



How Indonesian Polytechnic Students Navigate TOEFL's Demands

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Abstract

Indonesian Polytechnics' implementation of the TOEFL as a graduation requirement highlights issues between the demands of global employability and the fairness of vocational education. While previous research has criticized standardized testing in higher education, the present research addresses an essential gap in investigating its implications in technical education, where English language proficiency is supplementary to the skills that are practiced in vocational education. This qualitative case study explores polytechnic students' perceptions of the role, issues, and benefits of TOEFL test as a graduation requirement. Data were collected using questionnaires ($n=60$) and semi-structured interviews ($n=10$) at a single Serang-Banten Polytechnic, and thematically analyzed to take into account how institutional policy intersects with students' academic and career trajectories. Findings suggest that 72% of the students pragmatically endorsed TOEFL as a career necessity, driven by market demands. However, systemic limitations, such as content mismatch, inadequate infrastructure, and socioeconomic inequality, reduced performance and increased exam anxiety. In particular, 60% struggled with grammar and vocabulary, while 55% reported hearing unfamiliar accents in listening sections. Despite challenges, 89% identified the benefits of TOEFL, such as the acquisition of metacognitive skills and job prospects. The study contributes new insights by situating high-stakes testing in vocational studies, countering homogenized discourses of EFL learners. The study calls for context-sensitive language policies that mediate global standards and local contexts. This research hopes to educate policymakers and educators interested in balancing employability objectives with inclusive pedagogies in Indonesia's technical education sector.

INTRODUCTION

Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) has been a benchmark for language testing in general, and in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings in particular, whose institutions use its scores as central to determining academic preparedness and linguistic competence (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2021). Worldwide, TOEFL is not just a university



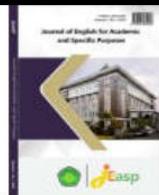
admission requirement but also a predictor of students' English-medium academic performance (Curle et al., 2020). In Indonesia, where English proficiency is still one of the most important competencies to be employable in the job market as well as internationally competitive, TOEFL has been made an integral graduation requirement in most higher education institutions, including polytechnics (Anggraini & Sari, 2023; Ginanjar & Rizkyanfi, 2021). In this case, one of the Serang-Banten polytechnics requires a TOEFL score of 450 and higher as a requirement for graduation, which aligns with a wider national movement of streamlining vocational education with global language norms (Indrawati & Kuncoro, 2021). The policy has, however, been controversial regarding its influence and consequence on the academic advancement of students, specifically in technical and applied learning environments (Mahmud, 2014).

Polytechnic education, focused on applied competencies and job readiness, highly values industry-relevant skills. In Indonesia's globalizing economy, English language ability is no longer a luxury but a requirement for polytechnic graduates, who will need to deal with international technical standards, use sophisticated equipment with English-language manuals, and interact in multinational work environments (Setyorini, 2017; Shin, 2016). TOEFL as an indicator of academic English competence acts as a gatekeeper to these opportunities. Additionally, English language proficiency is included in acquiring state-of-the-art technical knowledge. English is used to develop the majority of engineering and technology resources, such as software, research articles, and instructional modules (MacKenzie, 2014; Sung, 2013). For polytechnic students, reading and being able to implement the aforementioned materials has a direct influence on their technical skills and innovativeness. As Prasetya (2023) explained, Indonesian technical professionals indicated that English proficiency helped them in solving problems with equipment based on international standards and following international training courses, thus advancing their careers.

The Indonesian government's vocational education reform agenda adds to the growing significance of TOEFL. As part of the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) policy, polytechnics are urged to graduate technically skilled yet internationally competitive graduates (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). TOEFL scores therefore serve as a measurable indicator to ensure that graduates are able to achieve these twin objectives. Yet, this policy also raises concerns of equity, since students from disadvantaged or rural areas are less likely to be exposed to quality English education and test prep centers (Alek et al., 2019; Zuhrayana, 2018).

