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Exploring ESL Learners' Reading Test Taking Strategies

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Abstract

This study examined the test taking strategies of weak ESL students of an English language proficiency course. Test taking strategies are known as the methods that test takers use as an alternative aimed at attaining correct answers on a specified form of language assessment. The study adopted a qualitative study. The participants in this study were forty-four learners from the Bachelor of Arts Program. The learners were asked to think aloud while reading an assigned text to answer the questions. Four learners' thinking aloud recordings were transcribed and analysed. Focus group interviews were carried out for triangulation purposes. Data collected were analysed manually. The ESL learners implemented many test taking strategies as they coped with the reading comprehension test. The findings of the study show how ESL students used cognitive, metacognitive, compensating, and social strategies. Participants expressed that understanding and reading the passage allowed them to draw conclusions better in answering the multiple choice questions. The findings revealed that they used a compensation strategy whereby they tried guessing the answers on a number of occasions. The findings of the study implicate teachers'

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roles in L2 reading and also to guide the ESL learners in the process of answering reading passage and answer the comprehension questions.

Keywords: Test taking strategies, reading test taking strategies, weak ESL learners, metacognitive, cognitive processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The erosion in learner's English proficiency in Malaysia was gradual but by the later part of the 1990s, the results became clear. Many graduates could not secure employment, especially in the private sector because they lacked English language proficiency. Some did very well in the written examination but failed to communicate in the English language during job interviews (Rodrigues, 2006). The Malaysian Ministry of Education has emphasised that learners must attain a solid command of the English language as one of its ultimate goals in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025). In addition, to be commercially sustainable in the world economy, Malaysians need to advance and develop a knowledge economy-based society. Tertiary level institutes are more concerned since learners need to achieve a certain English language proficiency level as a graduation requirement. Yet, studies show Malaysians generally need to improve mastery of the English language (Singh et al., 2020). Hamzah and Abdullah (2011, p. 677) showed that the English language proficiency of tertiary learners is still at an alarming level. In Malaysia, English language proficiency as a second language (ESL) learners vary greatly. Their performance in productive skills (reading and writing) shows a great disparity. The good learners are able to read and write well while the weak ones struggle to read and write. In formal assessments, the products of good and weak learners are evaluated based on the same criteria (Singh & Samad, 2013). Obviously, weak learners are at a disadvantage. In most cases, their failure to read and write in English stems from their inability to master the language. Their range of vocabulary is limited and hence they are restricted in expressing their ideas in English (Singh et al., 2020; Sukadaria et al., 2020).

The findings from these previous studies provided the impetus for more research in this area of test taking strategies. Therefore, the objective of the research was to investigate the reading test taking strategies of low performing ESL learners. The study was guided by the following research question: What is the reading test taking strategies used by the learners?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Test Taking Strategies

Test taking strategies refer to the language use strategies selected on numerous forms of language assessment (Brown, 2007; Cohen, 1998). Test taking strategies are known as the methods that test takers use as an alternative aimed at attaining correct answers on a specified form of language assessment (Cohen, 1986, 1998; Cohen & Upton, 2006). Test takers' use of these strategies does not certainly indicate their ability to master the testing task; instead, it shows evidence that test takers have the

chance to get the answer correctly to a multiple choice reading test right “without fully or even partially understanding the text” (p. 132) as cited in [Assiri and Alodhahi \(2018\)](#). [Green \(1998\)](#) stated that verbal protocols are increasingly playing a vital role in validating assessment instruments and methods. Such protocols “offer a means for more directly gathering evidence that supports judgments regarding validity than some of the other more quantitative methods” (p. 3). Test taking strategies signify processes that test takers can attempt by choosing what they accept would assist them to master and answer a test question. In other words, test taking is also known as a conscious process ([Cohen, 1992](#)). According to [Cohen \(1992\)](#), these test taking strategies include a quick move searching for a clue that has links to the information in the question in a particular reading text or reading the text several times before attempting the questions.

