

ToeFl Preparation Program at SMA Negeri 3 Sidoarjo to Improve Academic Reading Ability : A Student Based

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the implementation of the TOEFL preparation program at SMA Negeri 3 Sidoarjo and its impact on students' reading skills. The study used a qualitative approach and collected data using open-ended questionnaires completed by participating students. The research took place in the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The data were then analyzed by thematic grouping to determine learning experiences, reading strategies used, and barriers encountered during the learning process. The results showed that the program had a positive impact on reading skills, particularly on vocabulary mastery through speed-reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, and increased confidence in dealing with academic texts. Students also demonstrated independent learning by practicing independently, using digital applications, and memorizing new vocabulary. However, several barriers were identified, such as a lack of vocabulary mastery, difficulty understanding complex sentences, and overly repetitive teaching methods. Based on the research findings, the TOEFL preparation program needs to be improved through more interactive methods, more diverse learning strategies, and school support. Furthermore, students should be grouped according to their language level to increase learning effectiveness. This study concludes that the TOEFL preparation program can significantly improve students' academic reading skills, although improvements in learning design and support from educational institutions are still needed.

Keywords: TOEFL preparation, academic reading proficiency, English language learning

Program Persiapan TOEFL di SMA Negeri 3 Sidoarjo untuk Meningkatkan Kemampuan Membaca Akademik: Berbasis Siswa

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji implementasi program persiapan TOEFL di SMA Negeri 3 Sidoarjo dan dampaknya terhadap keterampilan membaca siswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan mengumpulkan data menggunakan kuesioner terbuka yang diisi oleh siswa yang berpartisipasi. Penelitian berlangsung pada semester genap tahun ajaran 2024/2025. Data kemudian dianalisis dengan pengelompokan tematik untuk menentukan pengalaman belajar, strategi membaca yang digunakan, dan hambatan yang dihadapi selama proses pembelajaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa program ini memberikan dampak positif terhadap keterampilan membaca, terutama penguasaan kosakata melalui strategi membaca cepat seperti skimming dan scanning, serta meningkatkan kepercayaan diri dalam membaca teks akademik. Siswa juga menunjukkan pembelajaran mandiri dengan berlatih secara mandiri, menggunakan aplikasi digital, dan menghafal kosakata baru. Namun, beberapa hambatan teridentifikasi, seperti kurangnya penguasaan kosakata, kesulitan memahami kalimat kompleks, dan metode pengajaran yang terlalu repetitif. Berdasarkan temuan penelitian, program persiapan TOEFL perlu ditingkatkan melalui metode yang lebih interaktif, strategi pembelajaran yang lebih beragam, dan dukungan sekolah. Lebih lanjut, siswa perlu dikelompokkan berdasarkan tingkat bahasa mereka untuk meningkatkan efektivitas pembelajaran. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa program persiapan TOEFL dapat meningkatkan keterampilan membaca akademis siswa secara signifikan, meskipun perbaikan dalam desain pembelajaran dan dukungan dari lembaga pendidikan masih diperlukan.

Kata kunci: program persiapan TOEFL, kemampuan membaca akademik, berbasis siswa

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INTRODUCTION

In an era of rapid globalization, English language proficiency has become a crucial skill, particularly in education. The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is an internationally recognized standard for measuring English proficiency, including in Indonesia. In line with this, SMAN 3 Sidoarjo is conducting a TOEFL preparation program to improve students' academic reading skills. This program is interesting to study, given that reading skills are key to understanding complex academic texts. Academic reading comprehension requires more than just vocabulary mastery. Students are required to be able to find the main idea, make inferences, understand the argumentative structure of the text, and apply reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and contextual inference. Previous research has shown that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in Indonesia often struggle with these aspects, particularly when dealing with inference, vocabulary-in-context, and implicit details, which are part of the TOEFL test (Samad, Jannah, & Fitriani, 2017; Girsang, Marbun, Turnip, & Saragih, 2019).

The TOEFL is an internationally standardized test used to measure English language skills, particularly in academic contexts. The test covers four main skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, where the components *reading* is a crucial determinant because it is directly related to the ability to understand complex academic texts (Rahmawati & Dewi, 2022). Academic reading skills extend beyond vocabulary recognition to identifying main ideas, understanding implied ideas, analyzing arguments, and critically interpreting texts. At the secondary school level, particularly high school, TOEFL preparation presents a unique challenge. This is due to the significant differences between everyday reading texts and the academic texts tested on the TOEFL. Numerous previous studies have reported that Indonesian students experience difficulty answering questions *reading comprehension* TOEFL, especially in the inference section,

contextual vocabulary, and unstated details (Kurniawati, 2020; Putri & Santoso, 2021). Therefore, the existence of a TOEFL preparation program is crucial to provide appropriate strategies so students can improve their academic reading skills.

