

Unpacking Vietnamese EFL Learners' Deployment of Reading Test-Taking Strategies for the New TOEIC Test Format

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Abstract

Test-taking strategy (TTS) plays a vital role in accomplishing the tests, and many types of tests require test-takers to use TTSs differently. TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), one of the standardized tests, features two main parts, viz. listening and reading, requesting test-takers to deploy their TTSs intensively to accomplish the test effectively. Reading TTSs are of importance for test-takers in responding to the reading content. Nevertheless, test-takers in different learning ecologies utilize reading TTSs dissimilarly. Therefore, this study was to examine reading TTSs for the new TOEIC new format utilized by EFL learners at a language center in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This mixed-methods study employed two research instruments, namely questionnaire and semi-structured interview, for data collection. A cohort of 221 EFL learners was recruited to answer the questionnaires, and 25 of them were invited for semi-structured interviews. The SPSS software (version 26.0) was used to process the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires, while the content analysis approach was utilized to analyse the qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that research participants deployed the reading TTS for the new TOEIC test format at a high frequency. Additionally, participants were found to deploy the memory and compensatory strategies for TOEIC reading tests more frequently than cognitive, metacognitive, and affective ones. From the obtained findings, pedagogical implications are suggested to leverage the quality of reading teaching and learning in general and TOEIC training in specific.

Keywords: English language, reading, test-taker, test-taking strategy, TOEIC

1. Introduction

Scholars (e.g., Cohen, 2006; Pour-Mohammadi & Abidin, 2011; Ramli et al., 2018; Nguyen & Tran, 2022) have asserted that test-taking strategy (TTS) is important for test-takers to get successful in accomplishing the tests. Cohen (2006) asserts that TTS represents the consciously selected processes the respondents use to handle language issues and test item instruction in the test-taking tasks. Furthermore, Pour-Mohammadi and Abidin (2011) point out that test-takers with positive attitudes toward tests and good TTSs can succeed in doing the tests well, and argue that it is challenging to complete if the test-takers do not equip themselves with worthy TTSs. They also state that test-takers face various challenges such as recalling information and their background knowledge, drawing on the text structures' understanding and text organizers, and giving reflective and insightful responses. Likewise, Ramli et al. (2018) indicate that the primary factors contributing to test-takers' testing achievement are internal and external factors, including the test-takers themselves, supporting facilities, and the applied learning models. With respect to the reading comprehension tests, Graham and Bellert (2004) state that test takers struggle to comprehend texts due to the neglect of explicit instruction. Regarding the proficiency level, Nation (2005) mentions that test-takers have trouble understanding. Instead of understanding the main ideas and general concepts first to reach comprehension, they tend to concentrate more on word accuracy or have no metacognition skill.

TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) is one of the standardized tests which is popular in different contexts. It is a multiple-choice proficiency test that is built to measure communicative English for non-native speakers (Wilson, 2000), and it has been commonly used in educational institutions and workplaces worldwide (Im & Cheng, 2019). In Vietnam, it is observed that a big number of educational institutions use TOEIC as an outcome standard, and companies and businesses use it as one of the criteria for recruitment. Therefore, more and more learners take TOEIC-oriented English learning courses in order to meet the graduation requirement as well as recruitment (Nguyen & Gu, 2020). Within the research context which is a language center offering both English language courses and TOEIC preparation courses, most of the learners took TOEIC preparation courses in which they were provided with TTSs and did the TOEIC mock tests. Nonetheless, TOEIC learners often encountered different difficulties while doing TOEIC tests with the new format, especially in the reading comprehension section. They seemed to struggle with using their TTSs to do the reading comprehension effectively. Additionally, their low language proficiency also attributed to their difficulties in using their TTSs as they had to cope with the sophisticated terminologies terms, and jargon in the reading comprehension tests; consequently, their test results were not satisfactory. Therefore, this study aimed at delving into EFL learners' deployment of reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test format in the context of a language center in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and it addresses the following research question:

- To what extent do Vietnamese EFL learners deploy reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test format?

