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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Elements Found in English Textbooks Used at Palembang High</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools and the English Teachers' Perceptions of these Cultural Elements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariesa Astri</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortcut Strategies in Analyzing Sentence Structures in TOEFL</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustik Hambali</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pengenalan Simbol – Simbol Visual dalam Pertunjukan Sastra Lokal bagi</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maimunno Pendidikan Bahasa untuk Pengembangan Industri Kreatif</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rizie Indrawati</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pengenalan Model Pembelajaran Keterampilan</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herman Suma SMP Negeri Kota Palembang Melalui Pemetaan Pikiran dan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nugraha Struktur Teks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soe Suparniwati dan Subadyono</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlakukan Strategi Pembelajaran Bahasa dapat Meningkatkan Kemampuan</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernardina Sowa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Intensity of Using English:</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Case of S-1 and Non-S-1 Senior High School EFL Teachers in West</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamer East Nasa Teggara</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agustus Sambun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration of EFL Learning and Content Area Literacy through Concept</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) to Improve Students' Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension of Science Texts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surya Sibwany</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teknik Statistika Terhadap Puisi</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eka Adisuryo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretasi Perempuan dalam Perkawinan</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kajian Hermeneutika dan Kritik Sastra Feminis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dalam Novel Azah dan Sengara</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dais Suhendi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the Teaching and Learning Cycle to Develop Students'</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in Class Activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muchdalima Vianty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shortcut Strategies in Analyzing Sentence Structures in TOEFL
By Muslih Hambali*

Abstract: In Indonesia, TOEFL paper-based test (PBT) is still used by many universities, colleges, companies and even government offices, especially for internal use. In addition to how well TOEFL test takers master some basic English grammar such as the use of be and modals, the form of regular and irregular verbs, singular and plural nouns, count and noncount nouns, etc. the success to increase the TOEFL score for section 2 might depend on how well they could analyze sentence structures. One of the shortcuts to have successful analysis is that the test takers should be familiar with English parts of speech, derivation, phrases, and clauses. Using brackets ( ) for all prepositional phrases, parentheses [ ] for subordination and underline _____ for subjects and verbs in a stem of the questions, one might easily recognize which area of structure needs to be completed.

In error identification section, looking at both sides of the underlined word(s) and other related word(s) and learning the form of the underlined word(s), one might also be able to identify the error.

Keywords: sentence structure, TOEFL, basic English grammar

Introduction

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is one of the tests used to measure the ability of one’s English proficiency. In Indonesia, some universities and educational institutions have been using TOEFL score as one of the requirements for students to complete their studies or as a school admission to enter universities or colleges. Besides, some companies may use TOEFL score for their employee’s promotion. Different universities or colleges may have different standard requirement of TOEFL score. Some of them require a TOEFL score of paper-based test ≥ 450, while some others need ≥ 500 depending on what study program it is. In Graduate School of Sriwijaya University for example, students completing their masters degree program must submit their TOEFL score of at least 450 for non English Study Program and 530 for English Study Program.

In Indonesia, generally those who take TOEFL are adults or senior high school learners or graduates who have previous basic general English. They have already learnt basic English grammar such as the use of be verb and modals, how to form regular and irregular verbs, singular and plural nouns, and how to distinguish count and noncount nouns, etc. In relation to teaching activities learners taking TOEFL preparation class for example, should be given an overview of such basic things at once so that they could recall their previous experience of basic English grammar.

Learning basic English grammar is the key point to begin to learn sentence structure that exist in section 2 of TOEFL. Sentence structure is a part of learning grammar. Grammar, a system of rules governing the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence, plays an important role to learn as it tell us how to construct a sentence which covers word order, verb and noun system, modifiers, phrases, clauses, etc. (Brown, 1994:347-348). In addition, Haegeman and Gueron (1999:16) define grammar of the language as “a system of rules and principles which is at the basis of all sentences of a language enabling speakers to produce well-formed sentences, to evaluate sentences, and to replace unacceptable sentences by n acceptable variant.” This means that the learners of English are supposed to be able to analyze any sentence using rules and principles of grammar available.

