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EFL/ESL Test-wiseness and Test-taking Strategies

Abstract

Language testing research has recently witnessed an increased interest in test-wiseness strategies and test-taking strategies used by test-takers in responding to test tasks. Although these strategies are extensively studied in L1 literature, they are noticeably neglected in EFL/ESL testing literature. The purpose of this article is to: a) highlight the difference between test-wiseness strategies and test-taking strategies, b) discuss taxonomies of test-wiseness and test-taking strategies in the general educational literature and language testing literature, c) highlight the pedagogic significance of test-wiseness, d) review related EFL/ESL literature, and e) bring out the importance of test-wiseness and test-taking strategies to EFL/ESL teachers, teacher trainers and curriculum designers.

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Key Words

Test-wiseness; Test-taking strategies; EFL/ESL test-takers' strategies; Language testing; Test-wiseness and test validity.

EFL/ESL Test-wiseness and Test-taking Strategies

Language testing research has recently witnessed an increased interest in test-wiseness strategies (TWS) and test-taking strategies (TTS) used by test-takers in responding to test tasks. Understanding ESL learners' cognitive processes may be one of the most essential areas for language testers to be aware of (Anderson, 2001; Bachman, 2000). Although these strategies are extensively studied in L1 literature, they are noticeably neglected in EFL/ESL testing literature (Allan,1992). Cohen (1998, p.219) distinguishes between *test-wiseness strategies* and *test-taking strategies.* Test-wiseness strategies are not necessarily determined by proficiency in the language being assessed, but rather may be dependent on the respondent's knowledge of how to take tests. Test-taking strategies, in contrast, consist of language use strategies when they are used to help produce response to language testing tasks. The purpose of this article is to bring out the importance of test-wiseness and test-taking strategies to EFL/ESL teachers, teacher trainers and curriculum designers.

Test-wiseness strategies:

Test-wiseness is a skill that permits a test-taker to utilize the characteristics and forms of tests and/ or test-taking situation to receive a high score. Some researchers (e.g., Benson, 1988; Rogers and Bateson, 1991) believe that TW is a cognitive ability or a set of test-taking strategies a test taker can use to improve a test score no matter what the content area of a test. Bond (1981, p. 54) distinguishes between test-wiseness and test-coaching. TW is independent of content areas whereas test-coaching refers to: "sustained instruction in the domain presumably being measured".

While a part of language test performance is dependent on the knowledge that the learners have about the target language, another part is dependent on their test-wiseness, independent of their language knowledge. This does not imply that knowledge of content is totally irrelevant. Rogers and Bateson (1991, p. 348) indicated that the effective application of TW strategies is dependent on some partial knowledge of content. This partial knowledge, although inadequate to respond to a test item solely on the basis of this

knowledge, is sufficient when coupled with knowledge of the TW principles to increase the probability of correctly responding to items susceptible to TW. Roger and Bateson (ibid: 333) provided evidence that the cognition of the skilled test takers consist of:

a- a cognitive monitor that controls which abilities and skills are going to be engaged to answer the item under consideration;
b- knowledge, abilities, and skills relevant to the content or trait being measured;
c- knowledge of TW principles; and
d- the response (selection and record of choice).

Test-wiseness strategies taxonomies:

In the general educational literature, different taxonomies for test-wiseness strategies have been proposed. Nitko (2001), for example, classified TTS into three categories: 1- *Time-using strategies* (e.g., Begin to work as rapidly as possible with reasonable assurance of accuracy); 2- *Error-avoidance strategies* (e.g., Pay careful attention to directions, determining clearly the nature of the task and the intended basis of response); 3- *Guessing strategies* (e.g., Always guess if right answers only are scored). Sarnaki (1979) used a five-category taxonomy: 1- *Test-using strategies* (e.g., Being able to work as rapidly as possible with reasonable accuracy); 2- *Error-avoidance strategies* (e.g., Paying close attention to directions); 3- *Guessing strategies* (e.g., guessing when there is not a severe penalty for guessing); 4- *Deductive reasoning strategies* (e.g., Making use of relevant content information in other test items and options); 5- *Intent consideration and cue-using strategies* (e.g., Recognizing and making use of any consistent idiosyncrasies of the test that distinguish the correct answer from incorrect options). A widely used taxonomy in the general educational literature is classifying TW strategies into three major categories (Watter & Siebert,1990; Wenden,1991):

1) *Strategies used before answering the test* such as:
    a- Read all questions first to start with the easy one/s.

b- Write an outline for each question first.

c- Read instructions carefully.

d- Budget time (i.e. allocate specific time to each question according to its difficulty or length).

e- Form a mental image of the answer.

f- Underline key words in the questions.

