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# English Department Students' Problems With Standardized English Proficiency Test

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## ABSTRACT

Most people think that standardized English test (*SEPT*) will never be a problem for English department students. Their almost every day encounter with English is seen as a benefit that makes them fluent English users. However, the fact is different. A preliminary study in an English Department in a university in Surabaya indicates that many students have problems with the university made *SEPT*. They fail many times in their efforts to meet the passing grade 527. As a follow up, this study tries to reveal the problems which are faced by the students in dealing with *SEPT* as well as to find out the factors that cause the problems and how they cope with these problems. Questionnaire and interviews were used to collect data for this study. The questionnaire was distributed to the students of English Department who have already taken standardized English test. The study reveals that in average, the students take the test three times and more before they are able to reach the passing grade. The study also reveals that many students have problems with grammar and vocabulary. The very-limited time allotment to do the test and the unfamiliarity of the test form are considered as the main factors that cause the failure. It can be concluded that English Department students also have problems in successfully doing *SEPT*.

**Keywords:** Problem, factor, failure, standardized English test

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English department students are considered to easily get high scores in standardized English test (*SEPT*). They are also assumed to be worry free in facing *SEPT*. However, it is not necessarily the case. There are many English department students who get difficulties in meeting the passing grade *SEPT* by their institution. Based on a preliminary study, about 75% students of an English department get difficulty to reach passing grade 527. This fact seems to be unbelievable. Yet, this is the truth. Furthermore, this is not a new condition. It has happened for more than 10 years.

The number of the students who fail to reach the passing grade, especially in one time or two times test only, is always high. This unfortunate fact really triggers curiosity. It is questioned why the students fail in the test whereas English is their major in which they have frequent encounter with English in their daily life. Their lessons are in English. Their assignments are in English. Their routines are considered to be almost full with English atmosphere. Yet, their scores when taking *SEPT* do not reflect that they are proficient in English.

This phenomenon triggers curiosity on what problems that are actually faced by the students in getting good

score in *SEPT*. It also makes the lecturers curious on the factors that cause the problems. Lastly, there is also curiosity on the strategy the students use in facing *SEPT*. Considering that this phenomenon needs to be investigated more deeply to find the answers the curiosity above, it is decided that the research related to it worth conducting. The findings are expected to be able to be used in policy making in English department in the hope that the students will no longer face difficulties in meeting the passing grade 527 in the future.

### 1.1. Related work

#### 1.1.1. Standardized English Test (*SEPT*)

A standardized test is a test which has been ensured to be reliable and valid which applies particular consistent procedures for administering and scoring [8]. *SEPT* is widely used as a requirement to graduate or to pass admission tests. The purpose of *SEPT* in general is to assess the general knowledge or skills commonly required to enter an institution [9]. TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] and IELTS [International English Language Testing System] are examples of tests which have been standardized for worldwide use [1][5]. They

are the most well-known ones. TOEFL is generally used to measure the English language proficiency of foreign students who plan to study in the USA whereas IELTS is used to test students who wish to study in the UK or Australia. TOEFL has been used by more than 11,000 institutions in more than 150 countries around the world [5]. Based on the platforms that are used, there are two types of TOEFL test. They are PBT (paper-based) and IBT (internet-based) test. The score range on a PBT goes from 310-677, whereas the IBT ranges from 0-120. Grammar section in the PBT is replaced with speaking section in the IBT. Grammar is not tested directly on the IBT, however, it is tested indirectly through the writing and speaking sections. In Indonesia, paper-based test is still commonly used and favored by many test takers. Thus, the test referred in this paper is the paper-based one.

### 1.1.2. Problems in SEPT

Fairness is said to be one issue in SEPT. As widely believed, SEPT should be valid, reliable, and fair in terms of taking into account students' wide range of backgrounds in language, culture, and academic disciplines [7] [12]. In line with it, Davidson [2] has concern that even a well-established SEPT like TOEFL may not be able to represent English varieties used all over the world. The tasks SEPT in the TOEFL test is considered to represent the language used in and the academic nature of North American universities [4] [10].

Puspawati [7] identifies that students have problem on topics used in SEPT. Topic refers to the content of the language skill sections of the test. Test takers' familiarity or unfamiliarity with topics used in the test may influence the result of the test. Unfamiliar topic in which test takers have no schemata about might result bad test performance. Beside unfamiliarity with the topics, test takers also have problem related to unfamiliar vocabulary and test format. In addition, anxiety is the problem exists in SEPT. Fulton [2] finds that the higher the test taker's anxiety, the worse the performance they show. This finding is consistent with similar findings of previous studies.