Student attitudes towards TOEFL as a requirement for graduation are complex. On one hand, proponents believe that standardized testing promotes responsibility and motivation. Researches (Dalimunte et al., 2025; Permatasari et al., 2024; Rifiyanti et al., 2023) discovered that methodical preparation for TOEFL greatly enhanced students' grammatical accuracy and reading proficiency, skills essential to academic and professional achievement. Similarly, Wait & Gressel (2009) identified that students with higher TOEFL scores felt greater confidence in job interviews and workplace communication, corroborating research by Arkoudis et al. (2009), who credited English proficiency as being responsible for career growth in competitive job market. Such gains are in line with human capital theory, which upholds that language expertise enhances employability and socioeconomic development (Caromawati, S.S., M.A, 2017; Munandar, 2019).

On the other hand, there are also allegations of systemic injustices and psychologic burdens of TOEFL requirements. Mahmud (2014) showed that Indonesian students failed to pass institutional TOEFL cut-offs because of poor high school English backgrounds and unequal access to quality test preparation. This agrees with general complaints about standardized testing in EFL contexts, where socioeconomic inequalities skew outcomes



(Gunantar & Rosaria, 2023). In addition, successive failures in tests can reinforce anxiety and demotivation, as Kim (2018) similarly noted in the case of South Korean high-stakes language testing, and reduce learners' self-efficacy. In Indonesia, we find the same patterns too: A study conducted by Munandar (2019) found that students saw TOEFL requirements as "a barrier rather than a bridge," especially when institutional support for language learning was seen as lacking.

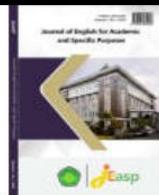
Existing literature supports these dichotomies. Barnes (2016) investigated the "washback effect" of TOEFL, which revealed that students became more involved in rote memorization of test-taking strategies, and lecturers changed pedagogy toward "teaching to the test" at the cost of communicative competence. The above phenomenon is similar to international concerns with the narrowing of curricula under high-stakes testing regimes (Cheng et al., 2015; Hall, 2017). A number of researches (Azhari et al., 2020; Bilal et al., 2024; Masfufah, 2018) also situated these tensions in that students found TOEFL requirements to be an institutional barrier, as much as a stimulus, based on their incoming language background and socioeconomic status.

Notwithstanding these advances, basic gaps remain. First, previous studies rely heavily on investigations involving typical university undergraduates with less attention to unique challenges for polytechnic students whose program structure prioritizes technical competence over liberal studies (Suharno et al., 2020). Second, methodological limitations are common: Most scholars depend only on quantitative questionnaires, without considering qualitative insights that might be revealed through a case study approach.

In order to fill in these gaps, this case study investigates students' perceptions of TOEFL as a graduation requirement at a polytechnic university in Serang-Banten. In contrast to larger-scale surveys, a case study provides an opportunity for close investigation of contextual influences on students' experiences, including institutional policies, pedagogical practices, and socioeconomic constraints (Merriam, 2022). By integrating questionnaire analysis of the with semi-structured interviews, the research herein takes account of students' lived experience in addressing TOEFL requirements. In doing so, the research takes heed of the contention by Creswell & Creswell (2017) that case studies are especially apt to reveal intricate interactions of policy and practice in precise educational contexts. This research offers an insight into how the demands of TOEFL impact the future studies and careers of polytechnic students, shaping more inclusive language policy. Theoretically, it adds to scholarship on high-stakes testing in vocational education, an area often marginalized in favor of more general academic contexts (Billett, 2011).

