

ENHANCING STUDENTS' TOEFL SKILLS THROUGH STRATEGY-BASED TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

This Community Service Program (PKM) aims to increase awareness and understanding of students in the region regarding the importance of English and TOEFL test in facing global competition and to provide concrete solutions to students' difficulties in preparing for TOEFL test. This program is conducted through a series of activities, including: Pre-test, training on TOEFL material coverage and strategies (Listening, SWE, and Reading Comprehension), and post-test. The target group for this program is 29 students from grades 10 to 12 at SMAN 1 Praya Barat Daya. The program is guided by the PKM Team from the English Education Study Program, University of Mataram. The program is held at SMAN 1 Praya Barat Daya as a partner. The results of the pre-test and post-test indicate the increase of student understanding of the TOEFL test and improved skills in answering TOEFL tests

Keywords: TOEFL, community service, high school students, English skills; Central Lombok, English training

INTRODUCTION

English has long been a key skill for facing national and global competition, particularly in higher education and the workplace. University of Mataram, through Rector's Circular Letter No. 3 of 2020, officially requires all students in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs to have a TOEFL certificate as a graduation requirement. This policy was created to increase graduates' competitiveness at the national and international levels. However, its implementation presents unique challenges, particularly for prospective students from regions with limited access to English language training.

Observations conducted by the Community Service (PkM) team indicate that students at SMAN 1 Praya Barat Daya face serious challenges in their English language skills. Most students struggle to pronounce and understand basic vocabulary. Brief interviews with several students indicate that classroom learning is ineffective. Students

stated that their English teacher taught well, using English entirely as the instruction in class. However, due to the students' limited vocabulary, the use of full English eventually hindered their understanding.

This situation is further aggravated by the students' backgrounds. Most of the society work in the agricultural sector and lack access to modern educational resources, including English language courses. Based on the initial assessment conducted by the PkM team, more than 80% of students in grades 10 to 12 experienced difficulties understanding English texts, particularly in listening, sentence structure, and reading comprehension. The limited learning environment outside the classroom further exacerbated the obstacles students faced in mastering English comprehensively.

Despite this problem, SMAN 1 Praya Barat Daya has significant potential for growth thanks to the support of the principal and teachers who are open to learning innovations. However, limited language laboratory facilities, a lack of structured TOEFL training, and the absence of dedicated TOEFL tutor make it difficult for students to meet the university's graduation standards. Furthermore, the lack of curriculum integration that supports TOEFL-based learning further widens the gap in access for students in this area compared to students in Mataram City, who have access to various TOEFL and IELTS courses.

Based on in-depth interviews with English teachers and direct classroom observations, it was found that most students still consider the TOEFL a "difficult and intimidating" test. This affects students' motivation to learn and their confidence in facing international-standard questions. From the teacher's perspective, there are no specific TOEFL learning modules or training available that can be used in regular learning. Therefore, intervention through a practical and applicable TOEFL training program is an urgent need at this partner school.

This PkM aligns with the Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy, specifically focusing on the study program's academic-based community service. Students and lecturers from the English Language Education Study Program at the University of Mataram are actively involved in developing, implementing, and evaluating the training program, providing direct learning experiences to students outside the campus.

This program also aligns with University of Mataram's primary focus of community service, which is to improve the quality of education for local communities through training based on regional needs and potential. By improving students' TOEFL skills, it is expected that students from remote areas will gain broader and higher-quality access to higher education.

METHODS

The following table is a summary of the time, place, object and method of the PkM.

Table 1: Method

Time and Place	May 24, 2025 at State Senior High School 1 Praya Barat Daya
Object/Target	Students of State Senior High School 1 Praya Barat Daya
Participants	14 students of grade X 15 students of grade XI
Methods	Socialization, Training, Mentoring, Evaluation

The following is description of the methods for PKM activities that were implemented:

1. Socialization

This step aimed to introduce the University of Mataram's Community Service (PKM) program to its partner, SMAN 1 Praya Barat Daya. In addition, the socialization also aimed to raise awareness among partners about the importance of improving students' TOEFL test skills to prepare them for continuing their education or entering the workforce.

2. Training

The training is designed to address the issues outlined in the previous section. The training activities are as follows:

- Pre-Test.

