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The Relationship between Choice of Reading Strategies and Performance on Task-Based Language Tests

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to investigate the relationship between students' choice of reading strategies and their performance on task-based tests. Five hundred and eighty junior and senior undergraduate students of English translation and English literature and upper-intermediate students studying English in a number of private language schools took three tests: a TOEFL (PBT) reading subtest (used for homogenizing the subjects), a reading strategies inventory (Bang & Guanfang, 2007), and an IELTS reading subtest. The correlation analysis showed a direct relationship between scores on the TOEFL and IELTS indicating that both tests measured similar constructs. Moreover, the results indicated that the test-takers benefited from a variety of reading strategies while taking language proficiency tests. The findings also demonstrated that test-takers employed 'after reading strategies' more frequently than 'while reading strategies', taking IELTS as a task-based test. Finally, the findings revealed a significant correlation between participants' scores on the IELTS reading comprehension section and two of the reading strategies, i.e. 'remember the content of the text' and 'when encountering difficulty' strategies. Thus, this study supported the results of the study by Cohen and Pinilla-Herrea (2009) on the correlation between tasks on a test and the learners' strategy repertoire.

Keywords: task-based language test, IELTS, TOEFL, reading strategies

Introduction

Reading is an essential skill for learners of English. It should be an active, fluent process that involves the reader and the reading material in building meaning. For the student, learning to read in a second or foreign language is a process that involves learning skills, learning new vocabulary, and cultivating the ability to transfer these skills from the classroom to the real world, where English may be used. Admin (2008) reports that there are numerous theories and approaches for teaching reading, but all have one

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thing in common, a desire to make reading as efficient and effective as possible. According to Littlewood (1993), underlying all of these approaches is a desire to involve students in some kind of purposeful interaction with information, objects and/or ideas, often in groups, in order to develop their skills and knowledge.

Researchers have sought ways to make the classroom more student-centered and have investigated the different ways in which students can play more active roles in discovering and processing knowledge. The approach which is currently best known in this respect, as Skehan (1996, p. 20) believes, is *task-based language teaching*. He concludes that task-based teaching has meaning as primary focus and it takes a fairly strong view of communicative language teaching. Nunan (2004) argues that one of the key features of a communicative task is that learners focus on communicating meanings rather than learning or practicing forms. Therefore, one may conclude that real or authentic communication is essential for task-based teaching or learning.

According to Kim (2002) in the last two decades or so, the tenets of communicative language teaching with their strong emphasis on students' ability to use language in real-life situations have taken hold in foreign and second language classrooms. Effective reading comprehension that happens in real-life situation is based on mastering of vocabulary, phonics, fluency, reading comprehension skills, and reading strategies. Pakhare (2007) states that a person having good comprehension skills is a person who can interact with words by understanding their complete meaning and the concepts behind them. Moreover, Bamett (1989, p. 66) has used the term reading strategy to refer to the mental operations involved when readers purposefully approach a text to make sense of what they read. Effective reading strategies offer various modules to enhance this skill containing vocabulary, fluency, phonics, and interpretation skills (Pakhare 2007).

Furthermore, a carefully designed reading comprehension test is a cleverly constructed set of questions targeted at the summary and the overall meaning of the text including most important meanings of words. Recognizing the fact that knowledge of vocabulary and grammar (linguistic competence) is not sufficient to use a language to achieve ends in social situations, task-based language testing (TBLT) embraces a broader conception of communicative competence (Almond, Steinberg, & Mislevy, 2001). In addition to linguistic competence, consideration broadens to the social context of language use (sociolinguistic competence), pragmatic considerations in using language to achieve goals (strategic competence),

and familiarity with forms, customs, and standards of communication above the level of sentences (discourse competence).

The study reported in this paper is one attempt to address the relationship between test-takers' performance on task-based reading comprehension tests and their choice of reading strategies. In the following section, the two main theoretical foundations of this study will be discussed. It will begin with reviewing major issues on task-based language testing. Then, since the study focuses on choice of reading strategies while answering reading comprehension items, background on reading comprehension strategies will also be introduced.