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to investigate polytechnic students' perceptions of TOEFL as a graduation requirement. A case study is defined as an empirical inquiry that examines a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2017). This approach is appropriate for exploring the complexities of students' perceptions, as it allows for an in-depth, context-specific understanding of how institutional policies interact with individual experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The case is limited by the setting of a single polytechnic institution in Serang-Banten, Indonesia, where TOEFL is mandated for graduation, providing a focused lens to analyze localized challenges and attitudes. The total population of final-year students at the polytechnic is 266, distributed across four study programs: Secretary, Informatics Management, Accounting and Tax Accounting. From this population, 60 students were selected



as participants. The rationale for selecting students from diverse disciplines lies in capturing a holistic view of perceptions influenced by varying academic demands and career trajectories. For instance, Informatics Management Program may prioritize English for Information Technology, while accounting programs may emphasize communication skills for global commerce. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific criteria: (1) enrollment in their final year, (2) prior attempts at the TOEFL test, and (3) proximity to fulfilling graduation requirements. Purposive sampling ensures the inclusion of information-rich cases that are most relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). By targeting students actively engaged with the TOEFL requirement, this method enhances the credibility of findings related to their lived experiences and challenges (Tisdell et al., 2025).

Data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, triangulating methods to strengthen validity (Flick, 2022). The questionnaire, adapted and modified from Shih (2013) study on English benchmark perceptions, comprised 16 items divided into three categories. Items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to quantify students' attitudes. The questionnaire was distributed via a Google Form link shared through WhatsApp groups, a platform familiar to students, ensuring accessibility and higher response rates. To complement the quantitative data and mitigate the risk of superficial or misleading responses (Cohen et al., 2017), 10 students were interviewed face-to-face using open-ended questions. The interview protocol explored themes which were the perceptions, benefits and challenges. Interviews lasted 10–15 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study investigated polytechnic students' perceptions of TOEFL as a graduation requirement, the challenges they encountered, and the benefits they derived from the policy. The findings reveal a connection between institutional objectives, student preparedness, and the socio-academic implications of high-stakes language testing in vocational education. In this section, the results are discussed thematically and supported by questionnaire and interview data, and also contextualized within language policy and standardized testing.

Students' Perception of TOEFL as a Graduation Requirement

Table 1 below presents the attitudes of 60 polytechnic students towards the TOEFL as a graduation requirement, as brought out in a standardized questionnaire through the use of a 5-point Likert scale. Results include the levels of agreement among students on major dimensions.

No	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	TOEFL should be used as a graduation requirement.	20.00%	51.67%	15.00%	10.00%	3.33%
2	The policy of TOEFL as a requirement provides benefits.	18.33%	46.67%	20.00%	11.67%	3.33%
3	TOEFL motivates me to learn English.	25.00%	40.00%	18.33%	13.33%	3.33%
4	The minimum TOEFL score (450) is too high.	5.00%	15.00%	20.00%	41.67%	18.33%
5	TOEFL is a difficult test.	35.00%	25.00%	20.00%	15.00%	5.00%

The finding revealed that majority of students (72%) supported TOEFL as a graduation requirement, viewing it as a necessary benchmark for academic and professional success. This aligns with global trends where standardized English tests are increasingly institutionalized to ensure graduates meet global employability standards (Jenkins & Leung, 2019; Zainuddin et al.,



2019). Notably, 65% of respondents agreed that the policy enhanced their English proficiency, reflecting the “washback effect” of high-stakes testing, where institutional mandates drive learning behaviors (Barnes, 2016; Caromawati, S.S., M.A, 2017). For instance, one interviewee stated:

“TOEFL forced me to study English systematically. I now practice grammar daily, which I never did before.”

However, 60% of students found TOEFL “difficult,” primarily due to unfamiliar reading topics and rapid speech in listening sections. This mirrors findings by Mahmud (2014), who noted that students in Indonesia often lack exposure to academic English genres, such as scientific articles or humanities-based passages common in TOEFL. One student explained:

“The reading section included topics like Renaissance art. How is that relevant to my field? I couldn’t connect with the content, so I guessed the answers.”

This disconnect highlights a critical gap between TOEFL’s academic focus and polytechnic curricula, which prioritize technical vocabulary over interdisciplinary literacy (Widodo, 2016). While the test aims to measure general English proficiency, its content often alienates vocational learners, exacerbating anxiety and disengagement (Zhou et al., 2023).