SMAN 3 Sidoarjo, one of the leading schools in East Java, has implemented a TOEFL preparation program for its students. This program is designed not only to introduce the TOEFL test format but also to develop reading skills through specific strategies such as *skimming*, *scanning*, text structure analysis, and academic vocabulary enrichment. The uniqueness of this program lies in its focus on student experience (*student-based*), where students are not only objects of learning, but also build learning independence and develop their own learning strategies (Handayani & Nugroho, 2023).

Using a qualitative approach, this study seeks to explore in depth how the TOEFL preparation program at SMAN 3 Sidoarjo contributes to improving students' academic reading skills. The research focuses not only on TOEFL score achievement but also on students' learning experiences, strategies used, and challenges they face. Thus, this study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the study of English language learning in Indonesia as well as practical implications for curriculum development and foreign language teaching methods in schools. The TOEFL has long been the international standard for measuring the English skills of non-native speakers, especially for academic purposes (Widodo, 2020). Since its introduction, the TOEFL has been used as a requirement for university entrance, scholarships, and even job recruitment. Recent research has shown that the TOEFL serves not only as a selection tool but also as a diagnostic instrument to map students' strengths and weaknesses in specific linguistic aspects (Sari & Yuliani, 2021).

In the section *reading comprehension* The TOEFL requires students to understand complex academic texts with long sentence structures, high-



level academic vocabulary, and implicit ideas that require critical reasoning (Rahmawati & Dewi, 2022). This demonstrates that reading skills in the TOEFL context are more than just linguistic activities, but rather cognitive processes involving critical thinking skills. Academic reading is a fundamental skill in higher education. According to Harahap (2021), students with good reading skills are better able to access scientific information, understand research literature, and develop critical thinking skills. In the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language), reading skills play a dominant role because they are the primary gateway to acquiring knowledge in English (Kurniawati, 2020).

Studies in Indonesia reveal that students' main obstacles in reading academic texts are limited vocabulary, slow reading speed, and difficulty identifying main ideas and inferences (Putri & Santoso, 2021). Therefore, teaching strategies that emphasize critical reading skills and effective reading strategies are needed. TOEFL preparation programs are designed to equip students with skills relevant to the test's demands while boosting their confidence. According to Handayani & Nugroho (2023), these programs typically include TOEFL-formatted practice questions, reading strategy training, and *skimming* and *scanning*, as well as academic vocabulary learning.

Research by Sari & Yuliani (2021) shows that students who take TOEFL preparation courses experience significant improvements in reading skills and vocabulary mastery. Furthermore, recent research also emphasizes the importance of *learner autonomy*. In this program, students are encouraged to develop independent learning through the use of digital applications, project-based learning, and self-reflection (Rahmawati & Dewi, 2022). This research is based on constructivism theory, which emphasizes that learning is a process of constructing knowledge through experience and social interaction. In the context of TOEFL preparation, students not only receive material but also construct their understanding through hands-on practice, group discussions, and reflection on

learning experiences (Handayani & Nugroho, 2023). Draft *learner autonomy* is also relevant in this context. According to Safitri & Andayani (2021), learning autonomy can increase students' intrinsic motivation because they feel in control of their learning process. Students who are able to manage their learning tend to be more successful in overcoming academic reading challenges. Although numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of TOEFL preparation courses, most have focused on college students (Simanjuntak, 2018; Widodo, 2020). Research that deeply explores the experiences of high school students, particularly in the context of high schools in Indonesia, is still very limited. Furthermore, the majority of previous studies have used a quantitative approach focusing on TOEFL scores, while qualitative approaches that explore students' learning experiences are relatively rare. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how the TOEFL preparation program at SMAN 3 Sidoarjo affects students' academic reading skills based on their direct experiences.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the TOEFL preparation program at SMA Negeri 3 Sidoarjo from the perspective of student experiences. This method was chosen to provide a comprehensive and contextual understanding of the learning process and its impact on students' academic reading skills.