Test taking strategies fall into two types, namely test management and test wiseness strategies ([Allan, 1992](#); [Cohen, 2014](#)). The former refers to decisive behaviours reflecting competence, and receptiveness to the basic construct being assessed. Test wiseness implies using written or textual procedural aspects of the test in order to get the correct answers which do not reflect competence in the construct being assessed. According to [Rupp et al. \(2006\)](#), test-taking strategies refer to strategies used on reading tests regardless of the test format, text-related strategies that candidates can use with selected texts, and also selections on item-related strategies that the test takers attempt with the question items.

[Wu and Stone \(2015\)](#) noted that decisions made by test takers when selecting between test management and test wiseness can greatly influence their test performance ([Wu & Stone, 2015](#)). Test taking strategies are seen as compensatory strategies since they substitute either in the language compulsory to achieving assigned test tasks, in the skill to take the test, or in both ([Assiri, 2016](#)). [Cohen and Upton \(2006\)](#) explained that these strategies operate within the strategic competence framework proposed by [Bachman and Palmer \(1996, 2010\)](#). The Bachman and Palmer framework suggests that test takers must use four metacognitive processes for solving a testing task: evaluating the task goals and determine what parts of knowledge are involved (assessment), distinguishing what to do in relation to given tasks (goal setting), then, relating key information in the task to their knowledge and choosing how to act (planning), and lastly, making a final decision before choosing a certain answer (performance).

Reading refers to an interactive and productive process whereby the reader intermingles with the text and instantaneously employs a variation of available knowledge (prior knowledge and contextual cues) to construct its meaning ([Alexander & Jetton, 2000](#); [Dole et al., 1991](#); [Powers & Leung, 1995](#)). The strategies readers employ enable researchers to understand the general cognitive and metacognitive processes in reading comprehension ([Singhal, 2001](#)). Reading strategies involve mindful processes readers use to increase comprehension of a certain reading text ([Birch, 2002](#)). Past research on L1 and L2 readers of different proficiency levels in different learning contexts show the importance of which reading strategies in enhancing reading skills ([Alfassi, 2004](#); [Mokhtari et al., 2008](#); [Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995](#)).

Test taking strategies and reading strategies differ. Despite each language skill having detailed test taking strategies, test taking strategies are not designed for any language skills. Reading strategies, on the other hand, are commonly used when readers are enraptured by a reading task and “are related to text comprehension”

(Singhal, 2001, p. 1). Test taking strategies are only used for dealing with a test or assessment task; in other words, they are more “driven by the test questions” (Farr et al., 1990, p. 218).

2.2 Previous Studies and the Present Study

For the purpose of this study, we referred to and adapted test taking strategies proposed by Rafi and Islam (2017). Rafi and Islam (2017, p. 46) identified seven categories of test taking strategies. These include cognitive strategies, clue-finding strategies, option consideration strategies, answer-checking strategies, question-rereading strategies, option-selecting strategies, and question-rereading strategies. There are seven types of questions in reading that will assist the learners in understanding the question's categories asked and how learners can strategize accordingly when they answer in the reading comprehension. The seven types of questions in reading are factual questions, sourcing for the main idea, inference questions, tone of the author questions, draw conclusion questions, exception questions, and source questions. For each type of reading questions, readers require different test taking strategies, based on the findings of previous studies. Test takers employ the same test taking strategies on multiple choice tests irrespective of text familiarity (Lee, 2015). Some previous studies reported that when L2 learners attempted the open-ended reading passages, they were found to locate where the answer was most probably to be in the comprehension passage and they write the whole sentence consisting of the answer in relation to the questions posed (Cohen & Apeh, 1979; Ghafournia & Afghari, 2013; Gopal & Singh, 2020; Kashkoulia & Baratib, 2013; Lin et al., 2019; Song et al., 2020).

