

Are They Right Participants for the Right Strategies? A Case Study in the Role of Levels of Language Ability in Strategy Use in Reading Section of TOEFL iBT

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Abstract—This paper investigates any significant differences in levels of language ability in employing the test-taking strategies. It is an exploration for the application of proper strategies for the intended item types and the effects on the test scores. A list of test-taking strategies which was involved Reading and Test-management strategies (suggested by Cohen and Upton, 2006) in a test of reading comprehension of TOEFL iBT was employed. A total of 22 items, two computerized reading comprehension passages, were administered to undergraduate students (26 males and 40 females) majoring in English language and literature in a computer site at University of Tehran, IR Iran. The participants were asked to do the tests in no longer than 45 minutes and then specify the strategies that they employed in doing each reading comprehension item. Before administering the test, participants became generally familiar with the test procedures and test taking strategies in a pre-test session. Non-parametric statistics were used to analyze the collected data. The results showed that there is no significant difference among test-takers with respect to different language abilities. However, the comparison of the amount of usage among participants with various language proficiencies showed that the Low and Medium group were out-performed in comparison with the High group. The results revealed that language learners tend to make use of different test-taking strategies in test of reading comprehension- whether the correct strategies for the correct item types or vice versa- in any levels of language abilities. Furthermore, it is concluded that the use of strategies- either appropriate or inappropriate- espoused directly on the learner's scores. And if the use of strategies are not directed it may cause unsuccessful result in the exams. Subsequently, some purposeful teaching of related strategies is suggested.

Index Terms—test-taking strategies, levels of language abilities, TOEFL iBT

I. INTRODUCTION

Mastering the English language appears to play a crucial role in post graduate studies. One common way of documenting the language ability of post grade students is presenting a score in an internationally known test such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and Grade Recode Exam (GRE). Since the 1990s, along with the increasing use of computer technology in language education and the rise in the accessibility of personal computers, making use of computer technology in development of language tests have been the focus of researchers. The evolutions in multimedia and web technologies suggest a good number of possibilities for designing and developing computer-based tests that are more authentic and interactional than their paper and pencil counterparts (Bachman, 2000). This evolutionary process, as a result, in late 2005, *Internet-Based Test (iBT)* was introduced to the language education contents in general, and testing centers in particular. The root of the word strategy comes from an ancient Greek word *strategia*, which means “steps or actions taken for the purpose of winning a war. Hopefully the warlike meaning of *strategia* has faded away, but the control and goal-directedness remains in the modern version of the word” (Oxford, 2003, p. 8). In this regard, test taking strategies define those processes which respondents select in responding to test items they are conscious of, at least to some degree. The concept of strategy, in other words implies an element of selection. The recent focus on different strategies in education appears to change approaches to the teaching and learning process. The test-taking strategies have been referred to as “techniques, tactics, potentially conscious plans, consciously employed operations, learning skills, basic skills, functional skills, cognitive ability, language processing strategies, and problem-solving procedure” (Wenden, 1987, p. 7). Nitko (1983, p. 326) defines test-taking strategy as “a student’s ability to use the characteristics of both the test and the test situation to attain a higher score”.

It seems that the iBT being progressively replaced both Computer-based (CBT) and Paper-based (PBT) tests, although paper-based testing is still used in many areas around the world. Very little study has so far endeavored to examine using test-taking strategies regarding language proficiencies and gender in doing iBT. It seems that using test-taking strategies in reading comprehension of TOEFL iBT concerning different language abilities and gender needs more investigation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Research on Language Proficiency and Strategy Use

Definition of construction of language proficiency is not a simple one. Referring to what exactly is meant by language proficiency is related to language competence, the ability to speak or listen, read, and write the language and metalinguistic awareness contextually in appropriate manner.

Over the years researchers have used some related terms to define language proficiency. For instance, Hymes (1972) made a distinction between *linguistic competence*, knowledge of the rules and systems of a language, from *communicative competence*, or knowledge of using language of social rules. Canale and Swain (1980), and Canale (1983), defined four subcategories of communicative competence: namely, linguistic (grammatical), discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence.

In this model, as Lee and Schallert (1997, p. 716) comment "linguistic competence refers to the mastery of lexical items and of the syntax of a language and is only one aspect of the competence required for appropriate L2 use". Thus the same type of competence is described by different researchers with different terms. As a result there is no clear cut definition and agreement over the construction associated with knowledge of language.

Alderson, Krahnke, and Stansfield (1987) provide a comprehensive review of reading comprehension tests. They have established tests with known valid and reliable tests such as the TOEFL (e.g., Perkins, Brutton, & Pohlmann, 1989), and the Michigan Test (e.g., Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kroll, & Kuehn, 1990) in order to study the relationship between L2 proficiency and other factors.

