

Exploring the Effect of Teaching Test-Taking Strategies on Intermediate Level Learners on Reading Section of Ielts; Learners' Attitude in Focus

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: December 09, 2017

Accepted: January 24, 2018

Published: April 30, 2018

Volume: 9 Issue: 2

Advance access: March 2018

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

Key words:

IELTS,

Reading,

Preparatory Courses,

Test-taking Strategies,

Washback, Attitude

ABSTRACT

Language proficiency tests have become common instruments to judge people based on their performance. Thus, the scores on language proficiency tests, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), play a crucial role in the test-takers' lives. Because of increasing demands on the part of students to get a good score on these tests, test preparatory courses have emerged. These preparatory courses, characteristically short and limited in terms of time, equip IELTS candidates with the skills required for passing the test, called test-taking strategies. The present study explored the effect of strategy teaching- namely wash-back effect on reading section of academic IELTS on intermediate learners in Iran. Besides, learners' attitude toward the strategy teaching was investigated as well. According to the descriptive statistics and t-test results, those learners who received strategy teaching outperformed those who had not received strategy teaching in reading section of IELTS. According to t-test results, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups since the p value was lower than .05 ($p < .001$). Furthermore, the learners had positive attitudes toward receiving strategy teaching since there was a significant difference between the obtained mean score and the presupposed average because the p value was lower than .05.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, international tests such as IELTS or TOEFL are becoming outstanding in test-takers' lives on the ground that the mentioned tests play a gate-keeping role for many purposes in different countries around the world, and Policy-makers make vital decisions with regard to test-takers academic and professional lives based on their performance on these language proficiency tests. Therefore, how to gain a better score and perform better on these tests have become a main concern for students and teachers. In strategy-based instruction classes, called preparatory courses, different types of strategies are taught through in which the element of *consciousness* is salient. Haladyna, Nolen and Haas (1991, p.4) pointed out that not all preparatory courses are ethical. They proposed a continuum of preparatory courses from *ethical* to *highly unethical*. In their opinion, training test-takers about test-wisness strategies and motivating them to succeed in the test constitutes the most ethical extreme of this continuum. On the other hand, they refer to developing the whole curriculum on the bases of a test, putting the objective of the test as the objective of the course instruction and practicing past papers in the course as the most unethical practices

in preparatory courses. It should be kept on the mind that not all the strategies which test-takers apply in an assessment are directly taught by the instructors. Some test-takers bring a set of innovative strategies, not completely a reflection of what they have been taught for, but a combination of personalized, adapted form of the strategies they have been trained for. Thus, the learner will be equipped by prescribed strategies (taught by the teacher) and voluntary strategies (learner's personalized strategies). Cohen (1998) has classified strategies into *language use strategies* and *test-wisness strategies*. He defines language use strategies as test-takers' conscious actions for improving their use of second or foreign language during a successful language task (p. 219). He also further categorizes language use strategies into retrieval, rehearsal, cover, and communication strategies. According to Cohen (1998), test-taking strategies are Learner strategies applied to the area of assessment. Some scholars believe in two types of test-taking strategies: test-management strategies and test-wisness strategies (Cohen, 2006; Phakiti, 2008). Test-management strategies are logical and purposeful and reflect the underlying trait being tested, but test-wisness strategies are just confined to tech-

nical and/or textual aspects of the test, not reflecting the underlying tested trait. Similarly, Alderson (1984) believes that test-management strategies can be achieved through preparation practices, while test-wiseness strategies cannot be trained. Regarding the aforementioned situation, test wash-back is the topic which comes to mind to explore different aspects of test, preparatory courses and other related issues. Test wash-back (or backwash) refers to "the effect of testing on teaching and learning, and is therefore a form of impact" (Hayes, 2003, p.1). Considering IELTS as an international renowned language proficiency test, it is assumed that it has a lot of impact (wash-back) on preparation courses.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

