



EFL University Students' Difficulties and Strategies in Taking the EnglishScore Test

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify the difficulties experienced by EFL English Language and Literature students in taking the EnglishScore test and to explore the strategies they used to overcome those difficulties. This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design involving 45 students from the English Language and Literature Department who had previously taken the EnglishScore test. The data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire distributed online. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis by categorizing students' difficulties based on Chapelle and Douglas' theory of digital language assessment and students' strategies based on Oxford's Language Learning Strategies theory. The findings revealed that listening comprehension difficulties became the most dominant difficulty with a frequency of 29 responses, particularly related to fast speech and unfamiliar accents. Meanwhile, cognitive strategies became the most frequently used strategies with 26 responses, especially practicing listening exercises and identifying keywords. Overall, the findings showed that students relied on various learning strategies to complete the EnglishScore test more effectively.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized and technology-driven era, English proficiency has become an essential skill for university students, especially for students majoring in English Education. English is widely used in academic communication, international collaboration, scholarship programs, and professional environments. Consequently, English proficiency assessment plays an important role in measuring students' language competence and academic readiness (Aryadoust et al., 2020). Along with the rapid development of educational technology, language testing has gradually shifted from traditional paper-based formats to computer-based and mobile-assisted assessments (Bahari, 2021). This transformation has encouraged educational institutions and learners to use more flexible, accessible, and efficient language testing systems.

The advancement of digital technology has significantly influenced English language assessment practices. Online and mobile-based English proficiency tests are increasingly popular because they offer practical access, automatic scoring systems, immediate feedback, and flexible testing environments (Isbell & Kremmel, 2020). In addition, technology-enhanced language assessment has become more widely implemented in higher education due to the increasing demand for remote learning and digital assessment systems after the COVID-19 pandemic (Chapelle, 2020). Mobile-assisted language assessment also enables students to take proficiency tests more conveniently through smartphones and other digital devices (Bahari, 2021).

One of the emerging mobile-based English proficiency tests is EnglishScore, developed by the British Council. EnglishScore is designed to assess users' English proficiency through a smartphone application that measures listening, reading, grammar, vocabulary, and speaking skills. Compared to conventional English proficiency tests, EnglishScore provides more flexible access and shorter testing duration, making it attractive for university students and job seekers. The integration of artificial intelligence and automated scoring systems in digital language assessment also reflects the growing implementation of technology-supported language testing in educational contexts (Settles et al., 2020).

Despite its practicality and accessibility, online English proficiency testing may still create several challenges for EFL learners. Students often experience difficulties related to listening comprehension, unfamiliar accents, limited vocabulary, internet connection problems, time pressure, and lack of familiarity with digital test formats (Wagner et al., 2021). Previous studies also revealed that online language assessment may increase students' anxiety and affect their concentration during the test process (Rahmat et al., 2021). Moreover, students' technological readiness and digital literacy can influence their performance in online proficiency tests (Bahari, 2021).

Based on preliminary observations conducted among English Education students, several students reported difficulties while taking the EnglishScore test. Some students stated that they found the listening section difficult because the speakers talked too quickly and used unfamiliar accents. Others mentioned that limited vocabulary mastery and time management became major obstacles during the test. In addition, several students admitted that they were unfamiliar with the EnglishScore test format because they had previously been more exposed to TOEFL and IELTS preparation. However, students also explained several strategies they used to overcome those difficulties, such as practicing online listening exercises, improving vocabulary mastery, focusing on keywords, and managing time effectively during the test.

This study specifically focuses on English Education students because they are expected to possess higher English proficiency compared to students from other departments. As future English teachers, they are required to demonstrate adequate English competence for academic and professional purposes. English proficiency tests are also commonly used as graduation requirements, scholarship requirements, and indicators of language achievement in higher education institutions (Fan & Yan, 2020). Therefore, understanding English Education students' experiences in taking mobile-based English proficiency tests is important for identifying their learning needs and assessment readiness.

Several previous studies have discussed students' difficulties in standardized English proficiency tests and online language assessment. For example, Liu et al. (2023) found that EFL learners frequently experience anxiety and technical difficulties during online assessment. Similarly, Wagner et al. (2021) reported that listening comprehension and unfamiliar testing formats are common problems faced by EFL students in digital language tests. However, studies specifically investigating EFL university students' difficulties and strategies in taking the EnglishScore test are still limited. Most recent studies focus more on general online assessment or other standardized tests rather than mobile-based English proficiency tests such as EnglishScore. Therefore, there is still a research gap concerning students' experiences, difficulties, and strategies in taking the EnglishScore test.

