

## The Opinions of The TOEFL Test-Takers About Writing Tasks: A Case Study in Tishk International University Continuing Education Center

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**Abstract:** TOEFL test was developed by Educational Testing Services (ETS) for academic purposes, and the non-native speakers of English were targeted. They can apply to many universities in the world with the scores they get from this exam. It consists of four sections: reading, listening, speaking, writing. As being one of the two productive skills, writing has some challenging dimensions in this test. Even though people may have improved their English to advanced levels, they still need extra studies and help in writing in this test. There are some difficulties of learning to write academically in this test, and the test-takers complain about some points. This study was conducted to draw attention to the points from which the test-takers suffer. 10 participants answered the questionnaire, and 3 of them were interviewed. These people participated in TOEFL courses of 50 hours during 6 weeks in Tishk International University.

**Keywords:** TOEFL Test, TOEFL Writing, Integrated Writing, Independent Writing

### 1. Introduction

TOEFL test is a highly academic test, and people try to get satisfactory marks to attend many universities in the world or to prove their English proficiency level. This test includes some difficulties in every part. There are four main parts in this test and reading and listening measure receptive skills: speaking and writing measures productive skills. Since writing is a productive skill, test-takers generally complain about the difficulty of this part. Even more, although they get some education and their English level is good enough, they still need extra studies for writing a satisfactory essay. This study will focus on these difficulties in TOEFL writing experienced by prospective test-takers some of whom may have taken this test previously.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 TOEFL Test

It is a test that was developed by Educational Testing Services (ETS), and it tests academic English proficiency of non-native speakers of English. TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign language) is especially taken by the international students who plan to continue their education in an English-medium

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The test results are accepted by many universities around the world. TOEFL test was quite different before 2000s, and they made important changes in the content of the test. It consists of four different sections as reading, listening, speaking and writing. Every section is evaluated out of 30, and the highest score adds up to 120 points from the whole test. Through these four skills, the test assesses language proficiency from different perspectives (Smart, 2019).

## **2.2 TOEFL Writing**

TOEFL writing is made up of two different tasks which are named as integrated writing and independent writing.

### **2.3 Integrated Writing**

In integrated writing, the test-taker is asked to read a passage in about three minutes and listen to a track having the same topic with the reading and make comparison between the two. In reading part, there is an academic topic that the test-taker should read and then listen to the track that could give some more examples, could support the idea in reading, could refute the idea in reading or could give more details. The test-takers are asked to listen to the lecture in about 2 or 3 minutes. Then while writing, they should put the ideas in an understandable order and give them effectively, find the connection between reading and lecture in listening, come up with suitable ideas with the explanations in reading and listening, provide unity in writing the essay, provide coherence, and use the language appropriately, namely grammar and vocabulary (Gallagher, 2012).

The essay should be around 150-220 words length and should be finished in 20 minutes after starting writing. If anyone does not write anything, or if they do not write about the given topic, or if they do not write in English, they get no mark at all (Educational Testing Service).

Asking the questions in this format is based on academic reasons. In the university environment, students are asked to write some term papers and essays on what they have learned in the classroom (Kim, 2021). Since this format is so common in the university setting, the same is asked in TOEFL tests. Here, it is tested what kind of organization the students make over the notes they take after reading and listening. In addition, students are required to summarize and paraphrase this information and to get the information from the sources in front of them correctly. Thus, they are asked to write the necessary essay by bringing together what they have heard and read (English Testing Service, 2012).

### **2.4 Independent Writing**

TOEFL writing test also contains the second task in which the test-taker is asked to write an essay of at least 300 words. They are asked a question and requested to write an essay expressing their opinions. In this type of writing, the test-taker should support their opinion with facts, details, examples or by comparison. They are given 30 minutes to finish this task (Rogers & Kenny, 2016). Independent writing consists of 3 parts.

1. **Introduction:** In this paragraph, the topic is introduced in general and information about the topic is given. At the end of the section, thesis statement is written. In the thesis statement, the test-taker is expected to express his own approach to the topic and write the idea that they will defend.
2. **Body paragraphs:** It is generally recommended to consist of three paragraphs, and in each of these paragraphs, the idea defended in thesis statement should be detailed and its justifications should be expressed in a logical order. In addition, examples supporting the topic, reasons and some details can be given here. However, all of these should be given in the integrity of the ideas.
3. **Conclusion:** What is required here is for the test-taker to summarize and paraphrase the topic they defended in the previous paragraphs. This paragraph demonstrates the test-taker's ability to express what they have already written in a different way. Also in this paragraph, it is possible to make recommendations (Phillips, 2016).