This study is hoped to supplement the foundation of existing literature on TTSs. Particularly, the findings of this study provide test-takers, teachers, and administrators with a general picture of test-takers' TTS use so that they can recognize the use of the TTSs and apply those TTSs in the TOEIC preparation courses. Additionally, this study will hopefully provide teachers with hands-on experience in implementing TTS to mitigate issues that impede testing procedures and with practical implications of the use of TTSs. Last but not least, this study is hoped to serve as a useful guide for syllabus developers to identify the factors that influence EFL learners' perceptions of TTSs so that TOEIC courses can be appropriately designed to increase learners' awareness and application of TTSs.

2. Literature Review

TTS is defined from diverse perceptions. Bachman and Palmer (2022), Cohen and Upton (2007), and Nation (2005) define TTS includes reading the rubrics and instructions judiciously, planning the allocated time appropriately, using keywords in the questions, suspending answering diverse and challenging questions, and rereading and assessing the work to check the answers. In a similar vein, Dodeen (2015) defines TTSs as cognitive abilities that allow test-takers to handle situations without knowing the test contents. These include managing time well, analyzing all questions before responding, and taking difficult, multiple-choice, and underlying keywords questions. Within the scope of this study, TTS is understood as carefully selected strategies that test-takers deploy to address language issues and answer test questions in the test-taking activity.

There are different types of language learning strategies (e.g., Duong et al., 2019; Duong et al., 2021; Tran & Chau, 2021; Tran & Nguyen, 2017; Tran & Tran, 2021). Nevertheless, this research focuses on TTS. TTSs for reading comprehension can be divided into five groups, viz. memory strategies, compensation strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and affective strategies (Cohen, 2006; Phakiti, 2008; Oxford 1996; Ahmadi, 2013). As for memory strategies, Ellis et al. (1995) describe that memory strategies are strategies that learners can use visual and verbal strategies to improve their retention of new words by linking the word to previously learned knowledge or grouping and making meaning links in memory. Similarly, Phakiti (2008) defines memory strategies as a retrieved information process; language learners use retrieval strategies such as drawing on prior knowledge and applying grammatical rules. Consistent with these concepts, Grabe (2009) illustrates that memory strategies are the process of recalling knowledge from long-term memory is a regularly employed test-taking strategy. In the same vein, Singh et al. (2021) state comprehensively that memory strategies are strategies which involve several interrelated brain processes that can be triggered automatically when test-takers are subjected to tests. Once activated, prior knowledge from working memory and learned linguistic abilities can function harmoniously to enhance the possibility of attaining the highest test scores. With respect to compensation strategies, Stanovich (2000) states that compensatory processing may occur when one of the reading processes for comprehension is weak, the other reading mechanisms will have to work harder to make up for it. Likewise, Pasumbu and Macora (2020) argue that compensation strategies for reading comprehension make up for the lack of appropriate vocabulary. That means test-takers use the surrounding sentence and context to determine the point or meaning of the text, and they employ compensation strategies to comprehend the target language when their knowledge of it is insufficient.

In respect of cognitive strategies, Oxford (2001) portrays that cognitive strategies allow learners to manage linguistic content directly through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, and reorganizing knowledge to facilitate new learning tasks. Similarly, Ahmadi et al. (2013) delineate that cognitive strategies allow test-takers to recognize or repeat words or phrases which combine text information with their previous knowledge to build mental explanations. From these notions, cognitive strategies can be implied that strategies which test-takers can use to construct meaning from text and accomplish the specified assignment using cognitive strategies related to their target language and knowledge of reading. Regarding metacognitive strategies, Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) define metacognitive strategies as strategies that readers use in the reading process and the self-control mechanisms they use to monitor and improve comprehension. In the same vein, Ahmadi (2013) states that metacognitive strategies are higher-order performance methods that involve planning, monitoring, and assessing a learning and activity's accomplishment. What is more, Jafarigohar (2014) points out metacognitive strategies are processes for self-control and self-regulation, enabling readers to choose between different reading strategies in different contexts and for other purposes. As regards the affective strategies, Oxford (1990) states that affective strategies focus on readers' confidence, emotions, attitudes, motives, and values, and affective strategies are one of the most common strategies employed by test-takers when taking a test. In the same line, Dreyer and Oxford (1996) consent that affective strategies are recognizing one's mood and anxiety, talking about thoughts and emotions, encouraging good performance, and using breathing techniques or positive self-talk. Singh et al. (2021) point out the main characteristics of affective strategies are self-questioning and displaying emotions which are affected by many interacting variables such as test style, test anxiety, and type of test.

