Multiple Choice Reading Comprehension Tests and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners Answering Strategies

Kaivan Parhoodeh
Islamic Azad University Gillan-e-Gharb center, Gillan-e-Gharb, Iran

Mahmoud Rostamy
Khatam Al Anbia University, Tehran, Iran

Abolfazl Mehry
Islamic Azad University Takestan Branch, Takestan, Iran

As far as we are concerned, one of the elements of assessing EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign Language/English as a Second Language) learners’ language proficiency in institutions and universities in our country “Iran” are multiple-choice reading comprehension tests. We also know that, it comprises one major section of the standard and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) tests. Taking into account its importance and the problems which EFL learners have answered them, I get motivated to uncover some of the test-taking strategies which they employ to answer multiple-choice reading comprehension questions when dealing with familiar versus unfamiliar topics. To get a better conclusion, I choose 20 advanced male and female candidates whose English proficiency is at an acceptable level and at least at the same age level, and they major in English language from different colleges and universities. They are given two reading comprehension passages (familiar and unfamiliar), each one with five final questions and allotted time to answer the questions. Two main instruments in this study are a retrospective think-aloud protocol and a semi-structured interview. The results of the reading comprehension tests and interview part revealed that advanced learners’ high scores in the familiar topic were not because of their strategy use but because of their high linguistic and background knowledge on the topic. I also concluded that the number, kind, and sequence of strategies employed, were greatly dependent on the degree of testees’ familiarity on the topic. In other words, test-takers used more strategies to compensate for their lack of linguistic knowledge.

Keywords: test-taking strategies, reading comprehension strategies, multiple-choice items, topic familiarity

Introduction

Due to the fact that reading is one of the key and main skills of learning a foreign or second language, and because of the fact that learning any language includes learning how to read in that language, mastering and getting familiar with reading skills and strategies is of paramount importance and merits consideration. The importance of reading as a prominent and outstanding skill must also be taken into account in tests and evaluations. In other words, a learner’s skill and ability in reading must also be gauged and evaluated in a test of
language. For this reason, one section of standard and language tests is allocated to testing reading skill.

As far as you are concerned, most designed and well-known tests of language are in the multiple-choice format and the testees are to choose one of the alternatives or choices according to their own criteria and judgments. How EFL learners embark on replying a multiple-choice reading-comprehension test format and how they deal with such a testing activity of reading, have been a question of interest for many researchers and test takers. How Iranian advanced EFL learners answer multiple-choice format reading comprehension tests? Which strategies and techniques do they employ to answer the so-called tests? When are learners confronted with familiar versus unfamiliar topics? Are the same strategies used for the two kinds of topics? Although many studies have been done in this realm, no definitive answer has been provided yet.

To be really honest, most Iranian EFL learners state that they have difficulty in answering multiple-choice reading comprehension section of their language tests and they are under stress and doubt when come to answering these kinds of tests. How can we help them to overcome their anxiety and stress? How can they answer these questions and tasks in a logical and sensible manner?

I believe that, any language skill (listening, speaking, and writing) has got its own techniques and strategies. Reading comprehension as a language skill is of no exception and has got its own strategies. Maybe by learning these strategies, testees and learners can get better and acceptable results. Doing such a research for me was not a matter of ease. The first problem was the definition of the key term “reading strategy” for native speakers VS. non-native speakers. (1) Do the learning strategies which are employed and used by native speakers correspond to those ones which are used by Non-natives? (2) Which learning strategies are acceptable and logical when answering multiple-choice reading comprehension questions? (3) If we teach learners the learning strategies which are mentioned in the authentic books and by well-known authors, do we contribute to the learners’ increased level of understanding? (4) This research is only done for advanced foreign language learners, so are the results applicable to the other learners and situations? (5) Is think-aloud protocols apt and suitable instruments for judging on learners’ true behavior?

“Strategies are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information” (Brown, 2000, p. 225). According to Brown (2000), strategies are contextualized “battle plans” that might vary from moment to moment, or day to day, or year to year. He says that they vary individually, each of us has a number of possible ways to solve a particular problem, and we choose one, or several in sequence, for a given problem.

Test-taking strategies, according to Cohen, are viewed as those test-taking processes that the respondents have selected and of which they are conscious, at least to some degree. In other words, the notion of strategy implies an element of selection otherwise; the processes would not be considered strategies (Cohen, 1993).

