



## THE PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES INSTRUCTION ON EFL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' MULTIPLE- CHOICE TESTS OF READING COMPREHENSION

Lien To Thi Nguyen<sup>1</sup>,

Tuyen Thanh Kim<sup>2i</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Thoi Thuan Lower and Upper Secondary School,  
Vietnam

<sup>2</sup>Can Tho University,  
Vietnam

### Abstract:

This study aims to investigate whether the use of a text-taking strategy could enhance EFL high school learners' reading comprehension. It draws on the test-taking strategies suggested by Cohen and Upton (2007), to focus on the two main aspects, (1) the influence of applying test-taking strategies on EFL high school students' reading comprehension tests and (2) their attitudes toward these strategies. In the pretest-posttest one-group design and descriptive quantitative research, the reading comprehension test and the questionnaire were used to collect the data of 90 EFL high school students in a school in rural Can Tho City. These students were assigned to apply test-taking strategies in a workshop every week in the second Semester of 2021-2022. The findings showed that (1) participating students' reading comprehension scores improved after following the test-taking strategies after 07 weeks; and (2) students were positive about their being active in their testing practice despite certain challenges. As a result of such positive attitudes, they had high motivation for continuing their practice test-taking strategies for the future examination.

**Keywords:** attitudes, improvement, reading comprehension, test-taking strategies

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, there is an increasing demand of becoming proficient in English language use in Vietnam. The fact is that many secondary and high school students have paid more attention to enhancing English proficiency by studying activities in the classroom. Moreover, test scores are a vital part of the assessment of learners in studying English. Moreover, reading comprehension is accepted as a vital skill for the acquisition of either

---

<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [kimthanhtuyen80@yahoo.com.vn](mailto:kimthanhtuyen80@yahoo.com.vn)

a second or foreign language (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). In the national examination in Vietnam, reading comprehension accounts for 34% of the total fifty multiple choice questions. Many high school students found it difficult to deal with the reading comprehension part of the exam.

To involve learners in the reading lessons, teachers have a tendency to implement various teaching approaches that can motivate learners to read and help them to improve reading comprehension. That is the reason why the researcher would like to explore one of many teaching strategies, test-taking strategies, in the reading comprehension test with four options. Teaching the ways to access the test to achieve appropriate test results as well as enhance the ability in learning and promote English proficiency.

According to Cohen (1998, p.90), since the last part of the 1970s, interest has gradually grown in moving toward second language testing according to the perspective of the strategies used by test-takers while taking tests. These strategies endanger the legitimacy and dependability of tests. This in turn impacts the process of decision-making, which is dependent after testing because test validity requires attention to how the test-takers arrive at their responses. According to Cohen (1998), the test-taking strategy basically contains three types of strategies including learner strategies, test-management strategies and testwiseness strategies. This study focuses on learner strategies and how students solve the problem in multiple-choice questions in reading comprehension tests. In line with this study, the perception of students on using test-taking strategies in English reading comprehension and acquisition is also investigated.

Many researchers have discovered that good learners are strategic, metacognitively active in selecting strategies, and monitor their progress in order to successfully accomplish given tasks (Macaro, 2001; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Rubin 1975). In Hwang (2001), an ESL student, who had all the qualities of a good language learner as mentioned above, showed enormous progress in her reading skill. Even though she was a good learner, she did not know much about specific strategies in the early stages of learning English. She discovered effective reading strategies by herself by reading continuously. Similarly, according to Chong (1985), students' reading skills change from non-strategic stages to more strategic stages in both the amount and the kinds as they experience more reading. By using interviews and logs, Chong found that students simply depend on their L2 linguistic knowledge solely in the elementary stages. However, the more reading experience students had, the more they tried to apply non-linguistic knowledge, i.e., strategies. The term, strategies, has started from language learning strategies, defined as conscious/semi-conscious, and goal-driven thoughts and behaviors, which are involved in language learning cognitively, metacognitively, socially, and effectively to facilitate a language learning task (Chamot, 2005; Cohen, 2002; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990).