This essay also requires pre-writing preparation such that the test takers should brainstorm over the topic and come up with ideas they will support during writing (Riazi, 2016). They should decide on their point of view that they will defend and think for ideas that will support the main idea they will hold. Then, the whole essay should be about that main idea, and supportive arguments should be put forth. The test-takers are expected to use rich vocabulary and a wide range of grammar topics in their essay. Moreover, they should use the connective words effectively and make smooth transition to other ideas (Gallagher, 2012).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Model**

This study was conducted on adults preparing for the TOEFL test. These people, whose English level is C1 and above, prepared for this exam by taking a total of 50 hours of courses at the Continuing Education Center of Tishk International University. During these 6-week courses, they learned TOEFL writing in detail and wrote essays. As a result, their ideas about TOEFL writing were compiled through a questionnaire. The results obtained were evaluated qualitatively. In this study, the difficulty level of TOEFL writing for these people was investigated.

#### **3.2 Sampling**

The participants are adult learners of English and all of them were university graduates. Their English levels were C1 and above. They were taking these courses to take a TOEFL test and get an academic career. Even more, 2 of the 10 participants were already lecturers at different universities in Erbil. All of their ages were 24 and above.

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

Data was collected by a questionnaire and resorting to the ideas of 3 of them through interview.

### **4. Findings**

The first thing we detected with them was if they already had an idea about TOEFL writing. These people

are somehow efficient users of English, and they improved English to a certain level to take courses in English. However, they did not have any idea about how to write TOEFL tasks.

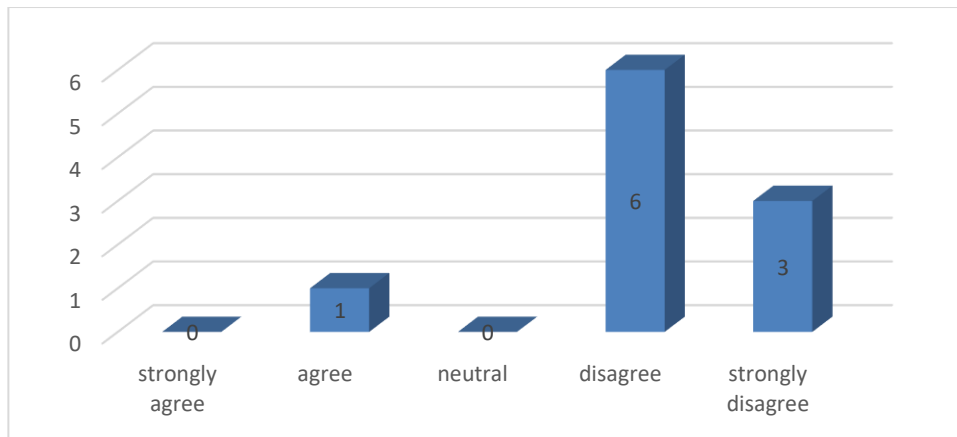


Figure 1: Did you know how to do TOEFL writing before you took this course?

Only one of the 10 students already had some experience about this kind of academic writing, and all others learned TOEFL writing during the 6-week courses.

After they got courses about TOEFL writing, they came to some conclusions about the organization of the tasks, and it requires some time and effort to comprehend the organization and make it for further writing. when we asked the question about this issue, we got these answers.

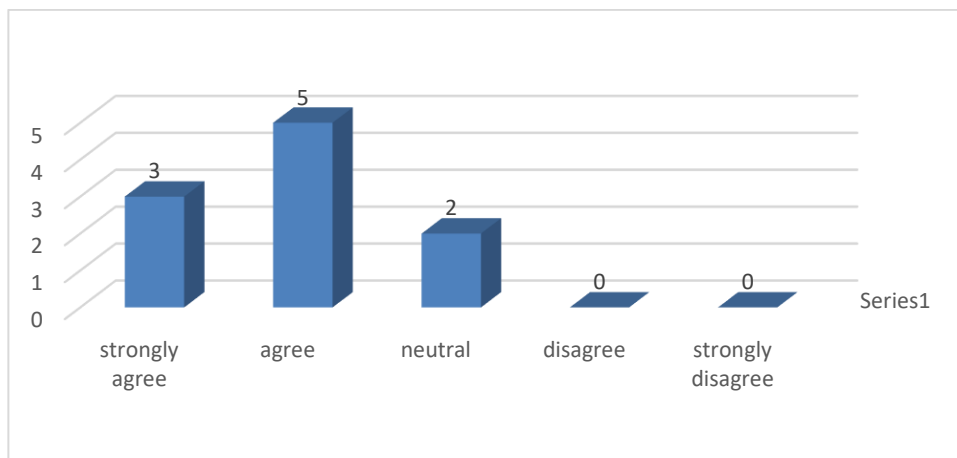


Figure 2: Do you find overall organization of TOEFL writing difficult?