According to Cohen and Upton (2007), Erler and Finkbeiner, comprehension strategies are the behaviors or the mental processes that learners consciously use when they want to complete language tasks. As Farhady, Jafarpoor, and Birjandi quoted “multiple-choice items are the most popular types of objective tests” (1996, p. 11). The students are presented with three, four or five alternatives or options (a correct response and distracters) and they are expected to choose the correct alternative from a range of answers provided (Farhady, Jafarpoor, & Birjandi, 1996).

As Johnston (1984) cited, multiple-choice items are “probably the most researched, most maligned, most difficult to construct, most abused, yet most functional of all items” (p. 59).

The point that reading comprehension depends on information from the readers’ background knowledge
and information from the written text is called topic familiarity by Carrel (1987).

**Literature Review**

According to the dictionary of language testing by Sayyed Abbas Mousavi (1999) test-taking strategies are strategies used by individuals in taking a test. The so called author states that, test taking strategies include: reading the instructions carefully, scheduling the allocated time appropriately, making use of clue words in the questions, delaying answering difficult questions, reviewing the work in order to check the answers, etc. According to Mousavi (1999), there is evidence to suggest that there is a positive relationship between test performance and skill in taking tests. He reiterates that, in spite of this positive relationship, instruction in test-taking is not commonly included in school curriculum or instruction.

Moreover, he adds, the cognitions of those who are skilled in taking tests consist of the following:

1. A cognitive monitor that controls which abilities and skills are going to be engaged to answer the items under investigation.
2. Knowledge, abilities, and skills relevant to the content or trait being measured.

According to Cohen (1998), since the late 1970s, second language testing has adopted an interest toward the strategies which test-takers employ when they take a test. He points out those test-taking strategies put the validity and reliability of tests in danger and as a result, the process of decision–making which depends on testing is influenced since the validity of test demands attention to the strategy which testees take to find the answer. When we take tests, not only our knowledge about the subject but also our knowledge about taking a test is also tested, and the second one is the subject of test-taking strategies (Cohen, 1998).

As Narjes Ghafournia cited in her article (*The Relationship Between Using Multiple-choice Test-taking Strategies and General Language Proficiency Levels*), many researchers have expressed the importance of test-taking strategies to the process of construct validation of language tests (e.g., Backman, 1990; Cohen, 1998). Cohen believed that, the validity of language tests diminishes, and the result of language tests becomes less strong and less influential, when test-takers cannot employ apt test-taking strategies.

What prompted me to do such a research was firstly the scarcity of studies regarding test-taking strategies and multiple-choice tests when dealing with familiar vs. unfamiliar topics, and secondly, the fact that multiple-choice tests are greatly used to assess different areas of learning English as a foreign language, in Iran especially at universities.

One of the research questions in a Ph.D. thesis done by Wei-Tsung Hsu (2006) from the University of Southampton, was: Do students’ English language knowledge, and reading and test-taking strategy use contribute to their multiple-choice reading comprehension test performance? He came to the conclusion that, there are:

1. Underlying students’ English language knowledge and their use of strategy, there are no single-faceted constructs.
2. In the entire test-taking process, there are potential relationships that happen among students’ English language knowledge, strategy use, and their test performance in the sheer test-taking process.
Another study done on the effect of topic familiarity and language learners’ comprehension is by Michael J. Leeser from Florida State University. He cited that schema-based models of comprehension (e.g., Carrel & Eisterhold, 1983; Rumelhart, 1977, 1980) are most often used in SLA research to describe the role that learners’ background knowledge plays in facilitating comprehension. According to him, the findings for the role of topic familiarity for reading comprehension, however, have not been clear enough. He also cited that some studies have reported facilitative effects for topic familiarity (e.g., Barry & Lazarte, 1995; Bugel & Bunk, 1996; Carrell & Wis, 1998), but others have not (Carrel, 1983; Hammadou, 1991; Peretz & shoham, 1990).

The most well-known article on test-taking strategies for multiple-choice comprehension questions is done by Lee Jia-ying (2011) from university of Iowa. He came to the conclusion that, the strategies used for the two texts (familiar and unfamiliar topics) were similar and that test-takers did in the same way, without considering the topic. The results of this study revealed that the types and frequency of use of test-taking strategies by Chinese speaking students were not different when they read familiar versus unfamiliar texts. Although, similar kinds of strategies were used with both topic types, unfamiliar topics encouraged a mild increase in test-taking strategy use in this study, but not in a statistically important way. Participants concentrated more on processing language skills when reading unfamiliar texts than they did when reading familiar texts.