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between the respondents' level of proficiency in using strategies, and their performance on the L2 tests. For instance, Purpura (1997, 1998) had a total of 1,382 test-takers from 17 language centers in Spain, Turkey, and the Czech Republic answer an 80-item cognitive and metacognitive strategy questionnaire, then take a 70-item standardized language test. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of Oxford (1990), O'Malley & Chamot, (1990).

Purpura used Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the relationships between strategy use and Second Language Test Performance (SLTP) with high and low-proficiency test-takers. Whereas the metacognitive strategy and SLTP models were found to produce almost identical factorial structures for the two proficiency groups, the use of monitoring, self-evaluating, and self-testing served as significantly stronger indicators of metacognitive strategy, used for the low-proficiency group than they did for the high-proficiency group (Purpura, 1999).

Also, Purpura (1999) found that high and low-proficiency test-takers, while often using the same strategies or clusters of strategies, experienced differing results when using them. In further analysis of the data looking across proficiency levels, Purpura found that a continuum was produced from product-oriented to process-oriented test-takers. The results showed the more product-oriented test-takers were seen to be able to answer questions "quickly and efficiently by retrieving information from long-term memory, while the more process-oriented test-takers might be more prone to spending time trying to comprehend or remember test input, rather than simply answering the question being asked" (Purpura, 1999, p. 181). In the appraisal of the researcher, process-oriented test-takers, regardless of their proficiency level, would be disadvantaged in timed testing situations.

Other studies have compared the respondents' levels of proficiency of L2 learners in using of test-taking strategies through taking a listening comprehension test (e.g., Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Fifty-four Japanese college EFL students in Taguchi's (2001) study took an English listening test and completed a strategy questionnaire immediately after the test. The questionnaire consisted of 42 Likert-scaled items and four open-ended questions, addressed the students' perceptions of listening strategies used for recovering from comprehension breakdown, compensating for non-comprehension, and reducing testing anxiety. The questionnaire also asked about the elements that caused comprehension difficulty for the students.

Taguchi (2001) found a statistically significant difference between more-proficient and less-proficient listeners in their perceived use of top-down strategies and in their reported elements of listening difficulty, but no difference in the use of bottom-up strategies, repair strategies, or affective strategies. Analyses of the open-ended responses showed that proficient listeners also identified a greater range of strategies.

Purpura (1997) used a Structural Equation Modeling approach to investigate the relationships among strategy use, levels of proficiency, and levels of foreign language aptitude of Japanese university students learning English as a Foreign Language. The study looked at the text-processing strategies that learners reported using while they were engaged in reading or listening tasks in second language situations, typically classrooms and testing situations.

Instruments in Purpura's (1997) study included reading and listening strategy questionnaires, the Language Aptitude Battery for the Japanese (The Psychological Corporation, 1997), and the TOEFL. Three factors emerged from the factor analysis of the test-taking strategy data: 1) comprehension and monitoring strategies, 2) compensatory strategies

(translation and repair in reading, and elaboration strategies in listening), and 3) strategies related to attention and task assessment. The findings also revealed that there were developmental stages of strategy use as the learners' proficiency improved; partially findings were confirmed by Purpura (1997) that strategy use varied by different levels of proficiency.

Phakiti's (2003a) study was designed to identify test-taking strategies and the respondents' levels of proficiency in a large-scale in order to investigate the relationship between use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies on an EFL reading test and success on the test. The participants consisted of 384 students who enrolled in a fundamental English course at a Thai university. Students took an 85-item reading achievement test (with both multiple-choice cloze and reading comprehension questions), followed by a cognitive-metacognitive questionnaire on what they had been thinking while responding to test items. The questionnaire was similar to that of Purpura (1999), but adjusted to suit a reading test.

Phakiti (2003a) selected 4 highly successful and 4 unsuccessful participants for retrospective interviews, which also included a 10-minute reading test (a short passage and six M-C questions), in order to remind the participants to report their thoughts while performing such tests. Analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies had a weak but positive relationship to the reading test performance. However, metacognitive strategies outperformed in comparison with cognitive ones. In addition, the highly successful test-takers reported significantly higher metacognitive strategy use than the moderately successful ones, who in turn reported higher use of these strategies than the unsuccessful test-takers.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

The present study aims to answer the following research question:

Is there any significant difference in the use of test-taking strategies by test takers with different levels of language abilities?