2) *Strategies used during answering the test* such as:

a- Answer questions in chronological order.

b- Revise each question immediately after answering it.

c- Use all available test time.

d- Immediately write what comes to mind.

e- Answer all questions even the one/s I do not know.

3) *Strategies used after answering the test* such as:

a- Revise answers to correct spelling and grammatical mistakes.

b- Re-read all questions to make sure I understood them correctly.

c- Revise both content and language.

d- Avoid last minute changes.

EFL/ESL Test-taking strategies:

In the EFL/ESL literature, TTS are classified differently. They may be classified according to question-type (e.g. strategies used in essay, multiple-choice or cloze questions); according to language skills (e.g. strategies used in reading tests, writing tests, oral tests); according to task type (e.g. strategies used in role-play). For example, in a reading test, a test-taker may read the questions below the reading text before reading the test; another may read the text first and then

the questions. In a writing test, a test-taker writing a composition may begin with writing the key words s/he may use in writing the composition; another may begin with writing an outline.

EFL/ESL Test-taking strategies Taxonomies:

Literature search on EFL/ESL test-taking strategies revealed, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, two taxonomies, which may be used for classifying TTS regardless of language test type, skill or task. The first taxonomy is proposed by Cohen (1998, p. 4-9). Cohen defines TTS with reference to second language learner strategies. Cohen divides *Second Language Learner Strategies* into two major categories: *second language learning strategies* and *second language use strategies.* Both constitute the actions *consciously* selected by learners either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both. Language learning strategies include strategies for identifying the material that needs to be learned, distinguishing it from other material if need be, grouping it for easier learning (e.g. grouping vocabulary by category into nouns, verbs, etc.), having repeated contact with the material (e.g. through classroom tasks or the completion of homework assignment), and formally committing the material to memory when it does not seem to be acquired naturally (whether through rote memory techniques such as repetition, the use of mnemonics, or some other memory technique). Language use strategies, on the other hand, are strategies for *using* the material. They include four types:

a- *Retrieval strategies*: used to call up language material from storage.

b- *Rehearsal strategies*: used for rehearsing target language structures.

c- *Cover strategies*: are those that learners use to create the impression that they have control over the material when they do not.

d- *Communication strategies:* which learners use to convey a message that is both meaningful and informative for the listener or the reader.

These language use strategies also constitute, according to Cohen (1998, p. 219), TTS when they are applied to tasks in language tests. All four types are used in test taking, since test takers need to *retrieve* material for use on the test, may need to *rehearse* it before using it (such as in speaking or writing tasks), are likely to use some *cover strategies* in order to look good, and may well need to engage in genuine *communication* if the tests call for it.

Bachman and Palmer (1996, p. 70-71) propose a different conceptualization and taxonomy for language test-taking strategies based on the concept of "strategic competence" which they define as "a set of metacognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes". They classify these metacognitive language test-taking strategies into three categories:

1- *Goal setting*: deciding what one is going to do.
    a- Identifying the test tasks.
    b- Choosing one or more tasks from a set of possible tasks.
    c- Deciding whether or not to attempt to complete the task(s) selected.
2- *Assessment:* Taking stock of what is needed, what one has to work with, and how well one has done.
    a- Assessing the characteristics of the test task to determine the desirability and feasibility of successfully completing it and what is needed to complete it.
    b- Assessing our knowledge components to see if relevant areas of knowledge are available for successfully completing the test task.
    c- Assessing the correctness or appropriateness of the response to the test task
3- *Planning*: deciding how to use what one has.
    a- Selecting elements from the areas of knowledge for successfully completing the test task.

b- Formulating one or more plans for implementing these elements in a response to the test task.

c- Selecting one plan for initial implementation as a response to the test task.

Different test-takers may make differential use of the components of this model. Thus, some test-takers, in an essay writing task, for instance, may:

a) Identify the task;

b) Decide what they are going to do;

c) Determine, for example, what vocabulary and concepts are needed for the task;

d) Figure out how to use their topic and language knowledge most effectively;

e) Evaluate how well they have done on the task (both during and after performing the task).

