Examining passage dependency in IELTS reading comprehension tests through its relation to IQ: A probe into test-taking strategies

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Abstract

The primary objective of the present study is to explore the extent to which the reading comprehension items in IELTS can be answered correctly by test takers in passage out condition, that is, the passage independency of the items. Furthermore, the study makes an attempt to investigate the role of different kinds of intelligences and the use of test-taking strategies in successful reading achievement of test takers in two conditions of the test (when the passage is present and when the passage is absent). The target participants of the present study comprised 175 male and female EFL students who were selected from three private EFL institutes of Mashhad. The instrumentation in the present study consists of two questionnaires and two tests. As the result shows, there is a significant difference between the passage-out, and passage-in conditions in terms of IELTS reading comprehension.

Keywords: IELTS; passage independency; intelligences; test-taking strategies; passage-in; passage-out

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1. Introduction

From its initial establishment in 1980, when identified as the English Language Testing Service (ELTS), it evolved into the International English Language Testing System in 1989 as a result of a validation study carried out by Edinburgh University (Criper & Davies, 1988). It is now available at more than 1,200 locations worldwide, including more than 50 locations in the USA, and there are 48 test dates a year. The test is composed of four equally weighted sub-tests which are speaking, reading, writing and listening and is generally completed over the course of one day in identified test centers with trained markers and examiners. The candidate's total score is then calculated as the mean average of the four individual sub-tests (IELTS Homepage, 2017).

A criticism which has been raised about language proficiency tests is whether they truly evaluate the communicative competence of the applicant (Brown, 2001). With many Asian and South Asian countries depending only on memorization and imitation (Ballard & Clanchey, 1991), doubt creates to creep in as to the general validity of the IELTS test, particularly with some studies demonstrating no relationship between scores of the IELTS test and overall academic performance (Cotton & Conrow, 1998).

On the other hand, research conducted by researchers such as Bellingham (1993) and Ferguson and White (1993) has revealed that there is a positive relationship, though sometimes weak, between IELTS and students' grade point average (GPA). A small-scale study about self-evaluation (Bayliss & Ingram, 2006) conducted in Australia questions whether or not we essentially need testing, as the applicants seemed to have very precise insight of their own language skills. The total mean score of the self-rating was 6.43 compared to a mean IELTS rating of 6.45, albeit this was only small-scale, there could be universal implications if candidates could commonly assess themselves to this kind of accuracy. Though clearly the aim of many language exams is not to confirm a language learner's own opinions, rather it is arguably more often for the practical aims of gaining admission to academic institutions, emigrating or job requests.

The matter of passage influence or passage dependency of reading comprehension items was debated broadly in the sixties and seventies. Efforts were continually made to call attention to the need for test-takers to read the stimulus texts in order to efficiently answer comprehension items (Pyrczak, 1975).

Numerous investigations showed that students regularly succeeded in answering reading comprehension questions correctly even when the related passages were not accessible (Preston, 1964; Pyrczak, 1975), and these outcomes were considered as a probable threat to the validity of reading comprehension tests. The fundamental notion was that what is assessed with the passages removed was something other than comprehension, and low relationship of students' performance in the passage-removed and the predicted circumstances have been used as confirmation that definitely two kinds of behaviors were assessed in two circumstances (Hanna & Oaster, 1978; Preston, 1964; Tuinman, 1971). To argue the problem of passage dependency in a more organized method, Tuinmann (1973-74) offered ways to evaluate the degree to which reading questions could be answered without reading the stimulus passage by determining the passage dependency index for each question. Outcomes of his study revealed that the passage dependency for all five tests was quite low. On one test, the participants were even able to answer half of the items correctly without access to the passages.

2. Review of the related literature

A number of studies have been carried out on test-taking strategies in Iran. For example, Barati and Kashkoul (2012) examined the effect of task-based assessment on the type and frequency of test-taking strategies

that three proficiency groups of Iranian adult EFL learners used when completing the First Certificate in English FCE reading paper. The results suggested that the intermediate group test takers used the strategies significantly differently after completing each task (sub-test) in the FCE reading paper. However, the high and low proficient test takers' use of strategies was only significant after completing the third task of the FCE reading paper. In addition, Ghafournia and Afghari (2014) scrutinized the interaction between linguistic and strategic variables in reading comprehension test performance of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, the interaction among the participants' reading comprehension test performance, use of test-taking strategies, and level of language proficiency were analyzed. The findings manifested a significant interaction among the use of test-taking strategies, level of reading proficiency, and test performance of the examinees. More proficient test takers used the strategies more frequently than less proficient test takers.