Besides all the problems mentioned above, it is suspected that there are other issues faced by SEPT takers. Since the previous studies did not focus on students of English department in non-English speaking countries, it is considered necessary to find out the problems to success in SEPT faced by English department students in non-English speaking countries. Hence, investigating the problems of English department students in Indonesia is necessary to help the students to find solution for their problems and to check whether the findings support the previous studies or not.

### 1.2 Research questions

Based on the previous explanation, the study is then focused on two things. First, what problems that English

Department students face in SEPT. Second, how the students attempt to meet the institution passing grade for SEPT.

## 2. METHODS

This research has two main purposes. First, it tries to reveal the problems that are faced by English Department students in facing SEPT and achieve the passing grade. Second, it attempts to find out the students' efforts and/or strategy to meet the institution passing grade. In short, this research depicts the profile of English Department students' SEPT scores in the last 4 years and the factors that prevent better SEPT scores achievement.

To achieve the purpose, this research used quantitative approach in collecting and analyzing the data. Naturally, this research applies ex post facto design because it tries to depict an existing phenomenon and explain how this phenomenon naturally occurs [3]. Active students SEPT scores and their test frequency are the quantitative data. The students' statements about their failure factors are obtained analyzed quantitatively as well.

Questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants. The questionnaire was distributed to English department students who have ever taken test of standardized English Test (SEPT). Those students were taken as the participants because data on their SEPT scores are available. Besides, since most of them have taken the test more than one, the data on their score progresses are also available. The data was obtained from the students' answers on the questionnaire and interview. There is no force to be the participants of this research. The potential participant candidates were asked whether they would be willing to join the study. The consent form is attached in the first page of the questionnaire. As many as 711 students provided data for this research. To triangulate the students' answer, interviews were conducted.

The participants of this study are English department students who have taken SEPT more than once but have not met the passing grade, yet. Since this research is conducted during pandemic outbreak, the questionnaire employed is online based. The online questionnaire is distributed online using online social media. The result of the questionnaire is described statistically, so that the research reveals the profile of the students SEPT scores and their difficulties in meeting the passing grades. The result of the interview was analyzed qualitatively. Before being analyzed, the data were cleansed, classified, coded then analyzed using descriptive statistics.

The validity of this research is obtained from the process of making questionnaire which involved expert validation and piloting (mini try out) before the questionnaire was distributed to the participants. The questionnaire was built using an online platform which is user-friendly so that the participants did not find difficulties to access and

fill it out. Expert validation and trial were important to ensure that the questionnaire contained no bias or multiple interpretation.

For triangulation, interviews were conducted to some participants to get confirmation for their answers in questionnaire. The participants were asked in the questionnaire whether they agreed to be contacted to be asked more for confirmation. Furthermore, the interviewees were asked to read the researcher interpretation of the data to check whether the interpretation met the reality.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before explaining and discussing more on the findings and the answers on the research questions, the result of preliminary study will be elaborated to show general profile of English department students' scores in SEPT. The profile is presented in a table as follows:

**Table 1.** Students' achievement in SEPT

Program	Batch	Total	5+	5-	BL	L	L 5+
Education	A	95	49	46	75	20	9
	B	97	20	77	90	7	3
	C	98	0	97	93	4	0
	D	94	0	94	91	3	0
Literature	A	85	39	47	61	25	11
	B	82	4	78	74	8	0
	C	77	1	76	70	7	0
	D	83	0	83	76	7	0

- 5+ = have taken SEPT more than 5 times
- 5- = have taken SEPT less than 5 times
- BL = have not achieved the targeted score
- L = have achieved the targeted score
- L5+ = achieved the targeted score after more than 5 times taking SEPT

Table 1 shows that in general there are only few students from both study programs i.e. education and literature who have passed the passing grade score 527. It also shows that the students of older batch whose encounter with English is relatively frequent still find difficulties in obtaining the passing grade score SEPT by their university. This research has investigated the problems faced by the students in general and the factors as well as the strategy the students apply in their attempts to get the targeted score. The findings of the investigation are elaborated as follow.

#### 3.1. The problems English Department students face in SEPT

The first thing to be identified from the participants is what problems they face in SEPT. Some questions in the online questionnaire were specially designed to get data to reveal the problems the students have in each section. The sections are listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. The students' answers in the questionnaire are vary and sometimes unexpected. The problems faced in each section are described in the following table.