Other test-takers, in contrast, may not follow these steps. They may not assess the situation before starting writing. They may start writing without determining either a goal or a detailed plan.

The Bachman Model received mixed reaction. For example, Alderson & Banerjee (2002: 80) consider the Bachman Model a significant advance in language testing. In their view it is an interactional model of language test performance that includes two major components: language ability and test method, where language ability consists of language knowledge and metacognitive strategies and test method includes characteristics of the environment, rubric, input, expected response and the relationship between input and expected response. In contrast, other researchers disagree with this assessment of the usefulness of the Bachman model. Chalhoub-Deville (1997), for example, argues that the Bachman model is a theoretical model. In her view, there is a degree of lack of congruence between theoretical models on the one hand and

operational assessment frameworks, which necessarily define a construct in particular context, on the other. McNamara & Lumley (1997) also argue that the Bachman model ignores the social dimension of language proficiency, since the model is, in their opinion, based on psychological rather than social psychological or social theories of language use.

It is noteworthy that both Cohen's and Palmer and Bachman's taxonomies of language test-taking strategies are theoretical conceptualizations. They lack experimental validity.

In the absence of a taxonomy of test-taking strategies specific to language, researchers used Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of *language learning strategies* as a frame of reference. Oxford classifies strategies into: *cognitive, meatcognitive, affective and social*. In *language tests*, cognitive strategies refer to the test-takers' ongoing mental activities to use their language and world knowledge to solve the test tasks (e.g., translating, predicting, summarizing, activating prior knowledge, applying grammatical rules, and guessing meaning from context). Metacognitive strategies are the test-takers' deliberate mental processes for directing and controlling their cognitive strategy processing for successful test performance (Phakiti, 2003). Affective strategies are concerned with the learner's emotional requirements such as confidence, while social strategies lead to increased interaction with the target language.

It is noteworthy that the distinction between cognitive and metacognitive strategies is not always clear-cut. It is likely that the goal of using a strategy determines whether a strategy used is cognitive or metacognitive (Flavell, 1992). The same strategy in one occasion may be cognitive while in another occasion it may be metacognitive. For example, if test-takers translate a text so that they can memorize the general idea, translation seems to be a

cognitive strategy. If they translate the same text to make sure that what they have understood is accurate (i.e., monitoring their understanding), translation seems to be metacognitive rather than cognitive. On the other hand, recent research suggests a closely interactive relationship between cognitive and metacognitive strategies. In a study by Phakiti (2003, p. 43), results showed that most cognitive strategies occurred in association with metacognitive strategies. For example, test-takers need to be metacognitive to use cognitive strategies such as elaboration, inferencing and transferring. Some cognitive strategies might even perform a metacognitive function. For instance, summarizing seemed to be metacognitive since the test-takers wanted to evaluate whether the text was understandable. Thus, it seems that cognitive and metacognitive strategies might need to be viewed as two interactive facets of the same mental process that do not occur independently of each other (p. 48).

Purpura (1997) reached similar conclusions. He used sophisticated statistical methods (e.g., S*tructured Equation Modeling*) and powerful statistical analyses to investigate the relationship between test-takers' cognitive and metacognitive strategy use and performance on ESL tests. Results indicated that the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies might depend on the characteristics of test-takers and the nature of the test tasks (e.g., difficulty level, oral/written, required response, etc.).). For example, it was also noted that successful and unsuccessful test-takers invoke strategies differently. Unsuccessful test-takers showed an extremely high degree of metacognitive strategies in retrieving information from the long-term memory, whereas the successful test-takers use metacognitive strategies to help them understand and remember.

The results also showed that cognitive strategy use seems to function in concert with metacognitive strategy use. Cognitive strategies are directly and positively related to test performance. Metacognitive strategies, on the other hand, have a significant, direct, positive relationship to cognitive strategies and are indirectly related to test performance. They exert an executive function over cognitive strategies. In other words, we can no longer operationalize Bachman and Palmer's (1996) notion of "strategic competence" solely in terms of a metacognitive component; rather, "strategic competence" should minimally include cognitive and metacognitive processes (Purpura,1997, p. 311). Besides, results indicated that metacognitive processing is a set of executive control processes that embodies "assessment", with "goal-setting" and "planning" as special cases of "assessment." This notion of metacognition necessitates a redefinition of Bachman and Palmer's (1996) conceptualization of 'strategic competence", which proposed metacognitive components as comprised of "goal-setting, planning, and assessment." (Purpura,1997, p. 307-8).