Other studies used cloze tasks for low proficient students and it was reported that the students utilise more micro-level processing as they tried to guess the deleted word based on hints as compared to a more comprehensive understanding of the word using macro-level processing (Stemmer, 1991). It was also reported that text authenticity did not affect the number of test taking strategies as compared to how these strategies were used. Dawadi and Shrestha (2018) observed the construct validity of an English reading test adopted in the Nepalese school-leaving examination. They found a vast inconsistency between test takers' self-reported strategies and eight experts' judgments of the skills measured by the test.

Using eye-tracking technology to study the text difficulty, reading task performance relationship when investigating test taking strategy use on the TOEFL iBT reading section, Assiri (2016) showed that test takers used multifarious strategies based on item format and level of difficulty; in this way, they can familiarise themselves with various task items and apply strategies in textual and technical ways. Cohen and Upton (2006) investigated to what extent a TOEFL iBT reading passage accurately assessed the reading skills of future ESL learners at the tertiary level. Findings showed that test takers regarded the reading text as challenging because it required good mastery of their test taking strategies. However, they reported that the reading text of the TOEFL iBT is appropriate for measuring reading skills compulsory at the tertiary level. These findings are further supported by Jung (2017) who reported that difficult text requires test takers' activation of focused reading. Wu et al. (2017) explained that test takers modified their test taking strategy based on the text difficulty. Lumley and Brown (2006) researched the validity of integrated reading and writing

tasks. They found that some drawbacks in terms of the text difficulty and uncertainty in terms of deciding on the answers given by the test takers were genuinely theirs or extracted from the text as it is.

Nam (2015) looked at individual test takers' strategy on relying on the gaps in the reading text with eight learners. Nosrati (2015) used multiple choice questions (MCQ) for investigating the 23 IELTS students' test-taking strategies in reading comprehension tests and different strategy use for different tasks. Nemati (2016) administered a re-test questionnaire on test-taking strategies to learners and then trained the same learners on test-taking strategies. Takallou et al. (2016) also conducted an experimental study to train learners on test-taking strategies. As in our study, the learners were given a reading comprehension test paper consisting of ten multiple choice questions. We did not give gap-filling or matching questions as it will not reflect how they do it. As for interviews it will depend on the questions asked and will not show how the learners reflect therefore, we cannot see the actual cognitive process. Tests could also allow learners to guess. We used think-aloud protocols as we want learners to verbalise what they were doing. We used to read multiple choice questions as the test task influences the learners' cognitive processing. Results of previous studies were inadequate to cover the scope of the study we intended to research. So, this inadequacy motivated this research. Studies by various researchers reveal several ways of obtaining data on test-taking strategies. They yield different results. The data collection procedures used include think-aloud protocols (Nam, 2015), questionnaire (Nemati, 2016; Zhang, 2016), post-task interview (Lee, 2015), pre-test and post-test (Takallou et al., 2016), and think-aloud protocols as learners took the test and categorised the protocols into reading strategies (Nosrati, 2015).

3. METHODS

This study takes a qualitative research approach as it tries to understand human experience and describe a phenomenon from the participant perspective (Varutharaju & Ratnavadivel, 2014). We carried out in-depth focus group interviews to investigate ESL learners' reading test-taking strategies.

The ESL learners in this study were selected through convenience sampling. They were accessible as they had registered for the English Proficiency Course at one of the universities in Malaysia as one of the graduation requirements. Only one class was available for teaching as the aim of the study was more exploratory. The participants consisted of 44 learners from the Bachelor of Arts Program at a local university. They were mostly Malays aged between 18 to 20 years. They had weak English language proficiency; their MUET (Malaysian University English Test) results showed that all the 44 learners managed to get only Band 1. The methodology involved this group of tertiary ESL learners undergoing the think-aloud protocol as they were reading a test and answering the comprehension questions. One of us (i.e., the researchers) had been teaching the learners and noticed that they were extremely weak in reading. They required more time in a regular lesson as they took a long time to read. This was also attributed to their poor command of English. Out of the 44 learners, only four weak learners of ESL were selected for interviews, based on their willingness to be interviewed. They were also the most conversant in this class of weak learners. Most of the learners were very shy to even utter a word in English.

