From Classroom to Screen: Students' Preferences for Online TOEFL Learning

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ABSTRACT

Online learning has become essential for continuing education, and the TOEFL exam, a subject well-suited for virtual instruction, has seamlessly transitioned to online platforms to facilitate uninterrupted learning. This research investigates students' preferences for virtual TOEFL instruction and the challenges encountered during online classes. It surveyed 83 students from four faculties at UIN Raden Intan Lampung, using questionnaires and interviews to collect data. Results showed mixed views on TOEFL learning methods: while some students preferred online over offline learning, others were ambivalent. Almost half (49.4%) were neutral on whether online learning improves focus, while 31.1% had mixed views, with 15.7% agreeing and 15.4% disagreeing. These varied perspectives underscore the complexity of learning preferences and the need for tailored language acquisition strategies. Interviews further indicated a preference for offline learning, primarily due to issues with internet connectivity and home distractions affecting TOEFL comprehension.

ABSTRAK

Pembelajaran daring dianggap penting bagi, dan ujian TOEFL, sebagai subjek yang cukup tepat diajarkan secara virtual, tampaknya telah beralih pada platform daring demi memfasilitasi pembelajaran yang bebas hambatan. Penelitian ini menyelidiki pilihan siswa dalam pembelajaran TOEFL secara virtual dan menyelidiki hambatan yang dihadapi selama pembelajaran daring. Penelitian ini melibatkan 83 siswa dari empat fakultas di UIN Raden Intan Lampung, kuesioner dan wawancara digunakan dalam pengumpulan data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa beberapa siswa lebih memilih pembelajaran daring daripada luring, sementara yang lain memilih kedua metode secara bersamaan. Hampir setengahnya (49,4%) bersikap netral mengenai pembelajaran daring dapat meningkatkan fokus pembelajaran, sementara 31,1% memilih kedua metode, dengan 15,7% setuju dan 15,4% tidak setuju. Perspektif yang beragam ini memperlihatkan kecenderunga metode belajar yang kompleks dan kebutuhan akan strategi akuisisi bahasa yang sesuai. Hasil wawancara menunjukkan kecenderungan pembelajaran luring, terutama karena masalah konektivitas internet dan kurangnya fokus saat di rumah dapat mempengaruhi pelaksanaan ujian.

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1.   Introduction

In recent years, the shift towards online learning has fundamentally transformed TOEFL preparation. Online courses offer flexibility and accessibility, enabling students to study at their own pace and from any location with internet connectivity. These courses typically include interactive modules, practice exams, and personalized feedback, significantly enhancing students' readiness for the TOEFL examination. Furthermore, the integration of technology allows educators to adapt their instructional methods to individual learning styles, thereby maximizing students' potential for success. Nonetheless, it is imperative for students to choose reputable online platforms with proficient instructors and comprehensive resources to ensure effective TOEFL preparation.

Experts maintain that the TOEFL continues to serve as a valuable instrument for evaluating English language proficiency at the university level, even after its paper-based format was discontinued in 2017. This format is now known as the TOEFL Institutional Testing Program (ITP) (Educational Testing Service, 2017). Many students encounter difficulties with TOEFL ITP questions due to their limited English proficiency, inadequate preparation, and low motivation (Halim & Ardiningtyas, 2018).

The study by Muthuprasad et al. (2021) explored students' perceptions and preferences regarding online learning, as well as various attributes of online classes. A survey involving 307 students revealed that the majority (70%) were willing to engage in online classes to manage their curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic, with most students preferring smartphones as their learning device. Content analysis indicated that students favored recorded classes with quizzes at the end of each session to enhance learning effectiveness. Students noted that the flexibility and convenience of online classes made them an attractive option, although broadband connectivity issues in rural areas posed challenges for online learning. Only 145 students (47.23%) had prior experience with online classes, while 162 (52.2%) had not participated in online learning before. Additionally, 82% of respondents reported that online classes had already commenced at their respective universities. When asked how to manage the curriculum during the pandemic, the majority (67.1%) suggested that online classes could substitute traditional classroom teaching, while 29.97% preferred suspending the curriculum, and a small minority (2.93%) favored receiving only assignments and reading materials. The reluctance of approximately 30% of respondents towards online classes was attributed to difficulties in focusing on the curriculum due to pandemic-related stress or technological challenges associated with online learning.