Previous studies on TTSs have been conducted in different contexts. Internationally, Rafi and Islam (2017) conducted a study to elucidate the test-taking method used by test-takers in doing reading comprehension tests in the context of Indonesia. It was a descriptive study using Principal Component Analysis (PCA). There were 95 respondents from the English Department who took part in answering the questionnaires. The results were that test-takers utilised different types of strategies for reading comprehension tests. In Saudi Arabia, Al-Khasawneh (2020) carried out a study to evaluate the correlational association between TTSs and reading comprehension. This research involved 64 undergraduate test-takers majoring in English at King Khalid University. The study's findings revealed that Saudi EFL test-takers employed a modest number of test-taking methods. There was no statistically significant link between test-takers' usage of test-taking methods and their performance on reading comprehension examinations. In the context of Vietnam, many studies on reading strategies (e.g., Tran & Chau, 2021; Tran & Duong, 2018) and reading TTSs (e.g., Do & Phan, 2021; Nguyen, 2014) have been conducted.

For instance, Nguyen (2014) conducted this study at Vietnam Maritime University to explore TTSs relating to learners' competence in TOEIC Reading Comprehension and verify differences in reading strategies among high-competent reduced-competition test-takers at Vietnam Maritime University. The findings indicated that when test-takers took the TOEIC course, they placed a high appreciation on reading strategies. Do and Phan (2021) did a study to explore metacognitive strategies in reading comprehension used by 123 tertiary English majors who partook in a survey and a reading comprehension test (TOEIC test). The results were that test-takers often employed reading strategies, and those with high reading ability employed reading strategies more often than those with low reading ability. In brief, many previous studies aimed to provide a broad and comprehensive overview of TTSs. Noticeably, research on reading strategies is dominant; however, not many studies on TTSs, especially reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test format have been conducted in Vietnam. This constraint confirms that this study niche has much more to explore and discuss. To that void, this study is to bridge the existing gap. Explicitly, the study seeks to investigate the extent to which EFL learners deploy their TTSs for the new TOEIC test format in the context of a language center in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

3. Method

3.1 Research Site and Participants

This mixed methods study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches in response to answering the research question as it is expected to be a flexible approach and offer more in-depth findings. The mixed-methods research combines quantitative and qualitative methods to maximize the strengths and minimize the drawbacks of the research (Creswell, 2014). It was conducted at a language center in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, which has offered both English language skills courses and TOEIC preparation ones. The number of learners is usually around 500, taking TOEIC preparation ones. Most of the learners at the language center are from higher education institutions in the area, and they take pre-TOEIC courses. To enroll in TOEIC preparation courses at the language center, learners must sit in the placement test in order to be placed in suitable classes. Each course lasts around 12 weeks, and learners take two 90-minute sessions weekly. Apart from learning TTSs, learners had to do four mock TOEIC tests during the course.

A cohort of 230 learners were sampled based on the convenience sampling method which is convenient for the researchers to collect the data by gaining access to available participants at the research site (Creswell, 2014). Most of the participants (93.2%) were tertiary non-English majors. Among 230 students, three (1.4%) learners were freshmen, 20 (9.0 %) learners were sophomores, 66 (29.9%) learners were juniors, and 132 (59.7%) learners were seniors. Regarding their English language proficiency, 118 (53.4%) learners assumed their English language proficiency at the elementary level, and 102 (46.6%) learners reported that their English language proficiency was at the pre-intermediate level. With respect to self-study time, 39 (17.6%) learners spent less than one hour self-studying English every day, 163 (73.8%) learners allocated from 1-3 hours to daily independent English learning, and 19 (8.6%) learners spent more than three hours self-studying English on a daily basis. Twenty-five learners were invited to partake in the semi-structured interviews voluntarily.

