

# Language Learning Strategies: A Key Factor to Improvement of TOEFL Candidates' Reading Comprehension Ability

Khalil Motallebzadeh (Corresponding Author)

Department of English, Torbat-e-Heydareih Branch, Islamic Azad University (IAU),

P.O. Box 140, Torbat-e-Heydareih, Iran

Tel: 98-511-767-2809

E-mail: kmotallebz@gmail.com

Neda Mamdoohi

Department of English, Garmsar Branch, Islamic Azad University (IAU),

P.O. Box 3581631167, Daneshjo Street, Garmsar, Iran

Tel: 98-232-422-6999

E-mail: Neda.Madoohi@gmail.com

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## Abstract

Many studies have been conducted to explore language learning strategies and their relations or effects on learners' performances (Prokop, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Gallo-Crail & Zerwekh, 2002). This small-scale study tries to explore the full range to learning achievement, with an emphasis on the skill of reading. Reading comprehension is highly emphasized for either exam-taking or academic purpose in most English classrooms. The study determines whether cognitive learning strategies have any effect on the improvement of reading comprehension or not. The intent of strategy-based instruction is to help all students become better language learners. This paper aims to help EFL learners become successful readers. In a non-intensive TOEFL coaching program, 20 students were instructed through learning strategies for a period of a month. Results of t-test analysis indicated that participants who had been taught the strategies could significantly outperform those in control group. There was significant evidence that the strategies were effective in raising their scores on the reading component. In

the related literature the author examines cognitive strategies which are considered better approaches in the EFL classroom.

**Key words:** Cognitive strategies, Skimming, Scanning, Inferences

## 1. Introduction

The results of several "good language learner" studies suggest that successful foreign language (FL) learners use a variety of strategies to assist them in gaining command over new language skills (O'Malley, 1987). The selection of appropriate language learning strategies enable students to take responsibility for their own learning by enhancing learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction, necessary attributes for life-long learning (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989). By understanding the strategies that successful FL learners use, less competent learners should be able to improve their skills in a foreign language through training in strategies evidenced among those who are more successful. The current study examines four cognitive learning strategies: skimming, scanning, inferences, and key words and their effect on score gain on TOEFL speaking subset.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Strategy Definitions

The word strategy comes from the ancient Greek word *strategia*, which means steps or actions taken for the purpose of winning a war known as military strategy (Wikipedia 2009). Learning strategies are broadly defined as operations and procedures employed by learners to facilitate the process of acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information in their learning (Rigney, 1978).

Learning strategies are "techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information" (Wenden, 1987:6). Oxford (1990) considers that "any specific action taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" is a language learning strategy.

### 2.2 Strategy-Based Instruction

The underlying premise of the SBI approach is that students should be given the opportunity to understand not only what they can learn in the language classroom, but also how they can learn the language they are studying more effectively and efficiently. SBI helps learners become more aware of what kinds of strategies are available to them, understand how to organize and use strategies systematically and effectively given their learning-style preferences, and learn when and how to transfer the strategies to new language learning and using contexts (Cohen, 2007).

Explicit learning strategy-instruction, as Chamot (2004) argues, essentially involves the development of "students' awareness of the strategies they use, teacher modeling of strategic thinking, student practice with new strategies, student self-evaluation of the strategies used, and practice in transferring strategies to new tasks".

### 2.3 Definition of Cognitive Approach

Kolers (1968) and Smith (1985) indicate that the reading process involves visual information

(seeing the text) and non-visual information (processing the visual stimuli in the brain). Indeed, the reader picks up visual information through his eyes; however, he also has to employ the non-visual information during the reading process.

Several writers explain how reading is a cognitive task. Goodman (1988) regards reading as a phase of written communication. In other words, reading is a process in which the reader reconstructs the message from the writer. Similarly, Grabe (1988) views reading as “a kind of dialogue between the reader and the text” (p.56). Yet Smith (1985) suggests that “the reader’s interaction with the text is far more important and relevant than being able to identify and recall the actual content of the text.” (p. 61). In short, reading is not a linear process, but it is a dynamic activity.

Ryan and Semmel (1969) and Yorio (1971) explain that reading is a sampling, prediction, testing, and confirming process. Prediction is not meaningless or reckless guessing. The reader brings his expectations to the text, and his expectations lead him to some hypotheses or prediction about what is likely to be seen. Since reading is a guessing game, reading is a process of sampling the fewest informative cues from the print. After the sampling process, the reader needs to put his guesses or hypothesis to the test to match or confirm his predictions for appropriate meaning which is provided by the text.

Comprehension should be the ultimate goal in the reading process. In an oral reading situation, if word identification precedes meaning identification, the reader is probably lost and he is unable to recall what he was reading. Since reading is for information and for meaning, the reader should get messages conveyed through the text rather than to read word for word.

