches that guide students in identifying main ideas and organizing the content of passages, fostering a deeper, more meaningful connection with the text (Grabe, 2009; Sari & Wardhani, 2020; Center, 2020; Muhtar et al., 2021; Tristiana et al., 2024). Furthermore, Schema Theory, proposed by Anderson and Pearson (1984), underscores the significance of prior knowledge in the comprehension process. It suggests that

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activating students' existing knowledge before engaging in reading tasks is crucial for enhancing their ability to understand main ideas and structure within passages (Nassaji, 2002; Carter, 2023).

**Instructional Strategies for Main Idea Identification**

Identifying the main idea is crucial for achieving success in TOEFL reading, as many questions are centered around this skill (Belouiza, Er-Rechydy, & Koumachi, 2024; Almulla, 2020; Rao, 2019). Effective teaching strategies include emphasizing topic sentences, key phrases, and encouraging students to summarize paragraphs. Philips (2003) suggests that skimming techniques can be particularly helpful in quickly identifying the main idea of a passage. A study at UIN Ar-Raniry highlighted that students often face challenges with this skill due to low motivation and insufficient background knowledge (Raihana, 2022). To improve comprehension, teachers can support students by training them to recognize organizational patterns within texts and using targeted exercises focused on common question types (Nobutoshi, 2023; Boudah, 2018; Lesiana et al., 2023).

**Passage Organization and Comprehension**

Understanding how ideas are structured within a passage is vital for success in TOEFL reading. Xiao (2016) points out that grasping organizational patterns enables students to link ideas between paragraphs more effectively. Teachers can improve comprehension by utilizing graphic organizers or outlines to visually map out the structure of information. A recent study published in the *Journal of English Education* found that providing explicit instruction on passage organization significantly boosted students' ability to correctly answer related questions (Fitria, 2024). This suggests that integrating organizational strategies into lessons can

enhance students' performance on TOEFL reading tasks.

**Question Types: Directly and Indirectly Answered Questions**

Effective TOEFL preparation requires understanding direct and indirect questions, with the latter needing inference from context. Many students struggle with indirect questions due to limited inferencing skills (Fitria, 2024). Teachers can address this by using targeted exercises, such as practicing inference-based answers and teaching keywords to help locate information, thereby improving student confidence and performance.

**Barriers to Effective Reading Instruction**

Barriers to effective TOEFL reading instruction include time management issues and lack of motivation, as identified by Muna Raihana (2018). To overcome these obstacles, teachers should adapt their instructional approaches by incorporating time management training and fostering supportive classroom environments to alleviate test anxiety (Fadilah et al., 2023; Fitriyah & Jannah, 2021). Research indicates that a positive learning atmosphere encourages student engagement and active participation in reading tasks, ultimately enhancing their performance.

**2. METHODS**

This community service project employed a descriptive design with both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative approach aimed to explore how the TOEFL reading preparation was implemented in the classroom (Creswell, 2012; Fraenkel et al., 2014). The preparation structure was adapted from Anastasi (1981) and included three stages: lecturing for test-taking orientation, coaching for test items, and training for problem-solving. The quantitative approach focused on two main aspects: the pre- and post-test results and the

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participants' responses. The data were collected using tests and questionnaires.

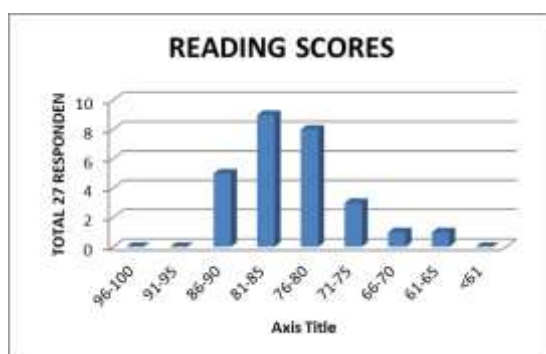
The program, which lasted for 7 days and involved 27 seminarians, included lectures, exercises, tests, and discussions. It was structured with pre- and post-tests at the beginning and end. In addition to the tests, participants were given questionnaires to provide feedback on the program and its process.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Results

The results presented are primarily divided into three categories: the preparation program design, the TOEFL reading test results, and the questionnaire feedback. The program design focused on four key skills: identifying main ideas, understanding reading organization, answering direct questions, and answering indirect questions. Over the course of 4 out of the 7 days, the 27 participants were guided through lectures on test-taking strategies, coaching on test items, and training on problem-solving techniques.

The second result pertains to the test outcomes. The reading test was administered to assess the participants' progress in the material covered. Of the various reading skills taught—main ideas, direct questions, indirect questions, vocabulary, and making inferences/conclusions—the following are the results of the reading test.



**Figure 1.** Reading TOEFL test results

Although none of the participants scored above 90, out of a total of 27

participants who took the reading test, 33% of participants scored 81 to 85. Meanwhile, 30% of participants scored in the range of 76 to 80. 19% of participants were between 86 and 90. Only a few of the total participants scored between 71 and 75 (11%). Meanwhile, each of the 3% participants had an achievement score between 66-70 and 61-65.

