



Advancing TOEFL Proficiency among Darussalam International High School Students: Community Service Research

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ABSTRACT

This study explores a community-based TOEFL preparation program for secondary students at an international school in Samarinda, East Kalimantan an underrepresented context in current research. Departing from conventional test-focused instruction, the program emphasized student autonomy, project-based learning, and reflective practices within a non-formal educational framework. Using a qualitative approach, the study involved 18 students from Grades 11 and 12 to explore their experiences and engagement in language learning. Rather than merely tracking score improvements, the research focused on how students interacted with collaborative and contextual learning strategies. Results showed that most participants reached Good to Very Good proficiency in Listening (83.33%), Structure and Written Expression (72.23%), and Reading Comprehension (66.67%). The program not only improved academic English skills but also enhanced motivation, confidence, and active participation. This study offers an innovative, student-centered model for TOEFL preparation, valuable for educators and practitioners working in similar educational and community settings.

ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengeksplorasi program persiapan TOEFL berbasis komunitas untuk siswa sekolah menengah di sebuah sekolah internasional di Samarinda, Kalimantan Timur, sebuah konteks yang kurang terwakili dalam penelitian sekarang ini. Berangkat dari instruksi yang berfokus pada tes konvensional, program ini menekankan otonomi siswa, pembelajaran berbasis proyek, dan praktik reflektif dalam kerangka pendidikan nonformal. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, studi ini melibatkan 18 siswa dari Kelas 11 dan 12 untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman dan keterlibatan mereka dalam pembelajaran bahasa. Alih-alih hanya melacak peningkatan skor, penelitian ini berfokus pada bagaimana siswa berinteraksi dengan strategi pembelajaran kolaboratif dan kontekstual. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar peserta mencapai kemahiran Baik hingga Sangat Baik dalam Mendengarkan (83,33%), Struktur dan Ekspresi Tertulis (72,23%), dan Pemahaman Membaca (66,67%). Program ini tidak hanya meningkatkan keterampilan bahasa Inggris akademis tetapi juga meningkatkan motivasi, kepercayaan diri, dan partisipasi aktif. Studi ini menawarkan model yang inovatif dan berpusat pada siswa untuk persiapan TOEFL, yang berharga bagi para pendidik dan praktisi yang bekerja di lingkungan pendidikan dan komunitas yang serupa.

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Situation Analysis

In an era characterised by intensifying globalisation, proficiency in the English language has emerged as an indispensable competence, particularly for students aspiring to pursue tertiary education abroad. Among the various standardised assessments of English proficiency, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) remains one of the most internationally recognised benchmarks. Nevertheless, a considerable number of secondary school students especially those residing in non-Anglophone regions encounter difficulties in attaining competitive TOEFL scores due to insufficient exposure, inadequate practice, and a lack of strategic preparation.



Figure 1. Implementation of TOEFL ITP Guidance at Darussalam International High School

Darussalam International High School situated on H.A.M Rifaddin Street in Samarinda, East Kalimantan, accommodates a diverse student population demonstrating a marked interest in overseas academic pathways. Despite this enthusiasm, a discernible disparity persists between students' existing English language competencies and the proficiency levels demanded by TOEFL standards. This incongruity necessitates focused pedagogical interventions aimed at narrowing the gap and facilitating students' progression towards their academic aspirations. This community-oriented research initiative was conceived to respond to this challenge through the development and implementation of a systematic TOEFL preparation programme, specifically designed for the student cohort at Darussalam International High School. The programme encompassed experiential learning activities, strategic skill workshops, and targeted training across the four principal TOEFL domains: Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing. This article delineates the programme's conceptual framework, operationalisation, and resultant impact, with a particular emphasis on the role of community engagement in advancing linguistic competence and fostering student confidence.

