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# Test Taking Strategies

# ABSTRACT

This study aims at exploring the debatable issue in a high-stakes testing situation which is desirable for any test taker. It has been found that, beside content knowledge, test-taking behavior, such as risk-taking strategies, motivation, and test anxiety, is important for test performance. This study assumes that teaching test-taking strategies will result in increasing students' overall scores in their tests. It is also assumed that having such strategies will reduce the level of test stress and improve students' overall attitudes toward tests.

Studies in this area often compare groups of test takers. They have for example found that high achievers tend to report using more effective test-taking strategies when compared to low achievers (Stenlund et al. 2017), that males are more prone to taking risks when answering test items (see, e.g., Baldiga 2014), and that females and low achievers seem to experience higher levels of test anxiety than males and high achievers (Stenlund et al. 2017). Findings like these can help understand and to some extent possibly explain performance differences that are often observed between manifest groups in achievement tests.

## استراتيجيات اجتياز الاختبارات

ابتسام جاسم محمد / ،كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية ،جامعة تكريت

### الخلاصة

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف القضية القابلة للنقاش في موقف اختبار عالي المخاطر وهو أمر مرغوب فيه لأي متقدم للاختبار. لقد وجد أنه إلى جانب معرفة المحتوى ، فإن سلوك إجراء الاختبار ، مثل استراتيجيات المخاطرة والتحفيز وقلق الاختبار ، مهم لأداء الاختبار. تفترض هذه الدراسة أن تدريس استراتيجيات إجراء الاختبارات سيؤدي إلى زيادة الدرجات الإجمالية للطلاب في اختباراتهم. من

المفترض أيضًا أن وجود مثل هذه الاستراتيجيات سيقلل من مستوى إجهاد الاختبار ويحسن المواقف العامة للطلاب تجاه الاختبارات.

غالبًا ما تقارن الدراسات في هذا المجال بين مجموعات المتقدمين للاختبار. لقد وجدوا على سبيل المثال أن المتفوقين يميلون إلى استخدام استراتيجيات أكثر فاعلية في إجراء الاختبارات بالمقارنة مع ذوي التحصيل المنخفض (Stenlund et al. 2017) ، أن الذكور أكثر عرضة للمخاطرة عند الإجابة على عناصر الاختبار (انظر ، على سبيل المثال ، Baldiga 2014) ، وأن الإناث وذوي التحصيل المنخفض يبدو أنهم يعانون من مستويات أعلى من قلق الاختبار مقارنة بالذكور والمتفوقين ( .Stenlund et al 2017). يمكن أن تساعد مثل هذه النتائج في فهم اختلافات الأداء التي يتم ملاحظتها غالبًا بين المجموعات بشكل واضح في اختبارات الإنجاز وربما تفسرها إلى حد ما.

## 1. Introduction

Standardized high-stakes achievement tests often present a very structured format. They are constrained with strict time limits and require utilizing a component of speediness. Such tests present a large number of items, often of multiple-choice character, and consequences attached to the test result. Thus, tests like these introduce the test takers to a situation where they might feel more or less comfortable.

To be successful in such test situations, sufficient content knowledge might not be enough. Components such as personal characteristics and appropriate reactions, behaviors, and strategies when taking the test may also be important features. For example, previous studies have quite consistently shown that for a test taker to be successful when taking a test, it is important to be able to reduce anxiety and sustain motivation (Dodeen et al. 2014) as well as using effective test-taking strategies, such as willingness to take risks (Bicak 2013).

Studies in this area often compare groups of test takers. They have for example found that high achievers tend to report using more effective test-taking strategies when compared to low achievers (Stenlund et al. 2017), that males are more prone to taking risks when answering test items (see, e.g., Baldiga 2014), and that females and low achievers seem to experience higher levels of test anxiety than males and high achievers (Stenlund et al. 2017).

Findings like these can help understand and to some extent possibly explain performance differences that are often observed between manifest groups in achievement tests. Still, considering the consequences of successful test-taking behavior in high-stakes test situations, and assuming that test takers adopt different test-taking behavior, exploring differences across groups, in

terms of profiles, and identifying patterns that seem associated with successful and less successful test-taking, respectively, might add important knowledge to this area.