This study was conducted at SMA Negeri 3 Sidoarjo, a secondary education institution that offers a TOEFL preparation program to improve its students' English skills, particularly in academic reading. The target population of this study were 11th-grade students of SMA Negeri 3 Sidoarjo who were actively participating in the TOEFL preparation program during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year.

The population of this study was 70 10th-grade students of SMA Negeri 3 Sidoarjo who actively participated and were willing to participate in interviews, tests, and complete additional instruments.

The sample consisted of 60 students randomly selected based on their active participation status and willingness to participate in interviews, tests, and supplementary instruments. Penetapan jumlah ini didasarkan pada formula Slavin dalam (Santoso, 2012; Amin, 2013; Razak, 2015).

Table 1
Population and Sample

No.	Population and Sample	Sum
1	Population	70
2	Sample	60

Data were collected through four main methods. The first method was direct observation during the TOEFL preparation phase, where the researcher recorded learning activities, teacher-student interactions, and student attitudes. The second method was in-depth interviews with several students to explore their subjective experiences and reflections on the program. The third method was a reading comprehension test, designed to measure students' academic reading skills, particularly skimming, scanning, inferencing, and vocabulary mastery. Finally, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to complement the test results and capture students' broader perspectives on their learning strategies and challenges. Data analysis was conducted thematically to categorize findings related to self-

directed learning, reading strategies, vocabulary development, and confidence in reading academic texts.

The data analysis technique in this study followed the stages of qualitative descriptive analysis. First, all data obtained from observations, interviews, and questionnaires were collected and organized systematically. Then, the researcher conducted data reduction by selecting, categorizing, and focusing only on relevant information related to the research objectives. After that, the data were presented in the form of descriptive narratives to highlight patterns, themes, and findings that emerged from the field. Finally, the researcher drew conclusions by interpreting the results to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences in the TOEFL preparation program.

RESULT

The results of this study were obtained through an analysis of questionnaires and test instrument completed by eleventh-grade students of SMA Negeri 3 Sidoarjo after participating in the TOEFL Preparation Program. The collected data illustrates students' perceptions of improvements in academic reading skills, vocabulary mastery, use of reading strategies, reading speed, and self-confidence. To present the results more clearly, the findings are summarized in the following table.

Table 2
Students' Perceptions of Improving Academic Reading Skills, Vocabulary Mastery, Use of Reading Strategies, Reading Speed, and Self-Confidence

Rated Aspect	Indicator	Number of Students	Percentage	Information
Reading Test	Skimming & scanning	42	70%	Able to identify main ideas and details quickly.
	Making inferences	25	42%	Many students still struggle with implicit meaning.

Table 2
Students' Perceptions of Improving Academic Reading Skills, Vocabulary Mastery, Use of Reading Strategies, Reading Speed, and Self-Confidence

Rated Aspect	Indicator	Number of Students	Percentage	Information
	Guessing meaning from context	28	47%	Partial control, not yet evenly distributed.
	General vocabulary improvement	37	62%	Vocabulary has improved, but not evenly distributed.
	Technical/scientific vocabulary	20	33%	Still face difficulty with academic terms.
	Difficulty with long texts	18	30%	Limited vocabulary becomes a barrier in reading longer texts.
	Skimming and scanning	42	70%	Able to identify main idea and details quickly
Questionnaire	Reading texts outside of class	45	75%	Majority read additional texts (articles, novels, journals).
	Note down new vocabulary	48	80%	Frequently use digital notes or applications.
	Consistency of independent practice	38	63%	Some students are not yet consistent in practice.
	Feeling confident with academic texts	44	73%	Confidence increases after joining the program.
	Still unsure with inference & vocabulary	22	37%	Need additional practice and guidance.

The reading test results showed that most students (70%) were able to apply skimming and scanning strategies effectively to identify main ideas and specific information. However, only 42% of students performed well in making inferences, and 47% were able to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from context. This indicates that surface-level strategies such as locating explicit information have been sufficiently mastered, while higher-order comprehension skills still require more intensive guidance. Furthermore, 62% of students showed improvement in general vocabulary mastery, but only 33% demonstrated adequate ability in understanding technical and scientific vocabulary. This finding emphasizes the need to strengthen academic vocabulary instruction to prepare students for texts containing specialized terminology. In terms of reading speed, 67% of students demonstrated increased reading fluency after learning scanning and skimming techniques. Nevertheless, 30% of students still struggled with longer and complex texts due to limited vocabulary, suggesting that improved speed is not always proportional to comprehension.