Task-Based Language Testing

Task-based language testing is employed to test the learner's communicative ability in a second language. In the past decade, language testers have increasingly recognized the value of tasks for testing a learner's capacity to communicate in L2. Ellis (2007, p. 279) viewed task-based tests as devices for eliciting and evaluating communicative performances from learners in the context of language use that is meaning focused and directed towards some specific goal. Kim (2002) found that as the primary goal in language instruction is shifted from an object of study to a system of communication, the need to assess students' ability to use the language communicatively has been raised and task-based testing has become more and more popular. Brindley (1994) identifies that task-based testing results in both teachers and learners focusing on language as a tool, i.e. it has a favorable washback effect; it enables testing to be more easily integrated into the learning process. He implies that we are entering a new phase in language testing where we seek a closer alignment between assessment and learning.

More generally, task-based testing is seen as a way of achieving a close correlation between the test performance, i.e. what the testee does during the test, and the criterion performance, i.e. what the testee has to do in the real world, and thus of ensuring the validity of the assessment. Kim (2002), however, believes that the use of real-life activities as test tasks may be impractical to administer and/or inappropriate or unfair for certain test-takers since they might presuppose prior knowledge or experience that the test-takers may not possess. Furthermore, given the complex nature of real-life tasks, the issue of task comparability is often raised. In other words, the criteria to select an assessment task among many different real-life tasks become a major concern. Bachman and Palmer (1996, p. 44) argue that

teachers will need to have a well-specified target language use domain defined as "a set of specific language use tasks that the test-taker is likely to encounter outside the test itself, and to which we want our inferences about language ability to generalize".

A high degree of task-based testing authenticity may be beneficial in achieving the intended consequences of assessment by bridging the gap between what the students face in the world and the way they are tested (Delandshere & Petrosky, 1998; Eisner, 1999; Khattri, Reeve, & Kane, 1998; Wiggins, 1993). Almond et al. (2001) point out that TBLT grows from the observation that mastering the grammar and lexicon of a language is not sufficient for using a language to achieve ends in social situations. Language use, as they believe, is observed in settings that are more realistic and complex and typically require the integration of topical, social, and/or pragmatic knowledge along with knowledge of the formal elements of language. In addition, the purpose of utilizing tasks needs to be clearly specified in advance.

Task-based tests measure not only the students' communicative abilities in a real-life situation but also most language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Authenticity of the tasks, as a major principle, is a critical quality in task-based testing. It might be assumed that the closer the relationship between the test tasks and real-life situations, the more accurate the generalization of test scores to non-testing situations will be (Kim, 2002).

Learning Strategies

The word strategy comes from the ancient Greek word *strategia,* which means steps or actions taken for the purpose of winning a war known as military strategy. Learning strategies are broadly defined as operations and procedures employed by learners to facilitate the process of acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information in their learning (Rigney, 1978). Oxford (1990) expanded this definition by noting that learning strategies are "specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). Learning strategies can also enable students to become more independent, autonomous, lifelong learners (Allwright, 1990; Little, 1991). Chamot (2004) also confirms that strategic learners have metacognitive knowledge about their own thinking and learning approaches, a good understanding of what a task entails, and the ability to orchestrate the strategies that best meet both the task demands and their own learning

strengths. Therefore, researchers have tried to identify strategies used by successful learners that might be transferred to less successful learners. Thanks to the advances made in second language acquisition (SLA), cognitive psychology, and information processing systems, as well as qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, new procedures are developed for gathering and validating learning strategies (Ellis, 1994).