Majid Pour-Mohammadi, a Ph.D. candidate from Rasht Islamic Azad university, Iran, and doctor Mohammad Jafre Zainol Abidin from the University of Science Malaysia (USM), jointly did a study titled “Test-taking Strategies, Schema Theory and Reading Comprehension Test Performance”. They came to the conclusion that the instruction of test-taking strategies culminated in advancement in the performance of language tests, especially reading comprehension scores for different levels of students without considering the context in which they were.

On the whole, as Nunan (1999), mentioned in his book (Second Language Learning & Teaching), different task types stimulated very different interactional patterns, and that this needed to be taken into account by curriculum developers and discourse analysts. By the same token, multiple-choice reading comprehension questions, as a kind of closed task required their own patterns and strategies.

**Purpose of the Study**

The main goal of this study is to draw a parallel between the strategies used by Iranian advanced EFL learners when faced with familiar versus unfamiliar topics in a multiple-choice format reading comprehension test. The focus is on describing what learners or subjects do when they are taking reading comprehension tests by asking them to state their strategy use.

Research questions:

1. Does topic familiarity affect the Iranian EFL advanced learners’ reading comprehension multiple choice tests?
2. Do Iranian EFL advanced learners use different types of reading comprehension strategies to answer multiple-choice tests when dealing with familiar and unfamiliar topics?

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Twenty advanced male and female EFL Iranian candidates whose general English is in an acceptable level and are from the same discipline “mainly majored in English language teaching” and mostly hold BA degrees
and are from different colleges and universities. Most of them are experienced teachers and have been teaching English for at least five or six years. By the way, they are in different age levels. More than half of them are military men. To be really honest, convincing them to take part in the study was not easily possible. Firstly, they told me that it was time-taking, and secondly they were afraid of answering multiple-choice questions, not willing to put their level of reading comprehension into practice, although I reiterated that what was important for me was their strategies use not their level of reading.

**Instruments**

Two main instruments used in this study are think-aloud protocol and a semi-structured interview. In this study I have used a retrospective think aloud protocol, which requires samples to report their thoughts after the reading task is completed. Two ways of employing think-aloud protocols with problem-solving activities are introspection and retrospection Ericsson and Simon (1984). According to Ericson and Simon retrospective think-aloud has the advantage of keeping the process and the task undamaged. I selected a semi-structured interview for two reasons: (1) It is less time-taking and the candidates have time to express their ideas in a more logical manner. (2) Think-aloud protocol alone is not a reliable source of getting the underlying processes and behavior of the test-takers (Bowles, 2010).

**Data-Collection Procedures**

To know which test-taking strategies candidates employ when they answer multiple-choice reading comprehension questions, in familiar and unfamiliar topics, I selected two short authentic reading comprehension passages from ARCO TOEFL reading comprehension and vocabulary work book (written by Elizabeth Davy & Karen Davy). One of the passages had a familiar content (about learning disabilities) to them and followed by five comprehension questions. The content of the other passage was not familiar to them (about a disease) and also followed by five comprehension questions. I intentionally selected short passages because when they were long, candidates’ cooperation diminishes greatly. I requested them to answer the questions at allotted time (10 minutes each passage) under exact testing conditions. Because some of them did not know my purpose behind the test, and how and what to verbalize their thought during think-aloud phase, I included some common and mostly used test-taking strategies in their exam paper (questionnaire) as a model. The semi-structured interview questions (containing five questions) were taken from the article “Test-taking Strategies for Multiple-choice Comprehension Questions” by Lee Jia-ying (2011). The two reading comprehension tests and the interview questions which were mentioned respectively in appendices A and B were taken by the candidates in the same testing session with a short time of break in between the familiar and unfamiliar reading tests.

**Data Analysis**

After distributing the reading comprehension questionnaire among the candidates, and allotting them the required time (about 10 minutes for familiar and another 10 minutes for unfamiliar topic), and some time to answer the general semi-structured interview questions, I analyzed the obtained results of the answer sheets. Each question in both familiar and unfamiliar reading passages received a score for being answered correctly, i.e., if they had answered all the familiar and unfamiliar questions correctly, their total score was 10 (five for familiar and five for unfamiliar respectively). Then, I went through the semi-structured interview section, to figure out the kinds of strategies, which they had generally employed to answer the familiar and unfamiliar reading comprehension passages. I checked the answer sheet of all the testees one by one and for each question,
to determine the most occurring strategies which they had employed to answer the multiple-choice reading comprehension questions.

