

# TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES AND READING COMPREHENSION OF SAUDI EFL STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

There is an increasing interest in studies investigating the correlation between Test-Taking Strategies (TTSs) and reading comprehension achievement among EFL learners. The relationship between the aforementioned variables is still unclear and more studies are needed in this area. The major concern of this study is to examine the correlational relationship between the use of test-taking strategies and reading comprehension. The sample of this study included 64 undergraduate students majoring in English language at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. The present research employed three instruments for data collection process; English Language Placement Test was used to distribute students according to their proficiency level, two reading passages taken from TOEFL reading comprehension tests, and a questionnaire adapted from Cohen and Upton (2007) asking about TTSs. The results of the present study showed that Saudi EFL students used test-taking strategies at a moderate level. There was no statistically significant correlation between test-taking strategies use and students' achievement in reading comprehension tests. There was also no significant differences between test-taking strategies and students' achievement in reading comprehension attributed to language proficiency level. Some pedagogical implications for EFL teachers were presented and discussed.

**Keywords:** Test-taking strategies, learning strategies, reading comprehension, reading test, Saudi EFL learners.

## Introduction

Tests are the most popular instrument for assessing learners' performance in different educational domains. The wide use of tests as an assessment tool could be attributed to its practicality and time-saving features. The learners' performance in tests is one of the determinants of academic success for learners (Tunaz & Tüm, 2019). Learners' test results could be affected by many factors such as psychological,

cognitive, and test/learner related ones (Hambleton, Swaminathan, & Rogers, 1991). Therefore, the prior research works on this field have referred to TTSs' training as an important element to enhance the learners' performance in their tests. The results of language tests are extremely important in learners' academic life; these results are used to obtain information about learners and their academic success (Cohen, 2006). Subsequently, employing TTSs is decisive for language test-takers to achieve high scores in test items. Besides, test-developers should be aware of the test strategies that learners may utilise during their test-taking, and to understand the content of the test in particular (Pourdana, Bornaki, Fard, & Sarkhosh, 2012).

Reading comprehension is one of the receptive language skills and it is defined as the capability of mentally process text, comprehend its content, and integrate the prior knowledge on the given text topic (Rahmani & Sadeghi, 2011). Kim and Anderson (2011) emphasise the importance of reading in college-level courses, which means that more proficient readers are more likely prepared to succeed in their courses. As mentioned earlier, tests are the most common method of assessing learners' academic achievement, and this also applies to the assessment of reading performance. Test-taking strategies (TTSs) play a vital role in enhancing students' performance in tests in general and in reading comprehension tests in particular (Zainol Abidin & Mohammadi, 2012). It is important to know how students get their answers and what mental processes they apply while taking a test. Students must be aware of the TTSs they may need to deal with reading comprehension tests such as dealing with unknown vocabulary in which hinder the comprehension of a certain topic (Cubuku, 2010). The test-taking behaviours and TTSs employed by students while taking a test have not been much studied (Tunaz & Tum, 2019). Consequently, the present study aims at studying the strategies that Saudi EFL students employ while taking a reading comprehension test. The research questions for the study are:

- 1) What is the level of TTSs used by Saudi EFL students?
- 2) Is there a significant correlation between TTSs used and students' performance in reading comprehension test?
- 3) Is there a significant difference between TTSs used and students' English proficiency level?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Test-Taking Strategies***

The term "Test-Taking Strategies" (TTSs) has been viewed and defined from different perspectives. Hirano (2009) defined TTSs as those strategies used by learners while taking a test. Cohen and Upton (2007) viewed TTSs as certain strategies that learners employ to complete a test task. Allan and MacLennan (1997) view test-taking strategy as the capability to record and take advantage of language test to get answers through the keyword approach. The answers, in this case, are reached without depending on the knowledge or skills that the questions were designed to assess or measure. Jiménez, García, and Pearson (1996) define test-taking strategies as procedures used by learners to retrieve the information easily,

and categorise them into different classes: reader' strategies, text strategies, bilingual strategies, and interactive strategies. In a similar vein, Bruch (1981) refers to TTSs as distinguished rules, procedures, or rules that facilitate the successful solution of test items. Cohen (1998) proposed two classes of the nature and sub-components of test-taking strategies. Cohen (1998) argues that TTSs include strategies for language use and strategies for test-wiseness. Strategies for language use involve the deliberate operations that learners use to boost the use of L2 to successfully complete the various tasks of language. This class of TTSs involves learners' use of some expected language strategies such as the recall of information, revision, cover, and then communication. These strategies would help learners to conserve, retain, remember, and apply the necessary information while taking a test. In opposition to strategies for language use, strategies for test-wiseness refer to the prior knowledge of examinees on how to take a test, rather than their language proficiency.

