

JORDANIAN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' STRATEGIES IN TEST TAKING

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Abstract

The present study sheds some light on the strategies used by EFL students in taking English tests. The researcher tried to investigate the use of some test-taking strategies which the students use before, during and after sitting for a test. In her analysis of the questionnaire results, the researcher took in consideration the role of some factors on the findings of the analysis such as students' gender, university academic major, as well as students' secondary school stream whether it was scientific, literal, or vocational.

Findings of the study showed that the students' use of test-taking strategies before the test got the highest score in comparison with the other types. Gender also played a role in favor of female students. Moreover, the findings showed that neither the students' university academic major nor their stream at secondary school has any significant effect on their use of strategies. The study also revealed that the students in general showed a moderate high use of test-taking strategies with a percentage of 67.5% while only 1.2% of them were considered as low users of those strategies.

Key words: Test-taking strategies, EFL, English, Gender, Learning Strategies, Jordan

Language learning strategies are among the main factors that help how and how well students learn a foreign language. They are basically the thoughts and actions that individuals tend to use to accomplish learning something. Chamot (1987:71) defines learning strategies as “ techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information”. Oxford (1990: 8) also gives a technical definition of learning strategies as “ operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information”. Thus strategies are techniques that can lead to success in learning in general, and they can also play a significant role in mastering a foreign language such as using them in learning new vocabulary, writing, listening, speaking and ultimately in passing exams successfully.

In the same vein, many researchers believe that it is fruitful to train L2 students to use learning strategies to be successful in learning L2 and there are various factors that influence the choice of those learning strategies such as the learner's sex, degree of awareness, motivation, cultural background, age, nationality, attitudes and beliefs, type of task, general learning style, and their purpose for learning the language (Oxford, 1990: 13).

It is well known that tests are part of every class students take at schools, colleges or universities. Richards, Platt and Platt (1992:377) define a test as “ any procedure for measuring ability, knowledge, or performance”. It is well acknowledged that there are different types of tests each with a specific goal. Brown (2001: 390) specifies five types that are commonly used in language curricula which are namely; proficiency tests, diagnostic tests, placement tests, achievement tests and aptitude tests. Achievement tests are the ones which this study will cater for.

An achievement test is defined as “a test which is related directly to classroom lessons, or even a total curriculum. Achievement tests are limited to particular material covered in a curriculum within a particular time frame, and are offered after a course has covered the objectives in question,..., but the primary role of an achievement test is to determine acquisition of course objectives at the end of a period of instruction.” (Brown, 2001:391).

Carkin, (2005) claims that Jordanian EFL learners have negative feelings towards learning English and they consider it as the most difficult subject at school although Jordan is a country where many subjects at the university level are taught in English such as medicine, technology and engineering. In fact the major aim for many of our students who learn English as a foreign language at a university context in Jordan is to pass their English exams successfully as it is a compulsory course for all majors

in Jordanian universities. This goes in line with what Wharton and Race (2000:118) state as “Indeed for some learners, the goal of passing an exam is in fact the main motivation for attending classes”. But unfortunately over the years L2 learners have suffered from failing their English tests for different reasons and it’s the teachers role to help them overcome such problem and direct them to use the right strategies that may help them and lead them to success. One could argue that all of us as educators should believe in what Skehan,(1991:290) claims “All learners use strategy: what good learners do is to choose the right strategy for the right occasion”. Thus teachers are invited to discover their students’ learning strategies and lead them to the right track which could lead to success in collaborative work between the teacher and the students.

It is common for some students to use certain strategies while taking exams, such as, using the information obtained from other places in the test in answering particular items, ruling out the options learners are sure are wrong (Mohammadi and Zainol Abidin, 2011: 240). With regards to taking language tests, there are certain strategies that students apply in order to improve their performance and, therefore, receive higher scores. Moreover, some researchers like Sarnacki (1979) and Benson (1988), claim that in certain cases the test provides the grounds for the test-takers to use some strategies or techniques known as test-taking strategies. These strategies can help the students to get a higher score than they deserve and they differ according to some factors like students gender, age , motivation and many others.

The present study will try look into some of these factors that affect the strategies used by L2 learners in taking English tests in order to give some additional insight on how to better meet the educational needs of L2 learners in preparing and passing their English tests. Language learning strategies are normally used to improve L2 learner’s knowledge of the foreign language which he/she wants to learn. Oxford (1990: 201) emphasizes the importance of strategy training especially in the area of second and foreign language learning, and the importance of focusing on its practical and useful side for students rather than the theoretical and abstract one.