**Results**

The first research null hypothesis of the present study predicted “Topic familiarity does not affect the Iranian EFL advanced learners’ reading comprehension”. The normality distribution of the reading comprehension scores of the participants when dealing with unfamiliar and familiar topics was tested in order to decide whether to use parametric or nonparametric data analysis. So I used One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. The results of this analysis are laid out in Table 1.

As Table 1 shows, the Z value of 1.49 and 1.20 for the familiar and unfamiliar scores respectively at the significance level of Sig. > .05 show that reading comprehension scores in familiar one are not normally distributed ($p = .02, p < .05$), but they have normal distribution in unfamiliar group ($p = .11, p > .05$). Since both sets of scores do not meet the normality assumption, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test which is nonparametric was used to compare reading comprehension scores of two sets of scores; otherwise the Paired Samples T-test which is parametric could be used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Familiar group</th>
<th>Unfamiliar group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal Parameters</td>
<td>.513</td>
<td>1.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>.335</td>
<td>.268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Extreme Differences</td>
<td>.335</td>
<td>.268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>-.335</td>
<td>-.182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z</td>
<td>1.499</td>
<td>1.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to analyze the data to test the first null hypothesis, first the students’ performances on the Reading Comprehension Test were assessed. Table 2 displays the related descriptive statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27.25</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfamiliarity</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.75</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3  
The Negative and Positive Ranks for Participants’ Reading Scores with Unfamiliar and Familiar Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Sum of Ranks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Ranks</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Ranks</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.76</td>
<td>166.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ties</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As obvious in the table, the mean negative rank was 5.00 (n = 1), and the mean positive rank was 9.76 (n = 17). Moreover, the sum of the ranks in negative ranks was 5.00, but it was 166.00 in positive rank.

Figure 1 below demonstrates the graphical representation of the results.

![Figure 1. Mean ranks for students’ reading comprehension scores in familiar and unfamiliar topics.](image)

To compare the two groups’ reading comprehension scores, Mann Whitney U Test was used. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4  
Non-Parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test to Compare the Two Group’s Reading Comprehension Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>275.00</td>
<td>-3.574</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Based on positive ranks.

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test detected significant difference in reading comprehension scores between the familiar scores (Md = 3.50, n = 20) and unfamiliar group (Md = 2.00, n = 20) with (Z = -3.574, p = .000, p < .05) in which the p value, .000 was lower than .05. Therefore, the first null hypothesis of the present study was rejected and it can be claimed that topic familiarity affects the Iranian EFL advanced learners’ reading comprehension.

The second research null hypothesis of the present study proposed: “Iranian EFL advanced learners do not use different types of reading comprehension strategies to answer multiple-choice tests when dealing with
familiar and unfamiliar topics”. To check this null crosstabs (Chi-square) was carried out. Table 4 manifests the frequencies, percentages and standardized residuals (Std. Residual) for the participants uses of five reading comprehension strategies when dealing with unfamiliar and unfamiliar topics (reading questions first, matching key words, paraphrasing, choosing an option deviating from others, and choosing longer or shorter options). The former two indices are descriptive and should be interpreted horizontally, i.e., within each group; while the latter—Std. Residual—is an inferential index based on which conclusions as to the significance of the differences between the two groups’ perceptions can be made. This index should be interpreted vertically for comparing the selection of each of the choices by the two groups. Std. Residuals beyond +/- 1.96 (Field, 2009) indicate that the selection of the strategies is not random; hence significantly beyond expectation.

According to the results presented in Table 5, it can be seen that 58.5 percent of the participants when dealing with unfamiliar topics have used the first strategy, i.e., reading questions first. On the other hand, 12.5 percent of them when dealing with familiar topics have used this strategy.

The 24.4 percent of the participants when dealing with unfamiliar topics used the second type of strategies, i.e., matching key words, compared with the 50 percent of them when dealing with familiar topics who applied this strategy.

As obvious in Table 5, 14.6 percent of the participants when dealing with unfamiliar topics have utilized the third strategy, i.e., paraphrasing. Conversely, 25 percent of them when dealing with familiar topics utilized paraphrasing strategy.

