Reading Strategies Used by High Scoring and Low Scoring IELTS Candidates: A Think-aloud Study

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Abstract—This study investigated the differences in the type and frequency of strategies used by high scoring and low scoring Iranian IELTS candidacies. The participants were required to read two types of Academic IELTS reading comprehension texts. The study used think-aloud procedures to have an in-depth investigation of reading strategies used by the readers while doing the reading module of the IELTS test. The strategies that emerged from the think-aloud procedures were coded and categorized based on Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of reading strategies. Then, the strategies used by the two groups were compared in terms of type and frequency. The results demonstrated a major difference between the two groups of candidates in the use of compensation and metacognitive strategies among the other strategies offered by Oxford (1990). The high scoring readers employed these strategies in different ways and more frequently than the other group.

Index Terms—reading strategies, IELTS reading module, think-aloud procedure

I. INTRODUCTION

From a psycholinguistic viewpoint, reading is a kind of problem-solving activity in which the readers have an active role by constantly constructing meaning and testing hypotheses based on their background knowledge of the reading content and their knowledge about the language system. As Block (1986) states:

The thoughts that wander and rush through the minds of readers, the searches and struggles for meaning , the reflections and associations, are hidden from the outside observer. Yet this struggle and search for control are the core of reading comprehension (p. 463).

In comprehending a text, it has been found (e.g. Quiroz, 2014; Lee-Thompson, 2008; Lau & Chan, 2003; Fitzgerald, 1995) that readers employ a wide range of strategies to manage their interaction with written texts. Reading strategies can be defined as "deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meanings of text" (Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris, 2008, p. 368).

Reading is the most essential skill for academic learning in EFL contexts. Moreover, it is the most available source of information and necessary input for EFL learners. Reading comprehension is also critical for EFL learners since it is one part of widely-used English proficiency tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) which continues to be a rigorous measure of English language proficiency in the world, and other international tests as well.

IELTS tests are offered in more than 140 countries four times a month ("IELTS Test Takers", 2015). There is no such thing as a pass or fail in IELTS. Results are reported as band scores on a scale from 1 (the lowest) to 9 (the highest). IELTS has two versions: IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training. IELTS Academic is for test takers who plan to study at undergraduate or postgraduate levels, and for those seeking professional registration. IELTS General Training is for test takers aiming to migrate to an English-speaking country (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK), and for those wishing to train or study at below degree level.

Focusing on the Academic IELTS Reading Module, this study using think-aloud procedures and a follow-up interview aims to detect the reading strategies employed by 8 Iranian high scoring IELTS candidates and 16 low scoring candidates so as to find out any differences between the two groups in terms of the type and frequency of strategies they used while doing the reading texts.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Reading strategies have attracted the attention of many researchers since the late 1970s. Since then, research in reading has shifted away from viewing reading as a product to focusing on the process of reading (Cohen & Macaro, 2007).

Following Hosenfled (1977), a pioneer in this area of research, a number of researchers began to focus on the relationship between reading proficiency and specific strategy use and tried to classify reading strategies of successful and less successful readers. Block (1986), for example, employed think-aloud protocols to study the strategies used by EFL readers enrolled in freshman reading courses in the USA. She found that, in contrast to the less skilled readers, the more skilled readers were able to integrate their understanding of the reading passage with information which they found about the text structure. Later, Parry's (1991, 1993) research widened the scope of the research conducted on the relationship between reading strategies and reading comprehension success by taking other variables such as cultural and L1 backgrounds into account. Anderson (1991) also carried out a study to investigate the Spanish-speaking students' use of reading strategies in two reading tasks: taking reading comprehension test and reading academic texts. He detected about 47 strategies which he classified into 5 general categories: surprising, support, paraphrase, coherence, and test taking. Moreover, he found that high scoring readers applied more but not necessarily different strategies than did the low scoring readers. He stated that the better readers could apply and monitor their strategies more effectively when reading a text.