3.2 Research Instruments

Two research instruments (questionnaire and interview) were employed for data collection. The questionnaire was adapted from Oxford's (1990) and Cohen's (2006) study for data collection, and consists of two sections: Section A seeks for respondent's background information; Section B is the questionnaire content featuring 34 closed-ended items divided into five parts (memory strategies: 12 items, compensation strategies: 8 items, cognitive strategies: 5 items, metacognitive strategies: 6 items, and affective strategies: 3 items). The five-point Likert scale (from Not at all true for me to Always true for me) was designed for 34 items. In order to assure the validity of the questionnaire, the confirmatory factor analysis was carried out to modify the questionnaire items (Pallant, 2016). Additionally, the questionnaire was first designed in English, it was then translated into the respondent's mother tongue to ensure that the language barrier could not hinder respondents from answering the questionnaire. The Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire was .71, which means the reliability of the questionnaire was acceptable.

The semi-structured interview, which was designed based on the research focus, comprised of seven questions to clarify ELF learners' deployment of reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test Format. All the interview questions were first designed in English, and they were converted into the respondent's mother tongue to collect respondent's in-depth answers.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Prior to the main research, the instruments were piloted with 25 participants answering the questionnaire and five participants partaking in the interview. The modification was made to the questionnaire and interview. All participants were invited to have a meeting on Google Meet to be given instructions and explanations, and then the official questionnaire using Google Forms was administered to respondents who spent from 25 to 35 minutes answering the questionnaire. Roughly a week, twenty-five learners were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews voluntarily. All the interviews were recorded for later analysis with the respondents' permission.

As regards the data analysis, two types of data (quantitative and qualitative data) were generated from this study. The quantitative data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using the SPSS software version 26 in terms of means (M) and standard deviation (SD). The interval scale was interpreted as 1.00-1.80: Not at all true for me; 1.81-2.60: Rarely true for me; 2.61-3.40: Sometimes true for me; 3.41-4.20: Often true for me; 4.21-5.00: Always true for me (Kan, 2009). The qualitative data garnered from the interviews were analysed using the content analysis approach. The intra-rating was employed for double-checking the data analysis to make sure that the data analysis was valid

and reliable.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

EFL learners’ use of reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test format

Table 1 shows that the overall mean score of EFL learners’ use of reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test format was 4.10 (SD=.36) out of five, which means that EFL learners deployed reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test at a high frequency. There are five groups of reading TTSs including memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, and affective strategies. The two most strategies frequently used by EFL learners were memory strategies (M=4.52; SD=.24) and compensation strategies (M=4.52; SD=.30), followed by cognitive strategies (M=4.16; SD=.44) and metacognitive strategies (M=3.82; SD=.35). The least frequently used strategies that EFL learners applied were affective strategies (M=3.49; SD=.45).

Table 1. EFL learners’ use of reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test format

No.	Reading TTSs	N = 221		
		Mean	SD	Level
1	Memory strategies	4.52	.24	very high
2	Cognitive strategies	4.16	.44	high
3	Compensation strategies	4.52	.30	very high
4	Metacognitive strategies	3.82	.35	high
5	Affective strategies	3.49	.45	high
	Average	4.10	.36	high