The necessity for structured and contextually grounded TOEFL preparation is substantiated by a wealth of scholarly discourse. (Finn, 2020) asserts that language

assessment yields more reliable outcomes when accompanied by targeted skill development and an intimate acquaintance with test formats, as such familiarity mitigates test-related anxiety and enhances student performance. In a similar vein, (Muchtar, 2021) contends that integrative instruction where the core language competencies of reading, writing, listening, and speaking are taught in a cohesive manner fosters communicative proficiency more effectively than the compartmentalised teaching of discrete skills. Given that the TOEFL comprehensively evaluates all four language domains, an instructional approach that is both balanced and integrative is not merely beneficial but imperative.

In addition, community based pedagogical models play a vital role in enriching and extending formal classroom learning. As articulated by (Resch & Schritteser, 2023), service-learning initiatives function as a conduit between theoretical academic learning and its practical application, thereby enabling students to engage with subject matter in a more substantive and meaningful way. Within the domain of language education, such engagement cultivates increased student motivation, situational awareness, and opportunities for authentic language practice. Through the implementation of this initiative, students at Darussalam International High School were afforded not only rigorous TOEFL-oriented instruction, but also the advantages of collaborative peer interaction and reflective learning environments. By synthesising research-driven pedagogical strategies with community engagement principles, the programme sought to foster a comprehensive educational experience addressing both the cognitive and affective facets of second language acquisition. Students internalise language more effectively when they are emotionally secure, positively motivated, and confident in their learning context (Saito et al., 2018).

Furthermore, a considerable corpus of academic literature has examined methodologies aimed at enhancing student performance in standardised English language proficiency assessments such as the TOEFL. Notably, the works by (Yang et al., 2021) and (Jin, 2023) highlight the pivotal role of strategic test-taking techniques and systematic practice in fostering improved test outcomes. Additional studies have explored the effectiveness of intensive language instruction and TOEFL-specific curricula embedded within formal educational structures (Johnson et al., 2005; Samburskiy, 2020). While these contributions have substantially enriched the discourse on TOEFL preparation, they predominantly centre on institutional or commercially-driven test preparation environments, often neglecting the potential of community-based and non-formal educational interventions.

Moreover, extant research tends to prioritise international high school students in general terms, with relatively scant attention paid to students in international schools within Southeast Asian contexts. There exists a discernible paucity of inquiry into the ways in which community engagement initiatives such as service-learning programmes might directly support the development of linguistic proficiency and preparedness for standardised assessments among secondary-level students. This study endeavours to address this lacuna by investigating the effects of a community-based TOEFL preparation initiative tailored for students at Darussalam International High School. Departing from the conventional, exam-centric paradigm, the present research integrates interactive, student-centred pedagogical activities and seeks to evaluate their impact on both language acquisition and student motivation. By situating the TOEFL preparatory programme within a community engagement framework, this

study aspires to offer an original and contextually relevant contribution to the intersecting fields of language education and community service learning.

The originality of this research lies in its fusion of community engagement principles with TOEFL preparation for secondary school students within an international school context in Southeast Asia especially Samarinda, East Kalimantan an area that has been notably underexplored in the existing body of literature. In contrast to previous studies that predominantly focus on standardised, test-focused instruction within formal institutional settings, this study adopts a community-oriented, non-formal educational model that prioritises student autonomy, collaborative learning, and contextual relevance. By developing a TOEFL preparatory programme rooted in interactive, student centred approaches such as peer-assisted learning, project-based activities, and reflective practices this research expands the conventional boundaries of language test preparation. Moreover, the study underscores the dual advantages of such programmes: not only do they improve specific test-related competencies (reading, listening, speaking, and writing), but they also enhance student motivation, self-confidence, and engagement affective dimensions frequently overlooked in traditional test preparation paradigms.

In this way, the research offers an innovative framework for advancing TOEFL proficiency through holistic, community-linked educational strategies, providing valuable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and community outreach practitioners working with high school students in similar educational contexts.

Implementation Method

This study adopted a qualitative research approach with an emphasis on exploring participant experiences, perceptions, and behavioral responses throughout the implementation of a community-based TOEFL preparation program. Rather than merely measuring score improvements, this approach aimed to understand the underlying processes by which students engaged with language learning in a non-formal, service-oriented context. The research was conducted at Darussalam International High School, a multilingual and multicultural learning environment, involving 18 students from Grades 11 and 12 who voluntarily enrolled in the program. These participants, though varied in English proficiency, shared the common goal of improving their TOEFL scores for university readiness. The program itself was framed as a community service initiative, guided by university-level English educators and supported by peer mentors.