**Table 2.** Details of students' problem in SEPT

Section	Problems	Frequency
Listening comprehension	Audio is too long. One audio is used for 3-5 questions, so that it is hard to memorize.	12%
	Audio is too fast	9%
	Audio is bad and not clear	24%
	Audio is echoing because of the use of no headset	6%
	Noise from passing by trains	3%
	Inability to listen and answer questions in the same time	3%
	Unfamiliar with native speakers' English	3%
	Running out of time	6%
	Lack of focus and concentration	24%
	Problem with hearing organ.	3%
	Hard to conclude what the speakers say in the test recording.	3%
	Not accustomed with the test yet	3%
	Structure & written expression	All options seem correct
Scientific sentence used in this section make it difficult to identify the grammatical errors.		6%
Poor grammar mastery		63%
Lack of practice		3%
Not adequate time		3%
Good distractors		20%
Reading comprehension	The question sequence does not match the paragraph sequence	5%

Poor scientific vocabulary mastery	15%
Energy drain, poor concentration and thinking power because reading is in the last part.	5%
Limited time to understand unfamiliar text	40%
Poor background knowledge	5%
Long text causes difficulty to find the keywords, lost focus, sleepy, and reading boredom	25%
High level distractors	3%
Not accustomed to read	3%

Besides the problem in the table above, the participants admitted that in all sections they have problem with time and familiarity with the test format as shown in the following table.

**Table 3.** Common problems in 3 sections of *SEPT*

Section	Running out of time	Unfamiliar with the test format
Listening	53%	47%
Structure	66%	34%
Reading	75%	25%

The result of the questionnaire presented in the tables above were confirmed by the result of the interview and it can be inferred that in answering the test questions in general the students have problems related to their own English competence and the test materials. For many of them, listening comprehension is very difficult, not because they do not understand the oral text but because they feel that the text is generally long and they do not have enough memory to retain all information stated in the text they listen. It occurs because they are not allowed to make note during the listening section in *SEPT*. Taking note during listening actually helps students' understanding when they are listening to longer conversation, talks, or lectures [11]. They also get difficulty to be multitasking in listening comprehension section. In their opinion, it is very hard because the audio is played just once. the question is not written in the test booklet, the space between questions is very short, and they must listen and read the options for the answer simultaneously.

In structure and written expression section, they get difficulty to identify which one is right and which one is wrong. Most students admit that they have inadequate grammar mastery so that all options seem right for them. In the questionnaire, as many as 63% participants admit that they have poor grammar competence. The students who have good grammar competence, however, do not mention that this structure and written expression is easy. They say that the test distractors are good so they often

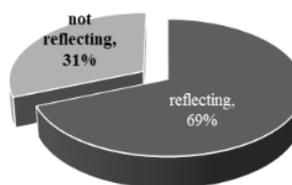
misled and choose wrong answers if they do not read the questions very carefully.

In reading, the students get difficulty to answer due to time limit, focus lost, and lack of vocabulary mastery. The students find it hard to understand long text in very short time. in their daily life, they can reread a text for as many times as they need, but they cannot do that during the test. This situation gives the, more burden and stress. The reading test position which is in the last part of the test causes more panic feeling for them. It also makes them lose focus and concentration. This condition is worsened by the vocabulary they find in the texts of *SEPT*. They consider the vocabulary used in the test belong to scientific cluster so that they feel it unfamiliar and it is hard to predict the word meaning since they have little or even no prior knowledge about it.

The factor that lead to this problem is the students' basic competence. It is actually unexpected findings because it is commonly believed that students of English department understand English and are able to apply it well. However, their scores do not prove that common assumption is true.

The students themselves actually realize their weakness that is their poor proficiency that prevents them to get the targeted scores easily. Most participants admit that the score they get in *SEPT* reflect their actual English proficiency. As many as 68.5% of the participants admitted that the scores that they got in *SEPT* reflect their real competence. It is shown in chart 1.

**Figure 1.** Students' perception on whether the *SEPT* scores reflect their actual English proficiency



Besides the students basic English competence, other problems that cause the failure are students' unfamiliarity with the test format, inability to manage time and deal with test distraction and mental barriers like boredom, energy drain, and panic attack.

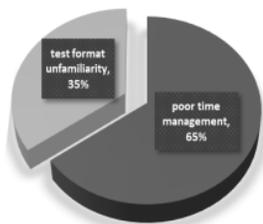
Many students also have problem with the test format. This problem faced by both students who have reached the passing grade and those who have not reached it. This problem is related to the next problem mentioned by the students, i.e. time management. It happens because the students do not know the proper strategies that can be utilized in doing *SEPT*.

The next problem is boredom, energy drain, and panic attack. It could happen in all three sections. Yet, most students feel it the most in reading comprehension section

because this is the last section in the test. As a result, the students feel depressed during the test.