Areas of TOEFL Questions

The TOEFL test covers three content areas: Listening with 50 questions (section 1), Structures and Written Expression with 40 questions (section 2), and Reading with 50 questions (section 3).
There is no specific area of studies that could be found in every section. A few of the topics of social studies, chemistry, biology, etc. are covered indirectly on the section. The following will be the brief discussion of section 2.

**Sentence Structure in TOEFL Questions**

Most sentences that appear in TOEFL test cover the four types of sentences: simple, compound, complex and compound complex. Deborah Philips in her Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL (2003; 98,107), divides sentences with one clause (simple) and with multiple clauses (either compound, complex or compound complex).

Basically a clause has one subject and one verb. This should be fully recognized by the learners. It is possible that a clause has more than one subject or more than one verb, but there must be a connector so called conjunction such as and, but and or. When there is clause like this, again learners should keep in mind that any conjunction joining two or more subjects or verbs, the subject or verb is still in one group. For example,

- *Amphetamines and amoxicillin are antibiotic drugs.* (double subjects)
- *Joe stayed at home and watched TV all day yesterday.* (double verb)

The problem that might appear is that whether or not the learners could identify which is subject and which is verb in a sentence especially if the sentence has a complex structure such as a subject with a long noun phrase, prepositional phrase or even a subordinate clause. Let’s observe the following sentence.

> The Bureau of Biological Survey, a little known and completely misunderstood arm of the Department of Agriculture, has continued its investigations of the economic relations of wild birds and mammals with special effort to render its work of practical importance to the stock grower.

Although long, the above sentence is actually a simple one with one subject, *the Bureau*, and one verb, *has continued*. The phrase “of Biological Survey” modifies the noun subject *Bureau* and the long phrase “a little known and completely misunderstood arm of the Department of Agriculture” modifies the noun subject phrase *The Bureau of Biological Survey* and functions as a noun phrase modifier called appositive.

There are two parts of section II in TOEFL paper-based test, A and B. Questions 1 – 15 in part A are incomplete sentences which usually require subject, verb or phrases. Questions 16-40 are sentences with error identification. The errors are usually related to function of the word, choice of word, word form, preposition, etc. The error appears in one of the four underlined word or phrases. The sentences in both part A and part B are either simple or complex. Carol King and Nancy Stanley (1983:134-135) state that about forty percent of questions in part A and B are simple sentences and about sixty percent of them are complex ones. The following are the examples of questions in Part A and in Part B.

**Part A.**

Directions: choose the letter of the word or group of words that best completes the sentence.

1. Wild Bill Hickok ____ for the Union Army during the Civil War by posing as a Confederate officer.
   (A) spied  
   (B) spying 
   (C) a spy 
   (D) was spied

2. The common puffin is a member of the very well-defined family of auks, including _______, guillemonts, razorbills, and the extinct great auk.
   (A) those little auks 
   (B) the auks which are little 
   (C) little auks 
   (D) auks that are little

Note that the first sentence requires a verb phrase in passive, and the second sentence requires a noun phrase. Therefore, the correct answer for sentence number 1 is D, and sentence number 2 is C.

**Part B**

Directions: Choose the letter of the underlined word or group of words that is not correct.
1. Ornithology, the study of birds, are one of the major fields for the students to study.

2. The doctor with a number of nurses have attended the seminar on tropical disease.

3. The fire fighters that helped people put out the fire using the fire extinguisher getting some medals from the government.

In sentence number 1, the students used are instead of is as they were probably influenced by the word birds. Theoretically, when a subject is followed by an appositive, the appositive does not influence the number of subject. An appositive can be a phrase placed before or after the subject. When it is placed after the subject, there are two commas in between, but when it occurs before the subject, a single comma after the appositive is used.