To capture rich, descriptive insights, the study employed several qualitative data collection techniques, including semi-structured interviews, reflective learning journals, non-participant classroom observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Interviews, conducted at both the mid-point and conclusion of the program, explored students' motivations, challenges, and perceived benefits of the instructional approach. Weekly journals provided introspective accounts of students' evolving understanding and self-reflection across the TOEFL components—Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension. Observations documented patterns of student engagement and classroom interactions, categorized through a coding framework emphasizing participation, peer

collaboration, and language use. FGDs offered additional layers of student perspectives, validating earlier findings.

The collected data were analyzed using (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) thematic analysis framework, involving six key phases: data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting. This analytical process enabled the identification of recurring patterns and thematic insights into how a community-oriented learning model could support students' linguistic development and preparedness for the TOEFL.

Output Results

Students' Advancing TOEFL For Listening

This section presents the principal findings concerning the enhancement of students' Listening proficiency within a community service-based TOEFL preparation programme. The analysis focuses on participants' performance in the Listening component, recognised as a key indicator of academic English competence. Data obtained from TOEFL scores reveal a marked upward trend among the majority of students, indicating the efficacy of the collaborative and practice-oriented learning approach implemented throughout the programme. Furthermore, these findings are enriched by qualitative data in the form of students' reflective accounts, which illustrate their deepened understanding of listening strategies and their active application during TOEFL practice exercises. As demonstrated in the following data:

Tabel 1. Students' Distribution Frequency

No	Value	Frequency	%	Category
1.	32	1	5.56	Bad
2.	38	2	11.11	Bad
3.	40	4	22.22	Good
4.	41	3	16.67	Good
5.	42	1	5.56	Good
6.	44	1	5.56	Good
7.	45	4	22.22	Very Good
8.	47	2	11.11	Very Good
Total		18	100.00	

The distribution of scores indicates that the majority of students fell within the good category (50%), followed by Very Good (33.33%), with the remaining students classified as Bad (16.67%). These findings suggest that the community service-based TOEFL preparation programme has been largely successful in enhancing listening competence among the participants. Students in the Bad category, who obtained scores of 32 and 38, demonstrated weaknesses in comprehending spoken information within academic contexts—likely due to limited vocabulary, insufficient comprehension strategies, or difficulties maintaining concentration while listening.

Conversely, the good category encompassed students with a reasonably solid understanding of listening material, though they continued to face challenges in responding to items requiring inferential skills and the recognition of implicit details. Meanwhile, students in the Very Good category exhibited a high level of mastery in listening strategies, such as identifying main ideas, drawing inferences, and accurately grasping the speaker's intent. These outcomes reflect the success of the interactive,

collaborative, and practice-oriented teaching methods employed throughout the programme.

Overall, more than 80% of the students demonstrated good to very good performance in the TOEFL listening component, underscoring the programme's effectiveness in supporting the development of English language competence within formal educational settings.

Students' Advancing TOEFL For Structure and Written Expression

The section on Structure and Written Expression in the TOEFL provides an overview of students' ability to comprehend grammar and sentence structure in formal English. This component serves as a critical indicator of how well students can identify appropriate grammatical forms within an academic context. Through this community service-based programme, participants were provided with intensive exercises and practical strategies designed to enhance their sensitivity to sentence structure patterns and common writing errors.