1. Statement of the Problem

This study acknowledges the current trends in teaching that call for adopting the best methods to help students learn better and try to find the weak points in their learning/teaching process in order to create a better atmosphere for them to be better learners. According to students there is nothing important for them than getting high grades in their exams, such thing could be the torch that enlightens their way and tempt them to try hard to be successful. Thus in this study the researcher investigated the extent to which EFL students implementation of test taking strategies because mastering the appropriate strategies is very essential especially in the second or foreign language learning process, and students should also be aware of the importance of using such strategies since they could play a significant role in success in their academic life.

2. Questions of the Study

The study tried to give the answers for the following questions:

1. To what extent do EFL students use test –taking strategies in general?
2. To what extent do EFL students use test –taking strategies before the test, during the test, and after it?
3. Are there significant differences between students use of test-taking strategies due to the difference in gender(male or female)?
4. Are there significant differences between students use of test-taking strategies due to the difference in the academic major at university?
5. Are there significant differences between students use of test-taking strategies due to the difference in the secondary school stream (academic or vocational)?
6. How good classroom test takers are they?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants of the Study

Participants of the study were purposefully chosen from the students registered in the first semester of the academic year 2013/2014 in English 101, a compulsory course given at Al-Huson University College. One hundred and sixty-nine male and female students participated in the study.

3.2. Instrument of the Study

A quantitative research methodology was used to conduct this study. The primary method of inquiry was a questionnaire. It was adopted from Brown (2002:67-68). The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section contains seven statements that cater for strategies used before taking tests. The second one also consisted of five statements which investigated about the strategies during the test. The third section consisted of four statements about the strategies used after taking a test.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The researcher distributed the questionnaire to three sections of English 101 at Al-Huson University College. All the questionnaire statements were explained thoroughly to the students and L1 explanation was used when necessary to guarantee the accuracy of answers.

The researcher computed the total average mean scores and the standard deviations of the students answers to the questionnaire statements in order to find out whether they tend to use test taking strategies in general and which type of strategy they use more than others. Moreover, students' responses to the questionnaire statements were analyzed to see if there were any significant differences between their responses that could be attributed to the difference in their gender, university academic major, or their academic stream in the secondary school by using SPSS program. T-test was used to see if there are any differences between the students use of strategies under study that could be due to the difference in gender. On the other hand, ANOVA-test was used to study the effect of university academic major and their academic stream in the secondary school.

4. Findings and Discussion

The aim of this section is to introduce the analysis of the collected data. As mentioned earlier, the study aimed to answer six questions related to the use of Jordanian EFL students of test-taking strategies in English tests.

The first research question sought to find out to what extent EFL students use test –taking strategies in general. To answer this question the researcher computed students' overall mean score and the standard deviation on the three types of strategies under study. Table (1) below shows this.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Students Overall Use of Test-taking Strategies

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total	169	56.2130	8.18402
Valid N(list wise)	169		

In order to answer the second question which seeks to determine which type of strategies is used more frequently than the other types, the researcher computed students' mean scores and standard deviations for each type separately. Table (2) below presents the results.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Students Use of Test-taking Strategies on Each Type.

Strategy	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
- Before the test	169	23.55	3.82
- During the test	169	17.40	3.29
- After the test	169	15.27	3.30
- Total	169	56.21	8.18

From the above table it is obvious that the students tend to use the first type of strategies more than the other two types with a mean square of (23.55), while the lowest mean goes to the strategies after taking the test with a mean score of (15.26). This finding is explainable as the students are very anxious about their test and they are fully aware of the importance of preparation before any exam in order to pass it. However, most of them try not to think about the exam after finishing it. The overall mean score of the three types is (56.21) for all students both males and females.

The third research question is designed to see whether there are any significant differences between the students' use of strategies according to their gender (male or female). To answer this question the researcher did a t-test for equality to the mean scores of the students' responses according to their gender. Table (3) below illustrates it.

Table (3): Mean scores and T-test of Students' Responses on the Questionnaire According to their Gender.