Although using test-taking strategies is criticized as mentioned above, if test-taking strategies are one of the features that high proficiency students use, are helping to improve students' reading test scores, and affect their confidence in a positive way, EFL teachers are asked to examine whether to teach test-taking strategies explicitly in their

class to make students more confident and motivated. In this current research, to see whether test-taking strategies are prominently used more by high proficiency students than lower proficiency students, and what kind of test-taking strategies are used by test-takers, the relationship between students' test-taking strategy use and English reading comprehension level is examined through data collected from an administered reading comprehension proficiency test and a retrospective questionnaire.

Most important to the current research is to identify EFL high school students' attitudes to test-taking strategies in multiple-choice reading comprehension. Therefore, the researcher attempted to find out answers to the research question: what are students' perceptions of the effects of test-taking strategies of the multiple-choice tests on their reading comprehension?

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature reviews three key concepts, namely reading comprehension, test-taking strategies, and conceptualisation of test-taking strategies.

### **2.1 Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension is defined as a thinking process by which a reader selects facts, information, or ideas from printed materials; determines the meanings the author intended to transmit; decides how they relate to previous knowledge; and judges their appropriateness and worth for meeting the learner's own objectives (Veeravagu, et al., 2010, p.206).

Word acknowledgement is one aspect of comprehension. Good readers are able to process words rapidly, accurately, and as an automatic process (Pressley, 1998; Stanovich, 2000). Pressley (1998) also found that good readers are able to read about the more troublesome text at the rate of 200 words per minute and for relaxed reading about 250 to 300 words per minute. They are able to do with little exertion. Poor readers have difficulty processing more complicated text. Readers must make some link between the words in the text to some kinds of knowledge that they have about the world, in order to know what is written. In addition, one of the first processes related to comprehending a text is the capacity to identify separate words. Indeed, a reader with poor reading comprehension has been shown to be slower at reading words than their typically developing peers.

Reading comprehension can be characterized as the ability to comprehend a text, analyze the information, and interpret accurately what the writer is expressing. No one interaction defines reading comprehension by itself, but together they provide a fairly accurate account of the processes required for fluent reading (Grabe, 2002). In a comparative prior work, Janzen and Stoller (1998) recognized ten processes or strategies of reading comprehension as identifying a purpose for reading, previewing, predicting, asking questions, checking predictions or finding an answer to the questions, connecting

the text to prior knowledge, summarizing, connecting one part of the text to another, and recognizing text structure.

Reading comprehension is a complicated process that involves many variables. These factors include general language skills, background knowledge, comprehension strategies, knowledge of the text and working memory (Babayigit, 2011). This led Perfetti et al., (2005) to state that the complex nature of the processes engaged with reading comprehension makes it very challenging for the development of hypothetical models of understanding perception. It is challenging to catch all of the complex relationships involved in the interaction.

## 2.2 Test-taking Strategies

Cohen (2006) defines test-taking strategies as the consciously selected processes that test-takers use for addressing language issues and the item-response demands in the test-taking tasks at hand. This definition has two important elements: consciousness, a “consciously selected processes” and goal-orientation, “used for dealing with language issues and the item-response demands”. In terms of consciousness, Cohen adopted the idea of consciousness, and as he once put it: “if the learners cannot identify any strategy associated with it as it is unconscious, then the behaviour would be referred to as a common process, not a strategy” (Cohen, 1998). Goal orientation is stated as the purpose of testing reading. Any behavior without an obvious and intended purpose is meaningless; test-taking strategies are no exception. In a testing situation, the test-taker use different sets of strategies with different intentions. One primary purpose of test-taking strategies is to improve one’s performance on exams. In short, when taking tests, a person is tested on two things: his or her knowledge about the subject and his or her knowledge about taking a test. Test-taking strategies address the latter.

Following this review of the definition of test-taking. It is necessary to conclude with a brief discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of test-taking strategies. There are two main advantages of using test-taking strategies if they indeed are part of the construct.