Out of 10, 8 students find the organization of the writing tasks difficult. Although they learned how to organize their writing, it was difficult for them to make a new organization of the essay when they came across some difficult topics that challenged them to produce new ideas. Sometimes the writing tasks may be incomprehensible, or they may have not thought over. In that case, it seems quite hard to come up with new ideas.

Between these two tasks in writing, some of them find the task 1 very difficult, while some other find the other quite hard. When the students are not familiar with the topics mentioned in task 1, they may not overcome the challenge (Kim, 2017). Even more, they may have the fear of misunderstanding or not understanding at all. On the other hand, some others find the task 2 more difficult because brainstorming and coming up with a new organization seems really demanding for them. Just to check which one these learners find more difficult; we asked the next question.

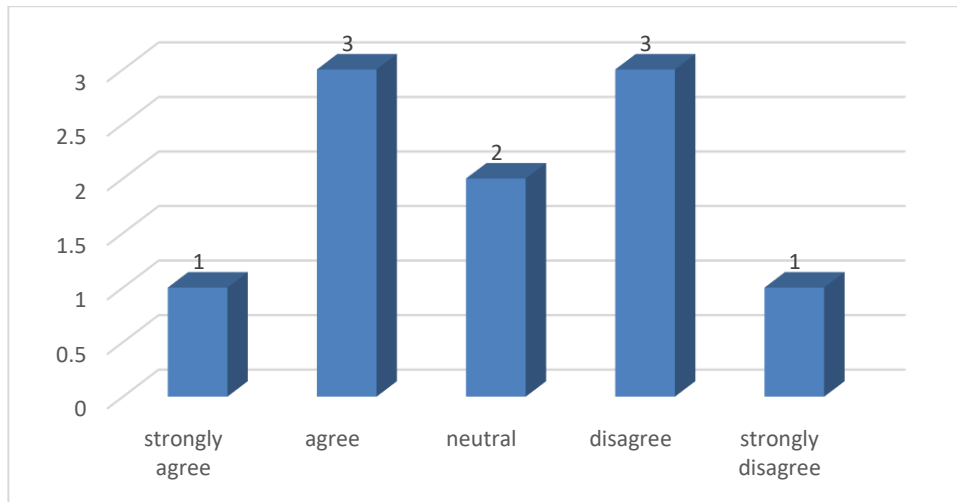


Figure 3: Do you think task 2 is more difficult than task 1?

There is an even distribution in this question. While some of them find task 1 difficult, some others find the other more difficult. This changes according to their learning styles, characteristics, level of English, and even level of academic achievement.

During our studies, we give them an overall organization and teach them how to write different paragraphs. Even more, when we read any sample essays, we show them the organization in them. In this way, they are exposed to the templates more and more and see them in ready-made essays for them. We asked next question to check if these templates helped them to understand better.

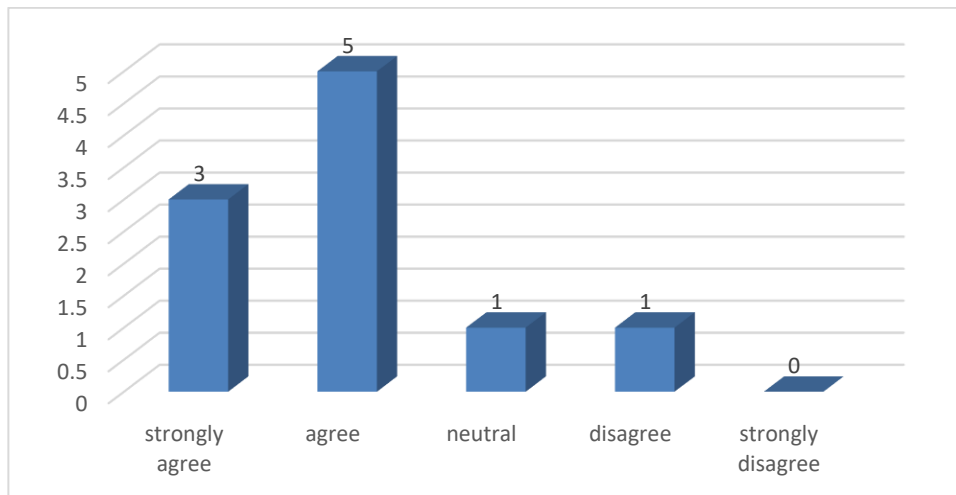


Figure 4: Do the templates help you better understand thesis writing?