Participants are given the opportunity to take a full TOEFL test to determine their initial abilities.

- Implementation.

The activity will be conducted in the form of training with material based on the TOEFL components: Listening Comprehension, Structure & Written Expression (SWE), and Reading Comprehension. The material will be presented in turns by the team according to an agreed schedule.

- Post-Test.

After the activity is completed, participants will be given a post-test using the full TOEFL score.

3. Mentoring

Mataram University PkM team will create a WhatsApp group and provide online tests periodically for two months after the post-test to sharpen the participants' skills in using the strategies provided.

4. Evaluation

Evaluation is conducted to measure the extent to which this activity has an impact on participants and to determine the improvements needed to improve the quality and impact of the activity for the PkM team and partners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This training involved 14 10th-grade and 15 11th-grade students from SMAN 1 Praya Barat Daya, located on Jl. Raya Darek Ungga, Darek Village, Praya Barat Daya District, Central Lombok. This activity was implemented in four stages: Socialization, Training, Ongoing Mentoring and Guidance, and Evaluation.

The socialization was conducted while the proposing team was preparing the community service proposal. This socialization aimed to introduce the University of Mataram Community Service Program (PKM) to its partner, SMAN 1 Praya Barat Daya. In addition to introducing the program, this socialization also aimed to encourage partners to recognize the importance of improving students' TOEFL test-taking skills to prepare them for continuing their education or entering the workforce. The socialization delivered by the PKM team to the principal and vice principal for student affairs went well and was well received. SMAN 1 Praya Barat Daya agreed to partner with the English Language Study Program (PKM) team to conduct TOEFL test-taking strategy training for their students. The socialization activity was followed by the training implementation phase.

Face-to-face training will be held on Saturday, May 24, 2025 with the following series:

1. General Overview of the TOEFL Test

The first training session provides a general overview of the TOEFL test. In this session, participants are given an explanation of the purpose and benefits of the TOEFL test, especially for high school and college students. Furthermore, they are introduced to the test structure and types of questions. This session provides participants with a comprehensive understanding of the TOEFL test, which will prepare them for more specific material.

2. Pretest

After receiving a general explanation, participants are given a pretest to measure their initial abilities. This pretest serves as a benchmark that can be compared with the posttest results at the end of the training, allowing participants to objectively assess their progress. The pre-test covers all three sections: listening (Part A), structure and written expressions (both parts, sentence completion and error correction), and reading comprehension (one reading text with 10 comprehension questions covering all question types).

3. Presentation of listening material and post-test for the listening section

In the next session, participants received an explanation of strategies for answering Part A (short dialogues) listening questions, including focusing on the second line, restating the second line, certain structures and expressions, and choosing answers with the most distinct sounds. Furthermore, participants were also given technical strategies on the importance of paying attention to the very short pauses between questions, marking answers quickly, preparing for the next question, and not leaving any questions unanswered. Before participants took the post-test specifically for the listening section, they were given sample questions and answered them together. The post-test consisted of 15 questions for Part A listening.

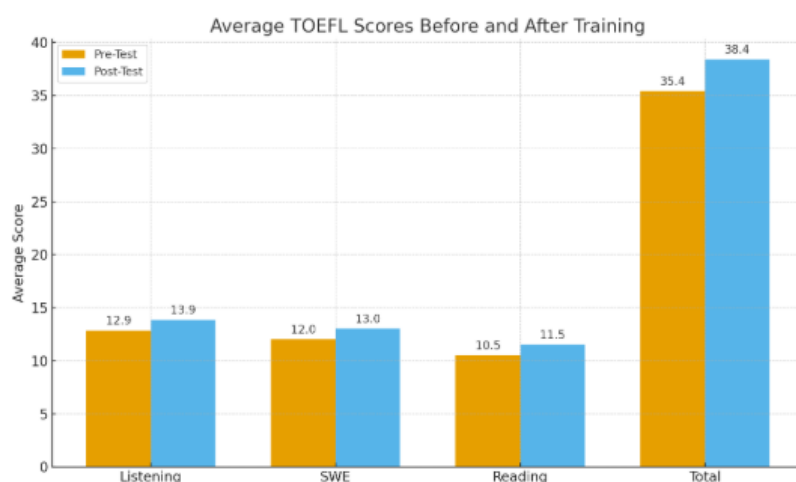
4. Presentation of Structure and Written Expressions and Post-Test