At UIN Raden Intan Lampung, TOEFL instruction is a key part of the academic program for first-year students, typically extending over two semesters, often referred to as the matriculation period. This program aims to provide students with a fundamental

grasp of English, particularly in alignment with the TOEFL exam's requirements. However, the structure of TOEFL instruction experienced a major shift three years ago due to the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating a transition to online learning modalities. This transition has garnered the interest of researchers who are investigating students' perceptions of this new instructional format. Given the inherent complexity of the TOEFL, this online adaptation raises questions about students' ability to effectively engage with and master the material. Furthermore, online TOEFL learning is a vital preparatory phase, familiarizing students with the exam's format and question types. Their understanding of TOEFL content is ultimately evaluated through a comprehensive test at the end of the instructional period.

Moreover, TOEFL proficiency holds crucial importance beyond mere academic preparation. At UIN Raden Intan Lampung, it is a requirement for registering for the thesis examination, highlighting its integral role in students' academic progression. Additionally, obtaining a minimum TOEFL score of 450 is mandatory for graduation, emphasizing the critical role of TOEFL learning in students' overall academic journeys. This research, by examining students' perceptions of online TOEFL learning, aims to illuminate both the effectiveness and challenges associated with this instructional format. Understanding students' experiences and viewpoints will enable educators to refine their teaching strategies, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of online TOEFL learning and providing better support for students in their academic pursuits at UIN Raden Intan Lampung.

1.1. Online Learning

The regulation mandating online learning applies to all educational institutions, necessitating a shift from traditional face-to-face methods to digital platforms. This abrupt transition has sparked debate regarding the quality of the resulting education. Some studies have highlighted both the benefits and drawbacks of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. On one hand, online learning was reported to benefit students by providing extensive access to rich learning materials without time or location constraints, and by offering significant opportunities to engage with digital learning programs (Firman & Rahayu, 2020; Hidayat & Noeraida, 2020; Simamora, 2020). Additionally, online learning facilitated high levels of virtual interaction between teachers and students, and among students themselves, leading to enhanced information and experience sharing (Pakpahan & Fitriani, 2020; Rochman et al., 2020). The integration of computer technology into teaching and learning processes increased the enthusiasm of both teachers and students, which in turn improved their computer skills (Hidayat & Noeraida, 2020; Khasanah et al., 2020).

Conversely, online learning has been associated with certain disadvantages. Students reported that online learning led to health issues such as fatigue, headaches, and fever, which they attributed to the high volume of assignments required within short time frames. Some students also experienced vision impairment due to prolonged screen time on computers or phones. Additionally, the financial burden of purchasing significant amounts of data for internet access was noted as a challenge (Simamora, 2020). Ultimately, these advantages and disadvantages, which influenced students' success in online learning, were closely linked to their motivation during the pandemic.

1.2. Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

The English Intensive Program refers to a course where students engage in a greater number of classes over a condensed timeframe (Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2012). While some research indicates that this program has been controversial as an effective strategy for achieving students' learning outcomes Abouzeid (2018), Kops (2014) found that an English intensive course effectively improved students' achievements and received positive feedback. Conversely, Nasiri & Shokrpour (2012) argued that students in such programs might struggle to assimilate compressed material and condensed knowledge due to time constraints, potentially leading to suboptimal performance compared to regular courses.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Lebanon, the English Intensive Program was effective in enhancing students' English language proficiency by improving their CEFR level (Abouzeid, 2018). This study highlighted that the success of an intensive program depends on optimizing prioritized learning, focusing on specific tasks or projects. However, in the context of TOEFL preparation, the intensive program primarily improved students' scores but did not significantly enhance their language interaction (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996). This limitation was attributed to the fact that students primarily engaged with the TOEFL course rather than a comprehensive English course, which emphasized English as a means of communication. Therefore, the focus was on content rather than on meeting students' communicative needs (Khattak et al., 2011).