8 of them answered this question positively, and this shows that the templates helped them much to have an idea about the organization of the writing tasks.

There are certain points in TOEFL writing that any test-taker should be aware of. These learners were taught what to do at every step and were given samples. The first and the most important step in any task is to understand it well. If you do not understand the task, it means you will write irrelevant things. In that case, you lose all the points. After that, one should determine their point of view and brainstorm about the topic to proceed further. It is also important to write an introduction in an acceptable frame. This also takes some time for the learners to learn how to introduce the topic. At the next level, they should learn to write the body paragraphs and defend their ideas there and write examples or details about these ideas. for all of these reasons, we asked them to put these tasks in writing in order of difficulty of them. (1 denotes the most difficult, while 5 denotes the least difficult.)

Table 1: Put these in order of difficulty: (Most difficult:1 / least difficult:5)

	understanding the task	brainstorming	writing an introduction	writing body paragraphs	writing details
Student 1	4	1	2	3	5
Student 2	1	2	3	4	5
Student 3	2	1	3	4	5
Student 4	3	2	1	4	5
Student 5	2	1	4	3	5
Student 6	1	3	2	4	5
Student 7	1	2	4	3	5
Student 8	3	1	2	4	5
Student 9	4	3	1	2	5
Student 10	2	1	3	4	5

5 of the learners found brainstorming most difficult while 3 of them found understanding the task difficult. It should also be underlined that some topics may be quite difficult to understand for some reasons. For instance, these learners may not have any references of these topics in their culture, so they may have not brainstormed about them before. For that reason, they have much difficulty to understand the topic. Only 2 learners found writing an introduction difficult. In fact, it can sometimes be crucial to make a good start with the essay, so introduction may be inspiring, and it may lead to better body paragraphs. In general, understanding the task and brainstorming seem to be the most difficult tasks while writing details are the least difficult because the important point is to come up with supporting ideas; when you support your thesis with reasonable points, then it is easier to come up with details.

Another constraint in front of the test-takers is timing in the exam. In fact, people mostly suffer from this, and they complain about the fact that time is never sufficient for them, not only in writing but also in other parts. Some of the test-takers even assert that if they had enough time, they would have written it much better way. To check it here, we asked the next question.

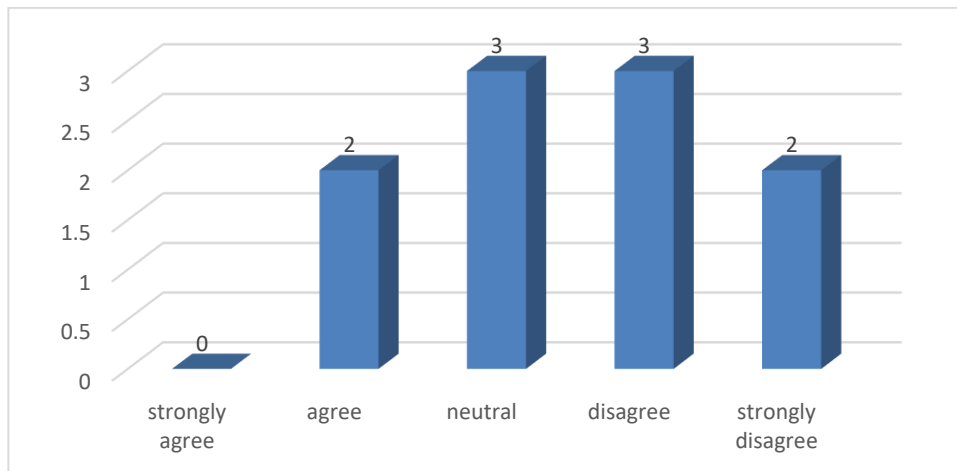


Figure 5: Do you think you have enough time to complete the tasks?