After Anderson's (1991) finding of the monitoring strategies used by more skilled readers, the significance of metacognitive strategies in reading comprehension success was emphasized by Carrell (1989, 1992) and Carrell, Gajdusek, & Wise (1998). They asserted that "successful comprehension was associated with metacognitive strategies which involved the monitoring of cognitive strategies" (Cohen & Macaro, 2007, p.192). Huang and Tseng (2000) also conducted a study on the strategies used by successful EFL learners who obtained paper-based TOEFL scores of higher than 600 and found that these EFL learners used more metacognitive strategies than other test takers.

Continuing this line of research, a number of other studies investigated the relationship between reading proficiency and strategy use in different contexts (Alavi & Bordbar, 2012; Tsai, Ernst, & Talley, 2010; Grabe, 2006; Lau & Chan, 2003; and Carrell and Grabe, 2002) and they all have found the presence of positive relationship between the two variables.

More recently, Ghavamnia, Ketabi, & Tavakoli (2013) used qualitative data obtained from a think-aloud technique and a follow-up interview to investigate the differences in the type and frequency of strategy use by four more proficient and four less proficient readers. According to their findings, the more proficient readers utilized more meaning-oriented strategies, while the less proficient readers adopted a word-centered model, trying to process word meaning rather than trying to comprehend and retain the meaning of the text. Hong-Nam & Page (2014) also investigated the metacognitive awareness and reading strategy use by Korean university students in Korea. Problem-solving strategies were the Korean students' most preferred strategies. The relationship between strategy use and reading proficiency was linear, while a curvilinear relationship between strategy use and English proficiency was found.

In another study, Quiroz (2014) investigated the reading strategies of 19 undergraduate students who varied in reading proficiency by the use of the think-aloud procedures and semi-structured interviews. What is new about this research is that the researcher focused on the strategy use of good and *average* readers, in contrast to the research previously described which included two groups of good and poor readers in their studies. She also considered the effect language background (Chinese or Spanish) on the use of reading strategies. Her findings suggested that differences in strategy use between readers with different reading proficiency are only apparent at the syntactic level, whereas readers' L1 can affect the types of reading strategies they use when they encounter unfamiliar vocabulary in their L2 (at the vocabulary level).

Overall, these studies provide evidence of the relationship between reading comprehension and strategy use. Findings reveal that learners "who are more proficient in English show greater awareness of reading strategies, use strategies more often, and apply them more efficiently when reading difficult L2 text" (Quiroz,2014, p.16). It can also be concluded that the think-aloud procedures have been proved to be effective for collecting data on strategy use. However, very little is known about the specific strategies used by the learners while answering reading questions of widely-used English proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL by the use of the think-aloud procedures.

The present study focusing specifically on the Academic IELTS Reading is the first attempt to introduce the reading strategies used by the Iranian IELTS candidates with different reading scores using the think-aloud procedures. Therefore, the study aims to fill the gap in the literature by answering the following questions:

1. What are the type and frequency of reading strategies used by Iranian IELTS Academic candidates doing the reading module of the test?

2. Is there any significant difference in the strategies used by the high scoring and low scoring IELTS candidates while doing the reading module?

III. Methodology

In this study, 35 male IELTS candidates participated in an IELTS mock exam. According to the exam results and based on purposive sampling, 24 participantes-16 low scoring and 8 high scoring candidates participated in the study and were asked to think aloud as they read two IELTS reading passages. In order to have a thorough picture of the

participants' performance, the think aloud sessions were videotaped and used for further analysis. In the final phase they were interviewed by the researchers.

A. Participants

This study started out with analyzing the exam result of 35 Academic IELTS candidates in an IELTS mock exam. They were all male university graduates, aged 25 to 35. All passed some preparation courses in IELTS. They had never been living in English-speaking countries and they were not the students of TEFL. Table I illustrates the participants' demographic characteristic**s.**

TABLE I.
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Number of participants	24
Age	25-35
University degree	Bachelor and above
Gender	Male
Level	IELTS Academic candidates

It should be explained here that in an IELTS exam each candidate receives four scores for four sub-tests including listening, reading, writing, and speaking on a Band Scale from 1 to 9. Then the four individual scores are averaged and rounded to produce an Overall Band Score. In this study, the participants had been categorized according to their Academic Reading Band Score. Among the 35 participants in the IELTS mock exam, 8 participants who scored 6.5 out of 9 or higher (high scoring candidates) and 16 candidates who scored 5.5 out of 9 or lower (low scoring candidates) participated in the think-aloud sessions.11 participants who scored 6 out of 9 were considered as ambivalent, and therefore were excluded from the study. The following table presents the participants' categorization in this study.