IV. METHOD

A. Participants

Sixty-six respondents (26 males and 40 females) participated in the present study. They were in third year of their study in English Language and Literature at the University of Tehran. As for age range, field of study and nationality, none were the main concern of the present study.

B. Instrumentation

To achieve the purpose of the study two kinds of instruments were used in the present study. 1) A sample test of a reading comprehension of TOEFL iBT, 2) A checklist of using strategies. An account of each instrument appears in the following sections.

a. Reading Comprehension Test

The Next Generation TOEFL, a new, internet-based version of the Test of English as a Foreign Language developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), included both traditional (Basic comprehension) and new (Reading to Learn and Inferencing) item types. One section of the new test of TOEFL iBT specifically focuses on academic reading skills. Generally, reading section in the TOEFL iBT includes three passages, with thirty-nine questions. The passages are relatively lengthy (each passage is between 600 to 700 words) on academic topics.

The new TOEFL reading section uses three general item types to evaluate the reader's level of proficiency to accomplish academic reading tasks: Basic Comprehension items, Inferencing items, and Reading to Learn items (Cohen & Upton, 2006). ETS extended for a total of ten different item types and defined five different types of Basic Comprehension items, three different types of Inferencing items, and two different types of Reading to Learn items.

Since the actual test of iBT was not available, it was decided to use the sample test of TOEFL iBT reading comprehension section (ETS, 2005). In the present study two out of three passages (22 items) of the Reading section of new TOEFL *Next Generation*, which contain all three general item types and specifically covered all ten different item types of TOEFL iBT were used.

b. A Check-list of Strategies

Among various questionnaires and checklists, for example, Nevo (1989), Purpura (1999), Phakiti (2003a, b), Cohen and Upton (2006), it was decided to adopt the checklist of the strategy which was used by Cohen and Upton (2006). The checklist consists of three types of strategies: Reading strategies, Test-management strategies, and Test-wiseness strategies. In this study the first part –Reading strategies (R) — was used. It is worth mentioning that the original checklist in 2006 was in paper-and-pencil format and used in the verbal report approach, while the adopted checklist in the present study was administered and programmed as computer software which was attached and performed just after the reading test.

C. Data Analysis

Some efforts were made in analyzing the data to bring statements in order to find out any significant difference in the use of strategies and item types. The main variable in this study, i.e., strategy and item types, were considered as nominal scales. In this case, the complexity of final results made the researcher to use statistical measures that typically run on nominal variables. The use of an appropriate statistical procedure, via probability, gives confidence to the researcher's claims that the results support the hypothesis. In this regard, this confidence would be established when an appropriate choice of statistical procedure is utilized. Non-parametric procedure is one which does not make strong assumptions about the shape of the distribution of the data (see Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991).

The test of normal distribution upon the data revealed a skewed rather than a normal, bell-shaped distribution.

Another assumption is what non-parametric tests apply to the data that are nominal and rank-ordered (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991). In the present study the data was ranked ordered and the variables were nominal. As a result, this assumption also has been met with the data. In the present research aims at reaching the answer of research question, non-parametric test of Friedman was assumed as the appropriate statistical procedures. Moreover, a significance level of 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) was set.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Test-taking Strategies and Levels of Language Abilities

With the intention of testing the first research question a series of Median test has conducted. The following analyses accompanied by tables attempt to explain any difference in the use of different strategies by the participants with different language proficiencies.

Fulfilling the requirements of research question made the participants divided into three groups. The participants were grouped into three based on the range of their scores and frequencies. In this case, a group which received scores, in the test of reading comprehension of TOEFL iBT, less than range of 33.33 was considered as the Low proficient group. The Medium group attained scores between the range of 33.33 and 66.66 and the group who gained more than 66.66 were put in the High-proficient group. Moreover, research involves two parts, Reading and Test-management strategies.

B. Reading Strategies and Levels of Language Abilities

The result of the non-parametric test for R1 (*plans a goal for the passage*) and R11 (*Identifies unknown sentence meaning, Uses of the passage and the main ideas to help in understanding*) revealed that there is significant difference in the use of reading strategy number one and eleven at the levels of .011 and .012 with chi-square levels of 9.089 and 8.858. Based on Table 1., the difference is significant just in the two strategies (R1 & R11); however, the remaining twenty six play almost an equal role among the three levels of proficiency. Therefore, the Median test revealed that there is no significant difference in the use of twenty six Reading strategies among participants with different levels of language abilities. Hence, in the case of Reading strategies the first null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

The results of the Median tests for every single Reading strategy will be shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
MEDIAN TEST FOR READING STRATEGIES ACROSS LEVELS OF LANGUAGE ABILITIES