Positively, 70% of students suggested that the minimum score of 450 “appropriate,” describing it as a “baseline standard” for employability. As one Accounting student noted:

“Companies and even government’s institution here require TOEFL scores. Even if I struggle, 450 is the price of entry.”

This acceptance reflects the internalization of institutional benchmarks as career prerequisites, even when personally challenging, a phenomenon observed in studies linking test compliance to perceived labor market advantages (Li et al., 2022; Terasawa, 2024).

Challenges Experienced by Students

Students faced challenges across TOEFL sections (Table 2), revealing issues in both test design and pedagogical preparation.

Table 2: Challenges Faced by Students in TOEFL Sections

No	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	The sound quality during the TOEFL listening test was poor.	25.00%	30.00%	20.00%	15.00%	10.00%
2	The speakers’ accents in the listening section were difficult to understand.	20.00%	28.33%	25.00%	20.00%	6.67%
3	I struggled with understanding implied meanings in listening dialogues.	15.00%	20.00%	30.00%	25.00%	10.00%
4	I found the grammar rules (e.g., subject-verb agreement) in the structure section confusing.	31.67%	30.00%	20.00%	11.67%	6.67%
5	The vocabulary in the reading section was too advanced for me.	35.00%	25.00%	20.00%	15.00%	5.00%
6	I lacked strategies (e.g., skimming/scanning) to tackle the reading section effectively.	30.00%	25.00%	25.00%	15.00%	5.00%

55% of students cited poor audio quality during tests as a barrier, with many describing the sound as “muffled” or “echoey.” This technical shortfall reflects broader resource limitations in Indonesian polytechnics, where outdated equipment often undermines assessment validity (Aryadoust, 2023). One participant recounted:

“The speakers crackled, I missed half the dialogue. Maybe the reason I have low listening score was because of faulty speakers.”



Additionally, 48% struggled with native-speaker accents, particularly American and British varieties unfamiliar to Indonesian learners. As English in Indonesia is often taught with local or non-native accents (A. Kirkpatrick, 2017), students found rapid, idiomatic speech in TOEFL listening sections disorienting. An Informatics Management student shared:

"The speakers talked too fast, used slang like 'gonna,' and mumbled. I'm used to my lecturer's clear, slow English."

These findings align with research by Monfared (2022), who argues that standardized tests like TOEFL privilege Inner Circle Englishes, disadvantaging EFL learners from Outer and Expanding Circle contexts.

62% of students identified grammar as their weakest area, particularly complex rules like subject-verb agreement and parallel structures. One Informatics student admitted:

"I was confident I memorized many grammar rules but couldn't apply them in the test. The sentences were longer and trickier than our textbook examples."

The disconnect between classroom instruction and test demands underscores the need for pedagogical reforms. The current teaching methods of Grammar, which emphasize discrete grammar points, should be enhanced to prepare students for the integrative tasks required in TOEFL.

60% of students struggled with reading comprehension, citing unfamiliar topics and insufficient vocabulary. Technical terms like "photosynthesis" or "colonialism" stymied even high-performing students, as polytechnic curricula rarely intersect with such content. One Secretary student noted:

"I know a little about business vocabulary but clueless about biology. TOEFL expects me to know everything!"

Moreover, 55% lacked critical reading strategies, such as skimming for main ideas or inferring meaning from context. This aligns with Sadri et al. (2019) finding that Indonesian students often approach reading as a decoding exercise rather than a critical thinking task. As one participant confessed:

"I read word-by-word, trying to translate everything. By the time I finished, I'd forgotten the main point."

These challenges highlight the inadequacy of current literacy instruction in fostering analytical skills, a gap that must be addressed through curriculum integration of authentic, discipline-specific texts (Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Beyond linguistic hurdles, 34% of students attributed failures to test anxiety and demotivation. Repeated attempts affect confidence, with many describing TOEFL as a "never-ending nightmare." One interviewee shared:

"I failed three times. Now, I panic just seeing the test booklet. I feel stupid, even though I'm top of my class in Tax Accounting."