Additionally, none of the participants when dealing with unfamiliar topics have used the fourth reading strategy, i.e., choosing an option deviating from others. In contrast, 12.5 percent of them when dealing with familiar topics utilized this strategy.

Besides, 2.4 percent of the participants when dealing with unfamiliar topics applied the fifth type of strategies, i.e., choosing longer or shorter options, compared with the zero percent of them when dealing with familiar topics that used this strategy.

Table 5
Frequencies, Percentages and Std. Residuals: Uses of Strategies Used By the Participants When Dealing With Unfamiliar and Familiar Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Unfamiliar</th>
<th>Familiar</th>
<th>Unfamiliar % within Group</th>
<th>Familiar % within Group</th>
<th>Unfamiliar Std. Residual</th>
<th>Familiar Std. Residual</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Matching key words</th>
<th>Paraphrasing</th>
<th>Choosing an option deviating from others</th>
<th>Choosing longer or shorter options</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading questions first</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>58.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>-2.0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matching key words</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrasing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>-.4</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing an option deviating from others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>-.2</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing longer or shorter options</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>.0%</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>-.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>58.5%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>-2.0</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Investigative Std. Residuals hands on that only one of the above mentioned statistics are selected significantly beyond expectation, i.e., Std. Residuals are beyond +/- 1.96. The use of the first strategy by the participants when dealing with familiar topics, i.e., reading questions first (12.5%, Std. Residual = -2.0 < -1.96)
is significantly below expectation. In other words, the participants when dealing with familiar topics have applied the reading questions first reading comprehension strategy significantly less than unfamiliar group. The results of Chi-Square Test for comparing the participants’ reading comprehension strategy use when dealing with familiar or unfamiliar topics are laid out in Table 6 below.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Use</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>13.958</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>15.379</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear-by-Linear Association</td>
<td>6.858</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Chi-square Test found a statistically significant difference in strategy use when dealing with unfamiliar and familiar groups with \(x^2 (4) = 13.958, p = .007, p < .05\) (see Table 6); accordingly, the second null hypothesis was rejected, and with high degree of confidence, we can assert that Iranian EFL advanced learners use different types of reading comprehension strategies to answer multiple-choice tests when dealing with familiar and unfamiliar topics. Figure 2 below graphically illustrates the results.

![Figure 2. Strategy uses by the participants when dealing with unfamiliar (out of 41) and familiar topics (out of 16).](image)
Discussions

Taking into account the studies which have been done before in this realm, with different samples and in different contexts, I want to know whether the same findings come true in an Iranian EFL context with a group of candidates who major in English language and have been involved in teaching for at least five to six years. For this reason, the two main instruments: two reading comprehension multiple-choice tests (familiar & unfamiliar) and a semi-structured interview were employed to figure out the most common test-taking strategies which they employed to get access to the correct or right option in a testing condition.

To be really honest, I expected more of the samples of my study. All of them were graduate teachers and held at least BA degrees, and more or less, were engaged in teaching and education. The result of the test, on familiar topic was not so bad, but on unfamiliar topic they really did their worst. Moreover, they weren’t under stress and success or failure did not matter for them. From among 20 test-takers, only one of them has answered all the unfamiliar questions correctly. In my opinion it can be a matter of guessing and chance. But, the result of familiar topic was good and satisfactory. 50 percent of the test-takers have answered four questions (out of five questions) correctly.

Regarding the first research question, taking advantage of one’s background knowledge is the most common strategy which a great number of Iranian EFL learners employ, in answering familiar multiple-choice reading comprehension questions. Background knowledge comprises both language knowledge and world knowledge. The candidates in this study mentioned that their general sequence of replying multiple choice reading comprehension questions in the familiar topic has mostly been from text or passage to the questions. The testees can answer any kind of question in a familiar text, taken from inferencing questions to vocabulary and so on. In familiar topics, test-takers may get help from the other strategies too, but not as much as unfamiliar topics.