The last problem is ability to deal with test distraction. The distraction usually comes up in the form of unexpected technical nuisance. For instance, too cold room air conditioner, unclear audio, and the sound of passing by trains. Distraction is also found in the form of social nuisance. For example, unfriendly proctor, other participants unpleasant odor, or noisy passers-by.

**Figure 2.** Factors beyond competence that cause students' failure in SEPT



The students' unfamiliarity with the test format occur because they were not introduced and trained to do the test due to common belief that as English department students it will be easy for them to manage any test in English. Yet, it is not necessarily the fact. Their prior knowledge on English needs to be supported with knowledge on the test format and strategy to do well and finish the test in the provided limited time. According to the students, some subjects have actually introduced some parts of the test format. the students, however, lack of training on doing the complete test which covers all sections so that they do not know how to manage their time and energy well in doing the test. Most students get panic when they have to do the complete test. Therefore, they need training on how to do the test skillfully and show their best. They say that sometimes they just cannot perform well not because they do not understand the test content, but because they do not have enough time to read and answer. It is obviously a problem with time management and being unfamiliar with the test format as mentioned previously.

### 3.2. The students' efforts to meet institution passing grade for SEPT

The result indicates that the students use the following efforts in trying to meet the institution passing grade. The efforts are:

**Table 5** Students' effort to succeed in SEPT

1. Practicing the exercises in TOEFL practice book	72.5%
2. Joining courses in university language center	11%
3. Joining courses in other language course	1.8%
4. Hiring private teacher	3.7%
5. Do nothing	11%
6. Cheating	0%

The table above shows that most students do exercises themselves using TOEFL practice book. The students say they do it because they want to be familiar with the test format and they want to sharpen their understanding on the language itself. They hope that by practicing do the exercise will help them to get better score. Unfortunately, only few students practice the time management. Most of them do not realize that their lack of time in doing the real test occurs because they do not train themselves to do the test in the provided limited time. If they practice to do the exercises in the limited time, they will be accustomed so that they will not get too panic during the real test. Being panic during the test ruins the concentration and makes them forget the knowledge about the language that they actually know.

Another strategy that is applied by many students is joining the courses in university language center. They hope that it helps them better because they have instructors that help them in practicing the test. They believe that they get better explanation this way. This group state that practicing with TOEFL book do not do well with them when they have no instructor who explain what they need to know about the answers of the exercises. Besides, taking the course in the university language center makes them feel more familiar with the test venue so that they have less anxiety and feel more comfortable in facing the real test.

Amongst all participants, there are 11% who admitted that they make no effort to improve themselves to get better score in SEPT. These group say that they are busy with assignments so that they have no time to practice themselves using TOEFL exercise books or to join any courses. Thus, their readiness to face the test is generally low.

When the participants were asked whether their department should help them preparing for the SEPT, as many as 96.3% participants state that it is necessary to conduct SEPT training in the department. In their opinion it would be a lot more comfortable for them to get the preparation training from the department. Dealing with it, they expect that their own lecturers who will be the tutor of such trainings.

The findings of this study include students' problems in SEPT, the factors that cause the problems and their efforts to meet the passing grade in SEPT. The findings that the students generally encounter problems in answering the test questions especially listening comprehension section is relatively new, different from that in Puspawati's [7] study. Unlike Puspawati's [7] finding on familiarity with

topic in SEPT as problems, most of the participants in this study refer their problems to the test skills and technicalities of the test. In addition, fatigue adds to their lack of technical skills, which supports Fulton [2] study.

The second finding of this study is that the main cause of those problems is lacking basic English competence. This finding is never expected in that it is beyond everyone's expectations. They should have gone through language skills courses during their study. This is not seen in previous studies findings.

The last finding is about the students' effort to pass the level of SEPT through independent training reflect their seriousness in taking SEPT. However, without proper formal training of SEPT the students will not be successful in time.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study proved that students still have fundamental problem with their own English proficiency so that they get difficulties to get the targeted score. It also proves that the students have problem with the test format, test duration, unexpected condition, and test distraction. Related to it, there are basically three main factors that cause the problems. They are basic competence, time management, and test format unfamiliarity. To overcome it, most students have made some efforts like for example practicing independently and joining courses. Yet, there are still quite many students who make no effort at all due to some reasons. Overall, the students admit that their SEPT scores represent their inadequate proficiency and almost all students want to get preparation classes for SEPT in their own department i.e. English department.

For pedagogical contribution, this study supplies an information for lecturers and for English department that their students' English proficiency is not really good. This is proven by the students' low score in SEPT. Such information should make the lecturers and the department think of what is wrong and try to find solution that make the students really able to acquire good English proficiency. The findings also provide information to be used to revise the policy related to English department students' English proficiency improvement.

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