3.1 Data Collection

A pilot study was not considered necessary. The learners were exposed to the MCQ test format. It has been a normal practice for learners to answer MCQ questions. Furthermore, they discussed most of the MCQ specifically on how to respond to questions during lecture hours. The learners were trained to do think aloud at the language lab. The think-aloud protocols were carried out at the language lab. The learners were divided into two groups. Each language lab could accommodate only 25 learners. For this reason, 22 learners were placed in Language Lab 1 and the other 22 learners were placed in Language Lab 2. Each learner sat in one cubicle during the test. The learner self-recorded their think aloud. The noise was controllable. The learners had inadequate reading skills and they were unable to utter some words in English. Since the study targeted test-taking rather than the language aspect, they were allowed to use the Malay language during the read and think aloud recording process. We were more interested to know the strategies the learners would use to answer the MCQ questions. The learners in this study would not use English all the time as they are Malay learners of English.

This study obtained verbal data through thinking-aloud by testing learners individually. Each learner was given a reading comprehension text. The text was selected based on the university's Instructional Plan. The test paper was similar to the task they would normally do in class. The lecturer usually gave the learners a 10 MCQ task sheet to be answered during the lectures. The learners were supposed to read a passage titled 'The Water Buffalo' and then answer 10 multiple choice questions. They were instructed to write their answers (A, B, C, or D) in the space given. The five-paragraph passage contained 369 words.

All the 44 learner participants took about two hours to answer 10 multiple choice items. This was because as they read the text, they were also doing the thinking-aloud strategy for us to identify their reading test-taking strategies. The learners had poor reading skills; therefore, they took a long time to read and answer the MCQ test. The learners described verbally what they thought and did during the test. We selected only four think-aloud recordings which could yield data for analysis because only 10% out of the 44 learners' think aloud recordings were usable. Some of the recordings were inaudible with very little data. The passage read were the outcomes of the study which referred to the learners' strategies exhibited in the process of answering test items. A variety of reading test-taking strategies was also recorded. A 30-minute interview session enabled them to explain what they had undergone during the think-aloud session. According to [Krueger and Casey \(2000\)](#), a focus group interview refers to a group interview that relies on a question and answer. In a focus group interview, the researcher enthusiastically promotes discussion and is observant of group communication ([Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999](#)). Qualitative data collection assumes that people can express their thoughts and feelings and are a useful source of information about themselves, their experiences, opinions, knowledge, beliefs, feelings, and information on how issues influence their lives ([Best & Kahn, 2006](#)).

3.2 Data Analysis

According to [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) and [Creswell and Clark \(2007\)](#), data analysis involves the following stages: familiarising with the data, formulating

preliminary codes, exploring possible themes (revising themes, defining and naming themes), and finally, producing the report. Reading think-aloud data and interview data were analysed separately. Both sets of data were categorised using the strategy classification by Rafi and Islam (2017). They were cognitive, meta-cognitive, social, affective, compensation, and memory strategies. Each strategy was then categorised into more detailed strategies. Every recorded verbal output from participants undergoing the think-aloud protocol and focus group interview was then transcribed word for word. We confirmed the analysis and findings with the respective learners who were involved with the reading and thinking aloud process. We confirmed with them what they have recorded and whether what they said was what they meant. The analysis and findings were discussed among us to avoid bias. The inter-coder consistency score was above 0.6. The consensus on disagreements of coding between the raters was made through consulting the four learners involved in this study. To develop a clear coding system for participants reading test-taking strategies, we reviewed each participant's responses to the reading text several times. We analysed each response to identify if any part of it represented a strategy and assigned a label to each strategy used in the response.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The ESL learners implemented many test-taking strategies as they coped with the reading comprehension test. Their main strategies were cognitive, metacognitive, compensating, and affective.