IELTS is getting a gatekeeping role for English learners who want to take this test for academic or general purposes. Right now, 224 centers in 105 countries are administrating IELTS for near 100,000 candidates around the world annually (Ying, 2011, p. 5). Regarding the vital role of IELTS for entrance to post-graduate programs overseas for Iranian students, and considering the fact that IELTS measures language skills required for handling the academic tasks, Iranian IELTS preparatory courses concentrate on academic language skills. According to Hayes(2003) "if there is a correspondence between skills tested on the exam and the objectives of the curriculum, then the wash-back of that exam could be said to be positive" (p. 13). IELTS has been constructed based on principles of communicative competence (Hayes, 2003), He further explains the principles of communicative language teaching: "a focus on EAP, use of "authentic" materials and tasks and a learner-centered approach which promoted learner autonomy" (p. 15). Ideally, it is expected that preparatory courses would mirror a focus on language skills and the practice of appropriate study tasks, such as use of authentic tasks, communicative language teaching and a learner-centered approach which promote learners' autonomy (Hayes, 2003, p.5). However, some researchers believe test preparation courses are to improve test scores by appropriate teaching what is on the test (Mehrens, 1991), teaching test taking strategies, familiarizing students with the test, and giving them practice under exam conditions. In this regard, wash-back is the effect which can be studied. Wash-back studies have followed two separate lines of research. Some have examined the effect of new and well-established tests on learners and teachers of the target society. For instance, Cheng (1997) and Qi (2002) in China both investigated the effect of introducing a new communicative test on persuading the teachers to adapt a more communicative instruction in their classes. The other wash-back studies, focused on the case of keeping the old tests for updated new teaching methodologies and the ways in which these test can constrain instructors' teaching practices, students' learning and the course design, because of their incompatibility with the current teaching methods (e.g. *Alderson, 1994*).Hosenfeld (1979)believes that test-takers' various knowledge and skills in employing test-wiseness strategies, if not being controlled for, can lead to outperforming some test-takers due to a factor other than test-takers' true language proficiency. This endangers test validity, as it introduces an

additional source of variance in test scores. Test-wiseness strategies then have been regarded as a source of content invalidity by some scholars (Miller, Fuqua and Fagley, 1990) on the ground that all test-takers do not equally benefit from them. Similarly, Ellis (1994) believes that when test-takers applying strategies becomes so automatic that they apply them unconsciously, these strategies cannot be described and consequently are not a strategy anymore. While studies on test-takers' strategy use on language learning tasks has revealed notable differences between high- and low- proficient test-takers (Cohen & Upton, 2006; Nikolov, 2006; Phakiti, 2003; Purpura, 1999; Tian, 2000), a question is raised as to how these variability among different proficiency levels are manifested on language tests. Some studies have sought to investigate how high- and low-proficiency test-takers perform on reading tasks and how they differ from each other in this respect (Anderson, 1991; Nevo, 1989; Tian, 2000; Yoshizawa, 2002). Studies concluded that test takers with different levels of proficiency tend to approach reading tasks differently from each other and exhibit different response behaviors and strategies. In this regard, Tian (2000) examined strategy use by proficiency levels on the TOEFL-PBT. This is to say that, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, the second question of differential use of test-taking strategies by proficiency levels remains an unexplored research line of research in the context of the IELTS reading section. Assiri, (2000) claims that "the higher the proficiency level of a test taker, the more the likelihood that she will make more use of test-management strategies than test-wiseness strategies" (p. 8).

This study aimed at investigating the impact of teaching reading test-taking strategies on IELTS candidates' performance on reading section of academic IELTS. The research questions investigated in this study are presented here:

RQ1: What is the effect of teaching test-taking strategies on Iranian IELTS candidate performance on reading?

RQ2: What is the Iranian IELTS candidates' attitude toward using test-taking strategies?

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed at investigating the impact of teaching reading test-taking strategies on IELTS candidates' performance on IELTS reading section. This study was of experimental design in which participants were assigned to groups of control and experimental randomly and the experimental group was provided with treatment. 90 IELTS candidates enrolling in the IELTS center were asked to take part in an IELTS proficiency test session to determine their level of proficiency taking academic IELTS reading section with 3 passages and total number of 40 tests items. To tackle on different levels of comprehension, a variety of test formats were selected. After scoring their paper based on IELTS standard scoring procedure, 40 of those who scored 5-6 were considered as the participants of the study. 40 participants were divided into two groups each including 20 IELTS candidates. Control group received test-taking instruction on strategies while the other group received reading instruction traditionally. 20 participants of the experimental group were asked to answer the perception questionnaire which was de-

signed by the researcher to find out what their attitude toward learning test-taking strategies was. The questionnaire included 20 items and the validity of the questionnaire was checked by 3 expert judges. The experts had at least 5 years of experience in teaching English and IELTS and checked the questionnaire on the ground that whether it tested what it intended to or not. All the experts agreed upon the validity of the questionnaire provided that some changes had to be necessary to be done. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants.