Memory strategies for the new TOEIC test format

As it can be seen in Table 2, in term of keywords, the participants always “[remembered] the passage’s important keywords to answer the questions” (item 6: M=4.60; SD=.54), “[utilized] the keywords to remember the content of the sentences” (item 10: M=4.41; SD=.64), and “[remembered] keywords in each question to link to the TOEIC passage” (item 11: M=4.53; SD=.61), but they frequently “[remembered] the keywords in the options to connect the passages and answers” (item 12: M=4.42; SD=.69). In terms of phrases or expressions, the participants always “[remembered] the phrases or expressions to visualize the passage’s context” (item 2: M=4.52; SD=.59), “[connected] the phrases or expressions in [their] mind to remember the contexts of the TOEIC reading passages” (item 4: M=4.56; SD =.58). Additionally, in terms of using words in the TOEIC reading tests, the participants always “[associated] words into groups in their mind to help recall the passage’s content” (item 3: M=4.57; SD =.56) and “[connected] the meanings of the words with pictures in mind to remember the passage of the TOEIC reading tests” (item 5: M=4.53; SD=.63). Regarding other domains, the students always remembered “pictures in the passages to answer the TOEIC reading questions” (item 7: M=4.61; SD=.53) and “the sequence of the TOEIC reading passage in mind to answer the questions” (item 1: M=4.51; SD=.60), and used “symbols in the TOEIC passages to answer the questions” (item 8: M=4.45; SD=.64), and “illustrations in the TOEIC passages to answer the questions” (item 9: M=4.53; SD=.60).

Table 2. EFL learners’ use of memory strategies for the new TOEIC test format

No.	Memory strategies	N = 221		
		Mean	SD	Level
1	I remember the sequence of the TOEIC reading passage in mind to answer the questions.	4.51	.60	very high
2	I remember the phrases or expressions to imagine the context of the TOEIC reading passage.	4.52	.59	very high
3	I associate words into groups in my mind to remember what the TOEIC reading passage is about.	4.57	.56	very high
4	I link the phrases or expressions in my mind to remember the contexts of the TOEIC reading passages.	4.56	.58	very high
5	I connect the meanings of the words with pictures in mind to remember the passage of the TOEIC reading tests.	4.53	.60	very high
6	I remember keywords in the TOEIC reading passage to answer the questions.	4.60	.54	very high
7	I remember pictures in the passages to answer the TOEIC reading questions.	4.61	.53	very high
8	I remember symbols in the TOEIC passages to answer the questions.	4.45	.62	very high
9	I remember illustrations in the TOEIC passages to answer the questions.	4.53	.60	very high
10	I use the keywords to remember the content of the sentences of the TOEIC passages.	4.41	.64	very high
11	I remember keywords in each question to link to the TOEIC passage.	4.53	.61	very high
12	I remember keywords in options to link the TOEIC passages with the answers.	4.42	.69	very high

Qualitatively, twenty-four out of twenty-five interviewees (96%) reported that they often used memory strategies for their reading test. Specifically, twelve students stated that they remembered phrases or expressions, or keywords to visualize the passage’s context and connected the phrases or expressions to do the TOEIC reading passages more effectively. For instance,

Interestingly, in part 5, sentence completion, I got deficient scores; by applying these strategies, I had increased my correct answers from roughly 15 to 25 and 27 questions. Phrases, expressions, pictures, and symbols; these things helped me do my test better, phrases and expressions and grammar points were my choices. (S17)

Meanwhile, the other twelve students pointed out their frequent use of these memory reading strategies by memorizing sequences, pictures, symbols, and illustrations in the passages to answer the TOEIC reading questions. One interviewee shared:

I thought memory strategies were advantageous by remembering keywords. In my point of view, memory strategies were the most important TTs. Thanks to the strategies, I realized that I needed to remember phrases, expressions, pictures, and symbols; these things help me do my TOEIC test better. (S14)

Cognitive strategies for the new TOEIC test format

The results in Table 3 illustrate that the participants always “[used their] prior knowledge to understand the TOEIC reading test” (item 20: M=4.24; SD=.63), and “[read] the TOEIC questions several times to better understand them” (item 19: M=4.24; SD=.65), “[grasped] the [central] ideas of the passages during the TOEIC reading test” (item 13, M=4.19, SD=.71), “[translated] the TOEIC reading tests into Vietnamese” (item 14, M=4.14, SD=.74). Meanwhile, the respondents usually used “pictures” (item 15: M=4.19; SD=.64), and applied “illustrations in the passages” (item 16: M=4.14; SD=.66), “symbols” (item 17: M=3.89; SD=.74), and “titles” (item 18: M=4.18; SD=.70) to help comprehend TOEIC reading tests.

