



Learner Strategies and Test-Wiseness of the Intermediate and Advanced Iranian TOEFL iBT Test Takers

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Abstract

Good language learners slot in a repertoire of strategies and when language tests are at stake, test-taking strategies and test-wiseness pave pay to a prolific outcome. Among such tests, TOEFL iBT seems to be a prerequisite to academic success and a nightmare many Iranian students struggle with. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to raise awareness about the type of questions in iBT, brush up the necessary skills integratively, and help them employ strategies that can facilitate optimal results during the preparation course and as they were taking the test. Furthermore, we intended to investigate if the level of proficiency alone was sufficient or strategies played a more important role. Therefore, 34 iBT candidates (18 intermediate and 16 advanced) sat an iBT test and later took part in special strategy training courses. They were interviewed on the effectiveness of the strategies during the course and after they sat the second exam. As the results revealed, there was a significant difference between the two sets of exam results and being test-wise and the strategies of goal setting, covering, interleaving, and considering the context along with spaced practice and compensation strategies helped the candidates perform better without further language classes.

Keywords: Test-Wiseness, Learner Strategies, Spaced Practice, Interleaving, TOEFL iBT

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Introduction

Language learning is a phenomenon most people experience as there is a wide range of languages worldwide; whether this experience is an enjoyable practice or raises out of necessity, directly depends on our objectives and future goals. Among such languages is English whose mastery is a requisite for higher education and at times better working conditions, which demands a great deal of perseverance, time, and costs on the part of language learner and yet is worthwhile and an asset enabling them to step into the brave new world and reach a level of occupational or academic realization. Good language learners slot in a repertoire of strategies and employing the right strategies is different from just floundering haplessly.

According to McDonough (2006), it is better to talk about learner strategies than learning strategies as they are uniquely used by individuals and are worth paying attention to. This issue is magnified when language tests are at stake and test-taking strategies along with test-wisness pave pay to a prolific outcome for each individual. Among such tests, the TOEFL iBT is a standard yardstick for measuring such level of proficiency globally and a terrifying test many Iranians need to take if they have higher drives. Therefore, there are copious TOEFL preparation courses and English instructors approach the tasks differently each casting emphasis on various skills and language points even though the related textbooks take into account all the necessary criteria for a desired result. Therefore, a myriad of research papers are annually published on the topic mainly focusing on a specific skill and exploring a new dimension. Among such diversity of topics, learning strategies, learner strategies, test-wisness and the right level of proficiency motivated the present paper considering the whole test.

Despite such diversity of topic, learner strategies employed during the preparation course with an added awareness of test type and with regard to the proficiency level of the skills and sub skills necessary, seem to be a promising domain that could aid many hapless TOEFL takers approach the test with composure and unnecessary distress helping them pluck their courage and the needed knowledge base to better handle the tasks. Therefore, this paper aims to shed some light on this issue more through the lenses of an Iranian context.

Cohen (1998) distinguishes between test-wisness strategies and test-taking strategies. Test-wisness strategies are not necessarily determined by proficiency in the language being assessed, but rather may be dependent on the respondent's knowledge of how to take tests. Test-taking strategies, in contrast, consist of language use strategies when they are used to help produce response to language testing tasks. Bond (1981), distinguishes between test-wisness and test-coaching. Test-wisness is independent of content areas whereas test-coaching refers to sustained instruction in the domain presumably being measured. Nitko and Brookhart (2007), classified test taking strategies into three categories of *Time-using strategies*, *Error-avoidance strategies*, and *Guessing strategies*.

In general education, test-wiseness strategies fall into three categories of 1. *Strategies used before answering the test* (e.g., reading the instructions carefully, starting with the easier questions, and budgeting time), *Strategies used during answering the test* (e.g., keeping up with the chronological order, maximum time allocated, and using intuition) and *Strategies used after answering the test* (e.g., revising the content and grammar and avoiding last minute changes) (Wenden, 1991). However, in an EFL/ESL context, these strategies could alter between question type, task type, and language skills. In a study carried by Nourmohammadi and Tahami (2018), it was revealed that Iranian EFL learners use different types of test-taking strategies in answering multiple-choice items in reading comprehension tasks.

