

**THE EFFECTS OF DIRECT TEACHING OF TEST-TAKING
STRATEGIES ON IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE
IN READING COMPREHENSION TESTS**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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by

MAJID POOR MOHAMMADI

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BA	Bachelor of Arts
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
FL	Foreign Language
L2	Second Language
LTS	Learning Test-taking Strategies
MCRCT	Multiple-choice Reading Comprehension Test
MCRCTP	Multiple-choice Reading Comprehension Test Performance
QAR	Question-Answer Relationship
RCK	Reading Comprehension Knowledge
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
SQ3R	Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
TSAQ	Test-taking Strategies Attitude Questionnaire
TSU	Test-taking Strategies Use
TSUQ	Test-taking Strategies Use Questionnaire

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**KESAN PENGAJARAN LANGSUNG STRATEGI
PENGAMBILAN UJIAN KE ATAS PRESTASI UJIAN
PEMAHAMAN PELAJAR EFL IRAN**

ABSTRAK

Penyelidikan ini mengkaji kesan pengajaran strategi menduduki ujian terhadap prestasi ujian kefahaman pelajar siswazah EFL Iran. Selain itu, kajian ini meneliti sikap pelajar terhadap pengajaran strategi tersebut dalam kelas pemahaman. Kajian ini juga bertujuan mengkaji kemungkinan perbezaan dari segi penggunaan strategi menduduki ujian di antara pelajar siswazah EFL Iran yang mempunyai tahap penguasaan yang tinggi dan rendah. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk kuasi eksperimen. Sejumlah 66 orang pelajar EFL tahun dua dari dua fakulti berasingan di *Islamic Azad University of Rasht, Iran* telah mengambil bahagian dalam penyelidikan ini sebagai kumpulan eksperimen dan kawalan. Mereka telah diberikan praujian, pascaujian, dan soal selidik tentang pengetahuan sedia ada mereka mengenai strategi-strategi menduduki ujian. Kumpulan eksperimen dilatih menggunakan 22 strategi menduduki ujian kefahaman bacaan berbentuk aneka pilihan, manakala kumpulan kawalan hanya diberikan latihan membaca yang biasa. Set soal selidik hanya diberikan kepada kumpulan eksperimen selepas pascaujian untuk mengkaji sikap pelajar terhadap pengajaran strategi tersebut. Seterusnya, temu bual secara retrospektif telah dijalankan ke atas empat orang pelajar yang mempunyai tahap penguasaan kefahaman yang tinggi dan empat orang pelajar yang mempunyai tahap penguasaan kefahaman yang rendah bagi mengenal pasti

perbezaan strategi mengambil ujian yang telah digunakan oleh mereka semasa menjawab pascaujian. Berdasarkan data kuantitatif, dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa rawatan yang diberikan adalah berkesan secara signifikan dan pencapaian kumpulan eksperimen telah mengatasi kumpulan kawalan. Selain itu, kedua-dua subkumpulan telah mengambil kesempatan daripada rawatan yang diberikan. Walau bagaimanapun, data kualitatif yang didapati melalui temu bual retrospektif telah mendedahkan beberapa perbezaan di antara kedua-dua subkumpulan ini. Selain itu, secara umum para pelajar telah memperlihatkan sikap yang positif terhadap pengajaran strategi menduduki ujian tersebut. Secara keseluruhan, pelajar percaya bahawa intervensi ini telah membolehkan mereka menjadi lebih selesa, bersemangat dan yakin dalam menduduki ujian. Tambahan pula, strategi tersebut telah membantu mereka menguruskan masa, meneka dengan efisien, dan menduduki ujian dengan lebih berjaya. Kajian ini memberi implikasi terhadap para pengajar, pembina bahan pengajaran dan pembelajaran, dan pereka kurikulum. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa strategi-strategi menduduki ujian ini perlu diperkenalkan dan diajar secara eksplisit supaya para pelajar bebas menggunakannya untuk meningkatkan prestasi mereka dalam ujian. Perkembangan kosa kata juga perlu diberi penekanan bagi membantu pelajar meningkatkan pengetahuan linguistik agar dapat memahami teks dengan lebih baik dan memahami arahan mengenai strategi menduduki ujian. Seterusnya, pelajar mestilah bermotivasi dan menyedari kepentingan dan kelebihan mempelajari strategi-strategi tersebut agar mereka dapat menggunakannya dengan efektif.