Table 3. EFL learners’ use of cognitive strategies for the new TOEIC test format

No.	Reading TTs	N = 221		
		Mean	SD	Level
13	I grasp the main ideas of the passages during the TOEIC reading test.	4.19	.71	high
14	I translate the TOEIC reading tests into Vietnamese.	4.14	.74	high
15	I use pictures in the passages to help comprehend TOEIC reading tests.	4.19	.64	high
16	I use illustrations in the passages to help comprehend TOEIC reading tests.	4.14	.66	high
17	I use symbols in the passages to help comprehend TOEIC reading tests.	3.89	.74	high
18	I use the titles of the texts to help comprehend TOEIC reading tests.	4.18	.70	high
19	I read the TOEIC questions several times to better understand them.	4.24	.65	very high
20	I use my prior knowledge to understand the TOEIC reading test.	4.33	.63	very high

From the results gained from the interviews, all the EFL students consented that they often favored using cognitive strategies for TOEIC reading tests. Thirteen interviewees focused on prior knowledge to understand the TOEIC reading texts better, whereas roughly half of them intentionally used the main ideas, pictures, titles, symbols, and illustrations of the passages to help comprehend the TOEIC reading tests. In general, all the interviewees highly appreciated cognitive strategies which facilitated their comprehension. Some remarkable extracts are:

All the passages and contents in passages were similar to my real-life circumstances, so prior knowledge was very important to me to find the answer. (S6)

Among these strategies, I believed that cognitive reading strategies were the most vital test-taking strategy because elements such as pictures, illustrations, symbols, and titles were useful. (S19)

From my perspective, cognitive strategies were the essential testing strategy because when I could not find the answer in the articles in part 7, I could use these strategies to help me to the test; I had just passed the real test at IIG center; I felt so happy. (S18)

Compensation strategies for the new TOEIC test format

The participants, see Table 4, always “[made] a guess the meaning of difficult words from the context” (item 21, M=4.42, SD=.59), “made inferences based on clues (hints) to complete the sentences in the TOEIC reading tests” (item 22, M=4.60, SD=.54. Additionally, the participants always “[located] the main ideas of the texts of TOEIC reading tests” (item 23: M=4.58; SD =.51), “[used] synonyms to understand the texts of TOEIC reading tests” (item 24: M=4.48; SD=.60), and “[scanned] the texts to look for specific information” (item 25: M=4.54; SD =.58).

Table 4. EFL learners’ use of compensation strategies for the new TOEIC test format

No.	Compensation strategies	N = 221		
		Mean	SD	Level
21	I make a guess at the meaning of difficult words from the context of TOEIC reading passages.	4.42	.59	very high
22	I make inferences based on clues (hints) to complete the sentences in the TOEIC reading tests.	4.60	.54	very high
23	I find the main ideas of the texts of TOEIC reading tests.	4.58	.51	very high
24	I use synonyms to understand the texts of TOEIC reading tests.	4.48	.60	very high
25	I scan the texts to look for specific information on TOEIC reading tests.	4.54	.58	very high

For the qualitative data, almost twenty-five interviewees (100 %) proclaimed that they often utilized compensation strategies in their reading tests. Specifically, they revealed that they frequently guessed the meaning of unfamiliar words they had read by using linguistic clues (e.g., word order, word formations) and used synonyms to understand the texts of TOEIC reading tests. One student shared:

Synonyms were important because I search for information in long passages for answering questions in part 7; I recognized that my test score improved significantly when I studied lessons about synonyms. (S8)

Moreover, twenty-three students (92%) indicated that they usually scanned the texts to look for specific information, or they scanned to find the main ideas on TOEIC reading tests. For example,

I focused on the first and the last passage to understand the main ideas. Regarding the most important strategy, my selection was compensation strategies as I must scan the texts with intense speed. (S3)

Metacognitive strategies for the new TOEIC test format

As regards Table 5, the participants often “[planned] how to use the time for the TOEIC reading test” (item 26: M=3.93; SD=.68), “[checked their] own performance while doing the TOEIC reading test” (item 27: M=3.75; SD=.68), and “[made] sure to clarify the goal of doing the TOEIC test” (item 28: M=3.74; SD=.65). Moreover, they also often “[prioritized] the easier questions before the tough ones” (item 29: M=3.79; SD=.69), “[knew] how to complete the easier passages on TOEIC reading tests before the difficult ones” (item 30: M=3.84; SD=.65), and “[checked] the answers before submitting the TOEIC test” (item 31: M=3.86; SD=.73).