First, the primary advantage of test-taking strategies is an improvement in test scores. A second, but related, advantage is a reduction of exam-related anxiety and a strengthening of students’ confidence about exams (Abdullah, 2012). In addition to the advantages of using test-taking strategies, there are also advantages to investigating them. First, once test constructors have knowledge of test-takers’ strategies, they can make more informed choices in the construction of test items, including choices that will ideally assess the test-takers’ language skills, rather than their cleverness at circumventing an assessment of these skills (Cohen A. D., 2006). This can provide insights into the behaviors used for the sake of passing tests and can help teachers to make test items that cannot be responded to easily by means of test-taking strategies aimed at bypassing a more informed means of producing responses (Cohen A. D., 2006).

Second, collecting test-taking strategies data helps to determine the extent to which performance on a given assessment measure is reflective of L2 knowledge and

performance in the area assessed. However, test-taking strategies can be disadvantageous. Test-wiseness can be a source of test invalidity. Test-takers vary in their knowledge and use of test-wiseness principles, and unless this is controlled for, some students will have unfair advantages over others. According to Houston (2005), previous research has found evidence that test-wiseness may be a source of additional variance in test scores and a factor that may lower test validity. As Baker et al. (1966) claim that test-wise examinees can be expected to obtain higher scores than equally competent examinees who lack test-wiseness.

### **2.3 Conceptualisation of Test-taking Strategies**

According to Cohen (2006), test-taking strategies include three types of strategies as follows:

- 1) Learner strategies- the ways that test-takers operationalise the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and the related skills of vocabulary, grammar, and translation. For example, in summarising reading passages, a learner strategy may be to distinguish key points from non-key ones.
- 2) Test-management strategies- strategies for responding meaningfully to test items that are consciously selected to assist in producing a correct answer. These strategies include logistic issues, such as keeping track of time and determining where to look for answers. For example, a strategy for dealing with multiple-choice items can be going back to the question for clarification, re-reading it, or paraphrasing it to verify or confirm understanding of the question.
- 3) Test-wiseness strategies- strategies for using knowledge of test formats and other peripheral information to answer test items without going through the expected linguistic and cognitive processes. With regard to a reading test, these strategies may involve using the process of elimination rather blindly (i.e., selecting an option without understanding it at all, but out of a vague sense that the other options are unlikely to be correct), selecting an option because it appears to have a word or phrase from the passage in it (possibly a keyword), and using clues in other items to answer an item under consideration.

## **3. Methodology**

This study aimed to investigate the perceived effects of test-taking strategies instruction on EFL high school students' multiple-choice tests of reading comprehension and their attitudes toward these strategies. In the current study, the quantitative research was designed as follows.

The one-group-experimental research was used to investigate the effects of test-taking strategies instruction on EFL high school students' multiple-choice tests of reading comprehension. The descriptive quantitative was applied to describe EFL high school students' attitudes toward these strategies.

In this study, the reading comprehension tests were used to investigate the perceived effects of test-taking strategies instruction on EFL high school students' multiple-choice tests of reading comprehension. Particularly, the students took part in the pre-test and post-test to assess their reading comprehension before and after practicing test-taking strategies. The main purpose of using tests was to measure a base capacity and achievement. Besides, tests could help gain directly some information and understand the problem of collecting data (Arifin, 2009).

The forty-five test-taking strategy questionnaires used in this study were selected from Anderson et al.'s (1991) categorization of processing strategies; Both Phakiti's (2003) cognitive and metacognitive questionnaire and Song's (1998) reading-strategy questionnaire were adjusted to suit the participants and translated into Vietnamese in order to make ease for the participants.

The data were gathered in the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022. Participants selected in this study were 90 high school students in a state school in a rural area in Can Tho City. All the participants were in their final year of high school and had never learned test-taking strategies for English reading comprehension tests. Although they are in the same grade, the English proficiency level of the participants varied from upper-intermediate to lower-intermediate. However, they are all attempting to pass the GCSE at the end of the year, so they have to overcome the same test in class.