Strategy use and selection:

In the process of strategy use and selection, we cannot assume that any test-taking strategy is a good or poor choice for a given test task. Strategies themselves are not inherently good or bad, but have the potential to be used effectively. Some learners may effectively use a limited number of strategies for the most part. Others may be aware of an extensive number of strategies but may use few, if any of them, effectively. Besides, the frequency of strategy use is not necessarily an indication of success, nor is success at using a given strategy in a given context a guarantee that the next use of that strategy will also be successful (Cohen, 1998, p. 220).

In practice, the students' use and selection of TTS is affected by numerous interacting variables such as: their cognitive style profile, their linguistic proficiency, their test-taking style, their repertoire of TTS, their test anxiety, type of test, and type of task. For example, high proficiency test-takers performing an easy task might report low use of a checking-for-accuracy strategy (i.e., a monitoring strategy). This may be interpreted as either the test was so easy that monitoring was not needed or this strategy might become so automatic that they did not realize they used it. Low proficiency test-takers, in contrast, might also report low use of this strategy, perhaps not because it had become automatic, but perhaps because they may be deficient in its use. Also, the test-taking style, i.e., the characteristic ways in which individuals orient to the test-taking process, may affect the learners' use and selection of strategies. Purpura (1997, p. 312-3) classifies test-taking styles into two types: *product- or test-oriented* and *process- or learning oriented*. Product-oriented test-takers view test input simply as the context from which to provide the expected response (i.e., to retrieve information). Process-oriented test-takers view input as an opportunity to *learn* as well as to *retrieve*. In other words, the latter would invoke both memory and retrieval processes; the former would simply engage the retrieval processes.

In my opinion, we have to be cautious when we talk about test-taking *style.* A *style* refers to the *habitual* use of a strategy (Schmeck, 1988) and reflects an individual's trait. Recent research on language testing draws attention to two important psychological constructs that may contribute to variation in language test performance. Chapelle (1998) and Hong (1998) refer to two different classes of psychological attributes for describing people: *state* and *trait*. They emphasize that it is vital to make a clear distinction between the two constructs when investigating cognitive and metacognitive strategies. It is assumed that

that each individual has both a transitory state and a relatively stable trait. States are situation-specific and are considered to vary in intensity and change over time because the level of activities changes from one situation to another. Traits, in contrast, are considered relatively enduring predispositions or characteristics of people. Hence, state strategies are a transitory state of the test-takers in a specific testing situation and varies in intensity and changes over time. On the other hand, trait strategies are considered a relatively stable individual difference variable to respond to testing situations with varying degrees of state strategies. Thus, in order to be able to identify an individual's test-taking style, we should investigate his *state* test-taking strategies on several occasions. If we notice that he/she habitually uses certain test-taking strategies in most states (occasions), then we may be able to identify his test-taking style.

Pedagogic significance of test-wiseness:

It was observed that the difference in approach between the test-wise and test-naïve students could be explained by differences in cognitive monitoring. Test-wise students experience metacognitive success while test-naïve students experience cognitive failure (Garner,1990, p. 518). Research on TW indicates that test-wise students: receive more points than they would have predicted, feel more relaxed and better organized while taking tests, are able to complete tests in the allotted time, manage their test time appropriately, and seldom leave out important information from answers (Watter & Siebert, 1990). Research also indicates that TW is an important correlate of test anxiety: test-wise students tend to perceive tests as less threatening than test-naïve students (Sapp,1999). On the other hand, test anxiety is closely related to self-efficacy: an individual's perceptions that he can successfully perform behaviours necessary to produce a desired outcome (Bandura, 1986). Test-anxious students usually have low levels of

self-efficacy. They feel helpless and unable to influence testing events (Schunk, 1991). As a result, they believe that any efforts to succeed on any tests are futile. When obstacles occur during a test, individuals with debilitating test anxiety are likely to quickly capitulate if initial attempts to overcome these obstacles are ineffective. Individuals with high self-efficacy, in contrast, are better able to cope with obstacles during a test. They are more likely to keep attempting to overcome obstacles. The higher level of self-efficacy gives low test-anxious students greater confidence in their abilities and this results in sustained effort and constant work to overcome obstacles that lead to better performance on tests (Sapp, 1999).