Table 5. EFL learners’ use of metacognitive strategies for the new TOEIC test format

No.	Metacognitive strategies	N = 221		
		Mean	SD	Level
26	I plan how to use the time for the TOEIC reading test.	3.93	.68	high
27	I check my own performance while doing the TOEIC reading test.	3.75	.68	high
28	I make sure to clarify the goal of doing the TOEIC test.	3.74	.65	high
29	I prioritize the easier questions before the difficult ones.	3.79	.69	high
30	I know how to complete the easier passages on TOEIC reading tests before the difficult ones.	3.84	.65	high
31	I carefully check the answers before submitting the TOEIC test.	3.86	.73	high

The interview results showed that eighteen out of the twenty-five student interviewees often employed metacognitive strategies for their reading process. Particularly, all these eighteen usually identified their clear goals before reading such as reading for gist, reading for details, or reading for speaker’s attitudes. Moreover, fourteen out of these eighteen students reported that they frequently decided to focus on using the time or check the whole reading performance. Some excerpts are:

I thought the useful TTS was metacognitive strategies because they helped me control the time to do the tests, with one minute for each question; I must practice this skill much more; I spent too much time reading the passages and metacognitive strategies saved my life. (S9)

Moreover, thirteen revealed that they usually prioritized the questions in the hierarchy and checked the answer after setting a clear goal for the reading tests.

Thanks to these strategies, I could bear in mind that doing the easy question first saves time and achieves my goals. Especially, I planned how to complete the easier passages on TOEIC reading tests before the difficult ones. (S14)

I believed that metacognitive strategies helped me to choose the order of assignments in priority, so I considered them as important strategies. (S13)

Affective strategies for the new TOEIC test format

As seen in Table 6, the participants often “[relaxed] while doing the TOEIC reading test” (item 32: M=3.47; SD=.65), “[breathed] deeply to lower [their] anxiety during the TOEIC reading test” (item 34: M=3.59; SD=.72), and “[encouraged themselves] before doing the TOEIC reading tests” (item 33, M=3.42, SD=.69) to better achieve the test performance.

Table 6. of EFL learners’ use of Affective strategies for the new TOEIC test format

No.	Affective strategies	N = 221		
		Mean	SD	Level
32	I relax while doing the TOEIC reading test.	3.47	.65	high
33	I encourage myself before doing the TOEIC reading tests.	3.42	.69	high
34	I breathe deeply to lower my anxiety during the TOEIC reading test.	3.59	.72	high

Based on the interview results, twenty-five student interviewees reported that they often breathed deeply, self-relaxed, and self-encouraged before reading. These students revealed that this affective strategy could help them reduce pressure and enhance their concentration level for their coming reading process. For example,

I encouraged myself to pass it, I would graduate, and I could have a job to earn money. (S7)

It was quite important to apply different strategies for my tests, and affective strategies were my selection because I always felt nervous when taking the test. Therefore, I took risks by closing my eyes, and did the easier question first. (S9)

4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the research participants deployed reading TTSs at a high level. It was found that the participants

deployed memory and compensation strategies more frequently than cognitive, metacognitive, and affective ones. A plausible explanation for this finding may be due to the fact that research participants in this study had low levels of English language proficiency (more than 90% of the participants had their English language proficiency at elementary and pre-intermediate levels). This could be why they deployed memory strategies and compensation strategies to overcome the difficulties in terms of vocabulary and grammar to do the TOEIC reading tests.