Strategy / Gender	N	Mean Scores	Std. Deviation	T	Significance
Before the test					
Male	63	23.54	3.64	-0.04	0.97
female	53	23.57	4.22		
During the test					
Male	63	17.03	3.25	-2.14	0.03
female	53	18.19	3.25		
After the test					
Male	63	14.63	3.45	-3.86	0.00
female	53	16.66	2.46		
Total					
Male	63	55.21	8.39	-2.40	0.02
female	53	58.42	7.31		

From table (3) it is can be said that there are no significant differences between students responses to the questionnaire statements according to their gender regarding the strategies before the test since the T value is (-0.04) which has no significant value at $\alpha \geq 0.05$. However, regarding the strategies during and after the test there are significant differences between the two genders at $\alpha \geq 0.05$ in favor of the females since the t values are (-2.14) and (-3.86) respectively. In general there are significant

differences between students responses that could be attributed to the difference in gender as the t- test value for the three types of strategies is $-(2.40)$ at $\alpha \geq 0.05$ in favor of the females.

The fourth research question looks for any significant differences between the students' responses that could be due to the difference of their academic major at the university. The majors were six, namely; 1. CS, 2. Accounting, 3. Nutrition, 4. Engineering, 5. Vocational Education, 6. MIS. To answer this question the researcher computed the mean scores and the standard deviations of the students' responses to the questionnaire. Table 4 below shows the results.

Table 4: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Students' Responses on the Questionnaire According to their University Academic Major

Strategy	Major	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Significance
Before the test	1	21	24.19	3.76	1.23	0.29
	2	33	23.76	4.05		
	3	22	23.64	4.60		
	4	74	23.68	3.46		
	5	11	20.91	3.53		
	6	8	23.25	3.92		
During the test	1	21	18.67	3.04	1.67	0.14
	2	33	18.03	3.48		
	3	22	16.68	3.27		
	4	74	16.96	2.77		
	5	11	16.64	3.50		
	6	8	18.50	5.98		
After the test	1	21	15.57	2.09	0.14	0.98
	2	33	15.52	2.83		
	3	22	15.36	3.11		
	4	74	15.05	3.64		
	5	11	15.18	4.98		
	6	8	15.25	2.96		
Total	1	21	58.43	6.40	0.92	0.47
	2	33	57.30	8.19		
	3	22	55.68	9.21		
	4	74	55.69	7.71		
	5	11	52.73	10.70		
	6	8	57.00	10.07		

To see if there are any significant differences between the means of the students' responses to the questionnaire according to their university academic major, the researcher did a test of covariance between their responses.

There were no significant differences between students' responses to the questionnaire that could be attributed to the difference in their university academic major (see Table 5).

Table 5: Results of Anova Analysis of the Means of the Students' Responses on the Questionnaire According to their University Academic Major

Strategy		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Before the test	Between Groups	80.247	5	16.049	1.105	.360
	Within Groups	2367.575	163	14.525		
	Total	2447.822	168			
During the test	Between Groups	65.606	5	13.121	1.222	.301
	Within Groups	1750.832	163	10.741		
	Total	1816.438	168			
After the test	Between Groups	48.580	5	9.716	.888	.491
	Within Groups	1784.438	163	10.947		
	Total	1833.018	168			
Total	Between Groups	360.393	5	72.079	1.079	.374
	Within Groups	10891.939	163	66.822		
	Total	11252.331	168			

The fifth research question inquired whether there are any significant differences between students' responses on the statements of the questionnaire due to the difference in their stream at the secondary school. The students were divided into three streams which were namely; scientific, IT and vocational. To answer this question, the researcher computed the mean scores and the standard deviations of the students' responses to the questionnaire. Table 6 below shows this.

Table 6: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Students' Responses on the Questionnaire According to their Stream in Secondary School

Strategy	School Stream	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Significance
Before the exam	Scientific	55	23.82	3.82	0.33	0.72
	IT	49	23.63	4.00		
	Vocational	65	23.26	3.72		
During the exam	Scientific	55	17.62	3.25	2.35	0.10
	IT	49	18.02	3.85		
	Vocational	65	16.74	2.75		
After the exam	Scientific	55	15.42	3.29	0.53	0.59
	IT	49	15.53	2.79		
	Vocational	65	14.94	3.67		
Total	Scientific	55	58.60	11.54	2.69	0.07

	IT	49	57.41	8.63		
	Vocational	65	54.68	8.22		

To find out whether there are any significant differences between the mean scores of the students' responses to the questionnaire according to the difference in the stream at the secondary school exist, the researcher did a test of covariance between their responses.