Considering the increasing use of mobile-assisted English proficiency assessment in higher education, it is important to explore students' experiences in taking the EnglishScore test. This study aims to identify the difficulties experienced by EFL English Education students in taking the EnglishScore test and to explore the strategies they use to overcome those difficulties during the test process. The findings of this study are expected to provide useful insights for lecturers, students, and future researchers regarding students' readiness for digital English proficiency assessment.

This study is limited to EFL English Education students who have taken the EnglishScore test. The research focuses on students' difficulties related to listening comprehension, vocabulary mastery and grammar, reading comprehension, time management, and online testing conditions. In addition, the study explores the strategies used by students to overcome those difficulties while completing the EnglishScore test.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the difficulties experienced by EFL students in taking the EnglishScore test and the strategies they used to overcome those difficulties. The participants of this study were 45 students from the English Language and Literature Department who had previously taken the EnglishScore test. The participants were selected purposively because they had direct experience with mobile-based English proficiency assessment. The data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to identify students' difficulties related to listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar, time management, and online testing conditions during the EnglishScore test.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis by identifying, classifying, and interpreting the students' responses. The analysis of students' strategies referred to Oxford's (1990) Language Learning Strategies theory, particularly cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, and affective strategies. Meanwhile, the categorization of students' difficulties in the EnglishScore assessment referred to the concepts of technology-enhanced language assessment proposed by Chapelle and Douglas (2006), especially difficulties related to digital testing environments and online language assessment. The findings were then described qualitatively to provide a clearer understanding of students' difficulties and strategies in taking the EnglishScore test.

FINDINGS

1. EFL University Students' Difficulties in Taking the EnglishScore Test

Based on the results of the open-ended questionnaire, the researchers found several difficulties experienced by students while taking the EnglishScore test. The difficulties were categorized based on the concepts of digital language assessment proposed by Chapelle and Douglas (2006), particularly difficulties related to online language testing environments.

Table 1: Students' Difficulties in Taking the EnglishScore Test

No	Categories of Difficulties	Students' Responses	Frequency
1	Listening comprehension difficulties	Difficulty understanding fast speech and unfamiliar accents	29
2	Vocabulary mastery difficulties	Limited vocabulary during reading and listening sections	23
3	Time management difficulties	Limited time to answer questions	18
4	Grammar difficulties	Confusion in grammar-related questions	15
5	Technological difficulties	Internet connection and distraction	9

Table 1 presents the categories of difficulties experienced by students while taking the EnglishScore test based on the responses obtained from the open-ended questionnaire. The frequencies were calculated based on the number of students who mentioned similar difficulties in their responses. Since one participant could mention more than one difficulty, the total frequency exceeded the total number of participants. The difficulties were then grouped into several categories, namely listening comprehension difficulties, vocabulary mastery difficulties, time management difficulties, grammar difficulties, and technological difficulties.

Based on the table, listening comprehension difficulties became the most dominant difficulty experienced by students, with a frequency of 29 responses. Most students reported problems related to fast speech delivery and unfamiliar accents in the listening section of the EnglishScore test. The second most common difficulty was vocabulary mastery difficulties with 23 responses, indicating that many students still struggled with unfamiliar vocabulary during the reading and listening sections. Time management difficulties ranked third with 18 responses, followed by grammar difficulties with 15 responses. Meanwhile, technological difficulties became the least reported difficulty with 9 responses, although some students still experienced unstable internet connections and distractions from mobile devices during the test process. These findings indicate that language-related difficulties, particularly listening comprehension and vocabulary mastery, were more dominant than technological issues in the EnglishScore test.

1) Listening Comprehension Difficulties

Listening comprehension became the most common difficulty experienced by students during the EnglishScore test. Several students stated that they found it difficult to understand the audio because the speakers talked too quickly and used unfamiliar accents.

Data 1:

“The speaker talked too fast and I could not replay the audio, so I missed some information.” (P12)

“I was confused by the pronunciation because it sounded different from what I usually hear in class.” (P7)

These responses indicate listening comprehension difficulties in digital language assessment, particularly related to fast speech delivery and unfamiliar accents, as explained by Chapelle and Douglas (2006). The limited opportunity to replay the audio in online assessments also affected students' understanding during the listening section.

