

Test-Taking strategies and Iranian EFL Learners' vocabulary and structure test performance

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Suggested Citation:

Yousofi, N., Pursiah, F. & Ahmadnejad, M. (2015). Test-Taking strategies and Iranian EFL Learners' vocabulary and structure test performance. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. 5(2), 129-142.

Received 12 May, 2015; revised 23 August, 2015; accepted 12 October, 2015.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc. Prof Dr. Ali Rahimi, Bangkok University.

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Abstract

Test-taking strategies are conscious processes that respondents employ to enhance their performance on language tests. This article reports a study on test-taking strategies utilized by low and high proficiency female EFL respondents in completing multiple-choice vocabulary and structure tests. The study seeks to explore how test-taking strategies vary according to the participants' proficiency level. Data were collected from 60 Persian EFL learners at a reputable institute on completing vocabulary and structure test items. The data were collected, categorized, and analyzed based on an adapted version of strategy questionnaire developed by Phakiti (2006). The results indicated that low-proficiency participants utilized mnemonic strategies more frequently than high-proficiency participants in completing both tests. In completing structure tests, high-proficiency participants employed mnemonic strategies more than cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. In completing vocabulary test items, however, they drew almost equally on all three strategy types. The results also indicated that the low-proficiency participants did better in completing vocabulary test than high-proficiency participants did. Further, high proficiency participants performed better in structure tests than low proficiency participants did. The findings seem to indicate that foreign language learners rely more on mnemonic strategies than cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies due to their deficient competency in L2 knowledge. The results have implications for foreign language teachers and learners.

Keywords: test-taking strategy, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategy, mnemonic strategy, Iranian EFL learners

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1. Introduction

Test results have always had a significant role in the life of test-takers regarding accessing a particular program or being hired for a job, thus "It may be crucial that beyond the standard orientation that is available for high-stakes tests, respondents have a sense as to how to enhance their performance on specific types of items and procedures found on such tests" (Cohen 2011). The strategies that "respondents were drawing upon as they completed language tests – that is, the consciously selected processes that the respondents used for dealing with both the language issues and the item-response demands in the test-taking tasks at hand" are test-taking strategies according to Cohen (2011). Test-taking strategy studies are carried out "to arrive at a series of empirically validated suggestions for what respondents need to do in order to enhance their performance on tests" (Cohen, 2011). Assessment specialists' growing concern about construct validation has resulted in a number of studies on the importance of the relationship between the respondents' performance on language tests and employing test-taking strategies (Abanomey, 2002; Anani Sarab & Seif Reihani, 2010; Cohen, 2011; Cohen & Upton, 2006; Cohen & Upton, 2007; Koda, 2007; Phakiti, 2003a; Phakiti, 2003b; Phakiti, 2006; Purpura, 1997; Purpura, 1999).

1.1. Literature review

Purpura (1999) and Phakiti (2003b) investigated the relationship between cognitive and metacognitive strategy use and the respondents' performance on a reading test by using a cognitive and metacognitive questionnaire. Song (2004) revised Purpura's (1999) strategy questionnaire and investigated the effect of cognitive and metacognitive strategies on test-takers' performance. Song (2005) investigated the relationship between test-takers' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies without considering the influence of specific test context.

Moreover, examining the cognitive factors underlying successful and unsuccessful language performance has been the focus of many studies (e.g., O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, 1990). A series of more recent studies on the relationship between cognitive and metacognitive strategies and how they affect the respondents' performance on language tasks indicate a close relationship between cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Anderson, 2005; Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown et al., 1983; Chamot, 2005; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Phatiki, 2006; Wenden, 1991). Cognitive strategies have been found to affect L2 performance directly since "they are involved directly in the target language use" (Phakiti, 2006, P.56). Phakiti has investigated the nature of cognitive strategies (comprehending, retrieval, and memory strategies) and metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, and evaluating strategies) and their relationships to English as a foreign language reading test performance via structural equation (2006). The results showed a positive correlation between memory and retrieval strategies and EFL reading test performance via comprehending strategies, the executive role of monitoring strategies on memory strategies, the regulatory role of evaluating strategies on retrieval strategies. Attempts for confirming the relationship between cognitive and metacognitive strategies have been made mostly on reading test performance (Anani Sarab & Seif Reihani, 2010; Phakiti, 2006).