More specifically, in terms of memory strategies, it was found out that participants deployed memory strategies to make use of keywords, phrases, expressions, and visual aids (e.g., illustrations, symbols) in the reading TOEIC tests to decode the meaning of the reading texts. They used memory strategies most frequently because understanding the reading texts may be one of the key strategies to do the reading tests effectively. This finding resonates with the theory claimed by scholars (e.g., Ellis et al., 1995; Phakiti, 2008; Singh et al., 2021) who have stated that test-takers use memory strategies to recall their prior knowledge of vocabulary and grammar to understand the reading texts. In terms of cognitive strategies, the findings showed that cognitive strategies were used at the second highest frequency, which may imply that participants may be aware of the importance of cognitive strategies and deployed them to construct the meaning from the reading texts. This result validates the conclusion of a prior study conducted by Khezrlou (2011) which has found out that cognitive strategies can help readers to comprehend the reading texts. Regarding compensation strategies, participants were also in favor of compensation strategies when doing TOEIC reading tests. They deployed such strategies to overcome their inadequate knowledge of vocabulary and grammar to do the reading tests as supported by Pasumbu and Macora (2020). By using these strategies, test-takers might make educated guesses even if they have not sufficiently understood the immediate context. This finding is partially in line with that of the study carried out by Tajeddin and Alemi (2010) who have found that test-takers used compensation strategies to compensate for a deficiency in a specific area (e.g., linguistic clues, guesses, and general resources) to do the reading tests.

In terms of metacognitive strategies, the results indicated that participants used these strategies at a high level. It is probable that the participants may recognize the significance of making clear plans and goals while doing their tests, which is supported by the claims of scholars (Karbalaei, 2010; Jafarigohar (2014; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001) indicating that test-takers need to self-control and self-regulate what they are reading for reading comprehension accomplishment. As for affective strategies; the result suggested that the EFL learners in MCB English Center used affective strategies at a high level, which further confirms that affective strategies are one of the common strategies deployed by test-takers when they do tests (e.g., Dreyer & Oxford, 1996; Oxford, 1990; Singh et al., 2021). This finding may imply that participants may also encounter different affective factors while doing reading tests, so they might have to deploy affective strategies to cope with negative emotions.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The study has unpacked that research participants seemed to be aware of reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test format as they deployed a variety of reading TTSs at a high frequency. They tended to utilize memory and compensation strategies at a higher frequency than they used cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies for the new TOEIC test format. Such findings are meant for pedagogical implications for learners, teachers, and administrators. Regarding the students, the findings revealed that participants employed memory and compensation strategies most, which resulted from the lack of English language proficiency in terms of vocabulary and grammar, so learners' English language proficiency should be improved first, then their TTS use should be instructed. As English language proficiency should be treated as the threshold for taking standardized tests like the TOEIC test which aims at assessing English users' English language proficiency, learners should take English language courses prior to taking TOEIC preparation courses. Moreover, there should be pre-TOEIC preparation courses focusing on TTSs for learners so that they can use the TTSs flexibly and effectively. Learners need to understand the rationale of using TTSs first, they are then provided with opportunities for practicing the trained TTSs with mock tests. As regards teachers, they should be able to identify their learners' strengths and weaknesses in TTS use, they then will be able to instruct their learners appropriately. Additionally, teachers should focus on teaching language skills and TTSs to learners concurrently since learners' English language proficiency is the threshold for their TTS use. With respect to the administrators, they should organize regular training workshops on language testing and TTSs so that both teachers and learners can get updated with the new test formats and TTSs. They should design the TOEIC training courses based on learners' English language proficiency rather than courses focusing only on TTSs and tips for doing tests since learners with good language skills usually know how to do test well after doing mock tests.

This study is still constrained in some way. Firstly, the scope of the study is delimited to only reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test format without relating to TTSs for other standardized tests. Secondly, this study did not address the deployment of reading TTSs for the new TOEIC test format by test-takers of different levels of English language proficiency. Therefore, future studies should focus on the use of TTSs for different types of standardized tests, and compare test-takers' deployment of TTSs in terms of levels of English language proficiency.

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