Language use strategies are strategies for using the material and include *Retrieval strategies* (e.g., calling up language material from storage), *Rehearsal strategies* (e.g., rehearsing structures), *Cover strategies* (e.g., the impression of having control over the material), *Communication strategies* (for conveying a message that is both meaningful and informative) Cohen (1998).

Metacognitive strategies according to Bachman and Palmer (1996) for test taking are:

1. Goal setting: deciding what one is going to do; a. identifying the test tasks, b. choosing one or more tasks from a set of possible tasks, and c. deciding whether or not to attempt to complete the task(s) selected.

2. Assessment: a. assessing the characteristics of the test task to determine the desirability and feasibility of successfully completing it and what is needed to complete it, b. assessing our knowledge components to see if relevant areas of knowledge are available for successfully completing the test task, and c. assessing the correctness or appropriateness of the response to the test task.

3. Planning: deciding how to use what one has: a. selecting elements from the areas of knowledge for successfully completing the test task, b. formulating one or more plans for implementing these elements in a response to the test task, and c. selecting one plan for initial implementation as a response to the test task.

Oxford (Oxford & Cohen, 1992; Oxford, 2001) classifies strategies into: cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social in general. Cognitive strategies refer to the test-takers' ongoing mental activities to use their language and world knowledge to solve the test tasks (e.g., translating, predicting, summarizing, activating prior knowledge, applying grammatical rules, and guessing meaning from context). Metacognitive strategies are the test-takers' deliberate mental processes for directing and controlling their cognitive strategy processing for successful test performance (Phakiti, 2003). A study carried out by Phakiti (2003) showed that most cognitive strategies occurred in association with metacognitive strategies and, therefore, it is not at times easy to distinguish between these two strategies. Affective strategies are concerned with the learner's emotional requirements such as

confidence, while social strategies lead to increased interaction with the target language. According to Amini, Alavi Hosseini, and Zahabi (2016), using oral picture-description task strategies were effective in enabling the language learners in language proficiency gain in general and specifically mastering grammatical knowledge.

Weinstein and Smith (2016) offer six other research-based strategies that, if instructed well, could help a lot of test takers tackle the barrier of tests, in our case the TOEFL iBT, much easier. These are as follows: 1. *Spaced practice*; overtime learning and review are more promising than just leaving everything to the last moment when many learned materials will vanish when needed. 2. *Retrieval practice*; without the help of material, a test taker should try to recall information to realize how much they remember what has been learned. 3. *Elaboration*; this involves going a step further and making connection with the content as one is retrieving information. 4. *Interleaving*; this involves mixing practice with other skills or switching between ideas as they study. 5. *Concrete examples*; using specific examples to understand abstract ideas. 6. *Dual coding*; learners can make their own mental pictures of concepts so that they can easily retrieve them.

This study has sought to clarify among many factors that warrant a desired score on the TOEFL test, how learner strategies and test-wiseness can help the test takers get better marks even if their level of proficiency cannot be increased and if it mainly depends on strategy use during the preparation course and being applied right at the exam session. Accordingly, 34 candidates (16 advanced & 18 intermediate) took part in a strategy training course which lasted twelve sessions. They twice sat the TOEFL iBT mock exam once before joining the program and once after the course was over to see whether strategy training on tests and being test-wise affected their performance on the test without much language lessons being inserted. As the results revealed, strategy training does help candidates of any proficiency level tackle the TOEFL iBT easier and goal setting, interleaving, and compensation strategies take priority over the others as the learners claimed. Furthermore, the same strategies along with spaced practice during the preparation course can better assist them get the desired results.

Research Method

Participants

Thirty-four TOEFL iBT candidates who formerly took part in English courses and managed to pass intermediate (18 learners) and advanced (16 learners) courses, participated in a twelve-session course where they got acquainted with learning strategies and questions types and were interviewed after they learned about different strategies and realized which one was most beneficial for them taking their personal style and taste into account. They all had taken a mock TOEFL iBT exam and yet needed to get a higher score and claimed they failed to do well due to unfamiliarity with the test types and that they lacked the necessary test taking skills

to complete different sections. Furthermore, only few had the chance to take further language courses and most needed a faster result.