Seemingly, this is also a huge problem for these people. 5 of them complain about timing, and even 3 of them are neutral about it. It means they are also not sure about if given time is enough for them. There are only 2 of them who think that they have no problem with timing.

The task 1 in the exam is a bit complicated because the test-takers firstly read a text and then listen to a lecture and compare them. Since it is chosen from academic topics, some test-takers may feel upset about it because they think some topics are totally irrelevant or they do not know anything about it. For this reason, we asked the next question.

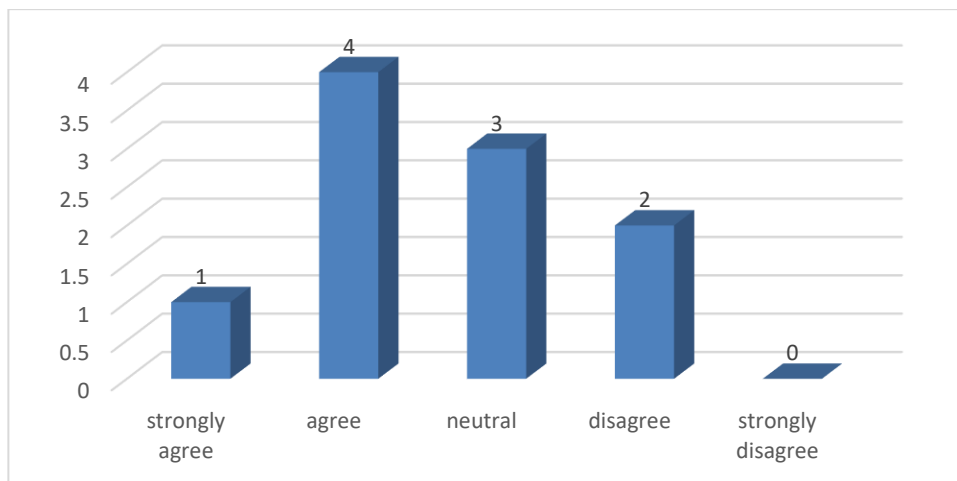


Figure 6: Do you think task 1 is complicated?

5 of them think that task 1 writing is complicated, and 3 of them say that they are neutral about it. Only two of them do not have any problems with this task. It seems this is also a significant problem for these people.



Task 2 writing asks the test-takers to come up with their own ideas and support them in logical order with appropriate language. there are several difficulties related to this task from beginning to the end. But it is sometimes really demanding job for some people to come up with appropriate ideas in writing. We asked a question in parallel and got their answers.

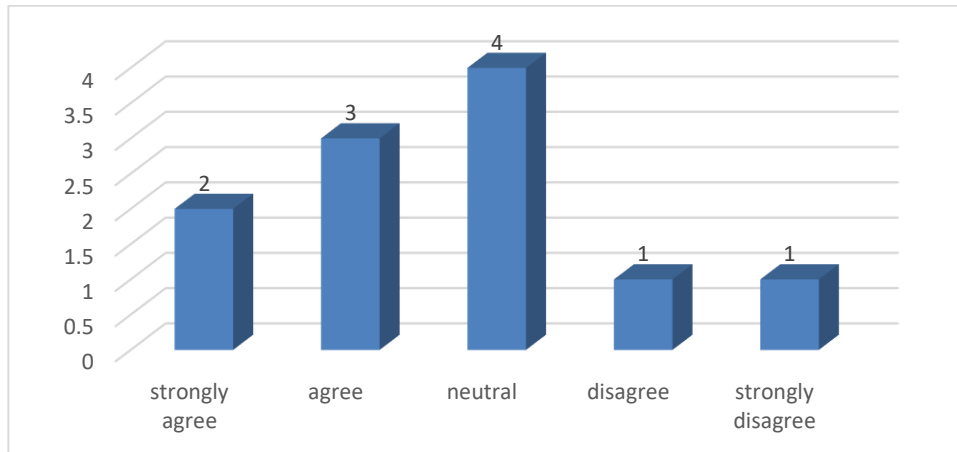


Figure 7: Do you find it difficult to come up with authentic ideas while writing?

Again 5 of them state that it is difficult for them to produce new ideas, and 4 of them are neutral about it. Only 2 of them think that it is not difficult to brainstorm and offer new ideas to the topic given. It seems this is still a problem for these people.

We also asked them if TOEFL preparation books helped them much to get prepared for the test.