This emotional toll mirrors Jiang & Lu (2025) findings, where high-stakes English testing correlates with diminished self-efficacy and academic burnout. In Indonesia, the stigma of failure is compounded by financial strain, as retaking TOEFL costs approximately IDR 500,000 (USD 33).

Benefits of TOEFL as a Graduation Requirement

Despite challenges, 89% of students acknowledged TOEFL's benefits, particularly in fostering self-assessment and career readiness (Table 3).

Table 3: Benefits of TOEFL as a Graduation Requirement

No	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	TOEFL helped me measure my English proficiency objectively.	40.00%	48.33%	8.33%	1.67%	1.67%
2	Preparing for TOEFL improved my academic skills (e.g., thesis writing).	35.00%	41.67%	15.00%	6.67%	1.67%
3	TOEFL scores increased my confidence in job applications.	38.33%	43.33%	11.67%	5.00%	1.67%
4	TOEFL motivated me to learn English more seriously.	30.00%	38.33%	20.00%	10.00%	1.67%
5	TOEFL preparation familiarized me with academic English tasks (e.g., lecture comprehension).	25.00%	45.00%	20.00%	8.33%	1.67%

Students valued TOEFL as a tool for benchmarking progress. One participant explained:

'My first score when trying for the first time was 360. After six months of study, I scored 460. TOEFL showed me where I improved and where I still need work.'

This metacognitive awareness aligns with research framing standardized tests as catalysts for self-regulated learning (Hawe & Dixon, 2017). Additionally, 76% reported improved academic skills, such as note-taking during lectures and synthesizing research. Those are competencies that critical for thesis completion and postgraduate success (Almusharraf et al., 2020).

81% linked TOEFL to enhanced job prospects, reflecting Indonesia's growing demand for English-proficient technical graduates. Multinational companies and even government offices explicitly require TOEFL scores for employment candidacies, viewing them as proxies for adaptability in global teams. One interviewee shared:

'I have started looking for jobs online, and I found that many international companies require proficiency in English, both spoken and written, and even a TOEFL certificate. Even the current recruitment for civil servants (CPNS) requires a TOEFL certificate for registration.'

Furthermore, TOEFL's recognition in 160 countries opens doors for overseas education and employment, a key motivator for students aspiring to work abroad (ETS, 2021).

TOEFL's focus on academic English, assessing skills like lecture comprehension and essay writing, resonated with students' vocational needs. For example, the integrated writing task, which requires synthesizing reading and listening materials, mirrors technical report-writing demands. As one participant noted:

'TOEFL reading is like reading project proposals. You have to summarize data quickly and clearly.'

This alignment validates TOEFL's role in bridging language learning with workplace readiness (Kirkpatrick, 2017).

The findings of the research point out TOEFL's dual-sided status as an Indonesian polytechnic graduation. In pinpointing the perceptions of the students, the work determines the ways in which institutional policy converges with individual experience in vocational settings and delivers crucial insights into high-stakes language testing within contexts that place value on technical competency rather than language ability.

Students' support for TOEFL being in conformity with international trends towards standardized testing legitimates its perceived use as a gate to employability and academic readiness. This aligns with the "washback effect" documented by Barnes (2016), whereby institutional demands drive systematic study routines. However, the study goes farther by placing this insight in the context of vocational education, where students' adoption of the TOEFL is pragmatic, driven more by job market demands than by innate academic motivation.



These findings counter the assumption that technical ability is of greater importance to vocational students than language; instead, they interpret TOEFL as an inescapable professional necessity, reflecting the neoliberal construction of language as human capital (Holborow, 2018).

In contrast, there is a clear contradiction between the academic content of the TOEFL and polytechnic programs. Students' struggle with interdisciplinary themes (e.g., paintings from the Renaissance) and unfamiliar accents point to an intrinsic preference for test-making in favor of educational and Inner Circle English standards (Monfared, 2022; Zhang, 2022). This study also particularly addresses the unique challenges faced by polytechnic students, such as their restricted training with academic genres and technical facility deficits (e.g., poor-quality sound), which make already-existing inequalities worse.