The discontinuation of the paper-based TOEFL in 2017 has not diminished its role as a viable tool for assessing English language skills at the university level, now known as the TOEFL Institutional Testing Program (ITP) (Educational Testing Service, 2017). Despite this, many students encounter difficulties with TOEFL ITP questions due to limited English proficiency, inadequate preparation, and lack of motivation (Halim & Ardiningtyas, 2018). These challenges are exacerbated by insufficient vocabulary skills, fatigue, and time constraints (Akmal et al., 2020). Consequently, students often achieve TOEFL scores that fall short of the minimum requirements set by universities and

stakeholders, typically between 450 and 480. A TOEFL preparatory course is therefore essential to help students attain the necessary scores for university graduation and job qualification (Manan et al., 2020).

Empirical studies have underscored the prevalence of poor TOEFL scores among undergraduate students, revealing that only about 5–15 percent of participating students at colleges typically achieve the minimum score of 450 (Rahayu, 2020; Yoestara & Putri, 2019). At a leading Indonesian university, a study found that when the minimum required score was set at 500, 98 percent of undergraduate students failed to meet this standard (Masfufah, 2018). According to ETS's TOEFL score performance descriptors Educational Testing Service (2021) scores between 337 and 459 correspond to basic users of English (A1 level) under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), while scores of 460–542 are associated with independent English users (B1 level). These results indicate that most Indonesian undergraduate students struggle to reach even the basic user level of English (A2) and that nearly 90 percent fail to attain the beginner level of independent English users (B1). Ideally, university graduates should achieve a B2 level (Vantage) with scores between 543 and 626 to be considered proficient at the international level. The TOEFL score requirement has become not only a graduation criterion but also a key factor in employment applications in both public and private sectors. Consequently, students with inadequate TOEFL scores face significant disadvantages, even if their universities do not mandate a minimum score.

While online learning may present difficulties and challenges, it is essential for educators to develop contingency plans in advance by evaluating class characteristics and student needs (Setiana et al., 2021). Several obstacles in incorporating ICT into the teaching and learning process have been identified, including the integration of technology for instructional purposes, acclimatizing learners to digital mediums, and dealing with time and technological constraints (Bahari et al., 2022; Fathali et al., 2020). Furthermore, potential issues such as privacy and copyright concerns, varying levels of students' digital literacy, access to communication tools, and technological limitations may arise (Jacobs, 2020; Ubaedillah & Pratiwi, 2021).

A study conducted at Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika examined students' perceptions of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) during the pandemic. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the researchers distributed questionnaires via Google Forms to 70 students from various majors and academic statuses (both graduates and current students). The questionnaire comprised ten questions about students' perceptions of TOEFL-related policies and three questions about strategies for improving TOEFL skills. The results indicated that 70.4% of participants preferred the computer-Based Test format, and 45.1% primarily studied for the TOEFL to obtain

scholarships. According to 36.6% of participants, the most challenging part of the TOEFL test was Listening Comprehension. To enhance their TOEFL skills, 43.7% of participants preferred watching movies. These findings suggest that students perceive the TOEFL as a crucial and challenging aspect of English proficiency assessment, employing diverse strategies to navigate its difficulties.

2.   Method

A mixed-methods approach was employed to thoroughly address the research objectives, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods for a comprehensive analysis of student preferences and challenges in online TOEFL learning. The quantitative component included a survey designed to gather numerical data on student preferences for online TOEFL learning, aiming to identify general trends and patterns. The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews to obtain detailed insights into the specific challenges students encounter during online TOEFL classes, exploring the contextual and subjective experiences of the students.

The study population comprised first-year students from the 2021 cohort enrolled in TOEFL preparation courses. A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to ensure a representative sample. For the quantitative survey, 83 students were selected, providing sufficient data for statistical analysis. Additionally, 30 students from the survey sample were purposively selected for the qualitative component to gain in-depth insights.