To find out how the seminarians' English proficiency, especially TOEFL, was held in this activity, pre-test and post-test were also held. The results of the overall pre and post tests showed an increase in the average score, from 409 to 429. However, it appears that some seminarians showed a decrease in scores when compared between the pretest and post test scores.

**Table 1.** Pre- and Post-Test average score

	Pre Test	Post Test
<b>Average Score</b>	409.7	429.6

To draw feedback on reading skills improvement activities from participants, the team distributed questionnaires. The questionnaire submitted via google form contains seven questions which are divided into six closed questions and one open question. Six closed questions related to topics, materials, delivery techniques, forms of activities, principles of benefit, and interest in holding other similar activities. While one question is open to see general responses and suggestions from participants.

Regarding the topic, 61% of participants agreed that the topic was suitable for their needs, and 36% of participants strongly agreed with the topic presented. However, one participant (3%) strongly disagreed with the topic presented.

## Topic and Focus: Preparation Program

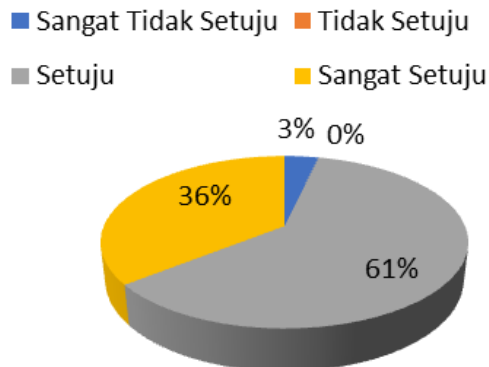


Figure 2. Feedbacks on topic and focus

From a total of 28 participants, 68% of participants agreed that the materials or materials, such as the contents of the slides, displays, illustrations or examples, which were delivered during the activity were interesting, practical, and easy to accept. This positive response was reinforced by 32% of participants who stated they strongly agreed with the material.

## Materials

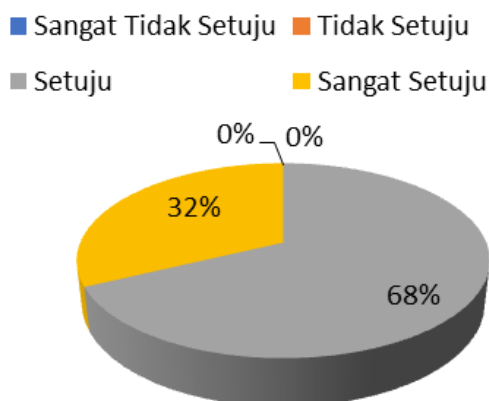


Figure 3. Feedbacks on materials

Regarding the technique of presenting the material and the reading test, 36% of the total participants strongly agree

that the technique and delivery of the material is clear and orderly. Most of the participants – 64% - agreed with the techniques used during the activity.

## Delivery

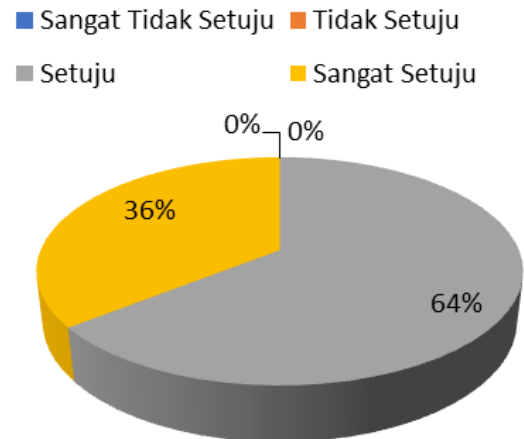


Figure 4. Feedbacks on delivery techniques

Although the activities are carried out online, in general, the form of devotional activities with reading material can be followed by participants well. 61% of participants agree with the form of the activity, and 39% of participants express strongly agree.

## Program Design

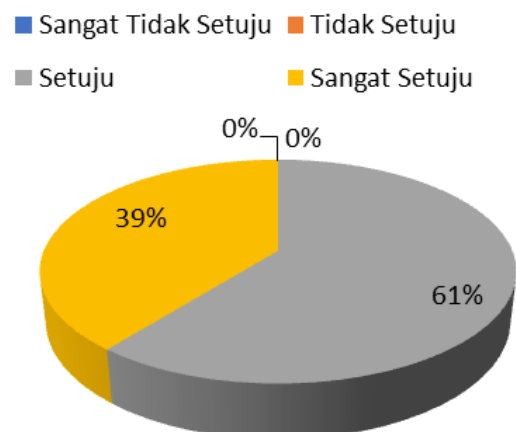
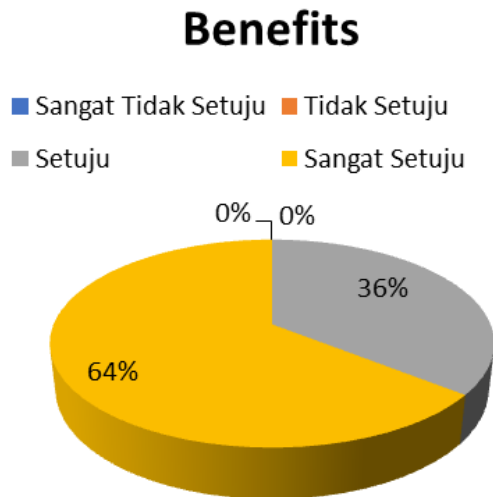