A review of related literature did not result in finding a strategy questionnaire for measuring mnemonic strategies. According to Phillai "Mnemonic strategy is a memory-enhancing instructional practice that uses keywords and visual cues to link new information to information the students already know (Phillai, 2004, p. 2). He believes, "All students benefit from mnemonic strategies, with a greater improvement seen in students with learning disabilities. Mnemonic strategies improve students' retention and ability to learn vocabulary words" (Phillai, 2004, p. 2). The current study seeks to determine the variation in types and frequency of strategies that the respondents use to arrive at their answers on tests of structure and vocabulary. It also aims to explore how test-taking strategies affect the respondents' performance on vocabulary and structure test items.

Test-taking strategies in this study refer to cognitive, metacognitive, and mnemonic strategies which Cohen (2011) calls "language learner strategies". Cohen (2011) presents three kinds of strategies that respondents might employ to arrive at their answers: a) language learner strategies are the basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and the knowledge of vocabulary and structure that the respondents utilize, b) test-management strategies, the meaningful use of linguistic and cognitive processes, and c) test-wiseness strategies, the respondents' familiarity with test formats and other information that the test-takers use to answer test items without drawing upon the expected linguistic and cognitive processes.

1.2 Research questions

1. The following questions guided the present study:
2. What test-taking strategies do Persian EFL respondents use in completing structure and vocabulary tests?
3. To what extent do these strategies affect Persian EFL respondents' performance on structure and vocabulary test items?
4. How do these strategies fluctuate according to the participants' proficiency level?

2. Research Method

2.1. Procedure and participants

The participants in the present study were 60 language learners selected based on purposive sampling "based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, and gain insights; therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most" (Merriam, 1998, p. 60). A group of 60 female EFL learners aged 16 to 25 from two levels according to the regulation of the institute were recruited to participate in the study. The participants were Pre-Intermediate and Advanced level English learners based on the regulation of the institute and their homogeneity was determined based on their current level at the institute. All the participants were Persian native speakers who were all selected from Iran Language Institute, which is one of the English academies in Kermanshah-Iran.

2.2. Instruments

Two sets of measurement instruments in this study were employed: a multiple-choice test of structure and vocabulary, and a test-taking strategy use questionnaire. The final multiple-choice test that was particularly designed to assess the language learners' mastery of vocabulary and structure at the Iran Language Institute at the end of each semester was used. The validity of these final achievement tests is accepted on the account that test designers have prepared them according to the syllabus of the institute. The strategy use questionnaire was adapted from Phakiti (2006), modified and validated to fit the requirement of the study. Two categories of cognitive and metacognitive strategies were modified according to Phakiti's strategy questionnaire. The items were then verified according to the strategies that were required for attempting vocabulary and structure test items. The adapted versions of the taxonomies were pilot-studied by a similar group in terms of the relevance, meaning, and clarity of the items. Due to lack of a strategy questionnaire for measuring mnemonic strategies in the literature, the researchers devised the items for evaluating mnemonic strategies. Mnemonic strategies such as grouping, using acronym, reviewing, visualization, rhyming, keyword technique, and semantic linking were taken from studies on language learning strategies. Mnemonic strategies employed for completing structure test items were different from the strategies utilized for answering vocabulary test items. Two separate sets of strategy questionnaires were designed for vocabulary and structure test questions. Both questionnaires were translated into Persian and

were pilot-studied with a similar group of language learners from the same institute and the same levels in order to identify any problems with the items in terms of clarity and appropriateness (See Appendices C and D). Some items were elaborated on and reworded. Moreover, the reliability of the instruments were checked using SPSS. The Cronbach alpha was 0.79 for the vocabulary questionnaire and 0.83 for the structure questionnaire.

2.3. Data collection

The surveys were administered to a group of 60 female EFL learners aged 16 to 25 from two levels, who were all Persian native speakers from Iran Language Institute. To ensure that the strategies had been used under normal conditions, the participants were given enough time to complete the tests based on the examination regulations at the Iran Language Institute. After they completed the final exam, they were given sufficient time to complete the strategy questionnaires. The questionnaires used in this study allowed learners to mark strategy use on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (Never), 2 (Sometimes), 3 (Often), 4 (Usually) and 5 (Always). The length of time needed to complete the questionnaires ranged from approximately 10-15 minutes.

Table 1. Taxonomy of the strategy questionnaire for Vocabulary

Processing	Subscale	No. of items	items
1. Cognitive strategies	Comprehending	1	1
	Memory	2	19,22
	Retrieval	1	2
2. Metacognitive strategies 20	Planning	5	3,10, 14,15
	Monitoring	5	4,5,8,11,21
	Evaluating	4	7,13,16,17
3.Mnemonic strategies	Visualization	2	9,23
	Rhyming	1	6
	Keyword technique	1	12
	Semantic linking	1	18

Table 2. Taxonomy of the strategy questionnaire for structure

Processing	Subscale	No. of items	items
Cognitive strategies	Comprehending	1	3
	Memory	2	19,22
	Retrieval	3	1,2, 4
Metacognitive strategies	Planning	5	5, 11, 15, 16, 20
	Monitoring	5	6, 7, 10,12,
	Evaluating	4	9,14,17,18
Mnemonic strategies	Review	1	23
	Using acronym	1	13
	Grouping	1	8

2.3. Data analysis

The average use of each strategy to complete structure and vocabulary test items has been presented in table 3 and 4.