2) Vocabulary Mastery Difficulties

Another difficulty experienced by students was limited vocabulary mastery. Some participants admitted that they encountered unfamiliar words in both reading and

listening sections.

Data 2:

“There were many unfamiliar words, so I could not understand the meaning of some questions.” (P18)

“Sometimes I knew the topic, but I did not know the vocabulary used in the test.” (P25)

These responses show that vocabulary limitation influenced students’ comprehension during the EnglishScore test. According to Chapelle and Douglas (2006), vocabulary mastery is an important factor affecting students’ performance.

3) Grammar Difficulties

Several students also experienced difficulties in understanding grammar-related questions during the test.

Data 3:

“I was confused when answering grammar questions because some sentences looked similar.” (P10)

“The grammar section was difficult because I forgot some tenses and sentence patterns.” (P31)

These findings indicate that grammatical understanding became one of the challenges faced by students in the EnglishScore assessment. The responses reflect students’ difficulties in identifying appropriate grammatical structures in online English proficiency tests.

4) Time Management Difficulties

Time limitation was another difficulty commonly reported by participants. Students explained that they felt nervous because they had limited time to answer all questions.

Data 4:

“The time was very limited, especially in the reading section.” (P5)

“I became nervous when the timer kept running during the test.” (P22)

These responses suggest that time pressure affected students’ concentration and performance during the EnglishScore test. Chapelle and Douglas (2006) explained that time management is one of the important factors influencing students’ experiences in digital language assessment.

5) Technological Difficulties

Some students also experienced technological difficulties while taking the EnglishScore test through their mobile devices.

Data 5:

“My internet connection became unstable during the test.” (P14)

“Notifications from my phone distracted me while answering the questions.” (P9)

These responses indicate that technological readiness and online testing

environments influenced students' performance during the test. Since EnglishScore is a mobile-based English proficiency test, technological factors became part of the students' assessment experience.

2. ELF University Students' Strategies in Taking the EnglishScore Test

The findings also revealed several strategies used by students to overcome their difficulties during the EnglishScore test. The strategies were categorized based on Oxford's (1990) Language Learning Strategies theory.

Table 2: Students' Strategies in Taking the EnglishScore Test

No	Strategy Categories	Students' Strategies	Frequency
1	Cognitive strategies	Practicing listening exercises and identifying keywords	26
2	Metacognitive strategies	Managing time and preparing before the test	21
3	Compensation strategies	Guessing unfamiliar words from context	17
4	Affective strategies	Staying calm and reducing anxiety during the test	13

Based on the table, cognitive strategies became the most dominant strategies used by students, with a frequency of 26 responses. Most students stated that they practiced listening exercises, watched English videos, and focused on identifying keywords before and during the EnglishScore test. Meanwhile, affective strategies became the least frequently used strategies with 13 responses, although some students still tried to stay calm and reduce anxiety during the test process. These findings indicate that students tended to use more direct learning strategies, particularly cognitive strategies, to help them complete the EnglishScore test more effectively.

These categories were analyzed based on Oxford's (1990) Language Learning Strategies theory. Among those strategies, cognitive strategies became the most frequently used strategy by students, while affective strategies were used less frequently compared to other categories. Each category of strategies is explained in the following sections.

1) Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies became the most dominant strategies used by students during the EnglishScore test. Several students stated that they practiced listening exercises, watched English videos, and focused on identifying keywords to help them understand the questions more easily.

Data 6:

"Before taking the test, I practiced listening using English videos and podcasts." (P15)

“I focused on important keywords in the questions to understand the meaning faster.” (P8)

These responses indicate that students used cognitive strategies to process and understand information during the EnglishScore test. According to Oxford (1990), cognitive strategies involve practicing, analyzing, and identifying information to improve language performance.

2) Metacognitive Strategies

Another strategy commonly used by students was metacognitive strategies. Some participants explained that they prepared themselves before the test and managed their time carefully while answering the questions.

Data 7:

“I tried to divide my time for each section so I would not panic during the test.” (P20)

“Before taking the test, I reviewed grammar and vocabulary materials first.” (P6)

These responses show that students attempted to organize, plan, and monitor their learning process during the test. Oxford (1990) explained that metacognitive strategies are related to planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning activities.