A structured questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative data, including preferences for learning styles (e.g., video lectures, interactive quizzes, live sessions), frequency of study sessions, preferred study times, and perceived effectiveness of various online learning tools and methods. For the qualitative analysis, a semi-structured interview guide was created to facilitate detailed discussions. Key questions explored challenges faced during online TOEFL classes, and how these challenges impacted their learning experience and performance.

The survey was distributed online via platforms such as Google Forms, allowing participants to complete the questionnaire at their convenience. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize student preferences, while thematic analysis was employed to identify and code themes related to obstacles and challenges encountered by students. Content analysis was conducted to analyze the frequency and context of specific issues mentioned in interviews, which were carried out via Zoom. This platform facilitated face-to-face interactions, providing a more nuanced exploration of students' experiences. During the interviews, students were asked about difficulties such as internet connectivity issues, home distractions, and the comparative effectiveness of online learning versus traditional classroom settings. These interviews aimed to provide a

richer, more detailed understanding of the challenges that may not be fully captured through the questionnaire alone.

The combination of questionnaires and interviews facilitated a comprehensive data collection process, where the questionnaires offered a broad overview of student preferences, and the interviews provided an in-depth exploration of the obstacles encountered. This methodological approach enabled data triangulation, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings. By examining both student preferences and challenges in online TOEFL learning, the study aims to provide valuable insights that can guide the development of more effective online learning strategies and support mechanisms for TOEFL education in a virtual environment.

The data analysis involved several meticulous steps to ensure accurate interpretation. Initially, questionnaire responses were organized and coded to identify common themes and patterns. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize student preferences, such as the proportion of students who preferred video tutorials over Zoom meetings or found Quizizz to be an effective learning tool. These quantitative summaries highlighted general trends in student preferences.

To ensure analytical reliability, multiple researchers independently coded a subset of interview transcripts, and their codes were compared for consistency. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved to achieve a consensus on the final themes. These themes were then used to interpret the data and draw conclusions regarding students' preferences and the obstacles they faced in online TOEFL learning.

By integrating quantitative analysis of questionnaire data with qualitative analysis of interview data, the research provided a comprehensive understanding of both student preferences and challenges in online TOEFL learning. This mixed-methods approach ensured robust and well-rounded findings, offering valuable insights to inform the development of more effective online learning strategies for TOEFL education.

3. Results and Discussion

The diagram illustrates that 42.2% of respondents selected "Neutral" regarding the statement on the effectiveness of online versus offline TOEFL learning, indicating that a significant portion of students did not discern a substantial difference in effectiveness between the two modes. Conversely, only 6% of respondents disagreed, representing the smallest portion.
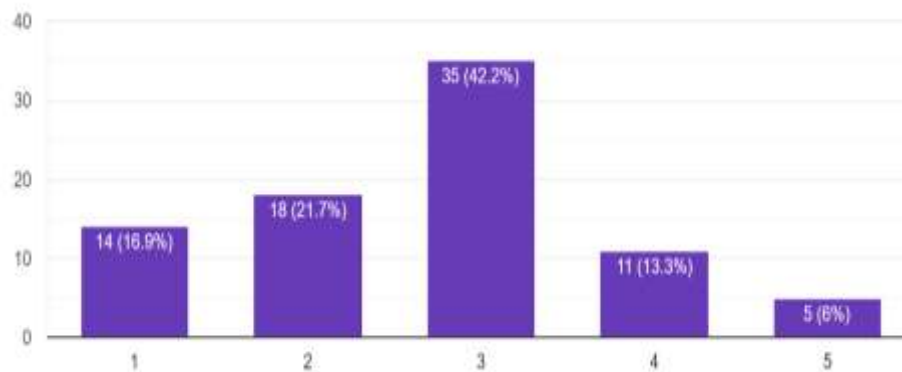
Figure 1. The efficiency of virtual TOEFL learning