**THE EFFECTS OF DIRECT TEACHING OF TEST-TAKING
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of teaching test-taking strategies on Iranian EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension test performance. Besides, it probes their attitudes towards the teaching of such strategies in their reading classes. It also seeks to discover the probable differences between high and low proficiency level EFL undergraduates in terms of their test-taking strategies use. This research employs a quasi experimental design. A total of 66 EFL sophomores studying in two classes from two detached schools at Islamic Azad University of Rasht, Iran participated in this study as experimental and control groups. They were administered a pretest, a posttest and a set of questionnaire about their prior knowledge on such strategies. The treatment, a set of 22 test-taking strategies for multiple-choice reading comprehension tests, was administered only to the experimental group within their regular Reading Comprehension classes while the control group took only the regular training in reading. Another Likert rating-scale questionnaire was also conducted for only the experimental group after the posttest to see the students' attitudes toward teaching such strategies. Finally, retrospective interviews were conducted from 4 high and 4 low proficiency students to discover their probable variations regarding the test-taking strategies utilization during the posttest. The findings, based upon the quantitative data, indicate that the treatment

was significantly effective and the experimental group outperformed the control group. Besides, both subgroups took advantage of the treatment. However, the qualitative data derived from the retrospective interviews unveiled some differences between these two subgroups. In addition, students revealed generally positive attitudes towards teaching test-taking strategies. Overall, they believed that the intervention enabled them to be more relaxed, enthusiastic and confident about taking tests. Moreover, it helped them manage time, guess efficiently, and take test more successfully. This study has implications for instructors, material developers and curriculum designers. The findings indicated that test-taking strategies should be introduced and explicitly taught so that students can independently employ them to improve test performance. Vocabulary development must also be emphasized for aiding students to improve their linguistic knowledge to understand a text as well as the instructions on test-taking strategies better. Further, students must be motivated to realize the importance and the advantages of learning such strategies in order to use them effectively.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Reading as an active, receptive, and decoding language skill is the main source of meaningful input in the process of learning a foreign language. Moreover, according to Kim and Anderson (2011, p. 30), “Reading is essential for successfully completing all college-level courses. In other words, college students who are more proficient readers are most likely to experience more success in their courses.” In addition, we are currently living in a competitive world that in order to succeed, one should learn how to read proficiently and competently (Lu, 2009).

Reading comprehension is commonly known as an interactive mental process among a reader’s linguistic knowledge, knowledge of the world, and knowledge about a given topic (Rahmani & Sadeghi, 2011). In the setting of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it is frequently supposed that reading comprehension is the fundamental way of acquiring new information and it is the most significant skill required for the students’ success. As Iranmehr, Erfani and Davari (2011, p. 142) maintain, “The importance and position of reading comprehension skill in Iranian academic setting like other EFL settings are undeniable; in a way, it is often introduced as the main goal of English language learning.” Likewise, Ghonsooly and Eghtesadee (2006)

declare that reading comprehension is the main purpose of teaching foreign language in Iran.

Meanwhile, tests are universally the most common evaluating method in nearly all educational systems and academic institutions. Generally, tests carry the most load of the student's total grade particularly at the university level. Language test is not an exception in this regard. Concerning the importance of language tests, Bachman (2008, p. 37) declares that "The challenges language testers face are in the areas where language tests are being used to make decisions about individuals and institutions."

The significance and uses of tests have gone beyond school level as many serious decisions about people's lives are made entirely according to certain tests. Whether the goal is college admission, certification, personal selection, etc., a decision about an individual's capability is normally made on the basis of his scores in particular tests. These tests are mostly defined as 'high stakes' which means tests with very vital results for testees.