#### *2.4 How Cognitive Strategies Work in Learning/Reading*

Krashen lists several hypotheses in his monitor model for second language learning (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). In the acquisition-learning hypothesis, Krashen differentiates between language acquisition and language learning. He indicates that language acquisition is a subconscious process. Acquisition refers to the implicit knowledge of rules; by contrast, learning as explicit knowledge of rules. Krashen’s monitor hypothesis indicates that the learning process is a conscious self-repair process, in which the learner is able to use the monitor to check or repair his language production.

Phye (1986) and Chamot and O’Malley (1987, 1990) suggest declarative and procedural knowledge are important elements for efficient learning. Declarative knowledge consists of the facts the learner knows. It enables the learner to set goals and adjust directions for different task or situations. On the other hand, procedural knowledge is about how to use learning strategies or skills to complete a reading task.

#### *2.5 What We Can Learn from Good Reader*

Goodman (1988) defines the good reader as being both efficient and effective in reading, and knowing how to use minimum efforts to achieve great effectiveness. Several studies show

that poor and good readers use different approaches to reading (Block, 1986; Chamot & O'Malley, 1990; Nunan, 1989; Rubin, 1975, 1987; Ryan & Semmel, 1969; Smith, 1973, 1985; Thompson, 1987). The poor reader is apt to pay attention and identify isolated words. Thus, the more the reader expects to see every word in front of his eyes, the less he is likely to see. By contrast, the experienced reader constantly focuses on constructing the meaning from the print, that is, he reads for comprehension. Yet, the good reader always pays selective attention, and uses the fewest but most productive cues to comprehend what he is reading. The good reader is also likely to use more sophisticated cognitive strategies in learning tasks. Additionally, the good reader can transfer strategies found effective in his first language to second language learning.

### *2.6 What Successful Language Learners Do*

Outside of the language learning field, research comparing experts to novices indicates that experts use more systematic and useful problem-solving and native-language reading comprehension strategies. A similar finding occurs with more successful language learners as compared to less successful ones. Better language learners generally use strategies appropriate to their own stage of learning, personality, age, purpose for learning the language and type of language (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989).

Ellis (1994) summarizes the results of various "good language learner studies" into five major aspects of successful language learning. The first aspect of successful language learning is a concern for language form. Researchers found that good language learners treat language as a system by making effective crosslingual comparisons, analyzing the target language, and using reference books. Good language learners also pay attention to meaning, searching for it in the second language data they are exposed to and trying to engage in real communication by seeking out opportunities for natural language use. Thirdly, good language learners show active involvement in language learning. Rather than developing dependence upon the teacher, they take charge of their own learning by identifying and pursuing goals and by trying to introduce new topics into conversations. The fourth characteristic concerned their metacognitive awareness of the learning process. Successful FL learners are thoughtful and aware of themselves, make conscious decisions and follow their own preferred learning style. These are the learners who have the ability to talk effectively about their language learning because they have a well-developed metalanguage with which to do it. Finally, Ellis concluded that successful learners are flexible and appropriately use learning strategies, demonstrating the ability to choose those that were appropriate for particular tasks.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) also undertook investigations comparing effective and ineffective students in their use of language learning strategies. More effective students used a greater variety of strategies in all the strategy groups, and used them in ways that helped the students to complete the language task successfully. Less effective students not only had fewer strategy types in their repertoires but also frequently used strategies that were inappropriate to the task or that did not lead to successful task completion.

Studying good FL learners provides insight into how strategies affect language learning and what kinds of behavior are associated with successful language acquisition. By comparing the strategies used by successful and unsuccessful FL learners, it may be possible to not only teach those strategies that are effective, but also avoid those that impede progress, particularly those strategies that are effective at the beginning levels of language acquisition but transform into stumbling blocks at higher levels of proficiency.

### 3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

For the purpose of the current study, the following question was set:

*Can explicit teaching of cognitive strategies (skimming, scanning, inferences, and key words) impact students' score gain on TOEFL reading subset?*

To find answers to the above-mentioned question, the following null hypothesis was proposed:

*Strategy-based instruction has no positive or negative effect on students' score gain on IELTS speaking subset.*

### 4. Method

#### 4.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 40 TOEFL candidates (all females). These candidates had enrolled in Aryan English Language Institute in Mashhad, Iran. The participants took preparation courses and coaching classes for a period of one month in Fall semester 2010. The age of the participants ranged from 22 to 29, with a mean of 21.15. Through conversations with the participants, it was found that most of them wanted to take TOEFL to continue their education in English speaking countries. These participants had various English-learning experiences: around 10 years in formal settings in high schools and universities. The majority of participants had additional English studies in private language institutes.