20 Instruction sessions were taught by the researcher in the center and after completing the instruction sessions, all 40 candidates were summoned to sit for IELTS academic reading test. After the legitimate time limit, 60 minutes, all papers were collected. The scoring procedure was carried out and the results were reported to both center and the candidates.

For the second research question, the participants of the experimental group were asked to answer a perception questionnaire about their attitude towards test-taking strategy instruction. The questionnaire was in the form of Likert-scale with five options. Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), No Opinion (NO), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The participants mean score on this questionnaire was regarded as their attitude towards test-taking instruction.

RESULTS

Before starting the courses, participants' homogeneity was checked to ensure that they are at the same level. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of their mean scores.

According to Table 2, the mean score of experimental group, those who receive test-taking instruction for their reading skill, was just a little more ($M = 5.45$, $SD = .48$) than participants' mean scores in control group, who were instructed in traditional way for their reading skill ($M = 5.31$, $SD = .44$). In order to find how significant this difference is, independent sample t-test was conducted. Table 3 presents the results.

According to Table 3, there was not a significant difference between the mean scores of the two group since the p value was greater than .05 ($p = .67$). Then, it can be inferred that participants of these two groups were at the same level of proficiency before starting the study and they were homogenous.

Addressing the first research question, mean scores of both experimental and control group were compared. Table 4. Presents the results:

According to Table 4, there was a small difference between participants' mean scores of experimental group ($M = 6.97$, $SD = .54$) and that of control group ($M = 5.63$, $SD = .36$) in IELTS reading score as posttest. In order to see how significant this difference was, independent samples

t-test was conducted. Next table shows the results of t-test for post-test:

Regarding the results of the t-test for the post test in Table 5, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups since the p value was lower than .05 ($p < .000$). Therefore, teaching test-taking strategies had positive effects on Iranian IELTS candidates' performance on reading.

The second research question of the present study was about the perceptions of the participants with regard to test-taking strategy instruction. Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics for participants' answer to this perception questionnaire. According to the result of this table, the mean score of participants with regard to test-taking instruction was $M = 4.400$ ($SD = .4114$). The mean score was between 4 and 5. This means that their perception towards test-taking instruction was between Agree and Strongly Agree.

Subsequently, in order to find whether there was a difference between the obtained mean score and the presupposed mean score one sample t-test was used. Regarding the t-test, there was a significant difference between the obtained mean score and the presupposed average since the p value was lower than .05 ($t(39) = 21.524$, $p < .000$). Hence, Iranian IELTS candidates had a positive attitude toward using test-taking strategies.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Language proficiency tests have become a common instrument to judge people based on their performance. Thus, the scores on language proficiency tests, such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) may play a crucial role in the test-takers' lives. Thus, it is important for the learners to get desirable scores in the test. It has been suggested that equipping learners and test candidates with test-taking strategies which are taught in preparatory courses could be an effective way to improve their scores in the test. This study aimed at investigating the effect of teaching test-taking strategies on Iranian IELTS candidates' performance on reading section of IELTS. The present study was an attempt to answer the questions whether teaching test-taking strategies was helpful in IELTS classes and what learners' attitude toward learning these strategies was. Data analysis showed that teaching test-strategies was beneficial for the learners and they had a positive attitude toward learning the strategies. According to the data analysis for the first research question which asked the effectiveness of teaching strategies to learners, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the control group and experimental groups since the p value was lower than .05 ($p < .000$). Whenever P value is lower than 0.5, it shows that the treatment was effective. Therefore, teaching test-taking strategies had positive effects on Iranian IELTS candidates' performance on reading. According to Mousavi (1999), there is an evidence to suggest that there is a positive relationship between test performance and skill in taking tests. It is clear that teaching reading strategies enabled learners to adapt behaviors, steps or techniques to enhance their learning and perform better

Table 1. Distribution of participants

	Test-taking instruction	Traditional reading instruction
Female	10	9
Male	10	10

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for IELTS past test as pretest