## 2. Literature Review

Test-taking strategies originated from the concept of '**test-wiseness**' which is defined as "*one's capacity for using test characteristics and formats and/or test-taking situations to raise test scores*". According to Cohen (2000), language test-taking strategies consisted of both language use strategies and test-wiseness strategies. He further defined them as those test-taking processes that the candidates have selected and are conscious of to a certain degree (Cohen & Upton, 2006). Meanwhile, Jimenez et al. (1996) referred to test-taking strategies as operations or steps used by test-takers to facilitate the retrieval of information and classified them into four groups—*reader-initiated strategies*, *text-initiated strategies, bilingual strategies* and *interactive strategies*. Deanna (2002) believed that cognitive and metacognitive strategies were involved in doing reading comprehension tests and that the former could be grouped into key words, deduction, reasoning and reconstruction; and the latter, could be categorized into planning, monitoring and evaluation.

Employing different classification models, many researchers have found that high achievers, distinguished by their grades in certain content areas, grade point averages, or achievement test scores, tend to use effective study strategies more frequently than do low achievers (Bremmer, 1999; VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston, 1999).

Phakiti (2003) employed both quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Around 384 students enrolled in a fundamental English course at a Thai university took an 85-item, multiple-choice reading comprehension achievement test and filled in a cognitive–metacognitive questionnaire. Then, eight of them were selected for retrospective interviews. The results suggested that (1) the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies had a positive relationship to the reading test performance; and (2) more successful test-takers reported significantly higher metacognitive strategy use than less successful ones.

## 3. The Stress of the Test-takers

Many of the strategies in these areas fall within the language teacher's domain; others remain the students' responsibility. A number of test preparation

strategies, however, are the responsibility of both teachers and students working together.

It is known that the majority of the students sustain some stress most probably before and notably during tests. It is observed that some learners are effective participants in the classroom, do their classwork and homework properly. They usually prepare themselves perfectly for taking the test, but when the time of the test approaches, they feel frightened and anxious. While they are taking the test, they cannot respond correctly to the questions, to the extent that even if they know the answers.

Nevertheless, tests are commonly used as a worldwide measuring instrument in making decisions in most educational and non-educational institutions, and the evaluation of students' performance is based on their achievement in certain tests.

Consequently, one of the main global concerns for instructors and pupils is the capability of learners to perfectly perform on tests (Al Fraidan & Al-Khalaf, 2012). Some studies show that students who develop their test-taking competencies enhanced their views concerning tests, displayed less stress and got better scores (Peng, 2005). Furthermore, those students who are well aware of the test components could poorly perform on tests because of their poor test-taking skills (Sweetnam, 2002).

## 4. The Key Players in Test-taking

Effective test-taking depends on three key players: the teachers, the parents, and the students themselves. In the following subsection, the roles of each key player will be highlighted.

### 4.1 The teachers

Teachers should facilitate the items of the test. Parents should prepare their children for the test.It is the teacher's responsibility to help students make what is known as an exam plan. This plan is a "test-attack strategies" that students can employ at the start of, or during, the test. According to (Coombe and Hubley, 1998), the six recommended areas to cover in an exam plan are:

1. Have an overview of the test paper before answering questions. Such a practice helps student think well of answers.

2. Point values for each question and exam section should be noted so that students can effectively budget their time. It is recommended that students distribute time to each question and spare some time to revise their answers.

3. Read test direction carefully. Students often think that reading direction carefully takes time away from the exam. This is not true as reading directions carefully actually saves time rather than wastes it. It is crucial that students are trained to read and listen to all direction carefully. One of the most important test-taking skills students can have is the ability to follow direction. Some students are so anxious to get started on the test that they skip the directions altogether, which is often a costly mistake (Lane, 2001; Coombe and Hubley, 1998).

4. Use test troubleshooting techniques. Teachers need to provide students with troubleshooting techniques for tests. One such a problem is the questions that students cannot answer or go blank on. If students are stuck on a question, teachers should train them to try to remember a related fact or retrieve information from their short- term memory. This can be accomplished by going from the general to the specific.

Another strategy that teachers can help students with is to encourage them to look for answers or memory triggers in other sections of the test. Whatever happens, if students are stuck on a question, they should be trained to not spend too much time trying to answer it. Instead, they should move on to another question as they can always go back to problem questions should time allow (Loulou, 1995).

### *4.2 The parents*

The parents should make sure their sons and daughters have already had slept well, had their healthy breakfast and gone to school punctually. Parents should also ensure that their sons and daughters have already had their school supplies (notebooks, pencils, and so on). Performing well on a test will be easier if students have been constantly completing their school home works.