As tests are commonly utilized for evaluating academic performance, assisting students to perform well in their tests is of great importance. Therefore, a primary step to attain this goal could be studying test-related factors or characteristics. Apart from related and needed knowledge, several cognitive and psychological factors also affect a test performance (Hambleton, Swaminathan, & Rogers, 1991). One of the most important test-related factors is test-taking strategies. These strategies are operations that

testees consciously select to use. Dodeen (2009) claims that this factor influences test performance and also affects some other important factors.

Test-taking strategies such as predicting questions, managing time efficiently, dealing with difficult questions, dealing with multiple-choice items, and underlining key words in questions, to name a few, are helpful strategies. These strategies can assist testees to have better performance on tests by means of the proficient use of their knowledge, time, and efforts. In addition, these strategies decrease test anxiety, improve learners' motivation, their attitudes toward tests as well as learning in general (Taylor & Walton, 1997; Vattanapath & Jaiprayoon, 1999). This research aims at studying the effects of teaching test-taking strategies on reading comprehension test performance of Iranian EFL sophomores.

1.2 Background

Iran, officially called the Islamic Republic of Iran, is a country located in the Southwest Asia. It lies between south of the Caspian Sea and north of the Persian Gulf. As a Middle Eastern country, Iran shares borders with Turkey and Iraq to the west, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkmenistan to the north, and Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east. With an area of 636,371 square miles (1,648,195 sq km), Iran is considered the 18th largest country in the world. Tehran is the capital of Iran. The formal Language is Persian and the religion is Islam. According to the latest census, the population rate of Iran is more than 75 million (Statistical Center of Iran, 2012).

1.2.1 The Educational System in Iran

To put this study into context, it is important to understand the basic structure of the educational system and the state of English language learning in Iran— from elementary school through university.

There are seven stages in the educational system of Iran, namely kindergarten education, pre-elementary school education, elementary school, junior high school education, senior high school education, university education, and post-graduate studies.

In the first stage, the kindergarten stage, four to five-year-old children study until the age of six. Afterward, they are promoted to pre-elementary school education. Elementary school starts from the age of seven to eleven. Junior high school education involves those from the age of twelve to fourteen years followed by senior high school education for the students from the age of fifteen to eighteen years. On completing this stage, senior high school graduates can sit for the University Entrance Exam and those who achieve the necessary standards, are admitted into university education which lasts for approximately four years. Then more capable graduates may proceed with their postgraduate studies. These include MA (Master of Arts) degree, and PhD (Doctorate of Philosophy) degree, and an advanced diploma in some of specialization areas.

1.2.2 The Status of English Language in Iran

In Iran, English language is considered as a foreign language (EFL) (Farhady, Hezaveh, & Hedayati, 2010) and for that reason not widely used. In the meantime, it is a compulsory subject in the educational system of Iran and Iranian students who move to junior high school start studying this language. However, most of such students voluntarily and unofficially learn it both inside and outside the school before or during their elementary school period (Vaezi, 2008). This means learning English in Iran officially begins at the age of twelve years for Iranian children.

They often take two one-hour English classes per week. They then attend senior high school and continue learning English at a higher level. Senior high school graduates who intend to study further English in university must sit for and pass the University Entrance Examination.

At the university level, English is taught in other departments as a subject. It is also studied by undergraduates who are majoring in English in the Departments of English in the Faculties of Humanities and Education in Iranian universities.

1.2.3 Test-taking strategies

This section briefly clarifies test-taking strategies since they are taught to the Iranian EFL students during this study to find out whether or not such strategies would influence their reading comprehension test scores. According to Rogers and Harley (1999), test-taking strategies enable

learners to use the characteristics and format of a test to increase scores in a test-taking situation. These strategies include: reading the instructions carefully, scheduling the allocated time appropriately, using clue words in the questions, delaying answering difficult questions, reviewing the work in order to check the answers, etc.