Strategy-Based Instruction

Style- and strategy-based instruction (SSBI) or strategy-based instruction (SBI) refers to a form of learner-focused language teaching that explicitly combines styles and strategy training activities with everyday classroom language instruction (Oxford, 2001; Cohen & Dörnyei, 2002). The underlying premise of the SSBI/SBI approach is that students should be given the opportunity to understand not only what they can learn in the language classroom, but also how they can learn the language they are studying more effectively and efficiently. SBI helps learners become more aware of what kinds of strategies are available to them, understand how to organize and use strategies systematically and effectively given their learning-style preferences, and learn when and how to transfer the strategies to new language learning and using contexts (Cohen, 2007).

Cohen (1998) makes a distinction between language use and language learning strategies. This distinction can be useful for L2 researchers and teachers. Cohen indicates that “Language use strategies focus primarily on employing the language that learners have in their current interlanguage” (p. 2). Under this umbrella term, the following strategies apply: retrieval strategies (e.g. strategies used to recall learned material; similar to Oxford's memory strategies), rehearsal strategies (e.g. strategies used to practice vocabulary or grammar structures), cover strategies (also known as compensation strategies, e.g. strategies used to get around missing knowledge), and communication strategies (e.g. strategies used to express a message). Cohen continues by stating that “Language learning strategies have an explicit goal of assisting learners in improving their knowledge in a target language” (pp. 1-2).

Explicit learning strategy-instruction, as Chamot (2004) argues, essentially involves the development of students’ awareness of the strategies they use, teacher modeling of strategic thinking, student practice with new strategies, student self-evaluation of the strategies used, and practice in transferring strategies to new tasks. While many other researchers in SL

contexts agree on the importance of integrating strategy instruction into the language curriculum or teaching them separately (Cohen, 1998; Nunan, 1997; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford & Leaver, 1996; Shen, 2003), others have voiced concerns. Some researchers believe that strategies learned within a language class are less likely to transfer to other tasks (Gu & Johnson, 1996), and from a practical point of view, it is easier to plan for one separate strategy course than to prepare all teachers to teach strategies (Vance, 1999). This indicates that teacher development programs should pay more attention to SBI in order to enable novice teachers to teach strategies explicitly and implicitly (Motallebzadeh, 2005).

Cohen and Pinilla-Herrea (2009) emphasize that the effectiveness of strategy instruction would depend on several variables such as learning context, task at hand, learners' background knowledge, learners' goal for learning language, learners' style preferences, and learners' knowledge strategy repertoire. Meanwhile, Purpura (1997) sees the relationship between strategy use and performance on second language tests as extremely complex. He maintains that, "Strategies' beneficial effects depend both on the type of the task in which the test takers deploy them and on the combination of the other strategies with which the test takers use them" (p. 315).

One thing that researchers and teachers must keep in mind is that there are no good or bad strategies; rather, there is good or bad application of strategies. Anderson's research (1991) shows that effective and less effective learners reported using the same kinds of strategies. Cohen (1998, p. 8) supports this concept by stating that, "With some exceptions, strategies themselves are not inherently good or bad, but have the potential to be used effectively". The hope is that if the strategies of more successful readers can be described and identified, it may be possible to train less successful learners to develop improved strategies.

Reading Comprehension Strategies

Many applied linguists have commented on the lack of consensus about the definition of the term 'reading strategies'. This diversity is largely due to the way the term has been used in different contexts, such as first, second, or foreign language learning. Reading strategies may be defined as an action or series of actions employed in order to construct meaning (Barnett, 1989, p. 66). Barnett has also used the term reading strategy to refer to the mental operations involved when readers purposefully approach a text to make sense of what they read. In the light of these somewhat tangled concepts,

definitions and arguments, the term 'reading strategy' is defined for the purposes of this research as specific actions consciously employed by the learner for the purpose of reading. Nunan (1997) notes that ESL academic reading is a very deliberate, demanding, and complex process in which the students are actively involved in a repertoire of reading strategies.

Existing research has shown that, based on the specific needs of their research projects, professional readers make choices as to what to read and how to read. That is to say, when readers encounter comprehension problems, they use strategies to overcome their difficulties. Different learners seem to approach reading tasks in different ways, and some of these ways appear to lead to better comprehension.