TABLE II
PARTICIPANTS' CATEGORIZATION

Groups	IELTS Academic Reading Band Score(1-9)	Number of participants
Group A (High scoring)	6.5 and higher	8
Group B (Low Scoring)	5.5 and lower	16

B. Materials

In order to fulfill the purposes of the study, two Academic IELTS Reading passages were chosen. The first passage was followed by True/False/Not given questions in which the readers decided if the information in the text agrees with the information in the question. The second passage was followed by matching paragraph headings in which the readers selected the headings of paragraphs and matched them to the paragraphs from a text. The reading test was adopted from IELTS tests, extracted from the books *Cambridge IELTS* 8(2011) and *Cambridge IELTS* 9 (2013) by University of Cambridge ESOL examinations.

C. Video Recording

Video recording was chosen for this research for capturing much of the useful data on video tape. While audio tape may just record the students talk, on its own, would not have been enough to represent the complete picture of the readers' process of answering to reading comprehension questions. In fact, readers' gestural reactions, different stages of circling and underlining some words and part of the text, the frequency of turning the pages, the number of checking the time, and some other details cannot be captured only by audio recording.

D. Follow-up Interview

In order to triangulate the data along with the think aloud sessions, follow-up interviews were conducted too. The interview sessions were held after watching the recorded video of each participant. The open-ended questions in an interview were:
  1. Before you start reading, what do you usually do?
  2. For answering reading comprehension questions, do you prefer to begin with the questions or the passage? Why?
  3. To what extent are you familiar with reading strategies?
  4. What do you usually do to tackle a problem while reading a text in English?
  5. What do you usually do when you have finished answering the reading questions?

E. The Main Task

Concurrent think-aloud technique was the main data source to investigate the reading strategies employed by high scoring and low scoring Iranian IELTS candidates while doing the academic reading module of the test. Before the experiment, instructions were given to the participants in separate sessions, to make them more familiar with the think-aloud procedures and to know how to do the tasks; then, the participants performance was videotaped for further analysis.

F. Procedures

The experiment started out with 24 IELTS candidates. They were asked to take part in the think-aloud session followed by a follow-up interview. The participants were asked to read two reading passages of IELTS Academic module. Then the participants' think-aloud sessions were transcribed, codified and classified according to Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies which can be applied to the four language skills including reading. Oxford (1990) divides language learning strategies into two broad categories, direct and indirect, which are further subdivided into six groups. Direct strategies are divided into *memory*, *cognitive* and *compensation* strategies; indirect strategies are divided into *metacognitive*, *affective* and *social* strategies. These six major strategies are further divided into other sub-categories. For example, memory strategies are divided into (a) creating mental linkage, (b) applying image and sound, (c) reviewing well, and (d) employing action. By analyzing the data retrieved from the think aloud sessions, the type and frequency of reading strategies used by high scoring and low scoring Iranian IELTS candidates were identified, compared, and contrasted.

IV. RESULTS

The analysis of the think-aloud sessions illustrated that the participants used four types of reading strategies among the six major reading strategies defined by Oxford (1990). The participants were conscious of their cognitive process during reading and were able to use a wide range of strategies to comprehend the IELTS passages better. The videotaped think- aloud sessions were transcribed. The raw data were coded and classified into six categories based on Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of Language Learning Strategy.

To answer the first research question in relation to the total use of strategies and their frequencies, Tables III, IV, V, and VI were compiled. Overall, the 24 participants in this study used 504 cognitive strategies.

