Reading Test-taking Strategies in General Training IELTS

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Abstract

The significance of gaining a better understanding of how test-taking strategies are used has been recognized by researchers. Considering this fact, this study aimed at investigating the test-taking strategies which were employed by IELTS candidates in reading comprehension test. Besides, it tried to take into account the differences among strategies used for different tasks. In order to gather data, two instruments were employed: the think-aloud protocol, and an IELTS reading test. The obtained data were analyzed and interpreted qualitatively by the researcher. The findings indicated that candidates employed 15 different strategies which were categorized in 3 stages, pre-reading, reading, and post-reading stages. Furthermore, it was revealed that test-takers used certain strategies differently, depending on the type of the task. The findings provide a better understanding of strategy use among IELTS candidates and help teachers to improve their approaches toward teaching and learning goals.

Keywords: Test-taking Strategy, Test-taker, Reading Comprehension, Language Learning Strategy, IELTS

1. Introduction

Reading is considered as a receptive skill in which the reader is receiving a message from a writer. It is the major source of meaningful and comprehensible input in the foreign language learning. The reading goal is to read for meaning or to recreate the writer's meaning. Recent researches in reading describe the reading process in a way that implies an active reader intent upon using background knowledge and skills to recreate the writer's intended meaning (Carrell & Grabe, 2002; Chastain, 1988).

Scholars have provided different definitions for reading. Those who were behaviorists and did not consider the mental aspect of reading define it as establishment of relationship between written symbols and their corresponding sound. But cognitivists who believe in the active role of the mind in language comprehension and production, defined reading as an active mental process through which the written input is processed to recreate the writer's intended meaning (Carrell & Grabe, 2002). In language learning the word reading is used to refer to two entirely different processes. First, helping the students establish the sound symbol relationship. This is done at the very beginning levels of language learning. Second, reading for comprehension which is common in the higher levels of language acquisition (Chastain, 1988; Cohen, 1998; Ellis, 2008).

Tests are universal methods of evaluating in all educational systems. The importance and usage of tests go beyond schools and universities, and it affects people's life. For instance in IELTS test, which is a high stakes test, success or failure can have a life changing impact on candidates. In order to be successful and achieve the best possible score, candidates must apply critical reading and thinking strategies to the test and avoid making careless mistakes (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Rogers & Harley, 1999).

In tests, knowledge and ability are not the only factors which influence learners' performance. There are several factors which affect learners' success in a test, one of these test-related factors is learning and test-taking strategies (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; O' Malley & Chamot, 1990). Learning strategies are defined by Oxford as "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information". This definition is further expanded to include "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferrable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The importance of test-taking strategies has been contended by numerous studies (Cohen, 1998; Nation, 2005; Phakiti, 2003; Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2012; Rogers & Harley, 1999). Despite the increase in scholarship devoted to strategies, test-taking strategies used in reading modules of IELTS have received relatively little attention while for many academic IELTS candidates reading is the hardest paper and the one which requires most training.

The focus of this research is on reading, a key skill in language use, but much harder to test and research than writing and speaking because, most of the processes involved in reading happen within the minds of language users (Chastain, 1988). Testing and assessing these skills requires the creation of a construct to understand what happens when language users read. That's why this research is using think-aloud protocol as the instrument in which candidates can talk about

the strategies they are using. The study to be done is supposed to shed light on the issue of test taking strategies and its effect on the candidates' performance in the IELTS test.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

Based on the literature, the study of test taking strategies is of paramount importance for researchers, teachers, and learners in order to develop understanding of the second language acquisition process. Because of the important consequences of standardized tests like IELTS, it is critical that candidates receive all the assistance and guidance they need to perform their best. The present study will be carried out with the aim of identifying the test taking strategies used by candidates in the reading module of IELTS in order to provide the candidates with information to help them achieve their greatest potential.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Language Learning Strategies

Language learner strategies can be broadly divided into two different types, i.e., learning strategies and use strategies. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) define learning strategies as "behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning and that are intended to influence the learners' encoding process." Different scholars have proposed different categorizations for learning strategies (Brown, 1987; O' Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Most of them recommend that students develop the following strategies:

1. Cognitive strategies: Learners employ cognitive strategies to focus on the important aspects of material to be learned, to comprehend input, to store for future use what they have learned, and to develop facility in using the learned material.