Studies in reading a second language also suggest that certain strategies characterize successful reading comprehension and certain ones characterize less successful comprehension (Bang & Guanfang, 2007). As Kletzien and Bednar (1988) argue too, often students approach reading assignments with no idea of why they are studying or what they are supposed to learn relying on what they were told by the teachers. These two researchers state that students are not used to taking control of their own reading and that they are lacking in metacognition, knowledge, and control of the four variables: person, goal, task, and strategies (Baker & Brown, 1984; Flavell, 1979). In fact, there are numerous studies about reading and studying strategies of higher education students and many have focused, using different approaches and methodologies, precisely on many reading comprehension specific strategies such as the visualization of content in a text, main idea identification, vocabulary assimilation, keyword detection, context usage, the use of mnemonics for memorization and highlighting, the use of dictionaries and grammar, and so forth. Some of these studies have found that the most successful individuals understand and use a variety of active study strategies to control and monitor their learning (Garner, 1987), applying particular strategies only when appropriate and that these students can also explain the strategies they use and can describe whether or not particular strategies prove to be useful in particular situations (Ruzic, 2001).

An impressive number of empirical investigations have established a positive relationship between strategies and reading comprehension skill. For instance, Sarig (1987) has found that the use of various reading strategies improved students' reading comprehension. Certain studies in second language contexts have shown that reading comprehension may be attributed to the level of the effective use of reading strategies (Coiro, 2003). Other studies that have attempted to investigate the relationship between reading strategies and success in comprehension by speakers of other

languages have produced interesting results. These studies have demonstrated that different text types may call for the use of different reading strategies. Studies examining the reading strategies of both good and poor readers have shown a differential use of strategies pertaining to text type. Coiro has also shown that poor readers peruse all types of texts in the same manner.

This study was intended to explore how test-takers' choice of reading strategies were related to their performance on task-based tests and thus, the following research question was raised:

Q. Is there a statistically significant relation between test-takers' choice of reading strategies and their performance on the IELTS reading subtest as a task-based test?

Method

In order to be able to answer the posed question, certain procedures were used to select the subjects and conduct the study. In the following sections, the participants who took part in the study, as well as the instrumentation used, and the procedure followed will be discussed.

Participants

All participants of the present study were junior and senior undergraduate students majoring in English literature and English translation of Islamic Azad University, Quchan Branch, as well as upper-intermediate EFL students at four private language schools. A total of 580 participants, were chosen in five groups:

- Islamic Azad University (150 students)
- Shokooh Language School for girls (170 students)
- Shokooh Language School for boys (100 students)
- Kish Language School (100 students)
- Daneshamoozi Language Center (100 students)

Instrumentation

To obtain the relevant data, the researcher used three sets of instruments: a TOEFL (PBT, version 2005) reading comprehension subtest was administered to 580 testees to homogenize the participants. This instrument included five passages followed by 50 items. The Cronbach's alpha index of reliability reported for this instrument was 0.812 (Motallebzadeh & Ghaemi, 2008). Analyzing the results of this test of language proficiency, 180 participants proved to be the main subjects of the present study, obtaining 70% of the total score.

The other instrument employed in this research was an IELTS reading subtest, general training (GT) module, developed by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (2003). The test included three passages and 40 items. The purpose of using this instrument was to determine the performance of the participants on the IELTS as a communicative and task-based test.

The next instrument was a reading comprehension strategies questionnaire (Bang & Guanfang, 2007) to explore test-takers' strategy use. This questionnaire (see Appendix A) consisted of five sections and sixty-four items: 'before reading' section (eight items), 'while reading' section (28 items), 'remembering the content of the text' section (six items), 'when encountering a difficult part in a text' section (17 items), and 'after reading' section (five items).