TABLE III
COGNITIVE STRATEGIES USED BY THE TWO GROUPS

Cognitive Strategy	Frequency
1. Highlighting and underlying	105
2. Translation	97
3. Getting the idea quickly	96
4. Rereading	78
5. Pausing and thinking	40
6. Changing the reading rate	23
7. Skipping	20
8. memorizing	18
9. Reasoning deductively	14
10. Predicting	8
11. Summarizing	2
12. Note taking	2
13. Paraphrasing	1

As shown in Table III, the four most frequently used cognitive strategies are highlighting, translation, getting the idea quickly by scanning and skimming the text, and rereading.

TABLE IV
METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES USED BY THE TWO GROUPS

Metacognitive Strategy	Frequency
1. Self-monitoring	30
2. Planning	22
3. Self-questioning	10
4. Paying attention	8
5. Self-evaluation	8

As can be seen in Table IV, 78 metacognitive strategies were utilized by the two groups, with self-monitoring and planning being the most frequent.

Table V displays that 38 propositions were allocated to compensation strategies.

TABLE V
COMPENSATION STRATEGIES USED BY THE TWO GROUPS

Compensation Strategy	**Frequency**
1. Using linguistic clues	28
2. Using other clues	10

The least number of strategies used by the participants belonged to the affective strategies (Table VI), only being used 15 times by the two groups.

TABLE VI
AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES USED BY THE TWO GROUPS

Affective Strategy	Frequency
1. Making positive statement	11
2. Lowering anxiety	4

Among the six categories of Oxford's (1990) taxonomy, memory strategy and social strategy were absent in the data retrieved through think aloud sessions in this study.

In order to answer the second research question, the strategies used by the low scoring and high scoring readers were compared. Because the number of participants in the two groups was not equal an average frequency of each strategy was calculated. Tables VII, VIII, IX, and X intensely summarize the data elicited from the think aloud sessions. To be more objective, in each part, an example of one of the participants' comment is provided.

TABLE VII
AN AVERAGE FREQUENCY OF COGNITIVE STRATEGIES USED BY EACH GROUP

N	Cognitive strategies	Group A N=8	Group B N=16	Examples
1	Highlighting	4	4.50	" I am circling these two key words, husband and the Noble Prize
2	Translation	2.80	4.60	The participants translated the intended points into L1.
3	Getting the idea quickly	3.75	4.12	"I am going to skim the paragraph for the main idea"
4	Rereading	3.25	3.25	"Oh, I did not understand it, again".
5	Pausing and thinking	1.87	1.56	"let me see. The text said she helps her sister but here is her sister's contribution,…"
6	Changing the reading rate	1.25	0.81	"I found it, so let's read the sentence slowly and carefully."
7	Skipping	1.50	0.5	"I don't need to read this Part"
8	Memorizing	1.5	0.37	"I should keep these keywords in my mind".
9	Reasoning deductively	0.87	0.43	"in the previous part the writer said she was poor so …"
11	Predicting	0.75	0.12	"This paragraph is about her marriage. So the paragraph about her children will come next."
12	Summarizing	0.25	0	"Therefore, in brief it is about improvement in different species."
13	Note taking	0.12	0.06	"I am going to write down these key words next to the paragraph".
14	Paraphrasing	0.12	0	"Okay it's saying that it relates to life span which is caused by energy reservation."

Table VII shows that the two groups made use of different types of cognitive strategies offered by Oxford (1990) and the major difference in the use of cognitive strategies between the two groups is related to the translation strategy. The low scoring readers used more of this strategy while reading the IELTS reading texts.

TABLE VIII
AN AVERAGE FREQUENCY OF METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES USED BY EACH GROUP

	Meta-cognitive Strategy	Group A N=8	Group B N=16	Examples
1	Self-monitoring	2.12	0.81	"oh, I misunderstood this part her husband died in 1906"
2	Planning	1.87	0.37	"I have to read the title and instruction before starting to read the questions."
3	Self-questioning	0.50	0.33	"What does this mean in this sentence?"
4	Paying attention	0.75	0.12	"Be careful this part of the text is about her childhood".
5	Self-evolution	0.87	0.06	"I understood just 10% of the paragraph".