2. Communication strategies: These strategies are developed to initiate conversation, to maintain conversation, to negotiate meaning, and to terminate conversation.

3. Global Strategies: They are used to read a paper in the second language, to make friends who speak the second language, to go to movies in the language, metacognitive strategies, to plan for learning, to monitor learning, and to check the outcome.

Chamot and O'Malley (1990) have defined several types of learner strategies as follows:

1. Metacognitive Strategies, which encompass advance organization, organizational planning, selective attention, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation.

2. Cognitive strategies like resourcing, grouping, note-taking, summarizing, deduction-induction, imagery, auditory representation, elaboration, transfer, and inference.

3. social-affective strategies like questioning for clarification, cooperation, and self-talk.

Oxford (1990) proposes a new system for classifying strategies, which seeks to be "more comprehensive and detailed" and "more systematic in linking individual strategies, as well as strategy groups, with each of the four language skills", and also to use "less technical terminology (Oxford, 1990). She draws heavily on previous classifications in using the cognitive, metacognitive, social and affecting groupings recognized by many researchers, but she recognizes two further groups: memory strategies and compensation strategies. She organizes these into two major classes of strategy: direct strategies (which are used on the new language itself) and indirect strategies (for general management of learning). Direct strategies encompass memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies, and indirect strategies encompass metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

A central part of language learning strategies research is exploring the relationship between strategy use with learners' characteristics such as gender. In investigating males and females' differences in strategy use, some studies have indicated that females employ more strategies than males (Anderson, 1991; Khaldieh, 2000). On the other hand, the results of a study by Vandergrift (1997) revealed no differences between females and males in strategy use, and a recent research on language learning strategies found differences in strategy use between male and female related to the type of strategy rather than an overall difference (El-Dib, 2004).

Nevertheless, the relationship between language learning strategies and the learners' level of proficiency is more obvious. More proficient learners employ a greater variety and often a greater number of learning strategies (Anderson, 2002; Chamot, 2004; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Differences between higher and lower proficient learners have been discovered in the range, kind, and number of strategies employed, in how the strategies are utilized in accomplishing the tasks, and in the usefulness and appropriateness of the strategies selected for different tasks. Learners with higher levels of proficiency have also revealed less anxiety and more self-esteem and self-confidence.

2.2 Reading Comprehension Strategies

For all language learners, with each level of proficiency, comprehension is the goal. Reading comprehension is mainly a matter of developing useful, appropriate, and effective comprehension strategies (Chastain, 1988; Nation, 2005; Oxford, 1990; Zare, 2012).

Learners use different strategies like top-down and bottom-up strategies in order to comprehend a text. The bottom-up strategies provide learners a sentence-by-sentence building of comprehension, while top-down strategies help them to comprehend larger pieces of text, such as a paragraph. These strategies will help learners and readers to find out how a

sentence or a group of sentences contribute to the whole meaning. Efficient readers employ different strategies, moving from one to the other as they read to get the meaning of the text (Cohen, 1998; Phakiti, 2003; Rogers & Harley, 1999).

The effective factors in L2 reading comprehension have been investigated by many scholars (Cohen, 1998; Ellis, 2008; Nation, 2005; Phakiti, 2003; Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2012; Rogers & Harley, 1999, Oxford, 1990). They contended that comprehension not only depends on what is written or given in the text, but it also relies on the learners' background knowledge, proficiency level, experiences, aims, feelings, and needs. Therefore, the reader is regarded as an active partner with the text in the process of comprehension and extracting meaning from the text (Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2012).

