

Reading Test-taking Strategies: A Study on Iranian EFL Undergraduates

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Abstract: Reading, as the most important academic language skill, receives the special focus in second/foreign language teaching. Besides, tests are regularly applied to evaluate academic performance. This study investigates whether teaching test-taking strategies to high and low proficiency EFL undergraduates similarly enhances their reading comprehension test performances. A total of 33 EFL sophomores studying at Islamic Azad University of Jahrom, Iran participated in the study. They took two TOEFL reading comprehension subtests as pretest and posttest plus instruction in test-taking strategies for multiple-choice reading comprehension test within their regular reading classes. Results of the posttest indicated that the high proficiency learners took almost more advantage of the treatment compared with the low proficiency ones. The results are discussed and some recommendations are finally provided.

Keywords: Test-taking strategy, Reading comprehension, Test performance, High and low proficiency

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is generally acknowledged as an interactive mental process between a reader's linguistic knowledge, knowledge of the world, and knowledge about a given topic (Rahmani & Sadeghi, 2011). Besides, Kim and Anderson (2011, p. 30) maintain that –Reading is essential for successfully completing all college-level courses. In other words, college students who are more proficient readers are most likely to experience more success in their courses. In the setting of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it is also commonly assumed that reading comprehension is the essential way of learning new information and the most important skill necessary for students' success. As Iranmehr, Erfani and Davari (2011, p. 142) declare, –The importance and position of reading comprehension skill in Iranian academic

setting like other EFL settings are undeniable; in a way, it is often introduced as the main goal of English language learning.

Moreover, tests are the most common method of evaluation in almost all educational systems worldwide. In general, tests carry the most load of the student's total grade especially at the college level. Nowadays, due to this influential effect of tests, serious decisions that affect people's lives are also made totally based on specific tests. Whether the goal is college admission, certification, detection of specific behavior, or personal selection, a decision about an individual's ability is frequently made according to his/her scores in specific tests (Pourmohammadi & Jafre, 2011a).

For this reason, the significance of studies on test-related factors as a way of helping students do well in their tests looks indisputable. This is because in tests, ability is not the only factor that affects students' performance. Rather, there are several cognitive and psychological factors that affect performances in tests (Hambleton, Swaminathan & Rogers, 1991). One of such important test-related factors is test-taking strategies.

Quite a few studies demonstrated that teaching test-taking strategies to EFL learners could improve their test performance (e.g., Chiu, 2011; Cohen, 1984; Radojevic, 2009; Scharnagl, 2004). However, the extent to which this training affects on learners of various language proficiency levels has not been dealt with to date. In other words, the effect of teaching test-taking strategies on the performance of EFL learners of different language proficiency levels has not deeply been taken into account yet.

This research was set to investigate whether high and low proficiency EFL undergraduates equally benefit from training additional test-taking strategies such as vocabulary tactics, process of elimination, preview of questions before reading, consideration of all answer choices, key word search, skimming, time management, etc. for their multiple-choice reading comprehension tests. If the results of the study verify that EFL learners of various proficiency levels benefit either equally or differently from teaching such strategies, then, instructors, curriculum designers, material developers, policy makers and so on could have a new and better view in this regard. More specifically, the research seeks to answer these questions:

1. Does training in test-taking strategies significantly enhance high proficiency EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension test performances?
2. Does training in test-taking strategies significantly enhance low proficiency EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension test performances?

2. Review

In spite of the equal importance attached to both categories of receptive and productive language skills (Salmani Nodoushan, 2003), reading is traditionally considered to be a vital requisite for the effective acquisition of knowledge and a major source of input for both writing and speaking (Mohamed, Eng & Ismail, 2010; Salmani Nodoushan, 2006). The term reading has been defined variously by different people; for example, Royer (2004) contends that, –Reading comprehension is the process of understanding and constructing meaning from a piece of text. Additionally, comprehension not only depends on what is coded or written in the text, but it also relies on the reader’s background experiences, purposes, feelings, and needs of the moment (Salmani Nodoushan, 2007a; 2014). Therefore, the reader is viewed as an equal and active partner with the text in the meaning-making process of comprehension.

The most influential factors in the area of L2 reading comprehension dealt with by many scientists are briefly reviewed below.

Although vocabulary knowledge is not the only factor contributing to text comprehension, it can be viewed as an essential and accurate predictor of reading ability of a SL/FL learner, and also has a direct impact on his comprehension ability. In other words, in order to comprehend a written text, readers must distinguish the meanings of the most words they encounter.