Thus, they were assigned into different groups based on their level of proficiency as the initial scores demanded and were interviewed after they learned about the strategies they could utilize. After the course was over, they sat another TOEFL iBT mock exam employing the strategies they learned and used during the course without taking further language courses. Later, they were interviewed about the second exam and their performance on it once they exploited the strategies. They were also asked about their performance and whether they could get a higher score compared to the first exam or not. It is worth mentioning that these 34 candidates took part in the course assigned for this study over a year's course as collecting these candidates at the same time was somehow not possible.

Materials and Instruments

In this study, for the test scores, TOEFL iBT mock exam which was administered by a licensed institute in Tabriz was used and every candidate sat the exam twice. In other words, sixty-eight tests were administered and scored based on the institute's raters.

For the second part of the study, which involved detailed interviews conducted every session during the course and after each session was over, the data was recorded and the most useful strategies that the candidates took advantage during the preparation and during the test were documented.

Data Collection Procedure

A twelve-session course for both intermediate and advanced candidates of the TOEFL iBT test was organized focusing on learning strategies and test-wiseness as the candidates worked on speaking, writing, listening, and reading parts of the test employing the relevant strategies. They were interviewed as what constituted better learner strategies for each individual and how employing them could make the tasks easier to handle even though the language by itself did not suffice.

The twelve learning strategies used in this study consisted of *compensation strategies*, *cover strategies*, *communication strategies*, *goal setting*, *assessment*, *planning*, along with *spaced practice*, *retrieval practice*, *elaboration*, *interleaving*, *concrete examples*, and *dual coding* which were practiced during the course and the candidates employed them as often as they could and were advised to use them during the test as well. It is worth mentioning that these strategies were not taught in order but whenever the questions demanded their use and depended on question types and the skills needed. Furthermore, the candidates were asked about their own personal strategies they used in other language proficiency tests they took since they were all university students or graduates who wanted to pursue higher academic or professional goals.

Every session the TOEFL iBT test related question-type was introduced and the needed strategies for better handling the tasks were taught and the candidates worked through the tasks employing them and later provided feedback on how they approached the parts and answered the questions. They also shared their ideas and tried to compensate for the tasks they could not complete. This procedure was conducted on all four skills and the researchers took notes of new patterns or techniques they did not cover in the study but were used intuitively by the participants. For instance, pre-fabricated chunks were what some participants used in their writing and speaking sections regardless of topics and claimed they saved time. Some others, avoided specific structures as they did not have a good command of English in them. And it seemed intermediate candidates relied more on strategies than the advanced candidates.

Analysis Results

This study sought to provide the TOEFL iBT candidates with specific test taking strategies and a tinge of test-wiseness to help them get better test results even though they would not take extra language courses. Therefore, the two groups of candidates (intermediate and advanced) sat the TOEFL iBT mock exam twice and the results of the pre-test and post-test were compared for both groups.

As the results of the paired sample t-test in Table 1 show, there was a significant difference between the results of the two sets of tests ($p < 0.00$; $p = 0.00$) for the intermediate level. The means for the pre-test and post-test were 70 and 72, respectively which is indicative of an increase in the intermediate level. This might be suggestive of the benefit of strategy training without further language lessons being given to candidates when they tap them into their existing repertoire and get acquainted with test questions types.

Table 1. Pre- and post-test results for the TOEFL iBT intermediate level

	N	Mean	SD	SE	t-test	Sig (2-tailed)
Post-test intermediate	18	70.50	5.15	1.21	-4.37	.00
Pre-test intermediate	18	72.50	5.15	1.21		

As Table 2 shows, the results of pre- and post-test TOEFL iBT mock exam for the advanced candidates revealed a significant difference ($p < 0.00$; $p = 0.03$) where the means of pre- and post-test were 75.68 and 77.18, respectively; it suggests that the training course was advantageous and that the scores remarkably increased for the advanced group, as well.

There is a very important issue to consider as the candidates sat the exam for a second time and grew a type of test-wiseness in the second test which might be in line with the premises of the present paper that test-wiseness can improve the test results itself without more language lessons being taught.