The study collected 108 pre-tests, 108 post-test and 108 questionnaires from EFL final-year high school students. Finally, the data from 18 students' questionnaires, pre-tests and post-tests were piloted and 90 students' questionnaires, pre-tests and post-tests were coded, processed and analysed by applying the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 20 (SPSS). All data collected from the questionnaire, pre-test and post-test were thoroughly checked after and before inputting in SPSS to avoid mistakes. The reliability of this test-taking strategy questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha, calculated at 0.830.

#### 4. Findings

The findings from the study focus on EFL students' attitudes towards using test-taking strategies in their reading comprehension. Responses from participants to the questionnaires suggest that students have positive attitudes towards using test-taking strategies in their reading comprehension.

Section Four of the questionnaires has fifteen items regarding EFL students' attitudes. The results of this questionnaire are shown as follows:

**Table 4.1:** Students' attitudes toward their practice test-taking strategies

Statement	Min	Max	M	SD
31. I enjoyed studying test-taking strategies.	2	5	4.13	.767
32. I feel that I can do the test better after learning test-taking strategies.	2	5	4.01	.906
34. Learning test-taking strategies assists in time management more effectively.	2	5	4.21	.711

35. Learning test-taking strategies helps me go through the test more carefully.	2	5	4.09	.802
36. Test-taking strategies should be taught in class.	2	5	4.10	.750
39. Learning test-taking strategies helps me guess effectively.	2	5	4.01	.814
40. I can apply test-taking strategies in the real situation while taking tests.	2	5	4.03	.841
41. There should be more time to practice test-taking strategies.	2	5	3.82	.931
42. Learning test-taking strategies enables me to do the easy items first, skip the difficult items and answer them later.	2	5	4.20	.782
44. Learning test-taking strategies enables me to read all options before choosing the best answer.	2	5	3.99	.893
45. Learning test-taking strategies made me get a higher score because I can take a test effectively, and I can manage time more appropriately.	2	5	4.23	.765

In general, the results of this study about the attitude of students are in line with those of other studies (e.g., Amer,1993; Dreisbach, 1982; Hirano, 2009; Scharnagle, 2004; Vattanapath, 1999). These authors suggest support for training in test-taking strategies. Its positive outcomes encourage EFL instructors to provide such instructions. In addition, with regards to the attitudes of the participants towards the teaching and learning of test-taking strategies for multiple-choice tests, the participants generally depicted positive attitudes. In the item “there should be more time to practice test-taking strategies”, they expressed their need for more time to practice test-taking strategies. It showed that having just test-taking strategies workshops in six weeks did not suffice them. Item 36, test-taking strategies should be taught in class, represented the participants’ positive attitude towards having test-taking strategies instruction while they were studying in their high school to integrate these strategies with their courses.

## 5. Discussions

The data from the questionnaire showed EFL high school students’ attitudes toward the test-taking strategies, their practicing test-taking strategies and the effects of test-taking strategies on reading comprehension are as follows.

The results are inconsistent with the previous researchers’ claim that training in test-taking strategies can lead to positive outcomes (e.g., Amer,1993; Dreisbach, 1982). According to the findings in their studies, these researchers suggested that teachers must emphasize the appropriate use of test-taking strategies so that students can know what they should do during taking a test. They reported that the use of test-taking strategies could decrease students’ test anxiety. As teaching test-taking strategies improves students’ test performance, they would be more confident and motivated to have an active role in learning. As Nourdad (2015) states, some probable causes of significant effect of test-taking strategies in assisting test-takers to solve the problems when they are taking tests are changing their attitudes toward testing and decreasing their test anxiety as a consequence. Investigations in general education (Kalechstein, 1998) and applied linguistics (Elkhafaiji, 2005; Golchi, 2012) have demonstrated that testwiseness co-vary with test anxiety. Furthermore, according to Arnold (2000), practicing test-taking

strategies is one sort of systematic desensitization, which reduces the amount of anxiety. It means that experiencing factors of anxiety-making helps language learners gain emotional and mental control, and eventually, they can participate in the situation effectively. To sum up, teaching and learning test-taking strategies can be valuable to boost students' attitudes towards tests and language learning, help them to have better performance on tests, and more significantly lower their test anxiety. Overall, the findings of this study along with those of other related studies suggest support for teaching test-taking strategies and encouraging EFL instructors to provide instructions.