The qualitative findings also confirmed the quantitative findings and revealed the underlying nonlinguistic reasons for the differences in the frequency and type of strategies used by test takers. Majidi Dehkordi and Shirani Bidabadi (2015) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' reading strategy use and Emotional Intelligence (EI) as well as exploring the most frequently-used reading strategies which can facilitate the process of reading comprehension. The results of the study revealed that EI level was positively associated with Reading Strategy Use (r=0.623, *p*<0.01). Also, the results of independent samples t-test were indicative of the fact that the degree of the usage of meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies by the high EI group was greater than that of the low EI group, while with respect to the test-taking strategies, this degree of usage was weaker in the former than in the latter. In addition, cognitive strategy, as the most frequent one, was observed to be a facilitative strategy for reading comprehension. It was, therefore, concluded that the importance of reading strategies should be taken into account to improve the reading skill and other areas of language learning and teaching. Recently, Nemati (2016) investigated whether teaching test-taking strategies to high and low proficiency EFL undergraduates similarly enhances their reading comprehension test performances. A total of 33 EFL sophomores studying at Islamic Azad University of Jahrom, Iran participated in the study. They took two TOEFL reading comprehension subtests as pretest and posttest plus instruction in test-taking strategies for multiple-choice reading comprehension test within their regular reading classes. Results of the post-test indicated that the high proficiency learners took almost more advantage of the treatment compared with the low proficiency ones.

Most of the intelligence tests are often correlated with success in school, and a link between intelligence and second language learning has been reported (Candlin & Mercer, 2001). Pimsleur (1971) stated that by estimating the average school grades of students in different subjects, there is a chance to predict how good they would be at language learning. It is also believed that being successful in second language learning is associated with cognitive ability and also language aptitude. Among the studies carried out on finding the relationship between intelligence and learning in general or more exclusively second language learning (L2), the intelligence variable has been found to be a strong predictor of learning (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2007). However, in their study, Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham (2005) maintained that there is not a stable correlation between intelligence quotient (IQ) and the student's grade.

The primary objective of the present study is to explore the extent to which the reading comprehension items in IELTS can be answered correctly by test takers in passage out condition, that is, the passage independency of the items. Furthermore, the study will make an attempt to investigate the role of overall intelligence (IQ) and use of test-taking strategies in successful reading achievement of test takers in two conditions of the test (when the passage is present and when the passage is absent). In other words, the effect of total intelligence (IQ) and use of four different test taking strategies (Reasoning, personal knowledge, vocabulary, and guessing) on different conditions of IELTS passages will be explored. In addition, the present study will explore the possible relationship between Iranian students' use of different test taking strategies, nine types of intelligence (Intrapersonal, Existential, Naturalistic, Visual, Musical, Verbal, Interpersonal, Kinesthetic, and Logical) and their IELTS reading scores under the passage-out and passage-in conditions.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the work of Amiri (2016) who explored the role of reading strategies and test-taking strategies on learners' TOEFL reading score in different conditions. Furthermore, one important framework that has been useful in addressing not only how beliefs about intelligence impact performance, but also how they impact rebound following failure, concerns individuals' theories of intelligence (Dweck & Sorich, 1999). Former behavioral researches have exposed that learners who consider that intelligence is a stable quantity ('entity theorists') are mainly defenseless to reduced performance when they comprehend they are at danger of failing, while learners who observe intelligence as acquirable ('incremental theorists') seem better capable to stay operative learners (Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006).

Figure 1 depicts the hypothesized model proposed based on the theoretical contentions discussed earlier. A path analysis was done to study the causal relations involved. In the proposed model, direct paths from learners' test-taking strategies to their IELTS score were hypothesized. Moreover, direct paths from learners' total multiple intelligences to their test-taking strategies and IELTS scores were hypothesized. This hypothesized model will be tested in two different passage-in and passage-out conditions.
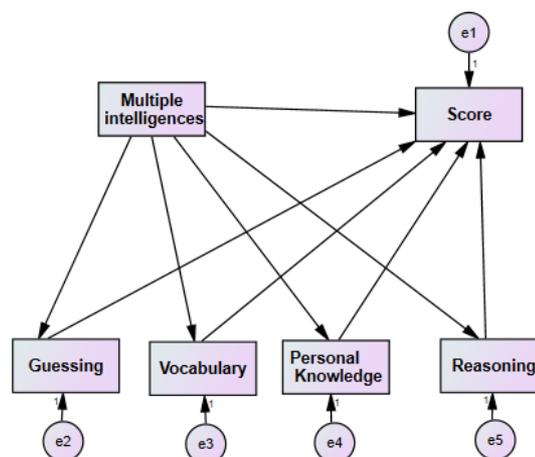
Figure 1. Hypothetical model of the relationships between Iranian EFL learners' multiple intelligence, test-taking strategies, and their IELTS score

To achieve the objectives outlined above, the following research questions have been proposed:

➢ RQ1: Is there any statistically significant difference between Iranian EFL students' responses in IELTS reading comprehension items in the passage-out, and passage-in conditions?