Learners reveal their understandings of texts in different ways, for instance they recall information and their background knowledge, draw on the text structures' knowledge and text organizers, give reflective and insightful responses, complete different task types, think critically and utter their ideas verbally, identify relationships, make logical connections, interpret the meaning of the text, and diagnose multiple points of view and specific details (Phakiti, 2003; Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2012; Rogers & Harley, 1999).

It has been explored that learners who are less able to comprehend, usually focus more on word accuracy rather than comprehension monitoring and generally have low and weak metacognition skills (Nation et al., 2005). Weak learners generally are poor at making inferences and integrating text information, according to Nation et al., (2005). They tend to read superficially, are less likely to take part in practical and useful processes, are unsure of when to utilize their background knowledge during reading, and cannot comprehend text effectively (Cain & Oakhill, 1999).

An effective and useful way to help learners overcome difficulties in comprehending texts is providing them with explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies (Graham & Bellert, 2004). Explicit instruction of the reading comprehension strategies will help learners to improve their comprehension skills and became autonomous learners. As Pearson (2002) states that the more learners become competent and confident of their comprehension, the less support they require from the teacher.

In considering the understanding of reading texts as a problem-solving process, reading strategy analysis provides insight and perception as to how readers interact with the text to get its message and how their choice of strategies affects their understanding of the text (Graham & Bellert, 2004; Nation & Norbury, 2005; Rogers & Harley, 1999). Concentrating on reading strategies helps researchers reveal the extent to which readers actually get the message and purpose of what they are reading, how they attempt to make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand some aspect of the text (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986; Zare, 2012).

Most of the previous studies indicated that using effective and appropriate strategies are clearly influenced by readers' proficiency level, the length of the text and the nature of the questions asked about it. For example, Carrell and Grabe (2002) have noted the significance of vocabulary knowledge in dealing with second language texts, as well as noting the difficulty nonnative readers may have guessing words from context (a reading strategy), especially when the context is not very helpful and supportive.

2.3 Test-taking Strategies

The exploration and identification of strategies employed by test-takers on reading comprehension tests is of interest (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Cohen, 1998; Phakiti, 2003; Rogers & Harley, 1999). The importance of gaining a better understanding of how reading and test-taking strategies are used on tests has been recognized by researchers. As Cohen (1998) indicates, "In order to assess reading comprehension in a second or foreign language, it is necessary to have a working knowledge of what that process entails"; and Bachman and Palmer (1996) recently have declared, "Unless we can demonstrate that the inferences [about language ability] we make on the basis of language tests are valid, we have no justification for using test scores for making decisions about individuals ... we must demonstrate that these inferences are appropriate for the decisions we need to make" (p. 95). Therefore, it is important to have good insight into what strategies people who take reading comprehension tests use in order to accomplish them.

Numerous studies have revealed that, there are different kinds of strategies which are used by test-takers during a test in the field of foreign or second language reading tests. (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Cohen & Upton, 2007; Nation, 2005). Rogers and Harley (1999) defines test-taking strategies as processes that enable learners to use the features and format of a test to get higher scores in a test-taking situation. These test-taking strategies contain: reading the rubrics and instructions carefully, planning the allocated time properly, making use of key words in the questions, delaying answering complex and difficult questions, and rereading and evaluating the work in order to check the answers.

Cohen (1998) claims that test-taking strategies involve language use strategies and testwiseness strategies. The actions that learners consciously take to increase the use of a foreign/second language so as to carry out language tasks are called language use strategies. Test takers need to employ four kinds of language use strategies (i.e., retrieval, rehearsal, cover, and communication strategies) in a testing situation in order to keep, retain, remind, and apply the information for use on the test (Cohen, 1998; Goh, 2002).