The training session continued with a presentation of structure and written expressions. In this session, the presenter focused on the most common and straightforward structures most likely to align with the material participants learned in school, namely subject-verb agreement, including avoiding distractors such as appositives, present and past

participles, and prepositions in the middle of sentences. Furthermore, participants were taught the importance of trusting their instincts or mental grammar when unsure of their answers. For each sub-topic, the presenter included sample questions to answer together. Afterward, participants took a post-test to gauge their mastery of the material. Participants were given 20 questions covering both test types.

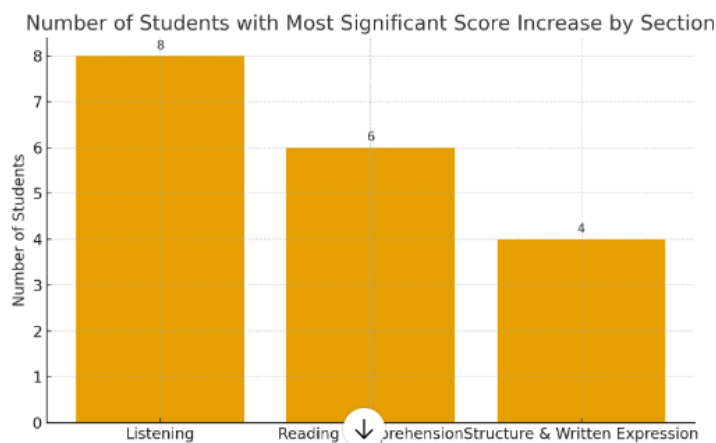
5. Presentation of Reading Comprehension and Post-Test

The final session of the presentation focused on strategies for answering reading comprehension questions. In this session, participants were given the opportunity to test their reading speed. The main topic covered the importance of skimming and scanning skills in quickly finding important information and determining answers within a reading text. After the presentation was completed, participants answered the post-test reading comprehension questions which consisted of one complete text with several question numbers.



Picture 1. Average score of pre-test and post-test

The following bar chart shows the students' average TOEFL scores before and after the training for each section of the test. Listening improved from 12.86 to 13.86. Structure and Written Expression (SWE) improved from 12.03 to 13.03. Reading improved from 10.52 to 11.52. Therefore, the total score improved from 35.41 to 38.41



Picture 2. Score Increase by Section

In addition, the second chart shows that the highest to lowest increase in scores in order is in the listening section (8 participants), reading comprehension section (6 participants), and structure and written expression section (4 participants). Both charts indicate that the training had a positive impact, although the improvement was not significant.

The main problem that prevented participants from achieving optimal improvement in their question-answering skills was their limited English vocabulary. Furthermore, the limited strategies discussed during the training also contributed to the limited improvement. Another factor contributing to the insignificant improvement in participants' abilities is their low interest in reading and their limited exposure to English both inside and outside the school environment. Therefore, ongoing mentoring and training to improve students' English skills are still highly needed by the participants.

Ongoing mentoring is conducted through blended learning, where participants are asked to answer mini-tests and discussed in online meetings with members of the community service team. Mini-tests are distributed weekly, and online meetings are held once every two weeks for eight weeks: two weeks in June, two weeks in August, and four weeks in September.

CONCLUSION

The TOEFL test answering strategy training activity for students of SMAN 1 Praya Barat Daya, which aims to increase students' awareness and knowledge to face the TOEFL test, went smoothly. Participants actively participated, as shown by their active participation in all four material presentation sessions: general material presentation, listening material, structure and written expressions, and reading comprehension, including completing the pretest and posttest. Participants also actively asked questions and responded to interactive training activities. This training is also proven effective in increasing participants' awareness and knowledge in answering the TOEFL test, as evidenced by the increase in scores obtained by participants, although not significant. Therefore, other training to improve students' basic knowledge of English, such as vocabulary mastery, listening skills, and reading skills, must be carried out.

RECOMMENDATION

To improve participants' TOEFL scores, adequate vocabulary mastery is essential. Therefore, in the next training, it will be beneficial to conduct vocabulary mastery training using the interactive application LanGeek and Magoosh.

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