#### 4.2 Instrumentation

To collect the required data for the present study, several instruments were employed:

(A) *TOEFL (PBT)*. This test was administered to a group of Advanced EFL learners to homogenize the Test. The reliability index of this test was estimated through Cronbach's Alpha as 0.8.75. It consisted of a passage and some questions in the form of multiple choice questions.

(B) *Reading Comprehension Test*. As the aim of this study is to examine the effect of SBI on reading comprehension ability, a reading comprehension test including 11 items was chosen from a TOEFL (IBT) preparation textbook. This test was piloted by the researchers with a group of Iranian EFL learners similar to the English proficiency of the target group at another English Language Institute in Mashhad, Iran. Having analyzed

the data, the results showed a high reliability index of 8.15 employing Cronbach's Alpha. This instrument was also employed as the study posttest.

#### 4.3 Procedure

The candidates participated in TOEFL preparation course for a period of one month.

They were divided into two experimental and control groups: 20 learners in each group. All the learners kept up with the program. During this period, in addition to the routine educational program developed by the institute, students in the experimental group were presented several activities listed under four types of cognitive strategies: *skimming*, *scanning*, *inferences and key words*. The researcher used explicit and indirect approaches to help learners practice and adopt these tasks. The control group received no strategy-based instruction except for the activities which were included in the routine program such as some questions related to reading as a warm up activity, asking general questions, discussing the main idea and followed up questions.

### 5. Results and Discussions

Having collected the required data based on the mentioned data collection instruments and procedures, the researchers conducted the analysis of data and tested the hypothesis formulated for the present study.

An independent t-test is run to compare the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the pretest in order to probe their reading ability before administering the reading strategies to the former group.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Pretest

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Cont.	20	13.35	2.207	0.494
Exp.	20	13.65	2.159	0.483

As shown in Table 1, participants in experimental group ( $M = 13.65$ ,  $SD = 2.159$ ) didn't outperform those in control groups ( $M = 13.35$ ,  $SD = 2.207$ ). That means there is no significant difference between the groups at the beginning of the treatment and they are homogenized.

Table 2. T-Test for pretest by Control & Experimental Groups

Group	N	M	SD	t	df
Cont.	20	13.35	2.207	0.435	38
Exp.	20	13.65	2.159		

As shown in Table 2, participants in experimental group ( $M = 13.65$ ,  $SD = 2.159$ ) didn't outperform [ $t(38) = .435$ ] those in control groups ( $M = 13.35$ ,  $SD = 2.207$ ). That means there

is no significant difference between the groups at the beginning of the treatment and they are homogenized.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics Posttest

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Exp.	20	24.35	2.390	0.534
Cont.	20	20.15	1.725	0.386

As Table 3 reveals, after twelve sessions of treatment, participants in experimental group ( $M = 24.35$ ,  $SD = 2.390$ ) significantly outperformed those in control group ( $M = 20.15$ ,  $SD = 1.725$ ).

Table 4. T-Test for pretest by Control & Experimental Groups

Group	N	M	SD	t	df
Cont.	20	20.15	1.725	6.372	38
Exp.	20	24.35	2.390		

As Table 4 reveals, participants in experimental group ( $M = 24.35$ ,  $SD = 2.390$ ) significantly outperformed [ $t(38) = 6.372$ ] those in control group ( $M = 20.15$ ,  $SD = 1.725$ ) in posttest.

## 6. Conclusion

The related research shows reading involves not only the visual information but the non-visual information. In the interactive reading process, the reader will pay selective attention, make predictions, sample fewest and productive cues to test and confirm his hypothesis through the written text.

In the author's opinion, learning (the conscious state) can be transferred into acquisition (the unconscious condition) after repeated practice. Therefore, in the ESL/EFL classroom the teacher can encourage the less skilled learner to observe the skilled learner's strategies and practice these operations himself in the learning task. Furthermore, the teacher should provide more opportunities for the learner to practice strategies.

The results of this study can also be useful for the IELTS/TOEFL exam coaching institutes to include strategy-based instruction in their ordinary or intensive programs to enable the candidates to become more autonomous in test-taking conditions.

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## Authors

**Khalil Motallebzadeh** is assistant professor at the Islamic Azad University (IAU) of Torbat-e-Heydareih and Mashhad Branches, Iran. He is a widely published researcher in language testing and e-learning. He is also an accredited teacher trainer of the British Council since 2008 and is currently the Iran representative in Asia TEFL.

**Neda Mamdoohi** holds MA in TEFL and is English instructor at Aryan College in Mashhad, Iran. She is interested in learning strategies, reading, teaching methodology, and ESP.