On the other hand, testwiseness is not necessarily revealed by the test takers' language ability and proficiency, but rather is related to his knowledge and experience of how to take tests. Cohen (cited in Pour-Mohammadi & Abidini, 2012) introduced three testwiseness strategies employed by test takers while taking a multiple-choice test. They are:

a.   Making a surface matching of some information in the passage with the identical information in the item stem and in one of the response choices,

b. Making use of material from a previous item when it "gives away", or reveals, the answer to a subsequent one, and

c. Taking shortcuts to arrive at answers - that is, not reading the text but simply searching for the answers to the reading comprehension questions.

Phakiti (2003) conducted a study on test-taking strategies. The study examined the relationship of test-takers' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to the EFL's performance in reading comprehension test. The results of his study indicated that the use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies have a positive relationship to the reading comprehension test performance, and higher examinees revealed significantly higher metacognitive strategy use than the lower successful examinees who, in turn, showed higher use of these strategies than the poor examinees.

In general, test-taking strategies are skills which can be learned and acquired, and if a learner has been trained to acquire some specific skills of taking tests, that learner is expected to score significantly higher in tests than learners with same proficiency level in the subject area that have not learned any test-taking strategies (Anderson, 2002; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Cohen, 1998; Khaldieh, 2000; Phakiti, 2003; Rogers & Harley, 1999). The aforementioned studies revealed that test-taking strategies explicit instruction along with the use of such strategies lead to development in test-takers' performance, particularly reading comprehension results, for learners with different proficiency levels. Furthermore, the knowledge of how to prepare for exams and take them can have a significant impact on learners' perceptions towards exam, decrease their test-anxiety, increase their self-confidence, make a difference in exam scores, and finally, help them to be more successful (Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2012).

2.4 Research Questions

This study is seeking to answer the following questions:
1. What are the reading test-taking strategies which are common in all reading tasks used by candidates?
2. What are the strategies which IELTS candidates use when taking various reading tasks?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The subjects of this study include 23 IELTS candidates who took part in IELTS preparation classes. The participants were from different institutes like: Pardis Danesh Institute in Tehran, Iran, and Atlas, Soroosh, and Shafaq Institutes in Sanandaj, Iran. Some of the participants took part in IELTS preparation courses and took the mock IELTS test in January 2014. Their age range was 20-30.

3.2 Instrumentation

In order to gather data two instruments were employed in this study: the think-aloud protocol, and an IELTS reading test. For the purpose of this study, an IELTS reading test was selected from McCarter and Ash's IELTS Reading tests (2001). The selected reading consists of three different tasks: Matching task, Multiple-choice task, and Yes/No/Not given task. The participants were asked to take the test while thinking aloud their processes of doing the tasks. So they recorded their voices while doing the reading test.

3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data were collected from participants individually. At first the participants were trained on how to think aloud. An example of think aloud was provided for them to accustom to producing a protocol, and they were asked to say what mental processes they had gone through in arriving at or failing to arrive at answers. The participants were allowed to think aloud in English and/or Persian as appropriate and comfortable. The participants then took the reading test while the think-aloud protocols were recorded. The recordings were transcribed by the researcher, and are analyzed qualitatively to identify the reading test taking strategies employed by IELTS candidates.

To answer the research questions and exploring IELTS candidates' test-taking strategies, researcher used various reading comprehension strategies' models found in previous studies by different scholars like Bachman and Cohen (1998), Alderson (2000), Phakiti (2003), and Bachman and Palmer (1996). Some of these strategies are skimming, scanning, making guesses and inferences, using the clues and keywords, and activating background knowledge.

4. Results

The main purpose of this study was to investigate IELTS candidates reading test-taking strategies when taking various reading tasks. To this end, the results of the present study are reported in two parts. The first part of this section, with regard to the first research question, deals with the results of the reading test-taking strategies used by IELTS candidates, and calculation of the frequency with which they occur. The second part deals with the strategies which IELTS candidates employed when taking various reading tasks _ matching task, multiple-choice task, and yes/no/not given task.