Cohen and Upton (2007, p. 2) describe test-taking strategies as “Those test-taking processes which respondents have selected and which they are conscious of, at least to some degree” (p. 211). Cohen (2006) states that there are basically different kinds of strategies that respondents apply while they take a language test as follows:

- 1) language learner strategies (the way learners operationalized their basic skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing including the related skills of grammar, vocabulary, and translation),
- 2) test management strategies (strategies to respond to test items meaningfully), and
- 3) testwiseness 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”) (p. 308).

In Iran, since multiple-choice questions are commonly applied in teaching English reading as well as testing the knowledge of this language

skill, instructing test-taking strategies to EFL students seems to be of great use and significance.

1.2.4 Reading comprehension and test-taking strategies

Reading is a basic and comprehensible skill in language learning (Hayati & Pour-Mohammadi, 2005). It is the best way of being in touch with vital new findings and increasing one's academic and professional position. Further, EFL students can benefit from this skill much more than other skills like speaking, writing, and listening. Consequently, it must be highlighted in the teaching of a foreign language.

It has been acknowledged that reading has been the skill most emphasized in an EFL classroom setting (Lu, 2002). Unlike ESL learners who use English as the medium of communication, most EFL learners study English only as a school subject, for they are not required to use English to communicate in a society.

In most cases, the pursuit of higher education demands reading a large variety of texts, such as textbooks, journal articles, and research papers, most of which are likely to be written in English. As they progress in their studies, they need to have the ability to autonomously understand, organize and use a significant amount of information obtained from the aforementioned documents (Atai & Nazari, 2011). Consequently, advanced reading skills of the English language often play a vital role in foreign language (English) learners' academic success. That is why reading has

become EFL learners' main learning activity in the classroom setting (Liu, Chen, & Chang, 2010).

It is common knowledge that English learning and teaching at every level, especially in junior and senior high schools, is centered on reading activities (Lu, 2009). Consequently, the capability of reading is considered as the major assessment of proficiency of English learners. Less prominence is placed on other language skills, such as speaking, writing, and listening. This imbalanced measurement can be reflected on University Entrance Examination where reading comprehension questions make up the largest proportion of the test content (Lu, 2002).

English has also been used as an international language and become a major means of conveying knowledge (Crystal, 2003). For example, English is used in all kinds of fields, such as academics, medication, business, science and technology when it comes to publication.

As far as EFL learners are concerned, the ability to read different written texts productively and efficiently is considered as a prerequisite for the current educated society. As Lu (2002) puts it, "Being proficient in English ensures a person's opportunity to worldwide information access and knowledge transfer" (p. 1). For that reason, reading has been the major focus of the curriculum in the formal L2 educational context.

She also maintains that despite this emphasis on L2 (English) literacy, most reading instructions may not be on the right track. She believes this is because L2 reading instructors view reading as a decoding process and put a considerable emphasis on teaching intensive reading, in which the whole process of teaching and learning is mostly based on an analytic approach. Thus, they spend most of their classroom time in explaining the meaning of new words, sentence structures, and grammar.

However, L1 (English) reading researchers (e.g., Farrell, 2008; Nation, 2009) argue that reading is more than getting the words right, but a complex cognitive activity. Grabe and Stoller (2013) maintain that successful reading needs not only lower-level processes, but also higher-level processes. The former comprises lexical access, syntactic parsing, semantic proposition formation, and working memory activation. While, the later includes text model of comprehension, situation model of reader interpretation, background knowledge use, and executive control processes.

Therefore, while proficient readers are reading printed texts, they are able to apply decoding skills at the lexical, syntactical and semantic levels without much effort and conscious attention. As a result, they are allowed sufficient memory capacity for other processing operations, for example inference making and reasoning, to integrate the meaning of the word with the overall meaning of the sentence, paragraph, and text.

