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 candidates. 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 Hosenfeld (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 participants: 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 characteristics.

| 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>IELTS Academic Reading Band Score(1-9)</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group A (High scoring)</td>
<td>6.5 and higher</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group B (Low Scoring)</td>
<td>5.5 and lower</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE III</th>
<th>COGNITIVE STRATEGIES USED BY THE TWO GROUPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Strategy</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Highlighting and underlying</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Translation</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Getting the idea quickly</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rereading</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Pausing and thinking</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Changing the reading rate</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Skipping</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Memorizing</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Reasoning deductively</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Predicting</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Summarizing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Note taking</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Paraphrasing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE IV</th>
<th>METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES USED BY THE TWO GROUPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive Strategy</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-monitoring</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Planning</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-questioning</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Paying attention</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Self-evaluation</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE V</th>
<th>COMPENSATION STRATEGIES USED BY THE TWO GROUPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compensation Strategy</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Using linguistic clues</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Using other clues</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
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 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.

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 readers in this study.

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).

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.

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 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

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**Table X**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affective Strategy</th>
<th>Group A N=8</th>
<th>Group B N=16</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Makin positive statements</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>“It’s ok if I made a mistake”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Using progressive relaxation</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>“I need to close my eyes for few seconds then I will continue”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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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
showed that: "Marie was remarkable for her prodigious memory". One example retrieved from think-aloud session may shed light on the idea. One sentence of the passage was "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 metacognitive 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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