As Table VIII presents, the high scoring readers employed more metacognitive strategies than the other group while reading the texts. It is also shown that self-monitoring is the most frequent metacognitive strategy used by high scoring IELTS readers in this study.

TABLE IX
AN AVERAGE FREQUENCY OF COMPENSATION STRATEGIES USED BY EACH GROUP

	Compensation Strategy	Group A N=8	Group B N=16	Examples
2	Using linguistic clues	2.50	0.50	The word immortality is new but I know the meaning of mortal and (im–) makes it negative."
3	Using other clues	1.00	0.12	"I did not understand the meaning of this paragraph but because it was the final paragraph of the text, it might be a conclusion which included suggestions for the future plan so I selected the statement that related to future measures."

Table IX manifests that the high scoring group used more compensation strategies than the low scoring group. Reading compensation strategies are types of strategies which help learners overcome knowledge gaps in grammar, and especially, in vocabulary while reading a text in the target language. Linguistic clues are language-based clues used to guess the meaning of unknown words. Other clues other than the linguistic clues are also available to the readers which

come from different sources such as "knowledge of context, situation, text structure, personal relationships, topic, or general world knowledge" (Oxford, 1990, p. 49).

TABLE X
AN AVERAGE FREQUENCY OF AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES USED BY EACH GROUP

	Affective Strategy	Group A N=8	Group B N=16	Examples
1	Makin positive statements	1.50	1.12	*"It's ok if I made a mistake".*
2	Using progressive relaxation	1.00	0.31	*"I need to close my eyes for few seconds then I will continue".*

According to Table X, the participants in the study used *making positive statement* and *using progressive relaxation* to lower their anxiety and encourage themselves while reading the passages.

All participants were asked to take part in an interview in Persian with the researcher. They did not know anything about reading strategies but when the researchers talked about some cognitive or metacognitive strategies they used and mentioned in their videos, they considered them IELTS techniques or tricks. In sum, the IELTS candidates in this study used different strategies even though some of them were not aware about the types of strategies they used while reading.

V. DISCUSSION

The 22 types of strategies elicited from the think-aloud procedures indicated that the participants applied a wide range of strategies to comprehend the passages and answer the question more accurately.

In order to answer the first research question, we were interested in identifying the type and frequency of reading strategies used by Iranian IELTS Academic candidates doing the reading module of the test. This is shown in Tables III through VI.

Almost all the IELTS candidates in this study (Table III) favored using a wide array of cognitive strategies while reading the two passages. They all used the underlining/highlighting strategies for answering all the questions. This could be explained by the fact that, as the participants explained in the follow-up interview, in IELTS preparation courses and IELTS tutorials in Iran, this reading strategy which is usually taught and the learners are encouraged to use the underlining and cycling strategy to able to answer the questions quickly.

Translation is the second frequent strategy used by the participants in this study. This tendency may be related to the Grammar Translation method which is still used in Iran education system. This finding supports the investigations that found translation as the most common strategy employed by both high scoring and low scoring readers (Quiroz, 2014; Ghavamnia et al., 2013; Du, 2000). Quiroz (2014) finds the use of this strategy helpful and asserts that students should be encouraged to use their first language reading skills when reading English texts, as it facilitates their comprehension and improves their English literacy development.

The participants in this study did not favor the strategy of note taking while reading the texts. However, Oxford (1990) indicates that note taking is a very important strategy for reading. Based on this finding, it seems this strategy needs to be taught and emphasized in the Iranian reading classes and IELTS preparation courses.

Unlike the results of studies by Goh and Kwah (1997), Magogwe and Oliver (2007) and Ghavamnia et al., (2013) in which a low level of preference for affective strategies has been reported, the participants in this study used affective strategies such as using positive statements to encourage themselves to continue and to decrease the tension and heavy mental load of reading comprehension test. In the follow-up interview, the participants justified some gestural behaviors gleaned from their videos as their personal relaxing strategies.