Quite a few studies have investigated the question as to what distinguishes a good reader from a poor reader (Anderson, 2005; Malcolm, 2009; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001). The findings of the studies also revealed that a poor reader often does not have sufficient knowledge of strategies.

Still, there is another type of unsuccessful reader who fails to comprehend text written in English not because he/she lacks cognitive reading strategies, but because he/she is unaware of reading strategies. In other words, he/she fails to access them metacognitively (Dhieb-Henia, 2003). The author continues that, "Successful reading strategy use is dependent on whether a strategy is employed metacognitively" (p. 391). Research has revealed that the role of strategic awareness is critical in reading comprehension, whether one is reading in the first language or a second language (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001).

Having examined 38 research studies on native speakers' reading, Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) similarly concluded that unlike poor readers, proficient readers are strategic and take conscious steps to comprehend what they are reading. Houtveen and Van de Grift (2007) also echoed this assertion based on the findings of their study.

Therefore, English teachers should recognize the importance of reading comprehension strategies in the reading classroom, and provide students with enough strategies instruction. Such strategies can indicate how readers deal with a reading activity, which contextual clues they consider,

how they comprehend what they read, and what they do while they fail to comprehend. Moreover, Belcher (1985) mentions the use of test-taking strategies enables test-takers to:

- 1) use their time wisely by pacing themselves through the test,
- 2) budget the amount of time spent on any difficult item, and
- 3) utilize clues inherent in the item as well as reasoning and knowledge of the subject matter in guessing which of several options may be correct for those items in which they are unsure of the answer.

Thus, aside from teaching cognitive and metacognitive strategies to promote students' reading comprehension (Alsamadani, 2011; Karbalaei, 2010), researchers also suggest that training students in the use of reading strategies including test-taking strategies could help them in a testing situation and considerably facilitate an increase in the results of their reading comprehension tests (Houtveen & Van de Grift, 2007).

Test-taking strategies are cognitive abilities which seriously affect learners' test performance. They let the learners tackle any testing situation properly and know what to do before, during, and after the test. With the increasing use of tests in different academic and non-academic contexts, using appropriate test-taking strategies gets an important variable to assist

the learners upgrade their test performance. This is also advantageous in terms of improving test validity (Al Fraidan & Al-Khalaf, 2012; Dodeen, 2009).

Some studies have been done on the positive and negative use of test-taking strategies on tests. For instance, according to Perlman (2000), teachers prepare students for standardized test by providing them with drill and practice. His study shows that drill and practice have not been very effective in improving standardized test scores.

In addition, Bunting and Mooney (2001) have researched on the effects of coaching on test performance. Their research indicated that test scores could be more than double with coaching. Students often know the materials but may not perform well because of a lack of test-taking strategies knowledge or failure in consistently applying this knowledge (Vattanapath & Jaiprayoon, 1999). Evidence suggests that teaching test-taking strategies will improve academic performance on tests (Chiu, 2011; Hsu, 2008).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Reading as an important language skill is highlighted in all language teaching contexts. In this regard, the Iranian context, especially at the college level, is not an exception. Iranian EFL students receive large sum of input through different written materials in their regular reading comprehension courses. Then they must show they have acquired those points well by means of answering to some reading comprehension test questions accurately. Ultimately, their achieved scores on those tests would be used as

the criteria to determine whether they have acquired the required competence and are qualified to proceed or not.

Nonetheless, one of the immediate problems among the Iranian EFL students is that sometimes they learn and know the instructed subject matters well yet cannot finally perform successfully in the related reading comprehension tests and achieve what they really deserve. In fact, they become underachievers.

The prevalence of this problem raises the following questions that: “How and why do two Iranian EFL students with almost the same degree of knowledge take the same reading comprehension test but perform differently and gain different scores? In addition to the content knowledge in reading comprehension, what are other important factors that ignoring them creates some obstacles for Iranian EFL students’ with good knowledge to perform well in their reading comprehension tests and receive what they really deserve? In other words, why Iranian EFL students with good knowledge in reading comprehension, cannot achieve what they must achieve in reading comprehension tests?”