Group statistics				
Groups	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
pre_pre_Exp_Cont				
Control	19	5.3158	0.44754	0.10267
Experimental	20	5.4500	0.48395	0.10822

Table 3. Results of independent samples t-test for IELTS mock paper as pretest

Independent samples test									
	Levene's test for equality of variances		T-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
								Lower	Upper
Pre_pre_Exp_Cont									
Equal variances assumed	0.001	0.971	-0.431	28	0.670	-0.400	0.928	-2.300	1.500
Equal variances not assumed			-0.431	27.993	0.670	-0.400	0.928	-2.300	1.500

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for IELTS post-test after passing their instructions in preparatory courses (as posttest)

Group statistics				
Groups	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Post test				
Control	19	5.6316	0.36675	0.08414
Experimental	20	6.9750	0.54952	0.12288

Table 5. Results of independent samples t-test for IELTS past paper after passing their instruction in preparatory courses (as posttest)

Independent samples test									
	Levene's test for equality of variances		T-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
								Lower	Upper
post_post_Exp_cont									
Equal variances assumed	2.081	0.158	-8.930	37	0.000	-1.34342	0.15043	-1.64823	-1.03861
Equal variances not assumed			-9.021	33.273	0.000	-1.34342	0.14892	-1.64631	-1.04053

on the test. It can be concluded that this conscious use of strategies is an indicator of the fact that this strategy teaching fitted learners' learning style and they become a useful tool kit for active, conscious and purposeful self-regulation of learning. The most effective strategy instruction appears to include demonstrating when a strategy might be useful as well as how to use and evaluate it and how to transfer it to

other related tasks and situations. The most effective strategy instruction appears to include demonstrating when a strategy might be useful as well as how to use and evaluate it and how to transfer it to other related tasks and situations. In a study conducted in 2003 by Read and Hayes, they have found that learners benefit from preparation courses in which test-taking strategies are taught. Some researchers state that successful

Table 6. Result of the t-test on on perception questionnaire

	Test value=3.00					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
					Lower	Upper
Questionnaire	21.524	39	0.000	1.4000	1.268	1.532

students are more informed about strategies. When success level increases, the number of learning strategies used by the students increases, too. Furthermore, it has been investigated that learners benefit from strategy instruction and perceive it as positive when it is a) understandable, b) effective and c) easy to implement (MacIntyre & Noels, 1996). Therefore, it can be cautiously concluded that strategies taught during this research possessed these 3 factors and had the learners have a positive view toward that. The results of the analysis can prove that strategy instruction and learning was almost successful in the situation in which this study was carried out since learners in experimental group outperformed those ones in control group.

Regarding the second question, data analysis showed that the mean score was between 4 and 5. This means that their perception towards test-taking instruction was between Agree and Strongly Agree. Hence, Iranian IELTS candidates had a positive attitude toward using test-taking strategies. It can be stated that learner strategies are the key to learner autonomy and one of the most important goals of teaching is facilitation of learner's autonomy. Whenever learners feel that a strategy is beneficial in the test and can improve their performance, they become positive toward strategy learning and using. In conclusion, unsuccessful students need to be informed about learning strategies and strategy use. This is a way to give unsuccessful students an opportunity to experience success. Students who experience success will make these learning strategies a part of their learning process by using them in new learning situations in order to experience success again. In addition, students internalize these strategies and adapt them for themselves. Moreover, they start to generate new strategies through new experiences. After all, such students develop more positive attitudes towards the course and, as a result, become more successful.

In sum, two conclusions can be drawn from this study. Firstly, teaching strategies can be beneficial for the test-takers to perform better on a specific item in a test. Secondly, learners' attitudes toward strategy instruction is positive due to the fact that strategies enhance their autonomy on the case that they are easy to implement and functional. Therefore, strategy instruction can be an important element in improving learners' performance on a given section of a test and enhancing their overall scores.

Like any other researches, the present research faced some limitations: a) this study was carried out with the intermediate learners, which limits the generalizability of the results. A comparative research can be done with advanced level in which two levels can be compared) the present research did not take gender differences into account due to the limitations in time and human resources to carry out the study. It would be an interesting idea to investigate the differences between genders in using different strategies. C)

This study was only done on the reading section of IELTS, which can be done by other sections of IELTS test as well for further research.

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