Table 3. The mean score for strategies used by participants

	Cognitive	metacognitive	Mnemonic
Pre. Structure	2.35	2.56	3.41
Adv. Structure	2.52	2.84	3.16
Pre. Vocabulary	1.91	2.59	3.22
Adv. Vocabulary	2.41	2.61	2.82

Table 3 demonstrates that for both groups of low-and high-proficiency respondents, the highest reported strategy is for mnemonic strategies in both tests of structure and vocabulary. However, examining the statistics in table 3 proves that low-proficiency respondents drew more on mnemonic strategies than cognitive and metacognitive strategies and more than their higher-proficiency counterparts did. This is in line with Oxford's (2003, p. 13) discussion that, "The probable reason for this is that memory strategies are often used for memorizing vocabulary and structures in initial stages of language learning, but that learners need such strategies much less when their arsenal of vocabulary and structures has become larger".

Table 4 Group Statistics, structure

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	Pre	30	14.77	.473	.452
	Adv	30	15.20	1.730	.316

Table 4 demonstrates that advanced participants did better on structure test items than low-level participants. Putting aside the mnemonic strategies, table 3 indicates that high-proficiency participants utilized cognitive and metacognitive strategies more than low-proficiency and as a result did better on the structure test.

Table 5 Group Statistics, vocabulary

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	Pre	31	15.42	2.873	.516
	Adv	29	12.07	2.711	.504

On the other hand, table 5 indicates that low-level participants did better in the vocabulary test. Again putting aside mnemonic strategies, an analysis of statistics in table 3 reveals that low-level participants did better than high-level participants in the vocabulary test because of utilizing metacognitive strategies to a larger extent than cognitive strategies. One interpretation of this finding is that for high-proficiency respondents, higher-level processing of cognitive strategies contributes to better performance in structure tests while with lower-level participants, strategic processing contributes to better performance in vocabulary test.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of the study led to two noticeable conclusions in terms of test-taking strategies: first, EFL high and low proficiency respondents draw on mnemonic strategies in completing tests of vocabulary and structure more than cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This may be explicable in terms of the EFL respondents' insufficient L2 competence. The second conclusion is the contribution of cognitive strategies to performance on vocabulary and structure tests. Further analysis of the strategies indicates that cognitive strategies contribute to successful performance on structure tests more than successful performance on vocabulary items. It appears that cognitive strategies correlate with structure items rather than vocabulary items especially with high-proficiency participants.

The results of the study demonstrate that the observed difference in the types and frequency of the strategies employed by low and high proficiency participants led to a difference in their performance on both vocabulary and structure tests. The fact that both low and high proficiency participants employed particular test-taking strategies for different test items that they assumed worked better for them conveys that learners require special preparation for these two testing items. The present study, on test-taking strategies in performance on vocabulary and structure items, have implications for how three categories of test-taking strategies can be integrated into designing EFL classroom tests of vocabulary and structure. EFL teachers can raise the learners' awareness of how they can benefit from test-taking strategies.

4. Conclusion

The findings of the present study on test-taking strategies have provided test developers and users with beneficial feedback about what actually the respondents do on a given test. It was the purpose of this study to seek how test-taking strategies affect test performance of test-takers on vocabulary and structure tests. It was also the purpose of this study to see how respondents' drawing on test-taking strategies varies from low to high proficiency test-takers. It is hoped that the results of the present study provide test developers and users in designing vocabulary and structure test items. It was also found that the difference observed in the types and frequency of strategies employed by low and high proficiency participants led to a difference between their performances on vocabulary test items. Finally, yet importantly, no doubt drawing on the findings of this study in testing contexts, the effect of test-taking strategies on vocabulary and structure needs further research.