4.1 Reading Test-taking Strategies Used by IELTS Candidates

The researcher examined the obtained data, and according to the reviewed literature, classified them into 3 categories: Pre-reading Strategies, Reading Strategies, and Post-reading Strategies. Each of these categories consists of 5 subcategories which were analyzed and the frequency of their occurrences in the participants' performances was calculated and reported in the Table 1.

Table 1. IELTS Candidates' Reading Test-taking Strategies

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage
Pre-reading Strategies	Read the instruction	17	%73.91
	Read the questions first	16	%69.56
	Activate background knowledge	14	%60.87
	Read the titles and headings	13	%56.52
	Set a purpose for reading	6	%26.08
Reading Strategies	Look for keywords	18	%78.26
	Scan the passage	14	%60.87
	Skim the passage	9	%39.13
	Make an educated guess	12	%52.17
	Think while reading	10	%43.48
Post-reading Strategies (answering the questions)	Take advantage of the clues	15	%65.22
	Reread the passage	13	%56.52
	Monitor comprehension	11	%47.83
	Use process of elimination	11	%47.83
	Making inferences	4	%17.40

Table 1 represents the observed strategies employed by IELTS candidates and the frequency with which they were attended to. The strategies in each category are arranged from the most frequent to the least frequent one. On the whole, 15 test-taking strategies in the performance of the IELTS candidates were observed in the data. As the table presents, the *Look for Keywords* strategy in the *Reading Strategy* category was the most frequent strategy used by candidates that was identified in about %78.26 of the strategies.

Read the Instruction and *Read the Questions First* are the next two strategies in the pre-reading category which were the frequent strategies observed in the candidates' performances. %73.91 of the candidates read the instruction of the test before reading the passage, and also %69.56 of them prefer to have a look at questions before attending to reading the passage. They read the questions in order to find out the keywords and searching them in the passage to get the answers. The rest of the strategies are listed in the table. As it can be seen, *Set a Purpose for Reading* and *Making Inferences* are attended to less than other strategies which were identified in about %26.08 and %17.40 of the observed data.

4.2 Strategies Which IELTS Candidates Use When Taking Various Reading Tasks

The observed strategies employed by IELTS candidates when taking various reading tasks and answering different questions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. IELTS Candidates' Strategies When Taking Various Reading Tasks

Reading Task	Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Multiple-choice	Use process of elimination	9	%39.13
	Make an educated guess	10	%43.48
Matching	Activate background knowledge	12	%52.17
Yes/No/Not Given	Reread the passage	9	%39.13
	Making inferences	3	%13.03

As table 2 presents, participants used certain strategies differently, depending on the type of the task and the question that was being asked. The strategies of *Use Process of Elimination* and *Make an Educated Guess* were reported more frequently for multiple-choice task than with matching and yes/no/not given tasks. On the whole, 11 candidates employed *Use Process of Elimination* strategy among whom 9 candidates used this strategy in multiple-choice task. And among 12 participants who attended to *Make an Educated Guess* strategy, 11 of them used it for multiple-choice task.

Activate Background Knowledge was the most frequent strategy used by candidates in matching task, which was identified in about %52.17 of the strategies. And finally, *Reread the Passage* and *Making Inferences* strategies were reported more frequently for yes/no/not given task. Other strategies were common among all of the tasks.

5. Discussion

One of the difficulties with researching test-taking strategies is that they cannot be observed clearly and directly; they can only be understood and inferred from learners' performances. As Ellis (2008) imaginatively puts it: "It is a bit like trying to work out the classification system of a library when the only evidence to go on consists of the few books you have been allowed to take out". Given the complexities of such a daunting task, the challenge has been to develop a means first of all to record and afterward to analyze and interpret the facts involved. Over the years, different scholars have utilized a variety of approaches, one of the most frequently used of which has been the gathering of data through think-aloud protocol in order to explore what mental processes test-takers had gone through in arriving at or failing to arrive at answers (Khaldieh, 2000; Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2012).