		Median	Asymp.sig.
		Chi-square (χ^2)	
Reading Strategies (R)	R1	7.372	0.02
	R2	0.437	0.80
	R3	0.525	0.76
	R4	0.27	0.87
	R5	0.088	0.95
	R6	2.085	0.35
	R7	4.052	0.13
	R8	3.32	0.19
	R9	0.751	0.68
	R10	4.28	0.11
	R11	8.858	0.01
	R12	0.176	0.91
	R13	1.754	0.41
	R14	1.83	0.40
	R15	0.27	0.87
	R16	1.373	0.50
	R17	2.416	0.29
	R18	3.21	0.20
	R19	3.29	0.19
	R20	2	0.36
	R21	4.815	0.09
	R22	0.33	0.84
	R23	3.232	0.19
	R24	2.04	0.36
	R25	2.062	0.35
	R26	1.341	0.51
	R27	4.334	0.11
	R28	2.953	0.22

* df= 2, and N = 66

C. Test-management Strategies and Levels of Language Abilities

Table 2. shows that all of the Test-management strategies acted almost identically among different levels of language proficiency. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in the use of Test-management strategies among Low, Medium, and High levels of language ability. The results of the Median tests for each Test-management strategies are presented in Table 2. .

TABLE 2
MEDIAN TEST FOR TEST MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES ACROSS LEVELS OF LANGUAGE ABILITIES

		Median	Asymp.sig.
		Chi-square (χ^2)	
Test-management Strategies (T)	T1	0	1
	T2	0.08	0.96
	T3	1.179	0.55
	T4	1.4	0.49
	T5	0.805	0.66
	T6	1.341	0.51
	T7	4.387	0.11
	T8	5.219	0.07
	T9	0.734	0.69
	T10	0.734	0.69
	T11	3.173	0.20
	T12	3.173	0.20
	T13	2.918	0.23
	T14	5.543	0.06
	T15	3.138	0.20
	T16	1.341	0.51
	T17	0.358	0.83
	T18	2.056	0.35
	T19	0.862	0.65
	T20	0.33	0.84
	T21	0.65	0.72
	T22	0.91	0.63
	T23	2.168	0.33
	T24	0.33	0.84
	T25	0.088	0.95
	T26	2.953	0.22
	T27	2.416	0.29
	T28	2.04	0.36

* df= 2, and N = 66

But the comparison of the amount of usage among the three groups showed that the Low and Medium group were out-performed in comparison with the High (see Tables 3. & 4.).

TABLE 3
COMPARISON AMONG DIFFERENT LEVELS OF LANGUAGE ABILITIES IN READING STRATEGIES

Reading Strategies (R)		Levels of Language Abilities
	R1	$L > H > M$
	R2	$L > M > H$
	R3	$H > M > L$
	R4	$M > L > H$
	R5	$M = L > H$
	R6	$M > H > L$
	R7	$H > M > L$
	R8	$M > L > H$
	R9	$L > H > M$
	R10	$L > M > H$
	R11	$L > M > H$
	R12	$H > M > L$
	R13	$L > M > H$
	R14	$L > M > H$
	R15	$L > M > H$
	R16	$L > H > M$
	R17	$L > M > H$
	R18	$L > H > M$
	R19	$L > M > H$
	R20	$L > H > M$
	R21	$L > M > H$
	R22	$M = L > H$
	R23	$L > M > H$
	R24	$L > M > H$
	R25	$L > H > M$
	R26	$L > M > H$
	R27	$L > H > M$
	R28	$L > M > H$

* H (High), M (Medium), and L (Low) - proficient group

** Highlights show the most frequent structure

***M=L: Amount of using in Reading strategies is equally the same between Medium and Low group

TABLE 4
COMPARISON AMONG DIFFERENT LEVELS OF LANGUAGE ABILITIES IN TEST-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Test-management Strategies (T)	Levels of Language Abilities	
	T1	M = L > H
	T2	L > H > M
	T3	M = L > H
	T4	H > M > L
	T5	H > L > M
	T6	L > M > H
	T7	H > L > M
	T8	L > H > M
	T9	L > M > H
	T10	L > M > H
	T11	L > M > H
	T12	L > M > H
	T13	M > L > H
	T14	L > M > H
	T15	L > M > H
	T16	L > M > H
	T17	L > H > M
	T18	H > M = L
	T19	L > M > H
	T20	H > M = L
	T21	M > L > H
	T22	L > M > H
	T23	L > M > H
	T24	*M = L > H
	T25	*M = L > H
	T26	L > M > H
	T27	L > M > H
	T28	L > M > H

