Attitudes towards Teaching and Learning Test-taking Strategies for Reading Comprehension Tests: The Case of Iranian EFL Undergraduates

Majid Pour-Mohammadi (Corresponding author)

Department of English Translation, Islamic Azad University, Rasht, Iran

PO Box 129, Rasht, Iran

Tel: 60-17-605-4350   E-mail: majid.pourmohammadi@gmail.com

Dr Mohamad Jafre Zainol Abidin

School of Educational Studies, University of Science Malaysia (USM)

11800 Gelugor, Penang Island, Malaysia

E-mail: Jafre@usm.my

Abstract

Reading, as the most important academic language skill, receives the special focus in second or foreign language teaching. In addition, tests are regularly applied to evaluate academic performance. There are several cognitive and psychological factors which affect test performance. One of such important test-related factors is test-taking strategies, also known as testwiseness. This study was set to probe the attitudes of Iranian EFL undergraduates towards training test-taking strategies. A set of 22 test-taking strategies for multiple-choice reading comprehension tests was taught as extra material to 30 EFL undergraduates in their regular reading classes within 11 sessions. A Likert rating-scale questionnaire was administered at the end of semester. Overall, students revealed positive opinions on teaching and learning of test-taking strategies. Results are discussed and some recommendations are ultimately provided.

Keywords: Test-taking strategy, Reading comprehension, Test performance, Attitude, Iranian EFL undergraduate

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is commonly known as an interactive mental process between a reader's linguistic knowledge, knowledge of the world, and knowledge about a given topic (Rahmani & Sadeghi, 2011). Moreover, according to Kim and Anderson (2011, p. 30), "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".

Additionally, in the setting of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it is frequently supposed that reading comprehension is the fundamental way of learning new information and it is the most significant skill required for the students' success. As Iranmehr et al. (2011, p. 142) maintain, "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." Likewise, Ghonsooly and Eghtesadee (2006) declare that reading comprehension is claimed to be the main purpose of foreign language teaching in Iran.

Meantime, tests are the most common evaluating method in nearly all educational systems and academic institutions worldwide. Generally, tests carry the most load of the student's total grade particularly at the college level. The significance and uses of tests have extended beyond schools as many serious decisions that affect people's lives are made entirely according to specific tests. Whether the goal is college admission, certification, detection of specific behavior, or personal selection, a decision about an individual's ability is usually made based on his or her scores in specific tests (Pour-Mohammadi & Jafre, 2011).

Hence, the significance of research on test-taking strategies as a way of helping students do well in their tests seems undeniable. A primary step to attain this goal could be studying test-related factors. This is because in tests, ability is not the only factor that affects students' performance. There are several cognitive and psychological factors which affect performances in tests (Hambleton et al., 1991). One important test-related factor is test-taking strategies, also known as testwiseness. This factor has its own effect on performance in tests and leads in another advantage which is improving test validity (Dodeen, 2009).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

How comes that two individuals with almost the same degree of knowledge take the same test but perform differently and gain different scores? In order to account for the differences, many internal and external factors can be taken into consideration one of which is test-taking strategies. In other words, to succeed in English testing does not require only English competence. Belcher (1985) maintains that a test score indicates not only the knowledge and aptitude the reader possesses in a subject area but also the ability to take advantage of the characteristics and format of the test.

1.2 Objective and Research Question

This research was set to investigate the Iranian EFL undergraduates' impressions and opinions about 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 reading comprehension tests. In other words, it sought to see whether these students, having been exposed to such test-taking strategies, view training in test-taking strategies as means of taking reading comprehension tests successfully or not.

If teaching test-taking strategies appears useful to the students and they think that such strategies can assist them to obtain better results, then instructors, curriculum designers, material developers, policy makers and so on ought to have a new view in this regard. More specifically, the research attempted to answer the following question:

- Do Iranian EFL undergraduates have a positive attitude towards teaching and learning test-taking strategies in their Reading Comprehension course?

2. Literature Review

Several studies have probed the impacts of test-taking strategies on test performance (e.g., Cohen, 1984; Nevo, 1989; Phakiti, 2008; Radojevic, 2009; Rezaee, 2005). In his study, Rezaee (2005) investigated the impact of knowing and applying test-taking strategies on the Iranian EFL learners' language test performance taking an achievement language test and whether the degree the testees use test-taking strategies vary in different sections of the test. The investigation of the collected data indicated that 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).

Another study on test-taking strategies was conducted by Phakiti (2008). The study investigated the relationship of test-takers' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to the EFL reading comprehension test performance. The results proposed that (1) the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies had a positive relationship to 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.