The results presented not only reflect numerical scores but also offer insight into students' development in applying correct grammatical rules contextually. These findings demonstrate how collaborative and reflective learning approaches can positively influence participants' structural competence. As evidenced by the data presented below:

Tabel 2. Students' Structure and Written Expression Distribution Frequency

No	Value	Frequency	%	Category
1.	36	1	5.56	Bad
2.	37	1	5.56	Bad
3.	38	3	16.67	Bad
4.	40	1	5.56	Good
5.	41	1	5.56	Good
6.	42	2	11.11	Good
7.	45	5	27.78	Very Good
8.	48	2	11.11	Very Good
9.	51	2	11.11	Very Good
Total		18		100.00

Table 2 presents the distribution of students' scores in the Structure and Written Expression component of the TOEFL. Among the total of 18 students, score variations are categorised into three levels of proficiency: Bad, Good, and Very Good.

A total of 5 students (27.79%) fell into the Bad category, with scores ranging from 36 to 38. This group exhibited ongoing difficulties in understanding and applying correct sentence structures, as well as in identifying grammatical errors. Such challenges may stem from limited mastery of commonly used grammatical patterns within academic contexts. The Good category comprised 4 students (22.23%) who scored between 40 and 42. These students demonstrated a reasonably sound ability to recognise appropriate sentence structures and written expressions, although they may still struggle with items requiring more advanced or context-sensitive grammatical comprehension.

The largest group, classified as Very Good, included 9 students (50%) who achieved scores between 45 and 51. Students in this category displayed a high level of proficiency in formal sentence construction and English grammar, alongside strong skills in identifying recurring error patterns. This outcome suggests that the pedagogical approach employed emphasising systematic drills, group discussions, and corrective feedback has been effective in strengthening participants' grammatical competence. Overall, 72.23% of students fell within the Good to Very Good range,

indicating that the community-based learning approach adopted in this programme has made a positive contribution to the enhancement of students' structural and written expression skills in the TOEFL context.

Students' Advancing TOEFL For Reading Comprehension

The Reading Comprehension component of the TOEFL reflects students' proficiency in understanding academic English texts. This section assesses key reading skills, including the ability to identify main ideas, comprehend both explicit and implicit information, and draw inferences from textual contexts. Within the framework of this community service-based training programme, students were equipped with a range of active reading strategies—such as skimming, scanning, and idea mapping aimed at improving both the efficiency and accuracy of their reading comprehension.

The evaluation results offer insights into the extent to which interactive and contextually grounded learning approaches have supported students in developing analytical skills when engaging with academic texts. The findings in this area also underscore the impact of student-centred pedagogical methods on the enhancement of academic reading abilities required for the TOEFL. The data may be analysed as follows:

Tabel 3. Students' Reading Comprehension Distribution Frequency

No	Value	Frequency	%	Category
1.	35	1	5.56	Bad
2.	37	1	5.56	Bad
3.	38	1	5.56	Bad
4.	39	3	16.67	Bad
5.	40	4	22.22	Good
6.	42	1	5.56	Good
7.	44	2	11.11	Good
8.	45	3	16.67	Very Good
9.	47	1	5.56	Very Good
10.	50	1	5.56	Very Good
Total		18		100.00

Table 3 presents the distribution of students' scores in the Reading Comprehension component of the TOEFL, reflecting their ability to understand academic texts, identify main ideas, draw conclusions, and comprehend implicit information. Among the 18 students, performance varied across three proficiency categories: Bad, Good, and Very Good. The Bad category comprised 6 students (33.33%), with scores ranging from 35 to 39. These students struggled to grasp the overall meaning of the texts, encountering difficulties both in recognising factual information and in inferring meaning from context. Contributing factors may include a limited academic vocabulary, ineffective reading strategies, and difficulty maintaining focus when reading extended passages.

The Good category included 7 students (38.89%), whose scores fell between 40 and 44. This group demonstrated a reasonably sound level of reading comprehension, particularly in identifying main ideas and responding to literal questions. However, they may still face challenges with items requiring inferential reasoning or an understanding of relationships between paragraphs.

The Very Good category consisted of 5 students (27.78%) who scored 45 and above. These students exhibited strong critical reading skills, such as recognising the structure of an author's argument, interpreting implied meanings, and synthesising information across sections of a text. This outcome suggests that the programme's approach centred on intensive practice, group discussions, and weekly reflection has significantly enhanced students' reading abilities.