Procedure

At the outset of the study, a TOEFL reading comprehension subtest was administered to 580 students. The researcher intended to select the participants obtaining similar levels of language proficiency. The set criteria for choosing the appropriate test-takers was considering 70% of the total score (35 out of 50). In the next two weeks, the 180 selected participants took an IELTS reading subtest (general training module) and the reading comprehension strategy questionnaire simultaneously. Due to logistic issues, this phase of the study had to be handled in different locations and at different times. The participants spent one hour answering the reading subtest and 30 minutes to fill the reading comprehension strategy questionnaire with a 15-minitue break for refreshment.

Results

As a first step in the analysis of the data, the reliability of each instrument was calculated. In this study the Cronbach's alpha index of reliability for IELTS reading subtest was estimated as being 0.831. This is a considerably high index and it truly conforms to the indices reported by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (2003) for different versions of the IELTS GT module reading subtest (ranging from 0.83 to 0.85). Also, the reading strategies questionnaire showed an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.615.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were then used to analyze the data. Firstly, the means and standard deviations of the scores obtained on the language proficiency measures and the questionnaire were computed. The descriptive statistics for the two instruments are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics of the participants' performances on the IELTS and TOEFL

	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	*Variance*
IELTS	180	5	32.07	1.736	*3.012*
TOEFL	*180*	*7*	*37.72*	*2.020*	*4.079*

In order to investigate the loading of the different components of the reading comprehension strategies questionnaire, descriptive statistics including range, mean, and standard deviation for all strategy types was calculated (see Table 2). This table shows a hierarchy of the strategy choice according to their mean loadings.

Table 2 – Descriptive statistics for the strategy questionnaire

Strategy Type	**Range**	**Mean**	***Std. Deviation***
After reading	1.00	2.34	*.157*
When encountering difficulty	.47	2.05	*.082*
Remember content	1	2	*.156*
Before reading	.75	1.941	*.128*
While reading	*.82*	*1.817*	*.103*

As Table 2 indicates, most participants employed all strategies during the IELTS test with a various distribution in which *after reading strategy* items

received a higher mean than other strategy types and *while reading strategy* items received the lowest mean score among the reading strategies.

Next, analysis was undertaken to investigate the degree of correlation (Pearson Product Moment) between participants' scores on the IELTS and TOEFL as well as their reading comprehension strategies and their IELTS scores.

To investigate the relationship between the reading scores on the IELTS and TOEFL, a correlation coefficient was calculated. Tables 3 summarizes the results.

Table 3 – Correlation between the IELTS and TOEFL reading comprehension scores

		IELTS scores	TOEFL scores
IELTS score	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2- tailed) N	1 180	.750** .000 180
TOEFL score	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2- tailed) N	.750** .000 180	1 180

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level

As shown in Table 3, the correlation coefficient index came out to be 0.750; a direct linear relationship between the two measures was proved to be significant ($\rho < 0.01$). This result can be evidence for the fact that the two tests aim at the same construct as language proficiency.

To investigate the relationship between the participants' performances on the IELTS reading subtest and their reading comprehension strategy preferences, a Pearson Product Moment correlation was employed (see Table 4).

Table 4 – Correlation between reading comprehension strategy preferences and IELTS reading scores

Strategy		IELTS scores
Before reading	Pearson Correlation	.000
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.997
	N	180
While reading	Pearson Correlation	-.116
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.121
	N	180
Remember the content of text	Pearson Correlation	.172*
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.021
	N	180
When encountering Difficulty	Pearson Correlation	.166*
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.026
	N	180
After Reading	Pearson Correlation	-.360
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.629
	N	180

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

As shown in Table 4, there is a significant positive correlation between the IELTS scores and the two reading comprehension strategies: *remember the content of the text* ($r = 0.172$, $\rho = 0.021 < 0.05$) and *when encountering difficult part in text* ($r = 0.166$, $\rho = 0.026 < 0.05$). As demonstrated in this table, there was a significant relationship between the choice of reading comprehension strategy and performance on task-based reading comprehension tests at 0.05 level of significance ($\rho < 0.05$).