4.1 Analysis of Learners' Reading and Think-Aloud Protocols

Analysis of the learners' reading and think-aloud protocols revealed that the learners have used the following reading test-strategies namely cognitive strategies that were further divided into its sub-categories such as repetition and translating. Next, the learners employed metacognitive strategies that were also divided into sub-categories such as self-questioning. Compensation strategies were also used by the learners as one of the reading test-taking strategies that was categorized as guessing.

4.1.1 Cognitive strategies

a. Repetition

The learners reviewed the passage a few times to obtain additional information so that they could develop their understanding of the passage as shown in Excerpt 1. Later, the learners admitted that it was also very imperative to reread the passage two to three times before they could decide on the answers. The learners had to flip the pages a few times so that they could find an accurate answer to the question posed.

Excerpt 1

Learner 3: On answering the reading multiple choice question read the text aloud, the water buffalo, "The water buffalo is often regarded as a pet the answer for the first question is in paragraph 1...pause...huh the answer is B".

Learner 4: On answering and looking for the answer to read the text aloud and number three, “The tractor of the east...ploughing the rice field”. She repeated reading the paragraph again, “...in most rice-growing areas of Southeast Asia and mainland China...”

Both Learners 3 and 4 referred to the reading comprehension passage to seek the answers. As illustrated in Excerpt 1, both learners had difficulties understanding and using their general knowledge to interpret the reading passage. Again, Learner 4 tried to read and verify her understanding. L2 reading difficulties arise in the dearth of initiating the suitable schema (Hudson, 2007). A study conducted by Phakiti (2003) showed that using cognitive and metacognitive strategies had a poor but encouraging connection to the reading test performance, with the metacognitive strategies contributing a more important role. The results of this study align with the findings from Phakiti (2003).

b. Translating

In this study, the learners employed a translation strategy by using their first language, that is, Malay, to comprehend the text as shown in Excerpt 2. Learners proclaimed that the translation strategy assisted them in strengthening their understanding. By doing so, they could have an in-depth understanding of the passage when they resorted to translation.

Excerpt 2

Learner 1: Mentioned number two. He continued reading again by asking himself a question, “What is likely to...? provoked is like something like *provokasi* [to provoke]...buffalo would be violent and would try to attack”.

Learner 2: She read aloud, “its strong legs and large hooves make him ideal for work in flooded fields. *Oh, dia ada kaki yang kuat dan* [the cow has strong legs and] oh my god...the water buffalo.

In Excerpt 2, Learner 1 tried to understand the sentence by translating the word provoked to Malay which is *provokasi*. Meanwhile, Learner 2, indulged in self-talk and further translating the meaning in her L1. She rereads the sentences aloud and transforms into L1 the words on the buffalo often used in wrestling competitions.

The learners had to rely on translating the meaning in L1 to comprehend the meaning of the reading passage because they had poor English language mastery. They applied background knowledge to assist in understanding the general meaning of the text. The weak readers in this study emphasised more on local or word-level processing strategies. This is supported by Block (1992) who concluded that strategy use is a stable phenomenon not tied to a specific language, because “there is a regular process that operates similarly for native speakers of English and [proficient] second language readers” (p. 335).

4.1.2 Metacognitive strategies

a. Relating content of the passage to real life

Excerpt 3 shows how the learner takes a step back to analyse what the passage is about by reflecting on the word wrestling. This process is known as a reflective process as the learner substituted a word by reasoning. The passage assisted the learner to acquire a new meaning and consequently, become more of an independent thinker.

This example shows that reading and thinking-aloud processes help learners to consciously monitor and reflect upon their learning.

Excerpt 3

Learner 4: Read and thought aloud when he said the following, “The Trojas feed and look...After special buffalo...huh passage one...oh let me guess wrestling like in a television show you know...answer is B. Not D. Ok, the answer should be A la. *sebab* [reason being] refer to word wrestling, wrestling means fighting”.