The other two strategies, offered by Oxford's (1990) taxonomy: Memory and social strategies, were completely absent in this study. The finding of the study done by Ghavamnia et al., (2013) also indicated that memory and social strategies were among the least used strategies in their studies.

In presenting the second research question, we were interested in a more detailed analysis and identification of similarities or differences among the two groups of IELTS candidates in terms of reading strategy use. The think-aloud procedures revealed some differences and similarities in strategy use between the two groups under investigation.

Translation, as mentioned before, was the most frequent strategy used by the Iranian IELTS candidates in this study. However, the low scoring readers made use of this strategy considerably more than the high scoring group. More importantly, the two groups differed in the way they employed this strategy. The low scoring readers in this study relied heavily on word by word translation of sentences. They translated each word without paying attention to the words' parts of speech and the contexts in which they had been used. On the contrary, the high scoring readers did not regard the words or phrases as isolated items and were aware of the significance of the context. Moreover, the high scoring readers in this study utilized deductive reasoning with translation to comprehend the sentences better. This finding lends support to Anderson's (1991) statement that "successful strategic reading was not only a matter of knowing what strategy to use, but also... knowing how to use a strategy successfully and to orchestrate its use with other strategies" (p.468).

Rereading is another frequent cognitive strategy used by both groups in this study. However, there is a difference in the use of this cognitive strategy among the participants. The high scoring readers stopped reading and reread only the

difficult part as soon as they faced any problem in understanding the text, but the low scoring readers usually reread some phrases or sentences of the text haphazardly.

Similarly, the two groups in this study were found to use the skipping strategy but in totally different ways. The low scoring readers' problem with skipping was that sometimes they skipped important parts of the text. It was also observed that sometimes the low scoring readers skipped a part in the text but they were not completely sure that they did something right, therefore; they went back and reread the skipped part.

Predicting is another cognitive strategy to skip unnecessary information which was used differently by the high scoring readers. An example from the given test in this study can clarify the point. After reading the sentence: "Mary took over the teaching position her husband had held", most of the high scoring readers thought aloud that "this sentence implies that her husband has died or works somewhere else". Then they skipped two paragraphs quickly and noticed the phrase "the sudden death of her husband…", and then answered the question quickly and correctly. Whereas the low scoring readers mostly selected "teaching position" as a key phrase and spent a lot of time finding the relevant information.

Into the bargain, the low scoring readers in this study were found to have difficulties in finding synonymous words and sometimes linked synonymous phrases carelessly without reading the whole sentence. The following example may clarify the point. The participants were asked to decide whether the sentence: "Marie stopped doing research for several years when her children were born" was True, False, or Not given. And the related sentence in the text was "the births of Marie's two daughters, Irene and Eve, in 1897 and 1904 failed to interrupt her scientific work". Some of the low scoring readers could not associate the word "research" with "scientific work". They said the statement was *Not Given.* Similarly, some other low scoring readers linked birth and born, stop and interrupt, and research and scientific work, but they concluded that the statement was *True* without paying attention to the word *failed* that completely changed the meaning of the sentence. In fact, forming a haphazard link between synonyms without careful reading of the sentence was a prevalent problem among the low scoring readers in this study.

With regard to the metacgnitive strategies, the high scoring IELTS candidates in this study used more of these strategies such as self-monitoring and planning than the other group. There is in line with the findings of other studies in the literature (e.g. Hong-Nam & Page, 2014; Rezvani & Tavakoli, 2013; Ghavamnia et al., 2013; Yin & Agnes, 2001; Alderson, 2000). All these studies concluded that good readers are more aware of metacognitive knowledge and use metacognitive strategies more frequently than poor readers. The high scoring readers in this study had more tendencies to utilize planning as an important metacognitive strategy. They read the test instruction before beginning to answer the questions while the low scoring readers began in haste. The high scoring readers in this study read the instruction, the title, and the introductory paragraph carefully. As they stated in the think-aloud sessions, they believed that the introductory paragraph of the passage could give them the holistic view of the text. In other words, the difference between the two groups of readers was that the high scoring readers were aware that spending few minutes reading the introduction could help them answer the questions accurately.