This shows the significance of training EFL/ESL students to be test-wise students.
Learning TWS helps EFL students become more relaxed, more confident, and more enthusiastic about taking tests (Vattanapath and Jaiprayoon, 1999).

Another significant reason for investigating TW is that it is a valuable source of test content or construct invalidity since it examines students' ability to answer correctly by exploiting weaknesses in test design. It is a relatively new undertaking to use data on test-taking strategies in order to validate language tests (Cohen, 1998, p. 217). Traditional approaches to construct validation ignore the strategies and processes that test takers employ in taking tests. Recent thinking in educational measurement and in language testing recognizes the necessity of including, in the investigation of construct validity, information about how test-takers go about processing test tasks, and relating this information to information on test content and test performance (Anderson et al., 1991, p. 41-42).

Research on EFL/ESL Test-wiseness and test-taking strategies:

While TW is widely researched in L1, it is noticeably neglected by EFL/ESL researchers (Allan, 1992). Review of EFL/ESL testing literature, revealed few studies dealing directly with TW. It is not the purpose of this study to review this literature; only four studies are presented. Allan (1992) developed and validated a multiple-choice test of TW specifically for ESL students. Allan argued that a reliable and valid measure of TW in ESL students could identify students who are likely to be disadvantaged by an objective test. Such a measure may even alert students to strategies of which they are unaware. Taking a test of TW and receiving feedback might be enough to sensitize students to the use of unfamiliar TTS. The test can also be used to diagnose inexperienced or underachieving language test takers, and, by exposure and sensitization, to confront their weaknesses. The test included: a) stem option cues, in which it was possible to match information from the stem with information in the correct option; b) grammatical cues, where only one alternative matched the stem grammatically; c) similar option cues, where several distracters could be eliminated because they essentially said the same thing; d) item give away, where another item already gave away the information.

Amer (1993) trained middle school students to use some test-wiseness strategies: to read instructions carefully; to schedule their time appropriately; to make use of clue words in questions; to delay answering difficult questions; and to review their work in order to check their answers. The findings showed that instruction in using these skills enabled students to better their scores. Hence, one of the reasons of poor performance on EFL tests may be attributed to a lack of test-wiseness strategies.

Vattanapath and Jaiprayoon (1999) trained EFL Thai students to use 22 test-taking strategies for multiple-choice English reading comprehension tests. The findings indicated that this training helped students improve their test scores. Besides, students reported positive attitudes

towards TTS instruction: they felt that learning test-taking strategies helped them become more relaxed, more confident and more enthusiastic about taking tests.

Yien (2001) investigated the relationships between Taiwanese EFL test-takers' characteristics, test-taking strategies, and test performance. The results suggest that test-taking strategies play a mediating role between test-takers' characteristics and test performance.

Conclusion

It is evident, from this review, that the constructs of test-wiseness and test-taking strategies need further investigation in EFL/ESL testing research. In particular, there is an urgent need for identifying TTS used by EFL/ESL students in different types of language tests and tasks. It is noteworthy here to bring out the fact that there are various noticeable differences between EFL and ESL settings in terms of: context, ages, learners' characteristics, cultural backgrounds and English proficiency levels etc. Hence, we can expect that the learners' use and selection of test-taking strategies will be different in each setting. Consequently, we can not generalize research findings in one setting to the other.

EFL/ESL pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes should explicitly and systematically address these pedagogically important constructs of test-wiseness and test-taking strategies. Teachers should be well prepared, in theory and practice, to train their students to be test-wise, and to help them develop positive attitudes towards language tests. Although there are no textbooks, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, on test-wiseness and test-taking strategies specifically for EFL/ESL learners, textbooks in L1 may be used and adapted by EFL/ESL teacher trainers and teachers (e.g., Powell, 2000; Calkins, Montgomery,

Santman & Falk, 1998; Boone, 1996a; Boone, 1996b; Wijgh, 1995). Besides, language test-taking strategies should be integrated in EFL/ESL syllabi in order to be a common practice in EFL/ESL classroom instruction.

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