In order to account for the reasons of such differences, many internal and external factors can be taken into consideration one of which is test-taking strategies. In other words, only English language competence is not enough to succeed in English reading comprehension testing.

This is because a test score indicates not only the knowledge and aptitude the reader possesses in a subject area but also the ability to take advantage of the characteristics and format of the test (Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2011b). Thus, English language instructors should also consider adding the instructions in test-taking strategies to their regular English classes so that their students may know what to do in a testing situation. This seems to be a must, particularly for reading instructors due to the crucial importance of reading skill in the process of learning a foreign language as mentioned before.

Some researchers declared that test-taking strategies assist students to have good performance in test without even having a complete knowledge of the test content or materials (Dodeen, Abdelfattah, & Alshumrani, 2014; Haynes, 2011), and aid them to transform their knowledge from classroom learning (Dodeen, 2008). Some students may be good at a subject but cannot do well on the related tests. At times, the obstacle for good performance is not the lack of content knowledge but the inefficient use of time, for example. While this occurs, the result of the test is not an accurate representation of the level of language competence.

A good knowledge of test-taking strategies can positively transform students' test performance and their academic career. This seems to be more vital for weak learners as they must perform well but lack such abilities. Actually, some maintain that the knowledge of such strategies, almost like

the basic content knowledge, is highly essential for effectively responding the test questions (Amer, 2007; Guthrie, 2002).

According to Sweetnam (2002), it has been recognized that achievement tests simultaneously measure two independent knowledge: knowledge of the subject matter, on the one hand, and knowledge of how to take a test on the other. Even those who know the subject matter may perform badly in tests due to inefficient knowledge of test-taking strategies.

In language classes, instructors do their best to teach English language content. Yet, other crucial and important factors, like test-taking strategies, that impact on test performance may be simply overlooked. Meanwhile, Iranian educational system is not an exception either. The experience of the researcher himself as an English language lecturer for more than twelve years in the context of Iran indicates that language instructors in either schools or universities almost ignore teaching and highlighting test-taking strategies in their regular classes as they are almost never asked to do so.

Gersten, Fuchs, Williams and Baker (2001) declare that this condition leads to some obstacles. "For example, students may not possess appropriate strategies for problem situations or they may not know when to use a strategy they, in fact, do possess" (p. 280). This, in turn, makes them unable to use and manifest their real knowledge of language. Hence, they fail to receive what they really deserve.

On the whole, test-taking strategies are acquired abilities. If one acquired such abilities, he is expected to achieve noticeably higher than those who enjoy equal competency in the subject area but lack such abilities. Moreover, knowing how to prepare for and take exams can affect students' attitudes toward exam, reduce their test anxiety, build up their self-confidence, make a difference in exam scores, and ultimately, help them to earn better grades (Holzer, Madaus, Bray, & Kehle, 2009).

1.4 Objectives and Research Questions

The first objective of this research is to investigate whether the direct instructions of test-taking strategies such as vocabulary tactics, process of elimination, preview of questions before reading, consideration of all answer choices, key word search, time management, etc. during reading comprehension test appear useful and helpful or not. If such instructions are proved to be useful, then they can assist EFL learners to enhance their reading comprehension test performance. In other words, as scores have been a significant part of our academic world, the main objective of this study is to determine whether given instructions and practices on test-taking strategies can improve EFL students' performance in reading comprehension tests. Besides, it intends to examine whether EFL students of different English ability levels differ from each other in this regard.

If teaching test-taking strategies proves to be useful, then the second objective involves introducing test-taking strategies as means of taking tests successfully and encouraging Iranian EFL students to apply the targeted

strategies consciously when they are taking multiple-choice reading comprehension tests.

The third objective of this research includes measuring students' overall learning experience as well as their deep viewpoints and attitudes towards the teaching and learning of such strategies in their regular Reading Comprehension classes. The gathered data, if positive, can facilitate the process of such strategies instructions and make it more fruitful, meaningful and efficient.