Scharnagl (2004) also conducted an experimental study to examine the impact of additional instruction of test-taking strategies on reading achievement of low-performing third-grade students. The results revealed that the experimental group who received additional instruction in test-taking strategies also outperformed the control group who received regular instruction only.

On the whole, the above-mentioned studies described that test-taking strategies instruction as well as the use of such strategies lead to improvement in language test performance, particularly reading comprehension scores, for different leveled students regardless of what learning context they are in. That is, students can be taught to use strategies, and that strategies use increases students' awareness of their own performance. Besides, as Hirano

(2009) stated in his study, test-taking strategies use and test performance are influenced by the language of response, language proficiency type, test method and item types among other potential variables. Thus, reading teachers need to go beyond their traditional roles by providing opportunities for their students to become familiar with and apply such strategies.

However, as it could be recognized, the conducted studies focused merely on the final achievement and outcome. Almost none of them directly and deeply considered the viewpoints of the participants themselves regarding such sort of training. It goes without saying that learners, as active variable in such sort of research, have a very significant and influential role and their opinions, willingness, preferences, likes and dislikes are very determining and influential in the success or failure of any teaching program. The present study tried to deal with this aspect in depth.

3. Methodology

The present study intended to investigate the opinions of Iranian EFL undergraduates about teaching and learning test-taking strategies during their Reading Comprehension course.

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 30 undergraduate students studying English as their major course at Islamic Azad University of Iran, Rasht Branch. These students were studying for a Bachelor of Arts in 'English Language Translation'. They were both male and female students and their average age was 20 and the average years of learning English was 7. Having passed their Reading Comprehension (1) and (2) courses in the two semesters of the first year of their education, they were doing their Reading Comprehension (3) course.

In selecting the participants for this study, factors such as age, ethnic affiliation, native language/dialect and linguistic background were not taken into account and all available students in that academic semester were selected. The rationale behind this decision is that students with all these various characteristics take the same University Entrance Examination. Therefore, they come together, from all over the country, in a given course. Furthermore, during their four-year period of study for the degree, they are all assigned the same materials. The participants were informed that they would be involved in this research at the beginning of the semester.

3.2 Measuring Instrument

A 4-point Likert rating-scale questionnaire: from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree) adopted from Vattanapath and Jaiprayoon (1999) was used for this study. It was conducted at the end of the course to investigate the students' impressions and opinions on the teaching of test-taking strategies as well as their learning experience. It also elicited information about their likes and dislikes and overall ideas about the teaching and learning of test-taking strategies for multiple-choice English tests in particular (See Appendix 1).

3.3 Procedure

This study was done during an academic semester. It included 2 stages as follows:

3.3.1 Teaching Test-taking Strategies

The participants were instructed with the same teaching techniques in their regular English Reading Comprehension course. Moreover, they were given additional training in test-taking strategies for multiple-choice English reading comprehension tests as supplementary teaching to their regular English Reading course. Two strategies were practiced in each session (See Appendix 2). This lasted for 11 sessions, once a week. Each session lasted around 20 minutes. In order to enable the participants to be familiar and internalize the test-taking strategies, the instructor clarified and modeled how each strategy must be used in the processes of completing reading comprehension questions.

3.3.2 Likert Rating-scale Questionnaire

After instructing all test-taking strategies, a 4-point Likert rating-scale questionnaire was conducted at the end of semester to elicit information about the participants' likes, dislikes and overall ideas about the teaching and learning of test-taking strategies for multiple-choice reading comprehension tests.

4. Results and Discussion

On the basis of the gathered data by means of the Likert rating-scale questionnaire and with regards to the attitudes of the participants towards the teaching and learning of test-taking strategies for reading comprehension tests, the participants, in general, depicted positive attitudes. In 25 items out of 30 items, they reported positive responses. Only in 5 items, out of 30, they reported mixed opinions. More than 86% of the participants strongly agreed that learning test-taking strategies for multiple-choice English reading comprehension tests could assist them to manage the testing time properly. Besides, 63.3% strongly and 36.7% agreed that they found learning test-taking strategies useful and students should be taught how to take a test. The results also revealed that around 40% of the participants strongly agreed that the training helped them take the test more carefully, and guess effectively. Furthermore, a high percentage of them acknowledged that learning test-taking strategies enabled them to be more comfortable, enthusiastic and confident about taking tests.

Perhaps, one reason for such a strong and unanimous agreement on the importance of teaching and learning test-taking strategies could be the fact that most teachers may not recognize the significance of the teaching of test-taking strategies; or else, they should instruct so much English content that there is not enough room to teach test-taking strategies.