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the relevant studies to answer the research question.

## 6. Conclusions

Students had positive attitudes toward test-taking strategies in which they expressed actively in doing reading comprehension tests. It became clear that test-taking strategy training could have a meaningful effect on students' attitudes and test performance. Teaching such strategies to high school students and motivating them to apply them can encourage them to make logical guesses, have better achievement, solve problems while taking tests, and reduce test anxiety. Therefore, it can be concluded that integrating such strategies in the teaching curriculum as to be instructed on a regular and disciplined basis could be beneficial for students. The findings of this study indicate that students outperformed after attending test-taking strategies workshops. Moreover, they had positive attitudes towards teaching and learning test-taking strategies for multiple-choice English tests.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### About the Authors

**Lien To Thi Nguyen** is a teacher at Thoi Thuan Lower and Upper Secondary School, Vietnam. Her research interests include Reading Comprehension in high school students.

**Tuyen Thanh Kim** is a Doctor of Philosophy, School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Vietnam. Her research interests include Autonomy learning, Culture, Process Genre Approach (PGA) in Writing, Testing and Assessment, and Curriculum Planning.

### References

Al-Mahrooqi, R. (2012). Reading literature in English: Challenges facing Omani college students. *Asian EFL Journal (Professional Teaching Articles)*, 24-51.



- Babayigit, S. S. (2011). Modeling the relationship between cognitive-linguistic skills and literacy skills: New insights from a transparent orthography. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 103*(1), 169-189.
- Cohen, A. D. (1998). *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. Addison Wesley.
- Cohen, A., & Upton, T. (2007). "I want to go back to the text": Response strategied on the reading subtest of the new TOEFL. *Language Testing, 24*(2), 209-250.
- Cohen., A. D. (1998). *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. London: Longman.
- Cohen., A. D. (2006). The coming of age of research on test-taking strategies. *Language Assessment Quarterly, 3*(4), 307-331.
- Dreisbach, M. &. (1982). Testwiseness as a factor in readiness test performance of young Mexican-American children. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 74*(2), 224-229.
- Elkhafaifi, H. (2005). Listening comprehension and anxiety in the Arabic language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal, 89*(2), 206-220.
- Golchi, M. M. (2012). Listening anxiety and its relationship with listening strategy use and listening comprehension among Iranian IELTS learners. *International Journal of English Linguistic, 2*(4), 115-128.
- Grabe, W. et al. (2002). *Teaching and researching reading*. Harlow: Essex: Pearson Education.
- Hirano, K. (2009). *Research on test-taking strategies in L2 reading* (28 ed.). Bull: Joetsu Unitversity Education.
- Janzen, J. S. (1998). Integrating strategic reading in L2 instruction. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 12*(1), 251-269.
- Kalechstein, P. B. (1998). Effects of test-wiseness training on test anxiety, locus of control and reading achievement in elementary school children. *Anxiety Research, 1*(3), 247-261.
- Perfetti, C. A. (2005). The acquisition of reading comprehension skills. In M. Snowling, & C. Hulme (Eds.). *The science of reading: A handbook, 227-247*.
- Pressley, M. (1998). *Reading instruction that really works*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Scharnagl, T. M. (2004). *the effects of test-taking strategies on students' reading achievement*. United States, Ohio: Union Institute and University.
- Stanovich, K. E. (2000). *Progress in understanding reading: Scientific foundation and new frontiers*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Vattanapath, R. a. (1999). An assessment of the effectiveness of teaching test-taking strategies for multiple choice English reading comprehension tests. *SLLT Occasional Papers, 57-71*.
- Veeravagu, J. M. (2010). Using Bloom's taxonomy to gause students' reading comprehension performance. *Canadian Social Science, 6*(3), 205-212.

Creative Commons licensing terms

Authors will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions, and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of English Language Teaching shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).