Conclusion

As the results of this study revealed, test-takers would prefer employing a variety of reading comprehension strategies, while taking task-based language proficiency tests. The findings also showed that most test-takers, taking the IELTS as a task-based test, used different strategies during the test with a various degree; they obtained the highest mean score on using *after reading strategies* and *when encountering difficulty text strategies* indicating that these two strategies were used more frequently than other strategy types. However, they obtained the lowest mean score on the *while reading strategies* showing that these strategies were the least selected ones.

The findings of the study also revealed that there was a significant correlation between participants' scores on the IELTS reading comprehension section and two of the reading strategies, i.e. remember the content of the text and when encountering difficulty strategies. This finding indicated that those who obtained higher scores on the IELTS reading comprehension test also obtained higher mean scores on the use of these two strategies, that is, used these two strategies more frequently.

These findings of the present study imply that strategy-based instruction can help L2 learners to be more aware of effective reading comprehension strategies in order to achieve better performance on task-based tests. Also the results suggest that L2 teachers should develop some classroom tasks and exercises such as guessing word meanings, using contextual clues, analyzing reference words, and predicting text content to encourage learners to improve *while reading strategies* use.

The Author

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Reading Strategies Questionnaire

Below is an inventory to see what sort of strategies you often prefer to employ in reading. Please write "Y" for "YES", "N" for "NO", and "O" for "Occasionally" in the blanks provided on the left-hand side of each column. Thank you very much for your contributions.

Before reading academic texts / When beginning reading for a class, I try to:
____ find answers to given questions based on the text
____ give my personal opinion about the topic
____ use my background knowledge
____ recognize the text structure
____ predict the content of the text
____ guess the reason the author is writing about the topic
____ think about different ways of writing the text
____ generate my own list of questions about the text

While reading, I:
____ take notes
____ read through the passage and underline difficult words and phrases
____ skim for a general idea of the whole passage
____ try to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases from context
____ look up the unfamiliar words in a dictionary or another relevant book, such as an encyclopedia
____ try to practice the sounds and the sentence structures
____ focus on the most important ideas of a text, separating what is central from what is peripheral
____ try to see how information is organized and supported in a text
____ try to see what point the writer is attempting to establish

____ try to determine what is being asserted as true
____ decide why I should accept this claim as true
____ try to determine what reasons or evidence the writer gives for this claim
____ focus on what I think the teacher expects me to know
____ do not believe everything I read
____ question everything that does not make sense to me
____ analyze arguments
____ dismiss arguments based on faulty reasoning
____ have good reasons for believing some things and not believing others
____ look for patterns or repetitions
____ assimilate the new material with personal experiences
____ assimilate the new material with previously read materials
____ try to see if the author writes emotionally
____ question why the author uses certain language (e.g. figurative language, verbs)
____ look for connectors that convey ideas and the writer's position on the matter
____ translate key words and phrases into my native language
____ try to build the meaning of the sentences from the meanings of individual words
____ analyze sentence structures
____ analyze parts of words

To remember the content of the text, I:
____ create mental images
____ draw maps or diagrams
____ focus on keywords
____ think of other words I associate with the keywords / main ideas
____ place new words into a context I am familiar with
____ try to find equivalences or similarities with my native language

When I encounter difficult parts of a text, I:
____ reread or repeat (sound out) the words or phrases that I do not understand
____ try to solve doubts by questioning
____ ignore or avoid them
____ slow down my speed of reading
____ speed up my speed of reading
____ try to guess while reading
____ use reference materials
____ try to pay closer attention
____ evaluate my ability to handle other texts of the same kind
____ use the organization of the text to gain a better understanding
____ reset / modify my goals and objectives
____ seek practice opportunities
____ monitor my understanding and correct errors
____ encourage myself to persist
____ try to lower my anxiety level
____ ask / cooperate with my peers
____ ask the teacher for clarification, correction, and / or feedback

After reading, I:
____ summarize what I have read
____ evaluate the reading
____ try to synthesize the reading with other materials I have read
____ comment on the reading through journal entries, conversations with colleagues
____ put the reading aside and do nothing