Findings of the covariance test show that there are no significant differences at $\alpha \geq 0.05$ between students' responses to the questionnaire statements could be attributed to the difference in their stream at secondary school. Table (7) below shows this.

Table 7: Results of Anova Analysis of the Means of the Students' Responses on the Questionnaire According to their Stream in Secondary School

Strategy		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Before the test	Between Groups	88.808	5	17.762	1.227	.299
	Within Groups	2359.015	163	14.472		
	Total	2447.822	168			
During the test	Between Groups	88.605	5	17.721	1.672	.144
	Within Groups	1727.833	163	10.600		
	Total	1816.438	168			
After the test	Between Groups	7.621	5	1.524	.136	.984
	Within Groups	1825.396	163	11.199		
	Total	1833.018	168			
Total	Between Groups	307.413	5	61.483	.916	.472
	Within Groups	10944.918	163	67.147		
	Total	11252.331	168			

To answer the last research question which investigates how well are the students in using the test taking strategies . The researcher calculated the scores of each student on the questionnaire items. The scores are classified under four categories which are: low users of test- taking strategies, average users, moderately high users, and high users of test-taking strategies. This classification is adopted from Brown (2002: 68). The results showed that most of the students displayed a moderately high use of test –taking strategies with a percentage of 67.5%. Table (8) below shows this.

Table 8: Overall Classification of Students Performance on the Use of Test-Taking Strategies.

Percent%	Frequency	Performance
1.2	2	low
12.4	21	average
67.5	114	moderately
18.9	32	high
100.0	169	Total

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

A number of conclusions could be drawn from the findings of the present study. First of all, the students both male and female displayed a moderately high use of test-taking strategies. This could be attributed to the significant role of exams in the academic life of the students as passing an exam is the only reason for some students to attend classes (Wharton and Race, 2000:118). It is well acknowledged that most students try to prepare well for their exams by following some strategies that prove to be helpful.

Secondly, the study revealed that the different academic major at the university, that is, whether the student is studying engineering, accounting, vocational education, MIS, CS, or nutrition, did not play a significant role in their responses on the questionnaire statements. This finding might be due to the fact that none of the students are English majored students, in fact all of them have to take the English courses as compulsory courses needed for graduation, i.e., they do not choose those courses on the contrary they do not prefer taking them because English is considered a difficult subject and they do not usually get high grades in the English exams. This harmonizes with what Ababneh and Al-Momani claimed that students at Al-Huson University College are seeing English as an assignment rather than an applicable skill in their future.(2011:56).

Thirdly, gender has a significant effect on students' responses on the questionnaire items in favor of the females. This finding goes in line with Aslan's (2009) study which revealed that female students were significantly more successful than males in terms of achievements and they used more language learning strategies in learning English. This conclusion is considered another brick that supports the claim that there is a significant connection between gender, language learning strategies and achievement in learning English as a foreign or second language.

Fourthly, the difference in the academic stream in the secondary school, that is, whether the student was at the scientific, literal or vocational stream, has no influence on students use of test taking strategies. That finding could be attributed to the fact that all the students in all streams in Jordan use the same English text book at the secondary school, so they are exposed to the same amount and time of the instructional material. This goes in the same vein with what Carroll (cited in Stern,1983 : 365) concluded in the same respect " ...the primary factor in attainment of proficiency in French (and presumably, any foreign language) is the amount of instructional time provided."

Finally, the findings show that the most used strategies by the students were the one's before the test, a matter which is explainable by the fact that they are highly extrinsically motivated to do their best in order to pass it since their only goal is to finish it successfully. However, at the same it shows that those students are poor and not aware of the importance of benefits that the strategies which they use after taking a test can bring them. Those strategies are the feedback on their tests. And it is beneficial to find out what they are doing well and where they should pay further effort.(Wharton and Race, 2000: 110).

Based on the above conclusions, it is recommended that EFL teachers raise their students' awareness to the importance of using learning strategies especially those that could be fruitful and helpful in test taking whether before, during and after the English test. Such awareness will of course help the learners in many situations both inside or outside the classroom. (Wharton and Race, 2000: 20). Moreover, it is recommended to repeat this study using a larger sample, as a larger sample of participants would be more representative and therefore, make results more reliable.

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