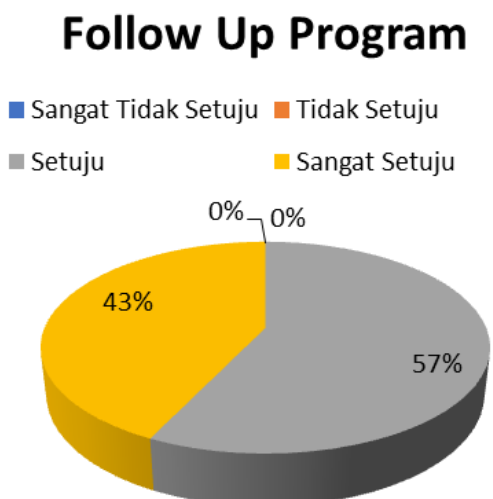
Figure 5. Feedbacks on (overall) program design

In line with the positive response to the topic and material presented, judging from the principle of the usefulness of the material presented, 64% of participants agreed that this reading training activity was beneficial for them. While 36% of participants strongly agreed with the perceived benefits of the activity.



**Figure 6.** Feedbacks on benefits of program

For the continuity of the collaboration with partners, the team felt it was important to see the responses from the participants regarding other similar activities that could be held. All participants agreed that there would be other similar activities. In fact, 43% of the total participants stated that they strongly agreed if other similar activities were held with useful topics and materials.



**Figure 7.** Feedbacks on follow up program

**Discussions**

The results presented earlier show a strong alignment between the questionnaire responses and the TOEFL test outcomes. For instance, positive feedback on topics, materials, the usefulness of the principles, and the interest in participating in similar activities highlight that knowledge of techniques for answering reading comprehension questions is crucial for participants, particularly as they continue their studies in higher education. This aligns with research by Girsang, Marbun, Turnip, and Saragih (2019), which found that, despite the challenges many students face with reading, it is considered a critical skill for mastering.

In terms of the methods and activities used, combining lectures, training, mentoring, and testing within a single program was seen as beneficial for the participants. Research by Samad, Jannah, and Fitriani (2017) and Girsang et al. (2019) supports this approach, highlighting that familiarizing participants with reading questions through exercises, tests, and discussions improves their ability to tackle reading questions and increases their motivation.

Participants expressed a strong desire for similar activities in the future, especially with more engaging topics. The positive average scores at the end of the session also indicated that the program effectively enhanced participants' understanding of how to answer TOEFL reading questions. According to Nazri, Nainurrahman, and Wijaya (2020), frequent training helps students develop strategies for tackling TOEFL reading questions.

Finally, statistical analysis of the pretest and posttest results revealed a strong positive correlation of 0.773 between the two variables, indicating a significant relationship.

**Table 2.** Paired samples correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Pre_test & Post_test	26	.773	.000

The significance value (2-tailed) was 0.005 ( $< 0.05$ ). So that the results of the initial test and the final test experienced a significant (meaningful) change. Based on descriptive statistics, the initial test and the final test proved to be higher in the final test.

**Table 3.** Paired samples test

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Paired Sample 1	Pre_test - Post_test	-3.048	25	.005

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The training focused on essential reading skills, including identifying main ideas, understanding organizational structure, answering direct questions, and addressing indirect questions. The core structure of the TOEFL reading preparation involved lectures on test-taking strategies, coaching with test items, and problem-solving training. According to descriptive statistics, the final test scores were higher than the initial test scores. Inferential statistics revealed a significant change, with a p-value of 0.005 ( $< 0.05$ ), indicating a meaningful improvement between the initial and final tests. The questionnaire results confirmed that the activity was well-executed and successfully facilitated the reading learning process for TOEFL preparation.

In practice, all participants were able to engage in the activities effectively. However, there are areas that need further development to ensure the sustainability of

the program. First, seminarians should continue to engage in TOEFL training as it will be crucial for their future academic pursuits. With their familiarity with the digital world, various media can be utilized to support their learning. Second, seminary tutors or staff should consider developing additional English language proficiency training to further improve seminarians' language abilities.

This study found that a well-designed TOEFL reading preparation program significantly improved seminarians' reading skills, as reflected in both the test results and participants' positive feedback. The combination of lectures, coaching, and problem-solving training proved to be an effective approach.

The findings highlight the importance of targeted TOEFL preparation for seminarians, especially as they transition to higher education. This training can provide them with essential skills needed to succeed academically. The study also suggests that leveraging digital resources and continuous language proficiency training can support sustainable learning.

Future research could focus on exploring the long-term effects of TOEFL preparation on seminarians' academic performance in university settings. Additionally, it would be beneficial to investigate the impact of integrating other language skills, such as speaking and writing, into TOEFL preparation programs. Further studies could also examine the use of digital platforms and multimedia tools in enhancing TOEFL preparation for seminarians and other student groups.

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