Later, Cohen (2006) proposed a new model where TTSs were divided into three groups: strategies for language learning, strategies for test-management, and strategies for test-wiseness. Language learning strategies are defined as the students' application of their prior language skills such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary, and translation while taking a test. Test-management strategies refer to the strategies used by students to meaningfully respond to the test questions. Test-wiseness strategies are known as the strategies for using the knowledge of test format and other environmental information to successfully respond to the test questions without going through the anticipated linguistic and cognitive processes. Similarly, Rezaei (2006) categorised TTSs into general and specific strategies. General strategies involve preparing for the test, reading the test directions, time management, and avoiding errors during the test. Specific strategies are those strategies employed by students in the subject area of the test; it also involves dealing with the different test types. For example, word matching multiple-choice questions, essay, fill-in-the space, true-false, short answers, and questions of problem-solving.

### ***Reading Comprehension***

According to Rahmani and Sadeghi (2011), reading comprehension is defined as a process of mental interaction containing the linguistic competence of readers, background knowledge of the real world, background knowledge of specific topics. Reading comprehension is the basic way of gaining new information and it is one of the most important skills required for success in language learning (Pourmohammadi, 2015). Reading comprehension has been defined in different ways. Chastain (1988) defined reading comprehension as a receptive skill that aims at decoding the language process. Nuttall (1996) argues that reading comprehension is highly related to meaning; it involves transferring meaning from one to another such as transferring the information from an author to a reader. Radojevic (2009) views reading comprehension as a process that relies on two different types of information: the one received from the text, and the one that readers retrieve from their memories. She also emphasised the vital role that past experiences and prior

knowledge play when learners attempt to gain meaning from the given topic. According to Radojevic (2009), reading comprehension is defined as the ability to grasp and understand the intended meaning of a certain text. Radojevic's (2009) definition of reading comprehension seems to be consistent with schema theory which indicates that the understanding of certain topics relies on the prior knowledge of readers concerning that particular text and how readers interact with it.

### ***Factors Influencing Reading Comprehension.***

Prior studies have proved that reading comprehension is influenced by certain factors. These factors include the size of vocabulary, knowledge of semantics and syntax, and background knowledge (Zainol Abidin & Mohammadi, 2012).

Vocabulary size is one of the essential factors that influence comprehending a written text. Readers should be aware of the meanings of words they face in a written text. The prior research on vocabulary size have not come into a consensus pertaining to the number of words that L2 learners need to succeed in a reading text. Laufer (1997) points out that learners should possess a vocabulary size of 3000-word families to succeed in a reading test. Hsueh-Chao and Nation (2000) argue that learners should recognise 98% of the words found in fiction works in order to comprehend a reading text.

Syntactic and semantic knowledge is another factor that influences reading comprehension. EFL learners differ in the capability of using syntactic and semantic knowledge; some are adept and others are not. Wu (2006) points out that syntactic knowledge is important for two reasons. The first reason is that learners can clearly get and use words in a sentence through the employment of syntactic and grammatical rules and structures. The second reason is that the analysis of the syntactic structure of sentences is helpful to distinguish meanings and recognise words. Concerning semantic knowledge, Oakhill and Garnham (1988) assert that recognising word meanings is extremely important to comprehend a reading text. Readers who can distinguish the meanings of words properly could easily comprehend a reading text compared to others. Therefore, the lack of semantic knowledge may lead to decoding problems, and then the inability to comprehend reading texts.

Background knowledge is another factor that influences reading comprehension. Background knowledge is defined as the life experiences that learners acquire throughout their life (Pittelman & Heimlich, 1991). As a sequence, background knowledge could help both good and poor readers in a reading comprehension test, and it could overcome linguistic deficiencies (Grabe, 1991).

### ***Prior Studies on Test-Taking Strategies and Reading Comprehension***

A number of research (Nourdad & Ajideh, 2019; Pourdana, et al., 2012; Pourmohammadi, 2015; Saraswati, 2017; Tunaz & Tüm, 2019) have been carried out to examine the relationship between TTs and reading performance. Pourdana et al. (2012) studied the relationship between TTs and reading comprehension