According to Wu (2006), syntactic knowledge is significant for two reasons; first, one can use a word or express the meaning of a sentence plainly with the aid of grammatical structures and rules of syntax. Next, analyzing the syntactic structure of a sentence can be useful to identify and recognize words. Furthermore, regarding the semantic knowledge, Oakhill & Garnham (1988) contend that the role of word meaning in comprehension is noticeable because readers who can recognize the meanings of words quickly and correctly are likely to comprehend text more easily.

Pittelman and Heimlich (1991) described background knowledge as an individual’s life experience and the knowledge of the world acquired through his life (See also Salmani Nodoushan, 2007b). On the whole, it is believed that background knowledge facilitates both good readers’ and poor readers’ reading comprehension and a high degree of background knowledge can even overcome linguistic insufficiencies (Grabe, 1991).

Cohen and Upton (2007, p. 211) define test-taking strategies as –those test-taking processes which respondents have selected and are conscious of, at least to some degree. Further, Hirano (2009, p. 158) says that there are essentially distinct types of strategies that respondents use as they do

language tests: 1) language learner strategies (the way learners operationalized their basic skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing including the related skills of grammar, vocabulary, and translation), 2) test management strategies (—strategies for responding meaningfully to the test items and tasks, and 3) testwiseness strategies (—strategies for using knowledge of test formats and other peripheral information to answer test items without going through the expected linguistic and cognitive processes).

Test-taking strategies consist of language use strategies and testwiseness strategies (Cohen, 1998). Language use strategies include actions that individuals consciously take to

enhance the use of a SL/FL in order to accomplish language tasks. Most of the time, examinees need to use four types of language use strategies (retrieval, rehearsal, cover, and communication strategies) in a testing situation so that they can store, retain, recall, and apply the information for use during the test.

In contrast, testwiseness is not necessarily determined by the examinee's language proficiency, but rather is concerned with his knowledge of how to take tests (Brown & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Johns & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Karami & Salmani Nodoushan, 2011, 2014). Cohen (1998) also describes three testwiseness strategies used by examinees when taking a multiple-choice test. They are: 1) making a surface matching of some information in the passage with the identical information in the item stem and in one of the response choices, 2) making use of material from a previous item when it —gives away, or reveals, the answer to a subsequent one, and 3) taking shortcuts to arrive at answers—that is, not reading the text but simply searching for the answers to the reading comprehension questions. In addition, he also pointed out that responding to multiple-choice questions, a testwise examinee may select a choice because it is a) the only grammatical one, b) the longest one, or c) the first or the last response.

In a classification, test-taking strategies have been divided into two broad categories of —general and specific by Rezaei (2006, p. 155). General strategies are used for a wider variety of tests such as preparing for the test, reading the directions, the use of time during a test, error avoidance strategies etc. While specific strategies are associated with the exact area of the subject matter that is being tested and deal with taking different kinds of tests such as multiple-choice, matching, fill-in-the-blanks, essay, short answer, true-false, and problem solving.

A few studies have probed the effects of test-taking strategies on test performance (For instance, Al-Shalabi & Salmani Nodoushan, 2009; Cohen, 1984; Nemati, Salmani Nodoushan, & Ashrafzadeh, 2010; Nevo, 1989; Phakiti,

2008; Radojevic, 2009; Rezaei, 2005; Salmani Nodoushan, 2009). Rezaei (2005) investigated the impact of knowing and applying test-taking strategies on the EFL learners' language test performance taking an achievement language test and whether the degree the testers use test-taking strategies vary in different sections of the test. First, the participants took a test-taking strategies questionnaire which was specifically devised for eliciting the participants' knowledge of test-taking strategies and the extent to which they use them. In addition to the questionnaire, an achievement language test was devised exactly based on the materials the participants had covered during their first year of education at university level.

The investigation of the collected data indicated there was a high correlation between the participants' total scores in the achievement test and their scores in the questionnaire. Furthermore, it was discovered that the participants demonstrated various degrees of tendency in utilizing test-taking strategies in the different sections of the test. He concluded that –Performance on language tests can be improved if both language teachers and test designers have a better insight into different strategies that the students apply. (p. 27).

Phakiti (2008) also investigated the relationship of test-takers' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies with the EFL reading comprehension test performance. The results proposed that 1) the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies had a positive relationship

with the reading test performance, and 2) highly successful test-takers reported considerably higher metacognitive strategy use than the moderately successful ones who in turn reported higher use of these strategies than the unsuccessful test takers. These results also support the findings of other research that successful readers are more metacognitive than less successful readers.