In addition, the results also implied that all of the participants believed that there were also other factors besides linguistic competence affecting the test scores. For instance, it might be ascribed to poor use of time, carelessness, and anxiety and confusion caused by unknown procedures. In other words, poor performance in language tests might be also related to lack of test-taking strategies competence. It was also revealed that the majority of the participants lacked test-taking strategies competence. Only a small number of them had learned test-taking strategies up to that time.

This result is in consistence with the previous researchers' claim that training of test-taking

strategies can lead to positive outcomes (Phakiti, 2003; Scharnagl, 2004). Based upon the findings in their studies, these researchers also suggested that teachers must highlight the proper use of test-taking strategies so that students can know what they should do during taking a test. In this regard, Chiu (2011) also reported that teaching test-taking strategies could decrease students' test anxiety. As teaching test-taking strategies enhances students' test performance, they would be more confident and motivated to have an active role in learning. In brief, teaching and learning test-taking strategies can be beneficial to improve students' attitudes towards tests and language learning, to aid them to have better performance on tests, and more prominently to lower their test anxiety. Overall, the findings of this study along with those of other related studies suggest support for training in test-taking strategies and encouraging EFL instructors to provide such instructions.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Studies

Overall, it became clear that test-taking strategies training could have a positive impact on students' test performance. Teaching such strategies to students and motivating them to apply them can encourage them make educational guesses, have better achievement, solve problems or difficulties while taking tests and also reduce test anxiety. Thus, it can be concluded that integrating such strategies in teaching curriculum as to be instructed on the regular and disciplined basis could be profitable for the students. In this case, instructors are also encouraged to add the instructions in test-taking strategies to their regular English classes so that their students may become testwise in a testing situation.

The findings of this study indicated that Iranian EFL undergraduates have positive attitudes towards teaching and learning test-taking strategies for multiple-choice English reading comprehension tests and could benefit in many ways. However, due to time limitation and administration, this study was performed over only 11 sessions which lasted around 4 hours. Hence, this study could be carried out again allowing time for more practice of taking tests. Further, a repeat study could be done in other language skills like writing tests, listening tests as well as other test formats such as essay tests, true false tests, matching tests, and so forth.

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Appendix 1

The Likert Rating-Scale Questionnaire: (Participants' Opinions about Teaching and Learning of Test-Taking Strategies.)

Please read each of the following statements carefully and choose one of the choices.

1. I enjoyed studying test-taking strategies.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

2. I feel that I can do the test better after learning test-taking strategies.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

3. Learning test-taking strategies enables me to be more enthusiastic about taking tests.

    A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

*4. Learning test-taking strategies makes me more anxious in taking tests.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

5. Learning test-taking strategies makes me more relaxed while taking tests.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

6. Learning test-taking strategies assists in time management more effectively.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

7. Learning test-taking strategies helps me go through the test more carefully.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

8. I find learning test-taking strategies very useful.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

*9. I think students should be taught how to take a test or test-taking strategies.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

10. I think students should not be taught how to take a test or test-taking strategies.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

11. Learning test-taking strategies helped me improve my English reading test scores.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

12. The content of the course along with learning about test-taking strategies is too demanding.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

13. The content of the course along with learning about test-taking strategies is appropriate.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

14. The content of the course along with learning about test-taking strategies is inadequate.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

15. Test-taking strategies should be taught in class.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

16. Test-taking strategies should be taught out of class.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

*17. I think it is not necessary to learn test-taking strategies.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

18. Learning test-taking strategies helped me guess effectively.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

*19. I think that learning test-taking strategies wasted my time.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

20. I can apply test-taking strategies in the real situation while taking tests.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

21. I find learning test-taking strategies make me have a better attitude towards taking tests.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

22. There should be more test exercises (practice taking tests) in class.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

23. I find learning test-taking strategies necessary for me.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

24. Learning test-taking strategies makes me think that to get a good score in English is not too difficult.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

25. Learning test-taking strategies enables me to do the easy items first, skip the difficult items and answer them later.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

*26. After studying test-taking strategies, I still do the test from the first item to the last item respectively without being concerned about the marks and how they are allotted.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

27. Learning test-taking strategies enables me to do all the questions even if I have to guess sometimes.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

28. Learning test-taking strategies enables me to read all options before choosing the best answer.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

*29. Learning test-taking strategies made me get a lower score because I worry about the strategies used.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

30. Learning test-taking strategies made me get a higher score because I can take a test effectively, and I can manage time more appropriately.