The answer to the second research question: This status (answering unfamiliar reading comprehension questions) is too much challenging for candidates. Not only weak but also good and advanced level learners have difficulty doing such tasks. The most difficult questions to be answered in this case are inferencing questions, which majority of test-takers resort to test-wiseness to answer it. I think it is apt to mention Douglas Brown’s idea who says “strategies are contextualized ‘battle plans’, that might vary from moment to moment, or day to day, or year to year” (2000, p. 113). According to him, each of us has a number of possible ways to solve a particular problem, and we choose one or several in sequence for a given problem. Most of the candidates in my study mentioned that, to answer the unfamiliar reading questions, first they had gone through the questions, to get the meaning of the text better. Some others had preferred the other way round. One point worthy of note is that, advanced learners/testees have more strategies at their command than intermediate or lower-level ones.

Of course, I did not expect the results to be so, because all the testees were in a high level, and I thought familiarity and unfamiliarity of the topic did not make so much difference in the range of scores, but the results were not in line with my expectations. Doing such a kind of research, has got its own limitations and problems. The main problem is the instruments which are used to obtain information. First of all participants have not had such an experience before, and even by explanation, they do not perform as well as is expected. Secondly, getting their consent and cooperation to fill out the forms or to answer interview questions is not a matter of ease. They do not bear responsibility and do not care about the results.
This study was carried out by adult and advanced group of learners. I am sure, doing it with another level and age group will culminate in other findings and conclusions.

Conclusion

Whether we are dealing with familiar or unfamiliar topics, we must bear in mind that there is not a single, fixed, unique, best strategy to use in all contexts and in all circumstances. According to Brown (2000), every learner, teacher, learner-teacher, context is unique. Our task is to understand the properties of each. On the whole, checking the answer sheet of the testees, I came across some overall similarities in their answering strategies:

Seventeen candidates have answered wrongly, questions number five and one of the unfamiliar topic. These questions (five to one) are inferencing questions and demand not only the power of deduction, but also the overall understanding of the whole passage. What comes to my mind in this regard is that, because the content of the reading passage was new to the testees they had to go through it in a bottom-up manner, i.e., they went to every detail of the passage to get the point. (sentential processing). Out of 20 candidates, 14 candidates had answered question number two of the unfamiliar reading topic wrongly. This question has the word “habitat” in its correct option which is not mentioned in the passage and maybe is new to some of them. My conclusion is that testees mostly choose an option which is directly related to the passage or mentioned in it. Another conclusion is that language knowledge is as important as world knowledge. They are the same as two wings for a bird. Most of the students had stumbled on question number two because the word “habitat” was new to them. My third conclusion is that in reading passages and sometimes in the mentioned options of multiple-choice questions, some words play a key role and not understanding them culminates in the abortion of the whole activity.

According to Segalowitz (2000), one of the important elements of reading fluency and one of the effective factors in distinguishing L2 reading comprehension abilities is word recognition fluency, because reading comprehension ability is related to a reader’s ability to read fast with ease and accuracy. As Koda (2005), cited low-scorers have insufficient linguistic knowledge.

More than half of the candidates have answered question number three correctly. This question has the option “all of the above” among its options as the correct answer. It is quite evident that, the selection of this option by candidates has not been according to their understanding of the passage, otherwise they would have answered all the other questions correctly, because this question embodies all the information of the passage in itself. In other words, the selection of this option has been according to test-wiseness. Test-wiseness is a test-taker’s ability to use the characteristics and formats of the test and the test-taking situation to receive a higher score, without necessarily knowing the content or using the skill that test authors intended to test (Allen, 1992; Dodeen, 2008).

Another common test-taking strategy which most Iranian EFL learners resort to it, especially in unfamiliar topics, is selecting the option which has a word or phrase from the passage in itself. Question number four in the unfamiliar reading follows this strategy. Seventeen candidates have chosen it because the words end and exterminate are mentioned in the same sentence and phrase in the passage.

Question number one in the familiar topic is answered correctly by 90 percent of the testees. That is only three testees have given a wrong answer. This question is the same as inferring questions (numbers 1 & 5) in the unfamiliar topic. While 85 percent of candidates have answered the inferring question in the unfamiliar
topic wrongly. So, what, first and foremost, is significant and meritorious in a multiple-choice reading comprehension question is familiarity and non-familiarity of the test-takers with the topic, not their test-taking strategies.

Paraphrasing options with the meaning of the text, is another common strategy for taking a multiple-choice reading comprehension test which only half of the testees have employed it in answering question number five in the familiar reading test. Although, the phrase “left to right” is not mentioned in the passage but candidates are able to answer the question easily by the phrase “reading difficulty”.