More recently, Radojevic (2009) examined the effects of providing students with explicit instruction in how to use a repertoire of reading comprehension and test-taking strategies when reading and responding to three kinds of questions (direct, inferential, and critical). Particularly, the study examined whether providing students with an explicit or implicit instruction on reading comprehension strategies and test-taking strategies could improve their reading comprehension achievement. Students' reading comprehension and test-taking performance scores were compared as a function of instructional condition. The findings revealed the effectiveness of providing students with explicit strategy instruction when reading and responding to different forms of text. Students became able to apply the same thought processes to their own independent work.

All in all, test-taking strategies are acquired skills. If learners have learned some of the specific skills of taking tests, they are expected to score considerably higher in tests than those with equal ability in the subject area that have not learned any test-taking strategies. The abovementioned studies showed that test-taking strategies instructions as well as the use of such strategies lead to improvement in language test performance, particularly reading comprehension scores. Besides, knowing how to prepare for and take exams can affect students' attitudes toward exam, reduce their test anxiety, build up their self-confidence, make a difference in exam scores and help them to have a better achievement (Pourmohammadi & Abidin, 2011b).

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 33 English major students doing their Reading Comprehension (3) course at Islamic Azad University of Rasht, Iran. They were both male and female students with the average age of 20 and their average years of learning English was 7.

3.2. Instruments

To gather the related data in this study, two instruments were applied as follows:

These were two TOEFL reading comprehension subtests administered as the pretest and posttest. Each test included three passages. The participants were given one hour to answer the questions in both pretest and posttest. The questions mostly required them to draw inferences based on careful reading and a profound comprehension of the texts.

It was a 5-point Likert rating-scale questionnaire: 1 (Never) to 5 (Always) adopted from Rezaei (2006) and modified for the purpose of this study to elicit information about the participants' general background knowledge in the domain of test-taking strategies. In other words, it intended to distinguish what percentage of the participants and to what extent was familiar with test-taking strategies before the intervention begins. This was done as some students may be familiar with and trained in such strategies in some private institutions or somewhere else before or during their university education and this could negatively affect the test results as well as the consequent conclusions. Thus, such probable participants who were highly familiar with test-taking strategies could be recognized by means of this questionnaire and their overall activities had to be discreetly excluded throughout the study in order to remove the effect of such prior knowledge.

3.3. Procedure

The process of collecting data for this study consisted of four stages: First, the pretest was administered to the participants of both groups before the initiation of the study. Second, the Likert rating-scale questionnaire was administered immediately after the pretest. Third, the participants were given an additional training in test-taking strategies for multiple-choice English reading comprehension tests as supplementary teaching to the regular English reading courses. The employed test-taking strategies in this research were mostly adopted from Vattanapath and Jaiprayoon (1999) and modified for the present study. Two strategies were practiced in each session. This lasted for 11 sessions, once a week. Each session lasted around 20 minutes, making a total of almost 4 hours. The participants were given a written guide and sample test. In order to enable the participants to be familiar and internalize the test-taking strategies, the researcher explained and modeled how each strategy is used in the processes of completing reading comprehension questions. Finally, the posttest was administered to determine the participants' reading comprehension test performance.

4. Results

The gathered data were analyzed through the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

The applied questionnaire intended to explore the participants' prior knowledge about test-taking strategies in general and what they perform during a test. In order to make the analysis of the participants' responses to the questionnaire feasible, values from 1 to 5 were respectively given to these five-point Likert rating-scale, *_never'*, *_rarely'*, *_sometimes'*, *_frequently'* and *_always'*, utilized for each item in this questionnaire.

According to the results of this questionnaire, the students had low to moderate knowledge of test-taking strategies at the beginning of this study. In other words, although all of them had some knowledge of test-taking strategies to some extent, they were all qualified to take part as the participants in the study.

The first research question stated: Does training in test-taking strategies significantly enhance high proficiency EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension test performances? Based on the pretest scores, the participants were classified into three equal subgroups. The top eleven students (out of thirty three) were categorized as the high proficiency group and the bottom eleven students as the low proficiency group. These two extremes

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were purposefully included as they could better show the highest probable variations in the performance due to the application of the treatment.

Table 1 depicts the Shapiro-Wilk statistics for score differences of the high and the low proficiency group levels. As the p-values are greater than .05, it can be concluded that score differences for both groups are normal. In other words, there is no violation of normality/normal distribution.

Table 1: Tests of Normality

	Proficiency	Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Score Dif.	High	.964	11	.820
	Low	.905	11	.213

Table 2 shows that the mean and standard deviation of the high proficiency group are 3.64 and 1.690 respectively and those for the low proficiency group are 2.55 and 2.296 respectively.