The parents should encourage their sons and daughters to have their homework completed daily. They should provoke their sons and daughters to test taking by enhancing the efforts they have exerted in studying and doing their home works, rather than scoring high grades on a test. Parents should help

their sons and daughters diminish their feeling of being afraid or stressed. They should also encourage them by spreading the spirit of enthusiasm, praising and rewarding their efforts. Concerned sons and daughters incline to display many discouraging ideas. Parents can teach their sons and daughters how to challenge such ideas by considering each proof of each destructive idea. They can also help them develop more positive ideas.

### 4.3 Test-takers Strategies

Researchers have also considered test takers' strategies for language problems as aspects of assessment (Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Upton, 2007; Phakiti, 2003). The common belief about this practice is that providing students with test-taking strategies can help them improve their test performance. This is because test-taking strategies can empower test takers to cope with both language issues and the item response demands in tests (Cohen, 2006). Strategies also help students to "know things that are unrelated to what is actually being tested" (Winke & Lim, 2017, p. 381), such as noticing patterns in test items or allocating different lengths of time to different test sections/items.

However, test-taking strategy instruction for candidates in standardized tests has rarely been investigated. Cohen and Upton (2006), for example, examined the test-taking strategies for familiarizing respondents with the TOEFL iBT exam. For the basic comprehension-vocabulary item, the most frequent strategies included *jumping immediately to a word before looking at the options* or reading the passage carefully. *Searching the passage for clues and eliminating incompatible answers* were common in basic inference items.

## 5. Test-taking strategies

Test-taking strategies (TTS) consist of language-use strategies when they are used to help produce response to language testing tasks. EFL/ESL test-taking strategies, TTS are classified differently. They may be classified according to **question-type** (e.g. strategies used in essay, multiple-choice or cloze questions); according to **language skills** (e.g. strategies used in reading tests, writing tests, oral tests); **according to task type** (e.g. strategies used in role-play).In what follows, these strategies will be divided according to the **time of using** them relative to the test time, viz. *before-test, during-test,* and *after-test*.

## *5.1 Before-test strategies*

Attending class regularly is a key to test preparation. The information on a test is usually presented, analyzed and reviewed in class. Students need to be in class when the teacher gives hints about what the test will mainly be on, so they can concentrate their studying and limit the amount of time it takes them. Reviewing class notes is another essential step towards successful studying habits. Students should review these notes on a regular basis, not in the last minutes. Letting the notes sink in over time will expand their knowledge on the subject and giving them more of a complete understanding of the material (Brodsky, 2004).

Students should maintain a soundly systematic plan of revising, sleeping, taking rest and having their meals. They should revise once or preferably twice a week prior to their tests. Students should not overburden themselves in studies. If they find themselves able to study with a full concentration for about 10-20 minutes, then they should only study for such a time and then have a break (Casbarro, 2005).

Students should start preparing for the test. They should familiarize themselves with the type of exam that will be given. Preparation for a multiple-choice test is different from an essay test. While preparing for **an essay test**, students can list carefully any course material and lectures notes that they have and observe any repeated themes. They can think of any possible essay questions from this information and write them down. It is important to determine relationships between ideas and to assess how these connections can be used as essay questions.  It is suggested that a week or two before taking the test, the students can create a summery sheet for each major topic that they generate from their course material. This seems to be an efficient way to highlight the significant themes of a unit.

Chargar (2002: 4) discusses why multiple-choice tests are easier than essay tests, and why it can also be more difficult. He says Multiple-choice tests are easier for three reasons:

1) it is guaranteed that the correct answer is given so you would not have to produce and answer,

2) comparisons and definitions are emphasized so no analyses are involved, and

3) There are a lot of questions, so each question has a low point value.

Multiple choice tests are more difficult in that they cover a greater range of information, they force students to be familiar with minute details, and because they are so difficult to write, an instructor may have two very similar given answers and the student could easily choose the wrong one (ibid).

### *5.2 On the day of test*

Test stress can be devastating to test results. Students must reduce their stress to a manageable level. The following tips can be pursued in order to minimize test stress:

- ✓ Students should allow themselves sufficient time to get to class;
- ✓ They should not feel that they have to rush.
- ✓ Students should first scan the test and then answer questions they know. This helps develop self-confidence (Casbarro, 2005).

### *5.3 During-test strategies*

Liu (2004: 1) suggests a stress control procedure as follows: First, learners overturn their question sheets and shut their eyes for a while. They think deeply with positive expectations towards the test. They open their eyes then they start first with the questions that they know their answers.

Each test type requires different strategies to answer. For example, multiple-choice test strategies do not usually work in an essay test. In what follows, strategies devised to each type of test are listed.