Table 2. Pre- and post-test results for the TOEFL iBT advance

	N	Mean	SD	SE	t-test	Sig (2-tailed)
Post-test advanced	16	75.68	5.88	1.47	-2.27	.03
Pre-test advanced	16	77.18	5.12	1.28		

As for the qualitative section in which the researchers conducted interviews with the candidates on the strategies they employed among the twelve strategies used in class, learners claimed the most important strategy for them was *goal setting* which allowed them to decide how to proceed with the rest of the test and actually which following strategies to pick up. The second most important strategy was *cover strategy* that the learners employed to have better command on their actions and continue with the exam. *Compensation strategies* ranked three as the learners used hints, clues, and even avoided a specific structure when they realized they had not mastered it well and might have problems with them. *Interleaving* was another favorite strategy that enabled the candidates to switch between ideas in the writing and speaking sections. Among the other strategies, it seems the *assessment strategy* was puzzling for them, since they thought they were doing wrong but the results showed the opposite and the vice versa.

Discussion

As the results of this study showed, strategy training and creating a type of awareness about the type of questions and actually helping the test takers be “test-wise” could lead to better scores and ultimately a feeling of satisfaction that all the effort made had prolific results and that a language test, in this case the TOEFL iBT, requires more than partial mastery of a language (based on the level of proficiency) and a myriad of other factors, few of which were taken into account in this study namely strategies and test-type preparedness, could affect the results. It could be said that the TOEFL iBT is not just a language proficiency exam but a mental readiness and acquaintance with different sections of the test demanding alertness and familiarity with question types. A good command of English alone cannot warrant a desired outcome and indeed for a result to be appealing to a candidate, it is necessary to tap into a circle of strategies that help them guess, analyze, compare, make associations, create mental images, follow up time limitations, and set goals regarding what they want to do with different tasks and sections, that is, to avoid the unfamiliar parts, use gut feelings, trust their first insight, and more importantly believe in themselves and the idea that things can naturally go wrong in exam contexts and that a cover strategy necessitates them to make the right decisions to arrive at a desired result.

The results of this study are in contrast with Carrell and Grabe (2002) who have revealed that strategy use is clearly influenced by the proficiency level of the reader while in this study only did intermediate level learners benefit more. Furthermore, in a myriad of research projects, the use of metacognitive strategies

has been examined (e.g., Goh, 2000; Goh & Taib, 2006; Mareschal, 2007; Graham & Macaro, 2008; Cross, 2009; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010) all of which show that more proficient learners use more metacognitive strategies especially in listening tasks. However, the beneficial effects of strategy training on better performance has been confirmed.

Research in this realm has usually been concerned with one skill at a time and not the whole test itself. Based on what the interviews revealed, many candidates believed that the test is more of a “chance game” than a proficiency test as the length and number of the reading passages, for instance, could tell them if the tasks ahead would be manageable or hard to handle so that they could make plans ahead to see what move they needed to take to tackle the problem. However, this criterion is related to the stake-holders’ policies and many other factors we do not even have a clue about which can still help many candidates be well aware of the situation and consider all aspects that can influence their performance.

Like any small-scale research, this study might have some shortcomings and limitations as the participants were all from East-Azerbaijan province and the gender differences (11 females and 23 males) were excluded. Furthermore, due to financial and time restraints, the TOEFL iBT mock exam was taken and the researchers do not know how accurate the results would be if the real exam could be taken; in addition, the candidates all took the test in the same exam center twice and we do not know for sure if the scoring procedures were valid enough and the raters qualified. Nevertheless, this can pave way to further research in wider scopes and the standardized TOEFL iBT exam administered by the authorized centers where test results could be valid and reputable. Besides, the TOEFL preparation courses could take the necessary strategies into account and better equip their candidates with them so that they can overcome the fear of failure in exam even though they have a good command of English.

It is hoped that this study could help test instructors, language teachers, test takers, and more importantly, course preparation centers insert strategy training components into their lessons and teaching procedures so that the TOEFL test, as required for higher education and professional careers, not only would not be scary but also an enjoyable experience which is worth the time, money, and efforts put into enabling them to discover new opportunities and push themselves to excel in a world where knowledge knows no boundaries and English teachers’ effort could be paid mentally and emotionally as they can see their years of teaching and preparing the learners for life could be paid off.

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