Learner 4 exhibited the ability to understand and then reflect to look for the clue in order to answer the question as mentioned by Oxford (2003) that readers can master the hidden processes when they try to understand and learn from the passage given.

b. Self-questioning

Learners used self-questioning strategies to get the answer. Self-questioning directed the learners’ attention to the critical aspects of the text which increased their understanding of vital textual elements shown in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4

Learner 1: “Its large horns which are pointed at the tips often give it a ferocious look. Yes, like usual. Its bellow is enough to frighten some people. But what it means by its bellow, is it the stomach?”

As illustrated in Excerpt 4, Learner 1 started questioning, “But what it means by its bellow, is it the stomach?” It is clearly illustrated here that the learner resorts to activated self-questioning as it is very critical to learning. The learner is very careful in selecting the information from the text so that he can engage and improve the active processing of text and comprehension.

c. Using prior knowledge

The participants also relied on activating their prior knowledge to help them construct the main idea as shown in Excerpt 5. One learner stated that she could relate her personal experiences to the passage as they were quite familiar. Furthermore, the text given enabled them to anticipate the meaning; it aided them in guessing the answer although they sometimes lacked the vocabulary knowledge.

Excerpt 5

I : “Reflects of own life is it?”

S2 : “Yea, reflects our own life, we try to think, what is it ah, what is it ah....

I have seen, but where, yea but cannot remember (recalling from memory)”

4.1.3 Compensation strategies

a. Guessing

Only one compensation strategy was identified as shown in Excerpt 6. The learners used to guess on a number of occasions. They tried to unlock the clues given in the passage by guessing because this helped them to find the answers easily.

Sometimes the learners guessed intelligently to obtain the answer. Intelligent guessing is close to rationalising used by learners to locate the answers.

Excerpt 6

Learner 5: “Shared that from passage we know...the answer is *kita keluarkan je la passage [we remove the answers]...apa yang tulis sini macam [what to write here is like] how strong is buffalo”.*

The findings revealed that the learners did not give up attempting the multiple choice questions; rather they opted for guessing to obtain the answer. The learners in this study were faced with unknown and unfamiliar words in context; therefore, they have to engage in the inferencing process to look for the answer. The learners have low proficiency in English and attempted to look up all unfamiliar words; this delayed proficiency acquisition. As stated by Oxford (1990) guessing is a compensation strategy allowing learners to practise the new language for understanding despite the lack of knowledge.

4.1.4 Affective strategy

This study found only one affective strategy being used. The students expressed some emotions on various occasions while reading the passage as shown in Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7

Learner 1: “Expressed actually; the water buffalo is such a gentle animal (yea) that it is often regarded as a pet (yea)”.

Learner 1 showed emotions in the example displayed in Excerpt 7. The affective strategy expressed is non-academic and Student 1 created a level of empathy between the student and the test task. To encourage test-taking strategy use, teachers need to identify anxiety-provoking situations and give learners a supportive environment such that learners can allocate their working memory to the learning tasks.

4.2 Findings from Learners' Interviews

4.2.1 Affective strategies

a. Analysing expressions

Learners discovered the answers from the reading passage by activating their analysis strategy. It was found that there were short and long pauses in the learners' thinking-aloud process. This was agreed by the learners that the short and long pauses were one of the strategies they used to find the answers to the multiple choice questions. The learners further shared that it was important for them to construe and examine the reading passage accordingly to have better comprehension. The learners further divulged that the short and long pauses assisted them to search for the most appropriate answers from the reading passage based on the following interview as shown in the following Excerpt 8.

Excerpt 8

I : When you were reading the passage, there were lots of short and long pauses in between. Can you tell me why was that? What was actually going on in your mind?

S1 : [We are thinking] *Thinking aloud process*.