A. Strongly agree   B. Agree   C. Disagree   D. Strongly disagree

*= Negative question

Appendix 2

The test-taking strategies employed in this study:

Session 1:

1.   Preview or survey the whole test to see how much there is to do.
2.   Be aware of the three types of questions you will have to answer:
<u>Right there questions</u> where the answer can be found right there on the page.
<u>Think and search questions</u> where you must look in two or more places for the answer and then make an intelligent guess. <u>On your own questions</u> where you must combine your own background knowledge with the information given in the reading passage. Remember to use your background knowledge. Try to connect what you are reading to what you already know. Read and think.

Session 2:

3.   Read the instructions carefully. Make sure you understand exactly what each question is asking. STOP and take a moment to think about what you will need to look for in the reading passage. Sometimes it helps to put the question in your own words or circle key words in the passage, such as *not, least*, *cause, effect, first, last*, etc.
4.   Manage your time to ensure that you schedule enough for all portions of the test. Use one to two minutes to survey the whole test and ten minutes for checking answers.

Session 3:

5. Complete the easy questions first; skip the difficult questions but mark them in some way so that you will remember which ones to come back later.

6. Use the process of elimination. Remember that you are expected to choose the best answer for each question, so it is important to read all of the answer choices before you select one. Eliminate options that do not seem correct or to best answer the question and then choose from among the remaining ones.

Session 4:

7. Use the context clues as well as your knowledge of common prefixes, suffixes, and word roots. For vocabulary questions, when you have to choose the correct meaning of a word, it is helpful to read the following:

- The sentence that the word is in

- The sentence right before

- The sentence right after

This area of the passage surrounding the word is called the context. Context clues are the words, phrases, and sentences that surround the word you do not know.

8. Glance quickly at a reading passage to get a sense of the topics and important ideas. However, It should never be used a substitute for careful reading of the passage (Skimming).

Session 5:

9. If the answer you choose is in the reading passage, make sure that it answers what the question asks. This could be a trick – a choice that has information from the passage but does not answer what is being asked.

10. Reread: Do not expect to always know the answers to most questions after only one reading. Knowing what information you need and rereading until you find it is one of the most important strategies for a reading test (Scanning).

Session 6:

11. Use an intelligent guess on any of the answers that you do not know. Choose what you think is the best answer by eliminating the choices that do not seem correct.

12. Do not change your first answer unless you are convinced that you have made an error.

Session 7:

13. Never choose an answer that contains any wrong information. If any part of an answer choice is wrong, do not choose this answer. Understand that part of an incorrect answer is often correct, but may not be complete enough to be the best answer.

14. Quickly skim the questions first, and then read the passage carefully and critically. This will help you to focus your attention and direct you to the parts of the reading passage that are most important for you to understand.

Session 8:

15. Read and analyze questions carefully. When you are answering questions that contain the key words such as NOT and EXCEPT, always read through your answer choices carefully. Underline such key words which give you clues to the correct answer. You can answer three of the answers choices with a '*yes*' based on what you read in the passage. The one answer choice that you can answer with a '*no*' will be the correct answer.

16. Be sure to answer the questions only on the basis of the information given to you in the passage, and not from outside information you may happen to know. Never choose an answer that is not supported by something in the selection.

Session 9:

17. Notice whether a detail question refers to a specific line, sentence, or quotation from the reading passage. Use key words in the reading passage. The answer to such a question is almost certain to be found on or near the reference in the passage.

18. For main idea questions, always reread the first and last sentences. Also, *skim* through the reading passage to see how many times each of the answer choices is discussed. Do not confuse a supporting detail with the main idea. Remember that a supporting detail just explains or gives more information about the topic. (When you finish a reading passage, try to sum up everything in one sentence. This should be very close to the main idea.)

Session 10:

19. If there are several choices that seem correct on a multiple-choice question, select the most complete answer, that is, the one that includes the other choices.

20. Learn how to handle special choices. Items that include "*all of above*" or "*none of above*" choices can be answered easily if you convert each choice into a true-false statement. When you are certain that at least two choices are correct on a multiple-choice item, select the answer "*all of above*". If there are at least two incorrect choices, select "*none of the above*". Be sure to read each choice carefully. The following answers are often wrong:

- Answers that seem humorous or ridiculous;

- Answers that contain extreme or absolute statements (*all, always, never, everyone, no one, impossible, must, absolutely*, etc.);

- Answer choices that are almost exactly alike or say the same thing in different words.

Session 11:

21. Try to anticipate the answer even though it is difficult. Then look for it among the choices. If it is not there, forget it. You must choose the best answer available.

22. Go back and recheck all of your answers when you finish the test. Be sure to check the ones you guessed or marked at first. Also, check your answers to make sure that you have put them in the right place and not made careless errors.