Furthermore, the diagram highlights student preferences for learning materials related to the English language learning program, TOEFL. The data indicates a strong preference for using Quizizz, with 68.7% of students (57 respondents) strongly agreeing on its effectiveness. Teacher explanations were also positively received, with 73.5% of students agreeing that they understood the explanations well. However, student responses regarding the impact of Quizizz on their focus during TOEFL studies were less definitive, with 41 students remaining neutral. This suggests a need to explore alternative methods that enhance both engagement and concentration in TOEFL learning.
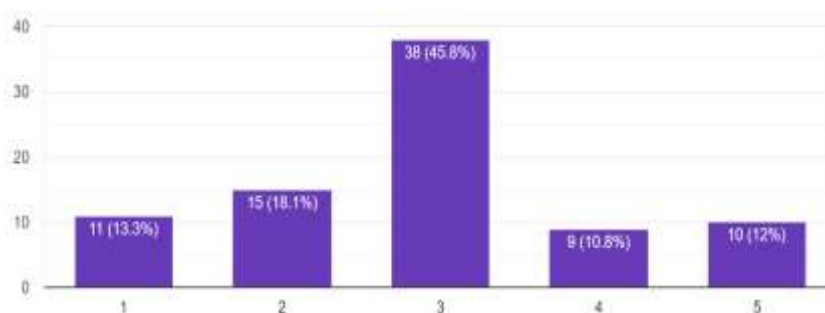

Figure 2. Online learning challenges students more than offline classes

The data reveals that a substantial portion of students, comprising 45.8%, adopted a neutral stance on whether online learning is more challenging than offline classes. This suggests a significant level of indecision or ambivalence among students regarding the comparative difficulty of online versus traditional classroom-based instruction. Additionally, 18.1% of students agreed that online learning is more challenging than offline classes, indicating a notable subset who perceive online learning as more arduous or demanding. Conversely, 10.8% of students disagreed, reflecting a segment that views online learning as less challenging or equally challenging as offline classes. Overall, the data underscores the diverse perspectives among students concerning the relative difficulty of online learning compared to traditional classroom instruction, with a

significant proportion remaining neutral and notable subsets perceiving it as either more or less challenging.
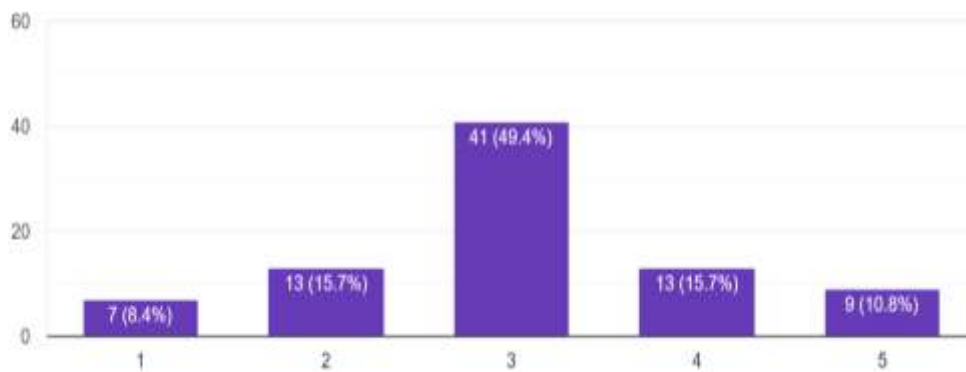

Figure 3. Online TOEFL learning enhances student focus.

The survey explores student perceptions of online versus offline TOEFL learning, uncovering a complex array of opinions. Nearly half of the respondents (49.4%) adopted a neutral position on whether online learning enhances focus, while a significant portion (31.1%) held varied views, with 15.7% agreeing and 15.4% disagreeing. This diversity of perspectives underscores the multifaceted nature of learning preferences and highlights the necessity for personalized approaches to language acquisition.