The psychological toll of repeated test failure also distinguishes this group. Unlike the usual university students, polytechnic students have dual pressures to balance language proficiency with technical proficiency and are likely to perceive TOEFL as an institutional barrier instead of a learning tool. This is in line with Jiang & Lu (2025) conclusion about high-stakes testing's affective consequence where language learning is secondary to core skills. These results emphasize the need for multifaceted support systems addressing cognitive and affective dimensions of test preparation.

Different from previous studies on mainstream universities, this study clarifies how the focus on practice in vocational education contributes to the content-relevance gap on the TOEFL. Although students recognized advantages such as improved metacognitive abilities and employment prospects, these relied on overcoming institutional obstacles—a detail not seen in the majority of EFL literature. This emphasizes the significance of context-sensitive language strategies that go beyond local pedagogical circumstances and international standards.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study examined the complicated character of TOEFL as a prerequisite for Indonesian polytechnic graduates, and how it functions to work as both gateway to global opportunity and institutional hurdle based on sociocultural, pedagogical, and institutional considerations. By placing vocational students' viewpoints first, a group previously underrepresented in high-stakes language test studies, the findings enrich the understanding of language policy by putting the specific problems and adaptive coping techniques in technical education. Most students pragmatically endorsed TOEFL as an unavoidable career necessity, associating acceptance with market need in place of curriculum connection. This practical position embodies the neoliberal focus on language as human capital but also gestures towards a contradiction between the agendas of institutions and the demands of vocational training, in which facility in technique outweighs language skill. Of central concern, research indicates that to the extent TOEFL does strengthen metacognitive capacity and job readiness, its academic contents and format selectively disadvantage polytechnic students generally, and those under-resourced most particularly. Challenges such as unfamiliar interdisciplinary material, Inner Circle English accents, and a lack of testing facilities exacerbate inequalities, cumulating the psychological and economic burden of serial test failure. These conclusions do not only substantiate current criticism of standardized testing in EFL contexts but add to it by identifying the special sociocultural dynamics of vocational learning.

This research stresses the importance of rethinking language assessment instruments so that they are more attuned to the applied curriculum of polytechnic studies. For instance, even though TOEFL's emphasis on academic English offers some transfer skills, e.g., integrating



technical reports, its lack of inclusion of industry-based communication tasks, e.g., interpreting equipment manuals or engaging in workplace discussions, renders it less suitable for vocational students. This realignment necessitates a hybrid model of evaluation that integrates standardized benchmarks with occupational competencies. This could be done through modular tests co-designed with industry partners that integrate general proficiency with domain-specific language tasks. Institutional reforms such as the integration of discipline-specific English modules into technical curricula and the upgrading of testing infrastructure could also address current inequities. Such tangible steps would not merely add validity to exams but also provide students with the means to understand language capability as additive to, rather than in opposition with, technical know-how. The findings also expand human capital theory by demonstrating how the capability in language is strategically internalized as currency within Indonesia's globalization of labor markets, even when detached from immediate academic or pedagogical relevance. Moreover, the emotional and monetary costs identified indicate the affective character of language policy, forcing intellectuals and policymakers to adopt more holistically integrated support frameworks.

Hopefully, this research provides an opening for emancipatory interventions and studies. Follow-up studies could follow the longitudinal impact of TOEFL requirement on post-graduation employment or compare outcomes across different polytechnic environments to identify best practices. Experimental approaches, such as AI-supported language platforms tailored for vocational environments or neighborhood-based testing support programs, could provide a level playing field in rural environments. Industry partnerships in collaborative research could also experiment with workplace-based tests, measuring their efficacy in bridging the gap between classroom instruction and job-site demands.

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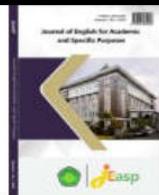
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