In total, 66.67% of students fell within the Good to Very Good range, indicating that the majority of participants successfully developed the academic reading skills required by the TOEFL. This achievement highlights the effectiveness of the community-based training programme in supporting sustained improvement in reading comprehension.

Students' Advancing TOEFL Score

The TOEFL Total Score section provides a comprehensive overview of students' final achievements following their participation in the community service-based preparation programme. The total TOEFL score, which is the sum of the three core components Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading Comprehension offers a holistic representation of the students' academic English proficiency.

The analysis of these scores not only reflects individual performance but also serves as an indicator of the effectiveness of the instructional approach in enhancing students' readiness for the TOEFL. By examining the distribution of total scores, one can assess the extent to which the interactive, collaborative, and reflective methods applied throughout the programme have contributed to the development of language competencies required for further academic pursuits. Accordingly, the data on TOEFL Scores are presented as follows:

Table 4. Students' TOEFL Score Distribution Frequency

No	Score	Frequency	%	Category
1.	400	3	16.67	Bad
2.	403	1	5.56	Bad
3.	410	1	5.56	Bad
4.	413	1	16.67	Bad
5.	417	4	22.22	Bad
6.	423	2	11.11	Good
7.	427	2	11.11	Good
8.	433	1	5.56	Good
9.	450	2	11.11	Very Good
10.	457	1	5.56	Very Good
Total		18		100.00

Based on Table 4 regarding the Students' TOEFL Score Distribution Frequency, it is evident that student scores are spread across three main categories: Bad, Good, and Very Good. Out of the total 18 students, 6 students (33.33%) fall into the Bad category, with scores ranging from 400 to 413. This group indicates that, despite participating in the preparation programme, some students still face difficulties in comprehensively understanding the TOEFL content. This is likely due to limitations in foundational academic English or a lack of critical thinking skills when responding to reading- and structure-based questions.



Figure 2. Implementation of TOEFL ITP Exam at Darussalam International High School

The Good category dominates the distribution, comprising 9 students (50%), suggesting that the majority of participants performed at a satisfactory level. Scores in this category range from 417 to 433, indicating that these students have mastered the majority of the exam material with a consistent level of understanding, though they still require further reinforcement in areas such as detailed reading comprehension or grammatical accuracy. Meanwhile, 3 students (16.67%) achieved the Very Good category with scores exceeding 450. This group demonstrates significant success in internalising TOEFL strategies, including rapid comprehension of texts, accuracy in sentence structure, and effective listening skills. This outcome reflects the positive impact of the practice-based, collaborative, and reflective learning approach implemented in this programme.

Overall, the score analysis reveals that the community service-based learning programme has made a tangible contribution to enhancing students' preparedness for the TOEFL. This is particularly evident in the dominance of the good category and the emergence of Very Good, even though some students still require additional support.

Conclusion

Based on the score distribution, it can be concluded that the community service-based TOEFL preparation programme has achieved notable success in enhancing participants' competencies in listening, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. The majority of participants fell into the Good and Very Good categories across all test components, reflecting the effectiveness of the learning approach grounded in practice, group discussion, and reflective activities.

In the Listening component, over 80% of participants were classified as Good or Very Good, indicating a strong ability to comprehend spoken information. Nevertheless, a number of students continue to face challenges in inferential listening and recognising implicit details. For the Structure and Written Expression component, 72.23% of participants achieved Good to Very Good results, signalling significant progress in formal sentence structure and written expression skills. This highlights the efficacy of the programme's emphasis on systematic practice and corrective feedback in strengthening students' formal English proficiency. In the Reading Comprehension

component, 66.67% of participants attained scores within the Good to Very Good range, demonstrating marked improvement in critical reading skills, such as identifying main ideas, drawing conclusions, and interpreting implied information within academic texts.

Although a minority of students remain in the Bad category and require further support, the overall score distribution reveals that more than half (50%) of the participants achieved satisfactory or higher results. The programme has made a positive contribution to the development of participants' academic English abilities, with a focus on intensive practice and collaborative learning that has enhanced their readiness to undertake the TOEFL.

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