Findings from the study revealed that the learners tried to make connections with related real-life situations while reading the text. The learners shared that after reading the text once, they had to revisit and reread it to gain better mastery and comprehension. By doing so, they were able to find the answers confidently by employing the rereading strategy. This rereading strategy is one that could facilitate ESL learners in answering a text better. The learners can also activate their higher order thinking skills which are also known to be useful for learners to read critically. Teachers can help learners to activate higher order thinking skills (HOTS) by guiding them from the lower order thinking questions to the next order of thinking. The learners must be taught and trained to be critical and creative thinkers in the reading activities prepared. The reading text also provides learners with a platform to think critically as well as analytically; by activating learners' creative and critical thinking teachers can assist them in using the skills for problem solving.

Analysis of the findings showed that test-takers employed more than one mental processing strategy depending on the individuals, including cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, and affective strategies. This is evident in this study when the test-takers expressed "different strategies or combinations of strategies that can be applied in each question in order to obtain a correct answer" for comprehending the reading text. Reading the passage many times helped the participants to better understand the passage. The learner participants expressed that understanding and reading the passage allowed them to draw conclusions better in answering the multiple choice questions. The findings revealed that they used a compensation strategy whereby they tried guessing the answers on a number of occasions. It could be assumed that they were unable to locate the answer and resorted to guessing due to their poor understanding of the passage given.

In practice, the learners' use and selection of the test-taking strategies in the study including repetition, guessing, translating, relating text content to real life, using prior knowledge, self-questioning, and displaying emotions show that they are affected by many interacting variables such as cognitive style, test anxiety, and type of test. The findings reflect the test-taking strategies proposed by Rafi and Islam (2017). Seven categories of test-taking strategies were identified and developed by Rafi and Islam (2017). These include cognitive strategies, clue-finding strategies, option consideration strategies, answer-checking strategies, question-rereading strategies, option-selecting strategies, and question-rereading strategies.

The use of strategies such as such as mechanically repeating or confirming information and full translation of reading passages are unrelated to performance (Cohen & Apeh, 1979; Singh et. al., 2017). The test-taking styles including how learners orient themselves to the test-taking process may affect the way they use or select strategies. Vattanapath and Jaiprayoon (1999) trained 22 students in test-taking strategies for English comprehension tests and showed how such training enhanced students' achievement and attitudes and influenced affective responses such as relaxation and confidence during tests. This showed the importance of training learners in test-taking strategies as this would boost the learners' confidence in answering the comprehension question given.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has unearthed some strategies weak readers of English use during a multiple choice comprehension reading test. The findings indicated the learners employed cognitive strategies of repetition and translation, metacognitive strategies relating the content of the passage to real life, self-questioning and using prior knowledge, and compensation strategies of guessing. From the interviews with learners, it was obvious that they employed strategies namely analysing expressions. It was clear from the analysis that they faced problems understanding certain keywords which caused difficulty in comprehending the reading text.

Although all the learner participants were able to complete the test within the time given, none of them could get all the answers right. This study obtained suggests evidence to conclude that the learners did not use effective reading strategies to answer the comprehension test questions. They had encountered problems understanding certain words, hence indicating the need to teach them vocabulary skills during reading lessons. The learners should also be given ample opportunity to practice reading comprehension strategies such as contextual cues to improve their reading test performance.

The strategies used by the language learners in this study reveal their understanding of the comprehension text given. It is clear that they have not utilised effective strategies as none of them could get all the items correct. The learners' poor command of the language is another issue that teachers should focus on. The learners' poor command of the language is not the reason for the inability to use the test taking strategies. By themselves, strategies are not inherently good or bad, but they have the potential to be used effectively. The learners should be taught more effective learning strategies. Teachers should take note of the strategies that learners use and analyse them to find out the extent of the strategy's effectiveness. Teachers should also identify the strategies employed by successful students to be taught to the weaker readers of English.

There are a large number of second language learners who will sit for language tests throughout the globe, while the small sample of this study selected from only one university in Malaysia cannot be generalized to other populations or countries. These results may not reveal the complete features of the whole population. In the future, it is recommended that similar studies should take into consideration of students from other educational backgrounds. Since reading test-taking strategies can be challenging tasks, it is hoped that teachers can provide sufficient instruction to the learners so that they are well equipped and prepared for the language tests.

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