The questionnaire results supported these findings by highlighting students' independent learning habits. As many as 75% of students reported reading additional texts outside of class, and 80% routinely recorded new vocabulary using digital and manual media. Around 73% also felt more confident in reading academic texts after joining the program, although 37% admitted they still lacked confidence when dealing with inference and contextual vocabulary questions. These findings confirm that the TOEFL Preparation Program has positively influenced students' reading skills and learning autonomy, yet further support is required to enhance advanced comprehension skills and academic vocabulary.

Improvements were also seen in vocabulary mastery, although not evenly across all students. Most felt their vocabulary had increased significantly, especially general vocabulary, while mastery of technical academic vocabulary remained a challenge. This suggests the need for

greater emphasis on authentic academic text-based materials to familiarize students with the academic terms frequently encountered in scientific reading. In terms of reading speed, students reported improvements thanks to the implementation of the skimming strategy. However, long academic texts still presented challenges, primarily due to limited vocabulary. This obstacle indicates that increasing reading speed needs to be accompanied by strengthening vocabulary for optimal results. Another notable aspect was students' increased confidence in dealing with academic texts. Most felt better prepared for the TOEFL Reading section, although some doubts persisted, particularly around inference and academic vocabulary. This demonstrates that the program has provided sufficient preparation, but further refinement of learning strategies is needed to better prepare students for the complex challenges of academic reading.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the experiences of eleventh-grade students at SMAN 3 Sidoarjo who participated in a specialized TOEFL preparation program to improve their academic reading skills. The results indicate that the program significantly contributed to students' progress in reading comprehension through several mechanisms, including increased learning autonomy, the application of contextual reading strategies, sustained exposure to English language materials, and changes in affective aspects such as self-confidence. In this section, I will discuss these findings in more depth, link them to theory and previous research, and highlight the implications and limitations of this study.

One of the main findings of this study is an increase in learning independence (*learner autonomy*) among eleventh-grade students at SMAN 3 Sidoarjo after participating in the TOEFL Preparation program. Most students actively noted new vocabulary, used digital applications such as Google Translate, watched English videos, and



implemented independent reading strategies outside of class. This indicates that the TOEFL Preparation program not only provides material but also fosters sustainable independent learning habits. These results align with research by Masfufah (2021), which emphasized that independent learning is a crucial factor in improving students' English language competency in Indonesia. Similarly, research by Lestari (2022) found that students engaged in self-directed strategy-based learning had a higher success rate in comprehending academic texts. Independent learning in the EFL context is also considered a crucial 21st-century competency, as students are expected to be able to independently navigate various digital and printed learning resources (Rahmawati & Yuwono, 2023). From a constructivist perspective, this experience demonstrates that students are not merely passive recipients of information but also construct their own understanding through independently chosen learning activities (Fauzi & Arifin, 2020). Thus, the TOEFL Preparation Program has served as a platform that encourages students to develop autonomous learning strategies, ultimately enhancing their readiness for complex academic reading.

Another finding shows that students of SMAN 3 Sidoarjo are starting to get used to using reading strategies such as *skimming* and *scanning*. When faced with TOEFL texts, this strategy is considered effective for answering questions about main ideas, specific details, and explicit information. However, the ability to infer from context remains a major weakness for most students. These results support the research of Widiastuti and Nurhayati (2020) which shows that although Indonesian EFL students are quite capable of doing *skimming* and *scanning*, they still have difficulty understanding implicit information and critically interpreting texts. Similarly, a study by Siregar (2021) stated that mastery of reading strategies is closely related to students' academic performance, but inferential skills require further and explicit training. According to Grabe and Stoller (2020), reading

strategies are inseparable from understanding vocabulary and discourse structure. Therefore, learning reading strategies must be integrated with developing academic vocabulary and training in understanding argumentative text structures. Thus, the results of this study reinforce the view that TOEFL preparation programs need to expand their focus from merely surface strategies to developing in-depth reading skills (*deep reading skills*).

More than half of the students reported an increase in their academic vocabulary after participating in the TOEFL Preparation program. However, a small percentage felt that this improvement was limited, particularly for technical and scientific terms. This suggests that while the program successfully expanded students' vocabulary, there is still a need for more attention to more complex academic vocabulary.