### 5.3.1 Essay tests

Many students think that an essay test question can be one of the most difficult to study. They can identify this type of question on the test by looking for key words such as list, name, define or identify. Krivoshik (2003: 1) lists some of the needed techniques and tips to do well on an essay test. They are as follows:

1) Read all directions before beginning.
2) Have a comprehensive over view of all questions, underscore main words and encircle directive words.
3) Brainstorm and note down clues as one reads and/or answers questions.

4) Ensure that all answers are systematized and thorough.

5) Outlines can help organize thoughts. Do not leave any answers that could be illusive to the instructor.

6) Do not use a long general introduction.

7) Emphasize new ideas through using new clauses and indicative words.

8) Attempt to substantiate your answers to the open-end essay questions.

9) Write clearly using ink on one side of the answer sheet, usually well-ordered work scores higher grades.

10) Attempt as possible to support arguments using more examples that are real.

Milnamow (2001: 1-2) has also listed seven brief and essential steps in answering an essay test:

1. Prepare a schedule. (Manage time properly).

2. Have a first reading of all questions.

3. Have an overview of all questions and pay head to all instructions (the directions on how to answer).

4. Set an outline for answers prior to writing down the answers.

5. Allocate some time to writing an introduction and conclusion.

6. Revise what has been written.

7. Make answers more expressive.

8. Manage uncertainties, e.g. when uncertain of the exact dates, it is recommended to say, "towards the turning of the Nineteenth century" rather than saying "in 1894."

### 5.3.2 Multiple-choice tests

Fieber (2001: 1-2) has listed numerous techniques and strategies which will increase one's ability to do well on a multiple-choice question test. He suggests breaking the question into the stem and the alternatives.

1. highlight significant indicative components of all questions that help finding the correct answers.

2. read the question a few times in order to ensure that they understand what the question is asking about.

3. Use more tangible and familiar words to get rid of distractions.

4. think of a correct answer before looking at the answer choices, then see if any of the answer choices are the same or similar to what they thought.

5. apply elimination process as it helps eliminate incorrect answers/choices, comparing the answer choices, eliminating the ones you know are incorrect, choices such as "all of the above," "none of the above," "A and B," etc. as to be treated as true or false questions.

6. mark questions you do not know their answers so that you may come over before the test ends.

7. review all answers on the answer sheet at the end of the test to make sure that they didn't leave any question blank unintentionally. Never leave a question blank unless there is a penalty for guessing.

8. check that their answers correspond to the correct question.

9. stick with their initial answer since, more often than not their changed answer is wrong more often than their first choice.

Young (2003: 1) also presents four additional useful tips for taking multiple-choicetests. They are as follows:

1- Eliminate words, such as always, no, and never. Longer statements are usually true, because it takes longer and more words to make a true statement true.

2- Choose options that directly match the stem, identifying key words in the stem identifies the question being asked.

3- Choose options that make sense based on logical reasoning and their background information.

4- Choose options that make a true statement when combined with the stem.

The rules when the students take this type of test are that they should read all of the possible choices, sometimes there might be a better choice. To manage their time, they answer the questions that they are confident about and mark the ones that they are not. They should not leave any blank unless points are taken

off. The students try to answer the question without looking at the options. They eliminate obviously wrong answers. They should be careful when they read "the all of the above" or "none of the above". One of them could be a distractor, but it could also be the right choice. The students should watch out for key words such as negatives or superlatives, or even words that might identify a true statement. They must not overanalyze questions.

### 5.3.3 Post-answering strategies

In essay tests, test-takers should check their work for spelling and grammatical errors and illegible handwriting. In reading through the exam, they check that the conclusion is well supported, and that the introduction corresponds with the conclusion.

In multiple-choice tests, test-takers should review all answers on the answer sheet at the end of the test to make sure that they didn't leave any question blank unintentionally. They should never leave a question blank unless there is a penalty for guessing. They should check that their answers correspond to the correct question.

## 6. Conclusions

Almost all research on instruction contexts has focused on general reading strategies. However, classes which include instruction in test-taking strategy can empower students to use their current knowledge to its fullest extent and thus achieve the best possible scores in reading comprehension. Since instruction in test-taking strategy is also favorably viewed by students, future EFL/ESL reading instructional programs may boldly consider its inclusion for student readers even before more evidence is sought for a wider learner population.

Test-taking strategies are compensatory in nature; however, whereas the former are used for communication goals, the latter serve test-taking purposes. As manifested throughout the discussion of test-taking strategy use on a variety of reading test formats, even highly proficient test takers cannot spare the use of strategies at all times, especially those strategies that can make a difference in test scores.

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