Considering the fact that the present study attempts to examine reading test-taking strategies employed by IELTS candidates, think-aloud protocol was deemed an appropriate instrument. The researcher attempts to examine the actual use of reading test-taking strategies to provide insights into the nature and level of reading strategy use among these test-takers.

Based on the previous studies on reading strategies (Brown, 1987; Chastain, 1988; Ellis, 2008), the researcher examined the obtained data and classified them into 3 categories: Pre-reading Strategies, Reading Strategies, and Post-reading Strategies. Each of these categories consists of 5 subcategories; *Read the Instruction, Read the Questions First, Activate Background Knowledge, Read the Titles and Headings,* and *Set a Purpose for Reading* are the strategies in pre-reading stage, *Look for Keywords, Scan the Passage, Skim the Passage, Make an Educated Guess,* and *Think While Reading* are among reading strategies. And finally the post-reading stage consists of *Take Advantage of the Clues, Reread the Passage, Monitor Comprehension, Use Process of Elimination,* and *Making Inferences* strategies.

As the results indicate, candidates employed different strategies while taking the reading test. The most frequent strategies were *Look for Keywords* and *Read the Questions First* which were used by %78 and %70 of the candidates. One reason for this maybe that these two strategies helped them to focus their attention and direct them to the parts of the reading passage that were most important for them to understand. This concurs with the studies of Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin (2011) and Zare (2012). They indicated that previewing the questions and answers helps examinees know what information to look for as they read.

This result is compatible with some previous studies. Some authors (e.g. Lunenfeld & Lunenfeld, 1981) argued that one should have a view of the questions before reading the passage, contending that it saves time and directs one's attention on certain information. But others claim that for standardized tests this manner is possibly a waste of time (Perlman, 1988). Because such tests are programed and timed, it is crucial to move through the passages and questions efficiently. If one reads the questions first, one will be tempted to move too quickly through the passage seeking the answers. As a result, the intentions and tone of the author will be lost. It is also likely that the general theme of the entire passage will be misunderstood (Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2011).

Most of the previous studies on reading strategies revealed the significance of *Skimming* and *Scanning* strategies (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown, 1987; Chastain, 1988; Cohen, 1998; Ellis, 2008; Phakiti, 2003). Furthermore, the results of the present study indicate that during the reading stage about %61 of the participants used scanning strategy and about %39 of them employed skimming strategy. Scanning and skimming are considered as two different reading strategies; scanning means reading a passage to find some particular information and specific details, while skimming means looking at a passage quickly in order to have a general idea of the contents (Chastain, 1988; Hong-Nam, & Leavell, 2007). This is in agreement with Phatiki's (2003) findings which revealed that the test-takers become more confident of their reading ability and language proficiency in second language, and begin to realize that they do not

have to read and understand every word of a text, they will approach the text by using skimming and scanning techniques which enable them to cover a vast amount of material very rapidly (Cohen, 1998, Pearson, 1988; Phakiti, 2003).

In the occurrences of different types of test-taking strategies in the obtained data, although there are a lot of similarities among strategies employed for various tasks, there are also some differences among the frequency of the strategies attended to in each task. To answer the second research question, as the results presents, participants used certain strategies differently, depending on the type of the task and the question that was being asked. The strategies of *Use Process of Elimination* and *Make an Educated Guess* were reported more frequently for multiple-choice task, *Activate Background Knowledge* was the most frequent strategy in matching task, and *Reread the Passage* and *Making Inferences* strategies were reported more frequently for yes/no/not given task. This result is well-matched with Anderson's study (1991).

Anderson's research investigated test-taking strategies among nonnatives; the findings of his study revealed that respondents used certain strategies for different types of questions. For example, the strategies of "trying to match the stem with the text" and "guessing" were reported more frequently for inference questions than for direct statement and main idea question types. The most frequent strategy used in responding to direct statement items was "paraphrasing" strategy (cited in Bachman & Cohen, 1998).