Table 2: Group Statistics

	Proficiency	N	Mean	S.D.	Std. Error Mean
Score Dif.	High	11	3.64	1.690	.509
	Low	11	2.55	2.296	.692

As indicated in Table 3, the mean and standard deviation for the high proficiency group in pretest are 20.00 and 1.41 and those for the posttest are 23.64 and 1.57, respectively.

Table 3: Paired Samples Statistics for High Proficiency Group

		Mean	N	S. D.	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	20.00	11	1.41	.43
	Posttest	23.64	11	1.57	.47

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to test for significant difference in score differences of the high group in pretest and posttest. As is shown in Table 4, there is a statistically significant difference because p-value (.000) is less than .05. That is, students in the high proficiency group did take advantage of the extra teaching of test-taking strategies as the treatment and improved their performance.

Table 4: Paired-samples T-test for the High Proficiency Group

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest-Posttest	-3.64	1.69	.51	-4.77	-2.50	-7.14	10	.000

The second research question asked: Does training in test-taking strategies significantly enhance low proficiency EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension test performances? Similarly, Table 5 shows that the mean and standard deviation for the low proficiency group in pretest are 11.09 and 1.70 and those for the posttest are 13.64 and 3.07 respectively.

Table 5: Paired Samples Statistics for the Low Proficiency Group

		Mean	N	S. D.	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	11.09	11	1.70	.51
	Posttest	13.64	11	3.07	.93

Another paired-samples t-test was also done to test for significant difference in score differences of the low group in pretest and posttest. As shown in Table 6, there is a statistically significant difference because p-value (.004) is less than .05. That is, students in the low proficiency group also benefited from the extra teaching of test-taking strategies as the treatment.

Table 6: Paired-samples T-test for the Low Proficiency Subgroup

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest- Posttest	-2.55	2.30	.69	-4.09	-1.00	-3.68	10	.004

Overall, on the basis of the results of the statistical analyses, it can be concluded that the instruction of test-taking strategies was statistically significant regarding the improvement of test performance at both high and low proficiency group levels. That is, the present study indicates that Iranian EFL undergraduates who received additional instructions in test-taking strategies outscored their peers who only received regular instructions in their reading classes.

Nonetheless, although the instruction of test-taking strategies was effective for both the low and the high proficiency groups, whether the participants in these two subgroups applied those test-taking strategies exactly equally or there were also some dissimilarities as well as the related reasons are other issues which are discussed below.

5. Discussion

The present findings agree with the findings of some studies such as Chiu (2011) and Scharnagl (2004) which state the application of test-taking strategies could facilitate an increase in the students' reading comprehension test scores. In other words, the instruction in test-taking strategies can help students improve their test performance when they are given a multiple-choice reading comprehension test.

The results of the respondents' reading comprehension test performance in the present study also revealed that no statistically significant difference was detected between the two high and low proficiency subgroup levels. However, both groups were not exactly equal in this regard. This little difference could mostly be attributable to the inadequacy of language competence, especially vocabulary knowledge, which the low proficiency students had with them while taking the reading comprehension test.

The high proficiency students, encountering unknown or unfamiliar words, orchestrated a variety of reading and test-taking strategies to solve their vocabulary problem. By contrast, the low proficiency students failed to do so. They probably had to use most of their mental capacities to decode each word

because of limited knowledge of vocabulary, which thereby prevented them from applying other test-taking strategies in the process of taking the reading comprehension test.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that test-taking strategies instruction could have a significant impact on the reading comprehension performance of the students. Thus, it seems wise that English teachers should teach test-taking strategies to improve their students' reading comprehension test performance.

English teachers should also put more emphasis on vocabulary development so that their students could have sufficient vocabulary knowledge to comprehend a text and grasp the instructions on test-taking strategies. In addition, teachers should motivate their students to realize the importance and the advantages of learning such strategies so that these strategies can positively be used in the testing situation.

They should also introduce and explicitly teach all the necessary strategies so that students can independently employ them while taking a test. Beckman (2002) maintains that such explicit instruction consists of: a) describing the strategy, b) modeling its use, c) providing ample assisted practice time, d) endorsing student self-monitoring and evaluation of personal strategy application, and e) encouraging constant use of the strategy and its application in other learning situations.

In conclusion, it is hoped that educators will maintain to update and enhance ESL/EFL students' existing competencies and expertise especially in reading area. Further studies that gather valuable information on individuals' differences hold great promise in assisting instructors to pick up the quality of L2 teaching and learning.

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