Finally, if the findings of this research indicate that teaching test-taking strategies appears to be useful and such instructions can aid the students to obtain better results, then it tries to persuade and encourage instructors, curriculum designers, material developers, policy makers and so on to have a new view in this regard and react more reasonably.

Overall, this research, through a quantitative study, attempts to find out whether or not teaching test-taking strategies can improve reading comprehension test scores of EFL students who are studying at Islamic Azad University of Iran, Rasht Branch. Besides, it seeks to discover the probable differences among the EFL students of various language proficiency levels in terms of their test-taking strategies utilization via a qualitative study. In addition, it also tries to discover the students' attitudes towards the teaching and learning of such strategies. More specifically, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Do the direct instructions of test-taking strategies significantly enhance the Iranian EFL students' reading comprehension test scores?
 - 1.a. Do test-taking strategies instructions significantly enhance the reading comprehension test scores of high proficiency Iranian EFL students?
 - 1.b. Do test-taking strategies instructions significantly enhance the reading comprehension test scores of low proficiency Iranian EFL students?
2. Is there any difference between high and low proficiency Iranian EFL students in the experimental group in terms of their employing test-taking strategies in performing the posttest?
3. What are the EFL students' attitudes towards the teaching and learning of test-taking strategies?

1.5 Statement of the Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses are devised according to the aforementioned questions:

H₀1: Teaching test-taking strategies has no significant effect on the reading comprehension test scores of Iranian EFL students studying at Islamic Azad University of Iran, Rasht Branch.

H₀2: Teaching test-taking strategies has no significant effect on the reading comprehension test scores of high proficiency Iranian EFL students.

H₀3: Teaching test-taking strategies has no significant effect on the reading comprehension test scores of low proficiency Iranian EFL students.

As it can be seen, question 2 deals with the qualitative aspect of the study and other questions and hypotheses tackle the quantitative aspect of this research.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The motivation behind this study is the fact that in the educational system of Iran not much work has been done concerning test-taking strategies and the related effects on students' reading comprehension test performance. In addition, although the curriculum for English instruction in junior and senior high schools emphasizes equal development of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, many Iranian teachers actually pay more attention to reading than they do to any other skill.

Generally, they spend a large amount of class time assisting students to make sense of materials in textbooks. This could be proved by considering that, in the context of English language teaching of Iran, there are so many textbooks and other similar materials at different levels to practice reading skill extensively (Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). In the meantime, most schools do not have any laboratory for students' listening and speaking activities.

One important reason for this may be the fact that reading is the most predominant skill measured on the English portion of a vital examination—University Entrance Examination. Another reason, nevertheless, is that high school graduates need to acquire a high level of proficiency in reading in order to understand textbooks and academic journals in university. This

means that the ability to read English plays a main role in students' ability to achieve high scores in the English language tests.

It is also noteworthy to mention that EFL university students at bachelor level in Iran ought to pass at least three Reading Comprehension courses, namely Reading Comprehension courses (1), (2) and (3), for three successive semesters while they start their university education (the syllabuses for a Bachelor of Arts in 'English Language Translation' and 'English Language and Literature' in the universities of Iran can be seen in Appendices 1 and 2). Besides, passing Reading Comprehension course (3) is a prerequisite for taking other courses in the succeeding semesters. Thus, the importance of reading comprehension courses and performance in reading comprehension tests for the future success of EFL students are also quite undeniable.

Due to the great significance attached to reading skill and reading comprehension tests throughout the educational system of Iran, it is vital to assist students to improve their performance in reading comprehension tests. Despite the increasing popularity of research on test-taking strategies in the past decades, it is still a new topic in the EFL context of Iran.

It seems that students develop their own understanding or pattern of test-taking strategies. That is, based on the twelve-year knowledge of the researcher as a university lecturer and his colleagues' knowledge, it is supposed that this matter has been overlooked in the curriculum of English

language teaching in Iran. Instructors mostly have students focus on vocabulary definitions, grammar explanation, paraphrasing, getting the main idea and so forth. They rarely make the students aware of several test-taking strategies that they can take during the examination to manifest their knowledge of the subject and achieve what they actually deserve. In other words, students are never systematically taught and asked in detail how to take a test.