In addition to the strategies mentioned, cultural factors are of importance and should not be overlooked as well. I think question number five in the familiar topic is an evident example. Although all the options are familiar to the students and they know the meaning of all the words and the whole passage, they are not able to distinguish the nuances of meaning and are in doubt about the right option.

Implications of the Study

One of the most important and possible effects of studies, such as this, is the changes which can be brought about in the methods of teaching reading in foreign and second language settings, especially in academia and universities. When reading becomes goal-oriented and purposeful, definitely the strategy and way of dealing with it changes accordingly. When success in one’s career and one’s academic life depends on passing a test which embodies some reading comprehension questions, our view to it changes, too. As comprehension becomes vital for test-takers to pass the test, reading teachers should help their students be more aware of their test-taking strategies to efficiently and effectively control their comprehension level and choose compensatory strategies when needed. On the whole, the results of this study help both educators and test takers, as well as contribute to the field of reading strategies in general and test-taking strategies in particular.

References

Familiar reading

Children who appear intelligent and have normal sight and hearing may nevertheless have learning disabilities such as dyslexia, difficulty in reading; dysgraphia, difficulty in writing; dyscalculia, difficulty with numbers; and auditory-memory problems that prevent the child from remembering what has just been said. Considered an “invisible” handicap, such learning disabilities can be detected by alert parents before the child goes to school. If the child at about thirty month is not developing normal language skills, something is amiss. A child who cannot do puzzles or put pegs in holes lacks perceptual-motor skills. Kindergartens should recognize the ABCs. First-graders may commonly reverse their letters, writing a d for a b, but if they are still doing this at the start of second grade, they should be tested for learning disabilities. Proper and early treatment is essential.

1. The author’s intent in this selection is to
   A) describe the various types of learning disabilities
   B) explain why some children have dyslexia
   C) warn parents of the signs of learning disabilities
   D) describe kindergartens’ skills

2. The selection would most likely appear in a
   A) health book B) medical journal C) college yearbook D) parents’ magazine

3. A child who cannot remember a long question might have
   A) dyslexia B) dysgraphia C) auditory-memory problems D) hyperactivity

4. The author emphasizes the need for
   A) listening to children
   B) more learning centers to help the disabled
   C) trained personnel to prevent learning disabilities
   D) early detection of learning disabilities

5. A child who reads from right to left may have
   A) a poor diet B) poor vision C) inadequate teachers D) dyslexia

Unfamiliar reading

Plague is a disease carried by animals, primarily by rodents, and by people. It was widespread in Europe, where in the 1300s, 25 million people died and raging epidemics spread as late as the latter part of the 17th century. Once people became aware of the fact that plague was spread by rats that carried the epidemic on ships from one port to another, rodent extermination put an end to the devastating plagues in the world. In the United States, plague occurred in epidemic strength in San Francisco in 1900. Intensive rat control measures were employed immediately, but squirrels in the area had been infected and had to be destroyed too. Descendants of these rodents continue the infection and have transmitted it to other rodents such as prairie dogs in the western and southwestern parts of the United States. The plague is endemic to those areas that are sparsely populated. There have been
scattered cases of plague since 1900, but no serious outbreaks.

1. You can infer that there were no further raging plague epidemics
   A) after the 1300s
   B) after the seventeenth century
   C) in Europe
   D) in San Francisco

2. The western and southwestern parts of the United States
   A) still have serious outbreaks of plague
   B) are the habitat of infected rodents
   C) have large populations
   D) are sparsely populated because of the plague

3. The plague spread in Europe because
   A) infected rats traveled in ships
   B) people did not know what caused the disease
   C) nothing was done to prevent the disease
   D) all of the above

4. Raging epidemics ended in Europe when
   A) ships were not allowed in foreign ports
   B) rats were exterminated
   C) populations moved out of the big cities
   D) 25 million people had died

5. You can infer that in the late 1300s
   A) Europe’s population was very small
   B) intensive rat control measures were applied
   C) people were extremely poor
   D) people were accustomed to the plague

Appendix B

(1) Tell me how much you know about this topic, on a scale of 1-10?
(2) What is your sequence of answering multiple-choice questions in the reading comprehension test?
(3) What do you think to be the easiest and hardest questions in the reading tests and how do you answer them?
(4) Do you adopt different reading strategies for familiar and unfamiliar topics or the same reading strategies?
(5) How do the reading process compare when taking a multiple-choice question test and reading in a non-testing situation?