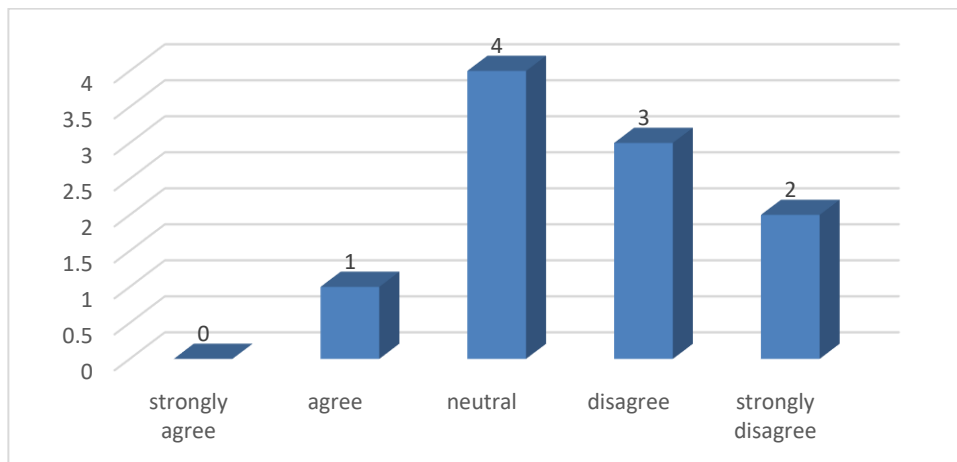


Figure 8: Do you think the TOEFL preparation books are helpful to you?

They mostly think that these books do not help them much about preparation to the test.

## 5. Discussion

In our survey of these adults, we see that TOEFL writing also poses some difficulties for them. These people who attended the courses had no previous knowledge of TOEFL writing. However, the English level of these people is suitable for an academic career. Therefore, although they had some knowledge about free writing, they mostly did not know about the academic writing required by this test. These people generally learned the content of the TOEFL test through the courses they took here and stated that the writing tasks were difficult in general. While task 1 is more difficult for some of them, task 2 is more difficult for others. In our studies with these people, they were taught how the writing organization would be. In addition, sample essays were studied. We see that these people have some difficulties even after they become familiar with TOEFL writing. However, they stated that the examples shown to them helped them.

TOEFL writing is a task that is completed by going through some stages. For this, first of all, it is necessary to understand the given topic. Then, the approach to the topic is determined and brainstorming is done about it. After finding supporting arguments for the main idea, an introductory paragraph is written, and the topic is introduced in this paragraph. At the end of the paragraph, thesis statement, which indicates the author's approach to the topic, is written. Supporting arguments are then explained in body paragraphs. In addition, some details and examples are given with these arguments. When asked which is the most difficult of all, the majority of these people seem to agree on brainstorming. The next difficult issue of understanding the topic arose as the second most difficult. In addition, according to the results, it was stated that the easiest part was to give examples and details. In the interview with 3 people, they focused on the same issue.

These people sometimes stated that they had difficulty in understanding the question. They explained the reason for this as follows: topics that are not understood sometimes have no place in their own culture. In some cases, they stated that they had difficulty because they did not know some of the keywords in the question.

Likewise, it has been observed that these people have significant problems with timing, both in the survey and in the interview. There were some who stated that if more time was given, they would do much better things.

The difficulty levels of task 1 and task 2 in TOEFL test vary from person to person. Similar results were obtained in our survey. For some, task 1 is more difficult, while for others task 2 is harder.

It was observed that the participants of this survey had difficulties in producing authentic ideas about the given topic. They stated in the interview that they had difficulties especially because they were not familiar with some academic subjects. Therefore, these people need to do studies that will familiarize them with the topics that are likely to come up in the test.

When we finally asked if TOEFL preparation books helped them, we saw that most of them stated that these books did not help them in preparation. The reason for this is that these books have a very complex

language, and these people are not familiar with the subjects. They also stated that it is not possible to learn the technical details they learned in the lessons from the books alone.

## 6. Conclusion

Writing is a productive skill, and it requires working on it much. As for TOEFL writing, it is even harder for people because it is a kind of academic writing, and people need some academic skills to cope with the tasks. There are several steps to go through while writing, and one should get necessary training at every step. Otherwise, it seems it is almost not possible to get satisfactory results from the test. Writing is generally feared by the test-takers because they have to produce the results themselves from the point of view of the authentic ideas and grammar and vocabulary. Even more, a good organization is also demanded. For these reasons, it seems any test-taker needs extra help and study to cope with the difficulties in writing.

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