Therefore, studies about test-related factors such as test-taking strategies can lead to empirical findings and assist the instructors and students to obtain good results. Moreover, such studies can offer practical implications for language testing.

Specifically, this research tries to study the impact of teaching of test-taking strategies on multiple-choice reading comprehension test performance of Iranian EFL students. Thus, its results have certain pedagogical implications which are beneficial to EFL students with good competence, but unable to compete with those who have the same knowledge equipped with good test-taking strategies.

A study about the effects of test-taking strategies on reading comprehension test performance can be important for several reasons. First, if a rise in test scores can be attributed to teaching test-taking strategies, then incorporating such strategies into the curriculum could benefit the students. Second, basic test-taking skills may be applied to most testing

situations and may help students progress in other academic areas besides reading only (Longman & Atkinson, 1999). Third, if the method used in this research is effective, then the method could be shared with other teachers to assist in raising students' test performance.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

Some limitations must be considered about the findings of this study. First of all, the scope of this study was limited to determining the effects of teaching test-taking strategies only on reading comprehension test performance of EFL students who were taking their Reading Comprehension course (3) at Islamic Azad University of Iran, Rasht Branch. These participants learned English as a foreign language (EFL) and had learned it at least for seven years at the time of this study and their average age was 20 or above. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts, like the ESL setting or other populations, such as English language learners at the high school level.

Secondly, this study only profiles the performance of respondents at a given time period. In other words, just 66 participants were engaged in this study for only one academic semester. The small sample size decreases the generalizability of findings and so decreases the applicability to all students.

Another limitation is that matters pertaining to techniques of teaching reading comprehension and reading strategies as well as preparing teaching

materials to suit the needs of the undergraduate EFL students were not included in this study as these issues would entail another study.

In addition, even though there are various types of second language reading comprehension tasks, such as short answers, open-ended questions, true/false questions, cloze tests, written summaries, etc., it is still difficult to measure precisely reading comprehension. In the current study, reading test performance was measured by only multiple-choice reading comprehension tests because this type of task is commonly used in the tests such EFL participants encounter most frequently in academic settings. Consequently, the findings here can only be extended to this type of reading test. In other words, it should not be generalized for other context.

1.8 Definitions of Key Terms

The following terms are used specifically in this study:

Reading comprehension

It is the ability to read a text, process it and understand its meaning. In other words, reading comprehension is the act of understanding what is being read. It is an intentional, active, interactive process that occurs before, during and after a person reads a particular piece of writing. Furthermore, comprehension depends both on what is coded in the text and the reader's background knowledge. The reader is then an equal and active partner with the text in this meaning-making process of comprehension.

Multiple-choice reading comprehension test

A passage followed by some questions developed to evaluate the understanding of written materials. In this test format, testees are asked to select one correct answer from multiple options. It involves skills like skimming, vocabulary recognition, guessing vocabulary of the passage, grasping the main idea of the passage, scanning, interpretation of questions, and so forth. A multiple-choice reading comprehension test also measures how well inferences are drawn.

Test-taking strategies

Rezaei (2006, p. 152) defines test-taking strategies as “a subject’s capacity to utilize test characteristics and formats of the test-taking situation to receive a higher score”. They also added that test-taking strategies are logically independent of the examinees’ knowledge of the subject matter being measured by the items. These strategies are operations that testees consciously select to use and include: reading the instructions carefully, scheduling the allocated time appropriately, using clues in the questions, delaying answering difficult questions, reviewing the work to check the answers, etc.

Direct teaching

It refers to providing the students with explicit written guides about test-taking strategies along with sample tests for practicing those strategies. Besides, through direct teaching, each strategy is vividly clarified, modeled and the way of its use in the processes of completing reading