3) Compensation Strategies

Several students also used compensation strategies when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary or difficult questions during the test.

Data 8:

“When I did not know the meaning of a word, I guessed it from the context.” (P11)

“I skipped difficult questions first and answered the easier ones.” (P24)

These findings indicate that students used compensation strategies to overcome limitations in vocabulary and understanding. According to Oxford (1990), compensation strategies help learners continue communication and complete tasks despite limited language knowledge.

4) Affective Strategies

The least frequently used strategies were affective strategies. Some students explained that they tried to stay calm and reduce their anxiety during the EnglishScore test.

Data 9:

“I tried to stay calm because I became nervous when the timer was running.” (P9)

“I took a deep breath before answering difficult questions.” (P27)

These responses indicate that students attempted to control their emotions and anxiety during the online test. Oxford (1990) stated that affective strategies are related

to managing feelings, motivation, and emotional conditions during language learning and assessment.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that EFL English Language and Literature students experienced several difficulties while taking the EnglishScore test, particularly in listening comprehension, vocabulary mastery, grammar understanding, time management, and technological aspects. Among those difficulties, listening comprehension became the most dominant difficulty experienced by students. Most participants reported that fast speech delivery and unfamiliar accents made it difficult for them to understand the audio clearly during the listening section. This finding is in line with Wagner et al. (2021), who stated that listening sections in digital language assessments often become challenging for EFL learners due to speech speed and accent variation. In addition, the limited opportunity to replay the audio in EnglishScore also affected students' comprehension and concentration during the test process.

Vocabulary mastery also became one of the major difficulties experienced by students during the EnglishScore test. Several participants explained that unfamiliar vocabulary made it difficult for them to understand reading passages and listening materials. This finding supports previous studies which found that vocabulary limitation significantly affects students' comprehension in English proficiency assessments (Bahari, 2021). Furthermore, grammar difficulties were also found among participants, especially in identifying appropriate sentence structures and tenses. This indicates that students still faced challenges in applying grammatical knowledge in online English proficiency tests. Time management difficulties also influenced students' performance because many participants felt nervous and rushed due to the limited duration of the test. In addition, although technological difficulties were reported less frequently, unstable internet connections and distractions from mobile devices still affected several students during the test. Since EnglishScore is a mobile-based English proficiency test, technological readiness became an important factor influencing students' testing experiences.

Regarding students' strategies, the findings showed that cognitive strategies became the most dominant strategies used by participants during the EnglishScore test. Most students reported practicing listening exercises, watching English videos, and identifying keywords before answering questions. According to Oxford (1990), cognitive strategies help learners process and understand information more effectively during language tasks. This finding indicates that students actively used direct learning strategies to improve their understanding during the test. Metacognitive strategies were also frequently used by participants, particularly in preparing before the test and managing time during the assessment process. These findings reflect students' awareness of planning and monitoring their learning activities while taking the EnglishScore test.

In addition, several students used compensation strategies by guessing unfamiliar

words based on context and skipping difficult questions temporarily. These strategies helped students continue answering questions despite limited vocabulary knowledge. Oxford (1990) explained that compensation strategies are important for helping learners overcome language limitations during communication and assessment tasks. Meanwhile, affective strategies became the least frequently used strategies among participants. Some students attempted to reduce anxiety and maintain confidence during the test process; however, emotional control was still challenging for several participants, especially during timed sections. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that students tended to rely more on cognitive and metacognitive strategies to overcome the difficulties they experienced during the EnglishScore test.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that EFL English Language and Literature students experienced several difficulties while taking the EnglishScore test, namely listening comprehension difficulties, vocabulary mastery difficulties, grammar difficulties, time management difficulties, and technological difficulties. Among these categories, listening comprehension difficulties became the most dominant difficulty with a frequency of 29 responses, indicating that many students had problems understanding fast speech and unfamiliar accents during the listening section. Meanwhile, technological difficulties became the least reported difficulty with only 9 responses. In overcoming those difficulties, students applied several strategies categorized into cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, and affective strategies. Cognitive strategies became the most frequently used strategies with 26 responses, particularly through practicing listening exercises and identifying keywords, while affective strategies became the least frequently used with 13 responses. Overall, the findings indicate that students relied more on direct learning strategies to help them complete the EnglishScore test more effectively.

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