➢ RQ2: Do students' use of test taking strategies and their multiple intelligences predict IELTS reading scores under the passage-out and passage-in conditions?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of the current study comprised 175 (98 males and 77 females) voluntary Iranian EFL students who were selected from three different private EFL institutes (Mahan, Shokooh, and Parax) of Mashhad. They were screened from a total of 203 participants who were intermediate- level. So, 28 participants were excluded from the study and 175 were remained. Females' age range varied from 17 to 25 (M=20.19, SD=2.77) and males' age range varied from 18 to 29 (M=21.77, SD=3.90). Convenience sampling method was used for data collection.

3.2 Instrumentation

The instrumentation in the present study consisted of two questionnaires and two tests. The participants

were also asked to write their age and gender.

Nelson English language test - Nelson English language test (1976) including 50 items was used as a tool for homogenizing the participants of the study and getting reading comprehension ability score. The validity and reliability of the Nelson test have been estimated several times before by other researchers and it is considered as highly valid and reliable test of English proficiency (Shahivand & Pazhakh, 2012, p. 18).The reliability index of this test was estimated through Kuder-Richarson formula 21 as 0.80.

The reading comprehension subsection of IELTS - The reading comprehension section of IELTS test comprises three comprehension passages with 40 questions associated to the given texts. A variety of questions are used, chosen from the following types; multiple choice, identifying information, identifying writer's views/claims, matching information, matching headings, matching features, matching sentence endings, sentence completion, summary completion, note completion, table completion, flow-chart completion, diagram label completion, and short-answer questions.

Multiple intelligences inventory (MI inventory) - In order to identify the intelligence profile of the participants, the MI questionnaire was distributed to the students. In this study, Persian version of McKenzie's (1999) MI inventory translated and validated by Hajhashemi and Bee Eng (2010) was used. The questionnaire includes nine sections measuring nine types of intelligences including natural, musical, logical/mathematical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, bodily/kinesthetic, linguistic, existential, and spatial/visual intelligences and each section consists of 10 items. Validity of the Persian version of this questionnaire has been checked in the study of Hajhashemi and Bee Eng (2010). The reliability index of this scale was estimated through Kuder-Richarson formula 21 as 0.82.

Test taking strategy questionnaire - The test taking strategy questionnaire, originally developed in English by Powers and Wilson (1995) which includes 19 items which are categorized as four sub-constructs of Reasoning, personal knowledge, vocabulary, and guessing. The Persian version of the questionnaire translated and validated by Amiri (2016) was utilized. It was based on five-point Likert scale ranging from 5= used for all or nearly all questions, 4= used for about 75 percent of questions, 3= used for about 50 of percent questions, 2= used for about 25 percent of questions, and 1= used for few or no questions. The questionnaire subdivided into four sub-constructs: Reasoning (items 1 through 6), personal knowledge (items 7 through 9), vocabulary (items 10 through 15), and guessing (items 16 through 19). In the present study the scale had Cronbach's Alpha .79 for total Test-Taking Strategy.

3.3 Procedure

The present study was done among students of English from Mashhad. The data collection of this study took place in May and June 2017.The participants (students) answered the questionnaires in the presence of the first researcher in two sessions in which participants were given instruction on how to answer the questions. Data collection took about 45-60 minutes. In the first session, after a brief explanation of the purpose of the research, the Nelson English proficiency test was administered to the available subjects. Then, participants whose scores fell one SD above and below the mean were selected to take part in this study. The level chosen for this study is the Intermediate (using Nelson English proficiency test). Then, these students were given the reading test in the passage-out condition and immediately after the completion of the reading test, they were asked to report their employed test strategies and intelligence. They were required to provide demographic information such as, gender and age. To minimize memory effect, in the second session, the students were given the test again in the passage-in condition four weeks after the first test. Again immediately after the completion of the reading test, they were asked to report their employed test taking strategy and intelligence, respectively. The researchers explained the main purpose of the current study and asked them to write their name on the tests and complete the questionnaires.