performance among 68 Iranian EFL learners from the Iranian Higher Education Institute (Alborz). The findings showed no significant correlation between TTSs and reading performance. Zainol Abidin dan Mohammadi (2012) examined the effect of TTSs instruction on the reading comprehension test of 66 Iranian EFL learners. The control group did not receive explicit instruction on how to use TTSs; while the experimental group did receive such kind of explicit instruction. After treatment, the results showed that explicit instruction had a considerable impact on enhancing students' achievement in reading comprehension test. Pourmohammadi (2015) examined the effectiveness of teaching TTSs in improving the 33 Iranian EFL learners' performance in reading comprehension. Two reading comprehension passages from TOEFL tests were selected to use as the pre-test and the post-test. The study showed that explicit instruction an impact on students' achievement in reading comprehension tests. Saraswati (2017) also studied the correlational relationship between reading strategy use and 312 Nepalese EFL students' achievement in reading tests. The instruments used in this study were reading comprehension test and a reading strategy questionnaire. The students were active in TTSs use, and they reported high usage of cognitive strategies compared to other types of strategies. In addition, a statistically significant relation appeared between reading strategies use and students' language proficiency level; students with higher proficiency level were more active users of reading strategies than students with low language proficiency level.

Nourdad and Ajideh (2019) studied the possible correlation between TTSs and reading comprehension performance among 214 Iranian learners studying in three departments (i.e. English Literature, Translation, and Teaching English) at the University of Tabriz, Iran. A statistically significant relationship was found between TTSs and the students' achievement in the reading test. The qualitative results showed that students employed more metacognitive strategies of test-taking than the cognitive strategies.

Similarly, Tunaz and Tm (2019) studied the impact of TTSs training on 90 Turkish students' reading comprehension, who were divided into three groups. The first group of students received physical training sessions on the use of TTSs for six weeks. The second group received self-training conducted online via videos related to TTSs. The third (control) group did not receive any kind of training. The findings showed no significant relationship between the use of TTSs and students' scores in reading tests. In addition, it has been found that face-to-face training is more influential compared to online training. The study recommended integrating test-strategy training into the English curriculum to foster the students' awareness of these strategies.

### **Method of the Study**

This study adopted the correlational design since it investigated the relationship between two variables (i.e. TTSs and reading comprehension).

The respondents were 64 Saudi EFL students who were studying at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. All students belong to the Department of English at that particular university.

Three instruments were employed to collect data. The first instrument was the English Placement Test Longman Pearson (LPEP) containing 100 multiple-choice questions for determining the proficiency level of Saudi EFL learners. The proficiency level of students was determined based on their results in the test as follows:

- a) 00-15 = Below Elementary
- b) 16-30 = Elementary
- c) 31-45 = Pre-Intermediate
- d) 46-60 = Intermediate
- e) 61-75 = Upper Intermediate
- f) 76- 100 = Advanced

The Cronbach’s Alpha for the English placement test was  $\alpha=.782$ , and this indicates accepted reliability since it is above  $\alpha=.700$  (Creswell, 2014).

The second instrument was a reading comprehension test to determine the achievement level of students in this particular skill. It includes two cloze passages with 20 questions (10 multiple-choice questions each) taken from previous TOEFL reading comprehension tests provided in its official website. The titles of the passages were “Running Water on Mars” and “Ancient Rome and Greece”. The Cronbach’s Alpha for both reading tests was  $\alpha=.748$  and  $\alpha=.796$  respectively.

The third instrument was a questionnaire on TTSs adapted from Cohen and Upton (2007). The questionnaire consists of 58 items about the TTSs used by the students when taking a reading comprehension test. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale as follows: 1 for never, 2 for rarely, 3 for sometimes, 4 for frequently, and 5 for always. The Cronbach’s Alpha for the questionnaire items was  $\alpha=.883$  which indicates an acceptable value to use the questionnaire.

### **Results and Discussion**

This section shows the distribution of the participants of this study according to their English proficiency level (Table 1). The number of students with below elementary proficiency level was seven (10.9%), elementary 14 (21.9%), pre-intermediate 22 (34.4%), intermediate 10 (15.6%), upper-intermediate six (9.4%), and advanced proficiency level students was five (7.8%).

Table 1  
*Distribution of participants according to language proficiency*

Proficiency level	Frequency	Percent
Below Elementary	7	10.9
Elementary	14	21.9
Pre-Intermediate	22	34.4
Intermediate	10	15.6
Upper-Intermediate	6	9.4
Advanced	5	7.8
Total	64	100.0

**Level of test-taking strategies used by Saudi EFL students**

Descriptive statistics were calculated and tabulated to show the extent of TTs used by Saudi EFL students (Table 2). Test-taking strategies were used moderately (M=3.62, SD=.48). The students' answers to the questionnaire items ranged from M= 2.19 to M= 4.34.