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**Appendix A The cognitive and metacognitive strategy questionnaire
(Phakiti,2006)**

Name-Surname:_____ **Student ID:** _____

Today's date: _____ **Gender:** [] male [] female **Age:** _____

No. of year learning English: ____ **English Entrance Test Score:** ____

Directions: A number of statements which people use to describe themselves when they were taking a reading test are given below. Read each statement and indicate how you thought during the test. Choose 1 (Never), 2 (Sometimes), 3 (Often), 4 (Usually), and 5 (Always)

	Your thinking	1	2	3	4	5
1	I made short notes or underlined main ideas during the test.					
2	I translated the reading texts and tasks into Thai					
3	I used pictures or titles of the texts to help comprehend reading tasks.					
4	I used my own English structure knowledge to comprehend the text.					
5	I spent more time on difficult questions.					
6	I tried to understand the texts and questions regardless of my vocabulary knowledge.					

7	I tried to find topics and main ideas by scanning and skimming.				
8	I read the texts and questions several times to better understand them.				
9	I used my prior knowledge to help understand the reading test.				
10	I tried to identify easy and difficult test tasks.				
11	When I started to complete the test, I planned how to complete it and followed the plan.				
12	I was aware of what and how I was doing in the test.				
13	I checked my own performance and progress while completing the test.				
14	I attempted to identify main points of the given reading texts and tasks.				
15	I thought through the meaning of the test tasks/questions before answering them.				
16	I was aware of which strategy to use and how and when to use it.				
17	I corrected mistakes immediately when found.				
18	I asked myself how the test questions and the given texts related to what I already knew.				
19	I determined what the test tasks/questions required me to do.				
20	I was aware of the need to plan a course of action.				
21	I was aware of how much the test remained to be completed.				
22	I tried to understand the questions adequately before attempting to find the answers.				
23	I made sure I understood what had to be done and how to do it.				
24	I was aware of my ongoing reading and test taking.				
25	I kept track of my own progress to complete the questions on				

	time.					
26	I used multiple thinking strategies to help answer the test questions					
27	I made sure to clarify the goal and know how to complete it.					
28	I checked my accuracy as I progressed through the test.					
29	I selected relevant information to help me understand the reading texts and answer the test questions.					
30	I carefully checked the answers before submitting the test.					

Appendix B The cognitive, metacognitive, and mnemonic strategy questionnaire

Directions: A number of statements which people use to describe themselves

when they were taking a reading test are given below. Read each statement and indicate how you thought during the test.

Choose 1 (Never), 2 (Sometimes), 3 (Often), 4 (Usually), and 5 (Always)

		1	2	3	4	5
1.	I used my own English structure knowledge to comprehend the question.					
2.	I translated the test questions and the choices.					
3.	I tried to understand the questions regardless of my vocabulary knowledge.					
4.	I used my prior knowledge to help understand the test questions.					
5.	When I started to complete the test, I planned how to complete it and followed the plan.					
6.	I was aware of what and how I was doing in the test.					
7.	I checked my own performance and progress while completing the test.					
8.	I connected the sound of the words in the options to a word I already know.					
9.	I thought through the meaning of the test tasks/questions before answering them.					
10.	I corrected mistakes immediately when found.					
11.	I created an image to help recall the meaning of the word.					
12.	I was aware of the need to plan a course of action.					
13.	I was aware of how much the test remained to be completed.					
14.	I tried to find a keyword for each word in the options and recall the definition.					
15.	I kept track of my own progress to complete the questions on time.					
16.	I tried to identify easy and difficult test tasks.					
17.	I made sure to clarify the goal and know how to complete it.					
18.	I selected relevant information to help me understand the test tasks and answer the test questions.					

19.	I carefully checked the answers before submitting the test.					
20.	I create a semantic link between the words in the options and familiar word					
21.	I spent more time on difficult questions.					
22.	I made sure I understood what had to be done and how to do it.					
23.	I checked my accuracy as I progressed through the test.					
24.	I tried to understand the questions adequately before attempting to find the answers.					
25.	I constructed a visual image that connects the words in the options to a familiar word with some common features.					
26.	I tried to review the grammatical rules I know well.					
27.	I linked the first letter of each to-be-remembered list items successively, as ACRONYM.					
28.	I organize/group grammatical structures semantically to enhance my recall.					