Sentence number 2 requires the verb has attended instead of have attended. Here the students were probably influenced by the object of preposition, a number of nurses. Theoretically, any prepositional phrase cannot become a subject.

Sentence number 3 requires the verb get, but some students chose getting instead of get as they thought the verb in the main clause shared the same verb helped in the subordinate clause. Theoretically, every clause need a verb, so there is no single verb in a sentence with multiple clauses.

b) Identifying the correct word order of subject and verb in Noun Clause.

This is especially if the noun clause connectors do not function as a subject. For example the students say,

- "What have you done is beneficial for your self. instead of"
- "What you have done is beneficial for your self."

or they say

- "We could not figure out why will Mrs. Smith call Paul. instead of"
- "We could not figure out why Mrs. Smith will call Paul."

Theoretically, the words when, who, whom, which, why, what, whose, and how are used...
for subordinators or connectors. The subjects must come first and then followed by verbs.

c) Identifying words with derivation and their function.
This usually occurs in part B of section 2 of TOEFL in which it focuses on error identification for examples *a milk substance* and *a recent published journal*. The students considered *a milk substance* correct instead of *a milky substance* or *a recent published journal* correct instead of *a recently published journal*.

Theoretically, any word with derivation for instance suffix may change its part of speech and automatically will function differently in a phrase.

**Key Points for Sentence Structure Analysis**
It is interesting to offer the following some key points for sentence structure analysis, which I believe it might be useful for TOEFL test takers to keep in mind when they take the test.

Basically, the structure of a sentence must have at least subject and predicate. Predicate itself must contain at least a verb followed by object sometime. Nordquist (online) mentions that the basic parts of a sentence consist of the subject, the verb, and (often, but not always) the object. Since both subjects and objects must be a noun or noun phrase, it is necessary that the learners know basic sentence structure. Therefore, the following items might be essential to be well mastered.

1. **Be familiar with English Parts of speech**
   As it is known that there are eight different kinds of parts of speech in English: *nouns, pronouns, adjective, adverb, verb, conjunction, interjection and determiner*. When learning English the learners should be familiar with those parts of speech and their functions. Therefore, it is a must for a teacher to introduce them to the learners especially the characteristics of each. For example an adjective modifies nouns or pronouns, an adverb modifies verbs or adjectives, a determiner modifies nouns, etc. It should be noted that all kinds of parts of speech might occur in a sentence. However, at least two parts of speech, *noun or pronoun* and *verb*, always appear in a sentence since the sentence must have them.

2. **Be familiar with Derivation**
   Like Indonesian language, English has also prefix or suffix to form a part of speech, so this is also good for learners to be familiar with. When they recognize the word with derivation, then they should also know its part of speech and its function. Note that in TOEFL questions many nouns derived from other parts of speech are used instead of common nouns or concrete ones such as the words ending with suffixes “on” and “ty” in *construction and responsibility* from *construct* and *responsible*. Furthermore, it is tricky that most of the questions in TOEFL use phrases instead of word-by-word. For example, the sentence uses noun phrases instead of single word for subject or object such as the subject in the following sentence:

   - *There are several good and important responsibilities for the nation to invest money in renewable energy sources.* *(several good and important responsibilities = noun phrase)*

3. **Be familiar with Phrase**
   The complexity of a structure in a sentence can be identified by too many phrases for example;

   - *The exotic plant can be successfully*  
     1                                  2  
     raised at home by lying horizontally 3       4  
     in a container full of fresh potting soil  5       6

   The underlined words are all phrases. Number 1 is a noun phrase, number 2 is verb phrase, numbers 3, 4, 5 and 6 are all prepositional phrases.

   The simplified sentence actually is:
   - *Plant can be raised at home*
useful for learners as it might help them group which is subject, verb or object, etc in a sentence.

4. Be familiar with Clauses

Another crucial thing to keep in mind when doing TOEFL questions is to recognize kinds of clauses. Both main and subordinate clauses may occur at the same time in a TOEFL sentence. For example;

[Although blue jay is a very pretty bird], it is not friendly with other birds.
The sentence above has two clauses. The clause in parenthesis is subordinate and the underlined one is main.