Based on the results of the study, it seems the use of compensation strategies by the high scoring readers is one of the main reasons that lead them to comprehend the texts more deeply. In other words, utilizing compensation strategies had made all the difference for the high scoring readers. It was found that the high scoring readers in this study used linguistic and other clues to guess the meaning of difficult words successfully. However, the low scoring readers withdrew answering difficult or seemingly difficult questions mainly because they did not know the meaning of some words in the sentences. One example retrieved from think-aloud session may shed light on the idea. One sentence of the passage was "Marie was remarkable for her prodigious memory". *Prodigious* was a difficult word for almost all the participants. However, most of the high scoring readers attempted to understand the main idea and guessed the meaning by paying attention to the linguistic clues. One of the high scoring readers facing this word said: "I do not know the meaning of prodigious but as it ends in *'–ous',* it is probably an adjective and because *remarkable* is a positive adjective so prodigious seems to be a positive adjective as well".

In a nutshell, the findings indicate that the major problems with the low scoring Iranian IELTS candidates in this study were related to the lack of compensation and metacognitive strategies in their strategy repertoire. On the contrary, the high scoring candidates in this research deployed compensation strategies frequently and, more importantly, effectively in their reading process. Effective employment of *self-monitoring* and *planning* as two types of metacognitive strategies were also observed to be the keys to the success of the high scoring readers in this study. Our findings are compatible with other studies (e.g., Ghavamnia, et al., 2013; Alderson, 2000; Chamot and El-Dinary, 1999), which concluded that the use of a wide range of compensation and metacognitive strategies is one of the characteristics of successful and strategic readers.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the reading strategies of 8 high scoring and 16 low scoring Iranian IELTS candidates while reading two types of Academic IELTS reading tasks by the use of a think-aloud technique and a follow-up interview. In general, the results obtained from the analyses of the think-aloud sessions showed that:

1. There was no great difference between the high scoring and low scoring readers in the use of cognitive strategies in terms of frequency. However, the high scoring readers made use of cognitive strategies such as *translation* and *skipping* more frequently and in different ways while doing the reading module of the IELTS test.

2. High scoring readers used metacognitive strategies such as *self-monitoring* and *planning* more frequently than the low scoring group.

3. The high scoring Iranian IELTS candidates in this study used dramatically more compensation strategies than the other group. This difference mainly affected the results of the test and helped the high scoring readers to comprehend the text better.

4. Affective strategies were more or less used by both groups. It seems that they used these strategies unconsciously for reducing the mental load of the reading tasks.

5. Memory strategy and social strategy were not used by the two groups in this study.

The findings of this study may have a number of implications for language pedagogy. Reading is the most important skill in EFL contexts in which there is a close relationship between the EFL learners reading proficiency and academic success (Nakatani, 2005). Given the significant of reading skill in EFL learners' academic and learning context, the teachers need to equip themselves with efficient reading strategies to become more proficient readers. According to Salataei & Akyel (2002) and Davis, 2010) strategy instruction has a positive impact on learners' reading strategy use and reading success. Therefore, the strategies detected to be used by high scoring readers (i.e. compensation and metacognitive strategies) in this study might be useful in reading comprehension courses with a focus on strategy instruction.

EFL teachers and specifically IELTS preparation instructors can also use the think-aloud technique used in this study "as a basis for designing teachable reading comprehension strategies (p.153). Moreover, the use of thinking-aloud procedure/s "provides a way of assessing learning so that, even when overall effects on performance are good, failures to learn specific strategies can be detected" (Bereiter & Bird, 1985, p. 154).

To pave the way for better research in the future, this study needs to consider some limitations. First, all participants of the study were male Academic IELTS candidates which limits the generalizability of the findings to both male and female candidates. Secondly, all the participants in this investigation had passed some IELTS preparation courses. If the candidates who had not attended any IELTS preparation courses were also included in this study, it would have given us a better picture of strategy use among the Iranian IELTS candidates. Finally, the participants' educational backgrounds were not considered in this study. A similar study can thus be conducted considering the effect of the participants' educational background on using different reading strategies.

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