* H (High), M (Medium), and L (Low) - proficient group

** Highlights show the most frequent structure

***M=L: Amount of using in test-management strategies is equally the same between Medium and Low group

With regard to the obtained results, it can be concluded that Low-proficient group (as it is bolded-italicized in the Table 3. & 4.) makes considerable amount of using Reading strategies in comparison with Medium and High-group. Moreover, the Low > Medium > High (L > M > H) structure is the more frequent one among others (they are highlighted in the Table 4.). Overall, the Low and Medium group out-performed in the use of Reading strategies. The same interpretation can be extended on the Test-management strategies as well.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The present study investigated any differences in language proficiency in the use of test-taking strategies in the reading test of TOEFL iBT. It has provided empirical evidence that although differences do not play a significant role in the use of Reading and Test-management strategies in the case of different language abilities.

A. Limitations and Delimitations

a. The test administered to the participants of this study was a low-stakes test task as their score did not have any sort of impact on their educational profile. In that case, for the test-takers the conditions were different from those in place when they actually take the TOEFL test.

b. No distinction was made between strategies used for test items that were answered accurately contrary to those answered inaccurately. Considering this variable might provide us with a clearer picture concerning the test takers' effectiveness of their strategy use.

c. The participants were Iranian junior students at the B.A level. All the participants in the present study have had the same first linguistic background. Using the same approaches in the present study is quite promising area to the students with different first linguistic background.

d. The checklist in the present study was adopted from Cohen and Upton (2006) which was more suitable for think aloud procedures in the reading comprehension test of TOEFL iBT. But it was ignored because of time related constraints.

B. Suggestions for Further Research

Due to the cyclical nature of any research more questions tend to be raised than are answered. In the established tradition of scientific inquiry this section offers several suggestions for future researchers to utilize in investigating the different areas.

a. This study analyzed test-taking strategies in the reading section of TOEFL iBT. The same procedure can be replicated in analyzing other skills of language writing (Cumming et al., 2000), speaking (Butler et al., 2000), and listening (Douglas et al., 2000).

b. To make the research manageable, this study investigated reading strategies through the checklist of strategies. The same procedure can be practiced through protocol analysis and verbal reports, specifically, think-aloud (Cohen & Upton, 2006).

c. The sample size of this research was 66 EFL, a low-stakes research. A high-stakes community in a larger size might be deployed to analyze and test the research questions of study.

d. Another way of extending the present research would be an idea of construct validity and item analysis (Anderson, et al., 1991; Alavi, 2005). This area is quite a promising area to be probed by Iranian researchers.

e. Furthermore, variables of age and field of study are quite promising areas and could be investigated. But, in the present study the age and field of study were ignored because of the time related constrains and study constrictions.

f. All the participants in the present study have had the same first language background knowledge. Another way to conduct the present research may be considered in the light of sociolinguistics. The same approaches in the present study probably applicable to other students with a different first language, such as Turkish, Armenian, and Hebrew in Iran may be carried out. This would be an attempt to explain how test-takers use their sources of language especially using L1 in their verbal report (Nevo, 1989).

C. Conclusions

The underlying goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of how reading and test-management strategies are used by test-takers in the reading section of TOEFL iBT (Cohen & Upton, 2006; Phakiti, 2003 a,b; Purpura, 1997, 1999). The focus was on the strategies that the participants (26 male and 40 females) used in producing answers of the reading section of TOEFL iBT. The basic assumption being made in this study is that the number of test-taking strategies was used differently with various language abilities. This appeared not to be the case on the basis of the study, and strategies were not used differently in levels of language proficiency. To summarize the findings of this study in terms of research question, the issue explored in this study was to investigate the difference in the use of different strategy types across different levels of language abilities. Overall, this was found not to be the case. Based on the findings from the statistical analysis, the strategies are utilized in all levels of language abilities. This finding supports the findings of other researchers e.g., Phakiti (2003a), Purpura (1997, 1999), Taguchi (2001), Oxford (1990), and O'Malley and Chamot (1990). Also, as the statistical analyses revealed that the Test-taking strategies have been largely used by Low and Medium group.

Regarding the results, there are some potentially important implications for EFL classes or TOEFL preparatory courses based on existing findings. The power of consciously using the Reading and Test-management strategies can help students, in any levels of language ability, to become aware of their strategy choices and make their learning quicker, purposeful, effective, and easier. Instructors of TOEFL courses can train and practice Test-taking strategies regularly in the classroom, by providing ample tasks (for further reading see Cohen & Apeh, 1979; Cohen & Upton, 2007; Cohen, 2002; Fransson, 1984).

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