As has previously been mentioned about sixty percent of the questions in structure & written expression section is complex sentences. Since a complex sentence has both main and subordinate clauses, therefore, a subordinate clause always exists in a complex sentence. It is true that a subordinator generally identifies a subordinate clause, but there are few subordinate clauses not marked by a subordinator such as in the following sentence containing an adjective clause. The underlined clauses are unmarked ones as the subordinators “that” or “which” are omitted.

• The three different local products the South Sumatra has exported since along time ago increase local revenue South Sumatra could use for its local development.

The full subordinate clauses of the sentence can be:

• The three different local products that South Sumatra has exported since along time ago increase local revenue which South Sumatra government could use for its local development.

Most sentences in sentence completion in the TOEFL paper-based test require subject, verb, and object to complete. Probably there is no problem if the subject, verb and object to be completed are single words, but if it is in the form of phrase especially for subjects or objects preceded by connectors such as and, or, but, etc. and is followed by another phrase or a clause as modifiers, it might be a case as in the following the sentence.

• Despite the appearance of being merely pests, ants can serve a garden by eliminating other bothersome insects and ___________________
  
(A) they can aerate the soil
(B) aerating the soil
(C) to aerate the soil
(D) that can aerate the soil

The sentence above requires a phrase parallel with eliminating other bothersome insects, so the correct answer is B.

Short Strategy for Sentence Structure Analysis

There are some practical guidelines of the key points as the strategy to analyze sentence structure of TOEFL questions in both parts A and B.

a) Part A Sentence completion

1. Bracket all prepositional phrases to identify the subject or the object if any. By bracketing all prepositional phrases we can identify whether or not the sentence has a subject or an object since prepositional phrases are never subjects or objects of verbs. This is a good way when the stem in the question requires verb or subject completion, and the position of a subject and a verb is separated by phrases.

2. Put parenthesis for a subordinate clause to identify whether a subordinate clause appears as a subject, an object or just an adverb. By putting parenthesis for a subordinate clause, we can find the real verb for the main clause.

3. Underline the verb twice, the subject once and circle the subordinator. If they have been available in the stem, the completion probably needs a phrase or full subordination

4. Finally learn the alternatives at once. See what is needed for the completion, subject, verb, object, the combination of each or part of the combination.

5. Besides, learn word order in a sentence pattern or a phrase.

Let’s discuss the following sentence using the above strategy.
Among the many unusual creatures of the high Nepalese forests ________ with genetic ties hearkening back to the time of mammoths.

Now what to do is to bracket all prepositional phrases’

(A) (Among the many unusual creatures) (of the high Nepalese forests) ________ (with genetic ties) hearkening back (to the time) (of mammoths).

Let’s discuss the following example.

In rivers like the Colorado, with highly banks ________ and a changeable water level, beavers make ________ a tunnel well under water, and this leads to a ________ large burrow in the bank.

Choice A is correct since the word like here is a preposition followed by noun Colorado, choice C is also correct as it is an adjective modifying water level, choice D is correct too because the word under is followed by the word water (noun), and the word well (noun) is preceded by a. Therefore choice B is incorrect since the word highly is an adverb and cannot modify the word banks (noun). Here they ask the function of the underlined word as an adjective.

The above strategies or guidelines might be helpful in analyzing sentence structures of TOEFL questions. However, these are not the only strategies to analyze the whole parts of the questions since many different kinds of grammar items may appear in the questions.

CONCLUSION
Sentence structure in section 2 of TOEFL paper-based test can be confusing if one is not familiar with strong basic English grammar since most sentences include not only simple but also complex sentences. However, by recognizing parts of speech and their functions, types of phrases and clauses, and learning shortcut strategies as well as guidelines offered above, perhaps one can get helped in identifying the correct answer of the questions. At least he or she could narrow down his or her choice among the four alternative answers.

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