Appendix C: Persian Questionnaire for Vocabulary Test

1 2 3 4 5

					1 من سوالات و گزینه ها را ترجمه می کردم.
					2 از دانش قبلی خود برای درک سوالات استفاده می کردم.
					3 هنگامی که شروع به پاسخ دادن به سوالات کردم برای آن برنامه ریزی کردم و طبق آن برنامه پیش رفتم.
					4 از اینکه چگونه می خواستم به سوالات پاسخ دهم کاملا آگاهی داشتم.
					5 عملکرد و پیشرفت خود را در طول آزمون مورد ارزیابی قرار می دادم.
					6 بین صدای کلمات در گزینه ها و کلماتی که می شناختم ارتباط برقرار می کردم.
					7 قبل از پاسخ دادن به سوالات به معنی آنها فکر می کردم.
					8 به محض پی بردن به اشتباهاتم آنها را تصحیح می کردم.
					9 برای بخاطر آوردن معنی کلمات سعی می کردم یک تصویر ذهنی خلق کنم.
					10 از ضرورت برنامه ریزی برای پاسخگویی به آزمون آگاه بودم.
					11 از اینکه چقدر از آزمون برای پاسخگویی یافیمانده بود آگاهی داشتم.
					12 برای به خاطر آوردن معنی کلمات در گزینه ها از تکنیک کلمه ی کلیدی استفاده می کردم.
					13 از پیشرفت خود در جوابگویی به سوالات برای به پایان رساندن آزمون قبل از اتمام وقت آگاهی داشتم.
					14 سعی می کردم سوالات آسان و سخت را از هم تشخیص دهم.
					15 هدف اصلی آزمون را تشخیص دادم و راه رسیدن به هدف را می دانستم.
					16 دانش قبلی ام را به کار گرفتم تا در فهم و پاسخگویی سوالات به من کمک کند.
					17 قبل از تحویل برگه امتحانی پاسخ ها را به دقت چک کردم.
					18 سعی می کردم ارتباط معنایی بین کلمات در گزینه ها و کلماتی که می دانستم ایجاد کنم.
					19 وقت بیشتری صرف پاسخگویی به سوالات مشکل می کردم.
					20 از اینکه باید چکار کنم و چگونه به سوالات پاسخ دهم اطمینان حاصل می کردم.

					21	در حالیکه به سوالات جواب می دادم دقت و صحت کارم را چک می کردم.
					22	قبل از پاسخ دادن به سوالات سعی می کردم که سوالات را به درستی بفهمم.
					23	برای خود تصویر ذهنی ایجاد می کردم که ارتباطی بین کلمات موجود در گزینه ها و کلمات با ویژگیهای مشابه بوجود بیاورد.

Appendix D: Persian Questionnaire for Structure Test

1	2	3	4	5		
					1	من دانش گرامری خود را برای فهمیدن سوال بکار می برم.
					2	من سوالات و گزینه ها را ترجمه می کردم.
					3	سعی می کردم سوالات را بدون توجه به دانش واژگان بفهمم.
					4	از دانش قبلی خود برای درک سوالات استفاده می کردم.
					5	هنگامی که شروع به پاسخ دادن به سوالات کردم برای آن برنامه ریزی کردم و طبق آن برنامه پیش رفتم.
					6	از اینکه چگونه می خواستم به سوالات پاسخ دهم کاملا آگاهی داشتم.
					7	عملکرد و پیشرفت خود را در طول آزمون مورد ارزیابی قرار می دادم.
					8	نکات دستوری را بصورت گروه های معنایی در آورده ام که بخاطر آوردن آنها ساده تر باشد.
					9	قبل از پاسخ دادن به سوالات به معنی آنها فکر می کردم.
					10	به محض پی بردن به اشتباهاتم آنها را تصحیح می کردم.
					11	از ضرورت برنامه ریزی برای پاسخگویی به آزمون آگاه بودم.
					12	از اینکه چقدر از آزمون برای پاسخگویی یافیمانده بود آگاهی داشتم.
					13	برای حفظ کردن لیست مطالب حرف اول آنها را بصورت یک کلمه در آورده ام که به آسانی به آنها دسترسی داشته باشم- مانند FANBOYS
					14	از پیشرفت خود در جوابگویی به سوالات برای به پایان رساندن آزمون قبل از اتمام وقت آگاهی داشتم.
					15	سعی می کردم سوالات آسان و سخت را از هم تشخیص دهم.
					16	هدف اصلی آزمون را تشخیص دادام و راه رسیدن به هدف را می دانستم.
					17	دانش قبلی ام را به کار گرفتم تا در فهم و پاسخگویی سوالات به من کمک کند.
					18	قبل از تحویل برگه امتحانی پاسخ ها را به دقت چک کردم.
					19	وقت بیشتری صرف پاسخگویی به سوالات مشکل می کردم.
					20	از اینکه باید چکار کنم و چگونه به سوالات پاسخ دهم اطمینان حاصل می کردم.
					21	در حالیکه به سوالات جواب می دادم دقت و صحت کارم را چک می کردم.
					22	قبل از پاسخ دادن به سوالات سعی می کردم که سوالات را به درستی بفهمم.
					23	سعی می کردم نکات دستوری را که می دانستم بخوبی مرور کنم.