Table 2  
*The level of TTs used by Saudi EFL students*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TTs	64	2.19	4.34	3.62	.480
Valid N (listwise)	64				

**Correlation between TTs use and students' performance in reading comprehension test**

Pearson correlation test results showed no significant correlation between TTs and reading comprehension achievement in the reading comprehension test ( $r=.055$ ,  $p=.688$ ). As shown in Table 3, the mean score of TTs use among Saudi EFL students was 3.62 (SD=.48) while the mean score of students' performance in the reading comprehension test was 11.78 (SD=6.43).

Table 3  
*Correlation between TTs use and reading comprehension*

	Mean	SD	r	Sig
TTs	3.62	.48		
Reading Comprehension	11.78	6.43	.055	.688

**Difference between employing TTs and students' English proficiency level**

One Way ANOVA was used to investigate the differences between TTs use and the students' English proficiency level. As shown in Table 4, the mean score of using TTs among the different proficiency levels are as follows: below elementary students (M=3.58, SD=.299), elementary (M=3.61, SD=.647), pre-intermediate (M=3.60, SD=.426), intermediate (M=3.52, SD=.465), upper-intermediate (M=3.68, SD=.689), and advanced proficiency level students was (M=3.75, SD=.176). It is clear that advanced level students used more TTs, while intermediate level students had the lowest mean score in using the same strategies. However, there was no statistically significant difference in the use of TTs attributed to language proficiency level ( $p=.952$ ).

Table 4

*The difference between TTSs use and students' language proficiency*

	N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
Below Elementary	7	3.58	.299		
Elementary	14	3.61	.647		
Pre-Intermediate	22	3.60	.426		
Intermediate	10	3.52	.465	.221	.952
Upper-Intermediate	6	3.68	.689		
Advanced	5	3.75	.176		
Total	64	3.62	.480		

The results revealed that Saudi EFL learners use TTSs at a moderate level ( $M=3.62$ ,  $SD=.48$ ). This result is in line with the results of other researchers (Pourdana et al., 2012; Zainol Abidin & Mohammadi, 2012) who found a moderate use of TTSs among the participants. This result implies that the students put high effort in their reading in order to obtain the correct answers. They also seemed to be determined to understand the idea that the text intended to convey. However, the moderate level of using TTSs among Saudi EFL learners could be attributed to a lack of training in using such strategies. In addition, the results showed no significant correlation between TTSs and reading comprehension achievement in the reading comprehension test. This result is consistent with the results obtained in the Iranian context (Nourdad & Ajideh, 2019; Pourdana et al., 2012). The inconsistent results could be attributed to different factors. The first factor is due to the different questionnaires used in the previous studies in terms of the number of items and the scales of TTSs. Furthermore, the context of the study plays a vital role in the variance of correlation of variables under investigation. The academic background affects the use of TTSs and its relation to reading comprehension achievement (Zhang & Wu, 2009).

There were no significant differences between the use of TTSs according to English proficiency level among Saudi EFL learners. This result contradicts with the results of Pourmohammadi (2015) and Saraswati (2017) who found a statistically significant correlation between the use of TTSs and students' English proficiency level. In this study, students with advanced English proficiency level got the highest mean score concerning TTSs usage. They used different TTSs to deal with unknown vocabulary and this could be attributed to their mental capacities to decode unknown words (Pourmohammadi, 2015). However, students' scores in the reading comprehension test was not statistically significant due to some reasons. The first reason is due to time constraints as students were in a rush to complete the reading test and they did not get enough opportunity to assess their achievement during the test. The second reason is that students treated the reading test as a real test, and this leads students to become anxious and this had a negative effect on student's achievement in the reading test. This suggests that EFL learners need more training and explicit instruction on how to use TTSs and how to successfully deal with reading comprehension tests (Saraswati, 2017).



### Conclusion

The present study examined the level of TTSs use among Saudi EFL learners and the possible correlation between TTSs use and students' performance in reading tests across different language proficiency levels. The results showed that Saudi EFL learners use TTSs at a moderate level. Furthermore, no significant correlation was found between the use of TTSs and students' achievement in reading comprehension test. Language proficiency level did not affect the students' scores in the reading test; there was no statistically significant relationship between the students' performance in the reading test attributed to language proficiency level.

This study has some pedagogical implications for EFL stakeholders. English instructors should pay special attention to developing students' vocabulary to assist them to comprehend reading texts and grasp the idea of test-taking strategies. Students should be introduced to the different TTSs and receive explicit instruction or training on how to use such strategies. Different models can be introduced to teach students how to describe, use model, time management, and apply test-taking strategies. English teachers should also update the students' existing competencies in reading comprehension skills to help them become more autonomous in this area.

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