The neutrality in responses suggests that online learning may not universally enhance focus. While some students benefit from online environments, others encounter distractions and a lack of structure that can impede concentration. This aligns with the growing understanding of individual learning styles and the need to address diverse needs within educational settings. The nearly even split between those who favor online and offline TOEFL learning further emphasizes the need for flexibility and adaptability. For some students, the convenience and accessibility of online platforms surpass potential focus-related challenges, whereas others prefer the traditional structure and direct interaction offered by offline learning.

To gain deeper insights into these preferences, researchers conducted interviews, a crucial step in understanding students' underlying motivations and concerns. By examining individual experiences and perspectives, researchers can identify factors influencing learning preferences and develop more tailored strategies for TOEFL preparation.

3.1. Offline Learning Preference

The majority of students' preference for offline learning can be attributed to several factors, including direct interaction, reduced distractions, and stable internet connectivity. Students find greater comfort and comprehension when engaging directly

with instructors, as face-to-face interaction allows for immediate feedback and clarification of uncertainties. Offline environments typically offer fewer distractions compared to home settings, where interruptions from family members or household activities may occur. Unlike online learning, offline classes do not encounter issues related to internet connectivity, thereby ensuring a more seamless learning experience. These factors underscore the significance of direct, uninterrupted interaction in the learning process, which many students perceive as conducive to their academic achievement.

3.2. Online Learning Challenges

While online learning offers flexibility, it also presents challenges such as disruptions at home, commonly occurring during online study sessions. Students frequently encounter interruptions from family members, which can disturb their concentration and impede their learning progress. Additionally, unreliable internet connectivity poses another obstacle for students. Fluctuating internet connections may cause students to miss segments of lessons, particularly when using platforms like Zoom, resulting in gaps in comprehension and requiring extra time to catch up. These challenges underscore that while online learning is a viable option, it necessitates a conducive home environment and dependable internet access to be effective.

3.3. Preferred Online Platforms and Tools

Students have shown a preference for specific online tools and platforms, notably Zoom for its interactive features. They appreciate Zoom's real-time interaction with instructors and the ability to view shared screens and PowerPoint presentations. However, Zoom's effectiveness hinges on stable internet connectivity. Furthermore, Quizizz has emerged as a preferred assessment tool among students. The gamified nature of Quizizz transforms assessments into engaging activities reminiscent of competitive quiz shows rather than traditional tests. This approach not only motivates students but also enhances their learning experience by making assessments more interactive and enjoyable. These preferences highlight that while students value interactive and engaging tools, the efficacy of these tools heavily relies on the technological infrastructure that supports them.

3.4. Interactive Teaching Methods

Based on the interview data, students emphasized the significance of interactive and communicative teaching methods over purely theoretical approaches. Two-way learning activities, such as engaging students in discussions, encouraging questions, and facilitating expression of opinions, enhance the dynamism and enjoyment of the learning process. This approach helps sustain student interest and makes classes feel more

dynamic and engaging. Moreover, communicative teaching enables students to actively participate in classroom activities. When instructors promote student sharing of ideas and perspectives, it not only motivates them but also prepares them to contribute actively during lessons. Randomly selecting students to respond to questions fosters a sense of readiness and encourages critical thinking, ensuring students are active participants rather than passive recipients of information. These findings underscore the importance of fostering an interactive and communicative classroom environment where students feel valued and involved.

The study's findings highlight the necessity of balancing offline and online learning methods to accommodate student preferences and enhance their educational experience. Offline learning offers focused and direct interactions, while online learning, despite its convenience, requires robust support systems to be effective. Interactive teaching methods and engaging assessment tools like Quizizz are pivotal in creating enjoyable and effective learning experiences. Educators should consider these insights and challenges to design a hybrid learning approach that optimizes student engagement and improves learning outcomes.

3.5. Major Challenges in Online TOEFL Learning

The shift to online TOEFL learning has revealed several significant challenges that impact students' ability to learn effectively, with internet connectivity emerging as the foremost issue. Unstable internet connections, particularly problematic in areas with poor signal coverage, force students to relocate frequently for better connectivity, disrupting their learning schedules and causing additional stress. Another critical concern is the numerous distractions present in home environments, such as interruptions from family members needing assistance or causing disturbances. These interruptions impede students' focus and their capacity to absorb the complex TOEFL materials. These challenges underscore the crucial need for a stable and conducive learning environment, often lacking in remote and home-based settings.