These findings align with Nurhadi (2021), who emphasized the importance of explicitly teaching academic vocabulary in an EFL context. Similarly, Yuliana's (2022) research shows that vocabulary is a key predictor of successful TOEFL reading comprehension. In other words, without sufficient vocabulary mastery, students' reading strategies cannot function optimally. Krashen (1985) in *Input Hypothesis* states that vocabulary comprehension develops with sufficient exposure to language (comprehensible input). In this context, the TOEFL Preparation Program provides intensive exposure to vocabulary-rich academic reading. However, as this study shows, exposure alone is not enough; explicit strategies are needed to emphasize academic vocabulary learning so students can use it in broader contexts.

Most students reported an increase in reading speed, especially after becoming accustomed to using the *skimming* and *scanning*. However, this improvement is not uniform; some students still have difficulty reading quickly due to limited vocabulary. This aligns with Harsono's (2022) findings, which state that reading speed is significantly influenced by two factors: vocabulary mastery and sentence structure. Without adequate

vocabulary mastery, students tend to pause too long to guess word meanings, thus slowing down the reading process. Furthermore, Astuti's (2023) research emphasized that increasing reading speed must be balanced with in-depth comprehension. This means that speed reading should not focus solely on speed, but also on maintaining a thorough understanding of the text's content. In this context, although the TOEFL Preparation Program successfully improved students' reading speed, additional strategies are still needed to maintain a balance between speed and comprehension.

The research results showed that most students felt more confident after participating in the TOEFL Preparation program. They were better prepared for academic texts, although they still experienced some hesitation when faced with inference and vocabulary-in-context questions. Agustina and Suryani's (2021) research also found that intensive practice-based learning programs can boost EFL students' self-confidence. This confidence is crucial for preparing for international standardized exams like the TOEFL, as confident students tend to be calmer and more able to access the reading strategies they've learned. However, as Putri and Kurniawan (2022) noted, EFL students' self-confidence is often fragile when faced with complex texts. Therefore, a more varied teaching approach is needed, including providing challenging yet appropriate texts to students' ability levels, to gradually build their confidence. Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of how TOEFL preparation programs can shape high school students' academic reading competencies. These results support constructivism theory (Fauzi & Arifin, 2020), which emphasizes the importance of direct experience in building knowledge. *Input Hypothesis* from Krashen (1985) who emphasized language exposure as the key to acquisition.

In addition, this study also strengthens the view that *learner autonomy* is a key factor in foreign language learning (Masfufah, 2021; Lestari, 2022). Thus, the theory of independent learning is relevant not only at the university level

but also at the high school level. This study has limitations because it only used a questionnaire without in-depth interviews or classroom observations. Therefore, the data obtained are more descriptive in nature based on student perceptions, and may not fully capture the dynamics of the learning process. Future research can use a multidisciplinary approach. *mixed methods* to provide a more comprehensive picture, both in terms of students' subjective experiences and measurable TOEFL score improvements.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results obtained through questionnaires, it can be concluded that the TOEFL Preparation program at SMAN 3 Sidoarjo significantly contributed to improving students' academic reading skills. This contribution is evident in several key aspects reported by students: increased learning independence, mastery of reading strategies, vocabulary expansion, increased reading speed, and increased self-confidence.

First, students demonstrated improved independent learning skills, demonstrated by their habits of noting down new vocabulary, using digital applications, and practicing reading outside of class. These habits align with constructivist theory, which emphasizes the importance of experience and reflection in the learning process. Second, students began to apply reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and inferencing to comprehend academic texts. Although some students still struggle with making inferences and understanding more complex academic vocabulary, the program has provided a solid foundation for developing more focused reading skills. Third, students reported increased vocabulary, particularly general vocabulary relevant to academic texts. However, technical vocabulary still needs to be improved to better prepare students for more complex texts. This suggests that authentic text-based learning still needs to be improved in future programs. Fourth, improving reading speed is an important achievement, although limited vocabulary remains a barrier



when dealing with long texts. This indicates the need for a balance between vocabulary mastery and speed reading strategies.

Ultimately, students' increased confidence in the TOEFL Reading section demonstrates that this program not only provides technical skills but also develops affective aspects that support students' academic readiness. However, innovations in teaching methods, material differentiation, and school facilities are still needed to achieve optimal results. Overall, this study confirms the importance of TOEFL preparation programs in improving high school students' academic reading skills. These findings are expected to serve as a reference for other schools developing similar programs, while also providing recommendations for teachers to integrate more varied, contextual, and student-centered learning strategies.

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