While answering matching questions, the participants examine both lists to determine the types of items and their relationships. They use one list as a starting point and go through the second list to find a match. For doing this task, most of the test-takers didn't guess the answer until all absolute matches have been made. On the other hand, they use their prior knowledge for deciding which answer choices make the most sense.

Besides, while doing multiple-choice task, candidates employed *Use Process of Elimination* and *make an Educated Guess* strategies more than other strategies. By making use of these strategies they get rid of wrong answers and narrow down their choices which are in line with Rogers & Harley's (1999) findings. It was easier for them to pick the right answer when have fewer options to choose from. Test developers use "distracters" in test questions that can confuse test-takers into choosing an incorrect answer. If test-takers familiarize themselves with some of the common distraction techniques that test makers use, they will increase their chances of eliminating wrong answers and selecting the right answer (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

And finally for dealing with yes/no/not given task, the test-takers used *Reread the Passage* and *Making Inferences* strategies more than other strategies. One possible reason for rereading the passage will be that this strategy helps test-takers to clarify a question and find information that they need in order to find the best answer. The nature of yes/no/not given tasks requires the test-takers to read very closely and pay attention to what the writer says in the passage; these kinds of questions require the examinees to find an equivalent statement in the reading passage in order to decide the answer. It is unlikely that the same words or phrases found in the question/statement would be used in the reading passage. Therefore, it is important for test-takers to reread the passage and make inference about the authors' opinion (Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2011; Vandergrift, 1997).

The findings have concluded that the employment of test-taking strategies facilitate and improve language learning and assist language learners in different ways; they will help to raise learners' test scores and course grades. Learning strategies are oriented towards the main goal of communicative competence, allow learners to get more self-directed, become more confidence and autonomous (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). In this regard, language instructors need to incorporate test-taking strategies into their teaching methods and procedures, teach the learners to apply the proper strategy for a specific purpose or a specific skill area, and motivate them to employ the strategies as frequently as possible.

Additionally, the insights gained from examining the test-taking strategies users of the target language claim to employ can help not only to improve the assessment instruments themselves but also to enhance the success that learners have in responding to these instruments (Cohen, 1998). In other words, the list of the reading test-taking strategies as presented in the present study can be exploited by test-designers and item writers as it demystifies the way candidates deal with reading test activities.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the test-taking strategies which were employed by IELTS candidates in reading comprehension test in order to provide the candidates with information to help them achieve their greatest potential. Besides, it tried to take into account the differences among strategies used for different tasks.

As the results indicate, candidates employed 15 different strategies while taking the reading test which were categorized in 3 stages, pre-reading, reading, and post-reading strategies. Also, it was revealed that in the occurrences of different types of test-taking strategies in the obtained data, although there are a lot of similarities among strategies employed for various tasks, there are also some differences among the frequency of the strategies attended to in each task; participants used certain strategies differently, depending on the type of the task and the question that was being asked.

Like all other studies, this study also suffers some shortcomings. The main shortcoming of this study can be the limited number of participants. With larger population and analyzing more learners' performance, other test-taking strategies can be distinguished which is worth taking into account. Besides, the participants were not homogenized and the

researcher did not consider the possible differences in participants' background knowledge, their age, and level of language proficiency which may lead to dissimilar outcomes.

The findings of this study provide a better understanding of strategy use among IELTS candidates and help language teachers and curriculum developers to improve their approaches toward teaching and learning goals. These results also reinforce the fact that strategy use is an intricate phenomenon that interacts with a number of variables. So, to get a clear idea of learners' strategy use, it is crucial to take different variables into consideration. In this regard, language instructors should pay attention to their learners' strategies and try to identify the learners' learning strategies in order to help less successful learners to reach success and master the target language. Teachers can recognize these strategies through language diaries, questionnaires, observations, interviews and so on. In this way, they will be able to assist learners to understand the importance of test-taking strategies in the process of foreign language learning. Through learning strategies, teachers can also help the learners to maintain their motivation, autonomy, and confidence and keep on going and try to accomplish the goal of learning the target language.

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