3.6. Difficulty in Grasping TOEFL Material

TOEFL, known for its rigor and comprehensiveness, presents inherent difficulties exacerbated in an online learning context, particularly in the Listening, Structure, and Application sections. Students frequently struggle with the listening section due to the rapid pace and clarity of speakers, often resorting to guessing based on incomplete words or phrases heard during audio playback. Moreover, the structure section poses notable challenges with its deceptive question formats that frequently mislead students. The intricate grammar rules, such as distinguishing between Present Participle and Past Participle, further contribute to the difficulty. Additionally, while students may comprehend explanations and practice exercises well, they often face significant

challenges when encountering diverse question types under actual test conditions. This discrepancy indicates a gap between theoretical understanding and practical application. Thus, these complexities suggest the need for more targeted and potentially personalized instructional approaches to ensure students can effectively grasp and apply TOEFL concepts.

3.7. Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

In response to these challenges, students have employed several strategies to enhance their learning experience and performance. Individual practice is crucial; many students engage in self-practice by accessing TOEFL practice questions online and working through them independently. This method allows them to proceed at their own pace and concentrate on areas needing improvement. Furthermore, manual review and clarification serve as an alternative approach. After completing practice questions, students manually review their answers and seek clarification on correct responses from instructors to resolve any confusion or misunderstanding. Additionally, peer discussions are often utilized, where students collaborate with peers who have a solid grasp of the material. Discussing challenging questions and concepts with peers can offer fresh perspectives and deepen understanding. When peer discussions are insufficient, students turn to instructors for further elucidation. These strategies underscore students' proactive efforts in addressing both inherent and situational challenges encountered in online TOEFL learning.

3.8. Importance of Instructor Support

Instructor support plays a pivotal role in assisting students with challenges in online TOEFL learning, particularly in providing clarification and feedback. Timely and clear explanations from instructors help students comprehend why certain answers are correct and others are not, facilitating learning from mistakes and enhancing performance. Moreover, interactive sessions are beneficial; instructors who engage students through interactive sessions where questions are encouraged and active participation is fostered mitigate the passive nature of online learning. This engagement is crucial for sustaining student interest and motivation. Overall, instructors play a crucial role in bridging the gap between self-directed study and comprehensive understanding, ensuring students navigate the complexities of TOEFL successfully.

4. Conclusion

This study explored student preferences for online TOEFL learning and the challenges they encounter in virtual classrooms. The findings unveiled a diverse array of viewpoints. While a significant proportion of students (49.4%) remained neutral on whether online

learning enhances focus, others expressed mixed opinions, suggesting that the impact of online learning on focus varies depending on individual learning styles. Additionally, the near-equal divide between those favoring online and offline learning underscores the necessity for adaptable TOEFL preparation programs.

Although online learning has served as a necessary alternative to traditional classrooms during challenging times, it is not without its challenges. Key obstacles identified include unreliable internet connectivity, which can impede access to course materials and live sessions. Moreover, distractions from family members in a home environment can significantly disrupt students' concentration and productivity. Furthermore, the depth of understanding students derives from explanations via platforms such as Zoom often falls short compared to in-person instruction. Lastly, the comfort level for asking questions or participating in discussions is notably lower in online settings, further influencing the overall learning experience.

Given this diversity, it is evident that online learning does not uniformly enhance focus for all students. Further research employing interviews or open-ended inquiries is warranted to delve deeper into the specific challenges encountered by students in online TOEFL environments and to devise strategies for improving focus and engagement within this increasingly prevalent mode of learning. Future programs should offer a blend of online and offline learning alternatives, alongside approaches designed to enhance focus in virtual settings. By recognizing diverse preferences and providing a range of effective learning methods, TOEFL programs can empower students to achieve their language learning objectives effectively.

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