4. Results

An assessment of the normality of data is a prerequisite for many statistical tests because normal data are an underlying assumption in parametric testing. First of all, in order to ensure the normality of data, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used for all the data. Results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the data are normally distributed, so parametric tests can be applied for further analysis. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of Intelligence, IELTs score, and test-taking strategies of passage out group and passage in including the mean, standard deviation, maximum and minimum scores.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of intelligence, IELTs score, test-taking strategies of the passage out and passage in groups

Groups	Variables	*n*	Min.	Max.	*Mean*	*SD*
	Intelligence	175	55.00	82.00	63.77	4.39
Passage Out	IELTs Score	175	.00	8.00	3.64	1.32
	Test-taking Strategies	175	23.00	72.00	63.59	5.16
	Intelligence	175	52.00	79.00	62.54	4.28
Passage In	IELTs Score	175	9.00	35.00	15.69	3.19
	Test-taking Strategies	175	29.00	83.00	67.98	6.02

Note. N=175.

The possible range of score for the Intelligence test with 90 items is between 0 and 90, for IELTs Score with 40 questions is between 0 and 40, and for total Test-taking Strategies with 19 items is between 19 and 95. To answer the first research question aiming at examining whether learners' responses in IELTS reading comprehension items differ significantly between the passage-out, and passage-in conditions, a dependent-samples t-test was performed. The mean score of IELTS reading comprehension in passage-in groups (15.69) was higher than the passage-out group (3.64). To find out whether these differences are significant, a dependent samples t-test was run. T-test results show that there was a statistically significant difference between the passage-out, and passage-in conditions in terms of IELTS reading comprehension ($t= 4.598$, $p=.000$).

To answer the second research question, Path analysis and Pearson correlation were conducted. In statistics, path analysis is used to describe the directed dependencies among a set of variables. It can be viewed as a special case of structural equation modeling (SEM) in which only single indicators are employed for each of the variables in the causal model. To check the strengths of the causal relationships among the components, the standardized estimates were examined. As indicated in Figures 2 and Figure 3, an estimate is displayed on each path. This standardized estimate is the standardized coefficient or beta coefficients (*β*) resulting from an analysis carried out on independent variables that have been standardized. It explains the predictive power of the independent variable and the effect size. To examine the structural relations, the proposed models were tested using the Amos 24 statistical package. A number of fit indices were examined to evaluate the model fit: the chi-square magnitude which should not be significant, Chi-square/*df* ratio which should be lower than 2 or 3, the normed fit index (NFI), the good fit index (GFI), and the comparative fit index (CFI) with the cut value greater than .90, and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of about .06 or .07 (Schreiber, Nora, Stage, Barlow, & King, 2006). Table 2 shows Goodness of fit indices of two models.

Table 2

Goodness of fit indices

Models	X2/df	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
Acceptable fit	< 3	> .90	> .90	< .08
Model 2	2.682	.923	.901	.051
Model 3	4.043	.770	.650	.221

Figure 2 shows the results of path analysis between EFL learners' intelligence, test-taking strategies and their IELTS reading score in passage-in group. As can be seen in Table 4, the chi-square/df ratio (2.682), GFI

(.923), CFI (.901), and RMSEA (.051) lie within the acceptable fit thresholds. Hence, it can be concluded that the proposed model had a perfect fit with the empirical data in passage-in group.
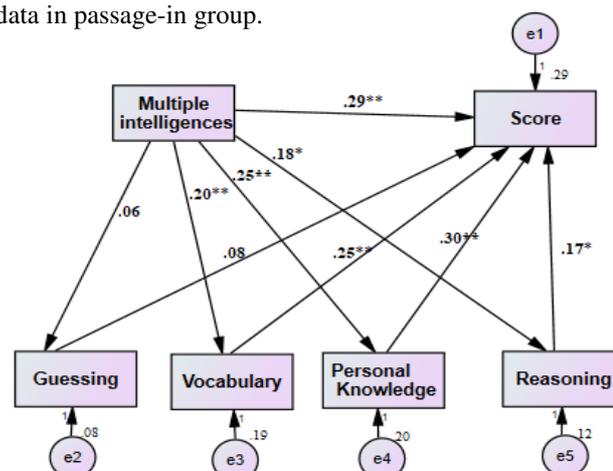
Figure 2. Path analysis between EFL learners' intelligence, test-taking strategies and their IELTS reading score in passage-in group

As indicated in Figure 2, IELTS reading score is predicted by all four sub-constructs of test-taking strategies except guessing in passage-in condition: Reasoning (β=.18, *p*<0.05), personal knowledge (β= .25, *p*<0.05), vocabulary (β=.20, *p*<0.05), and guessing (β= .06, *p*>0.05). In addition, a Pearson correlation was conducted to find the relationship. Table 3 indicates the results of the correlation between Iranian EFL learners' use of test taking strategies and students IELTS reading score under the passage-in conditions.

Table 3

Correlation between use of test taking strategies and IELTS reading score under the passage-in conditions

	Reasoning	Personal Knowledge	Vocabulary	Guessing	Total Strategies
Reading Score	.16*	.42**	.39**	.09	.27**

Note. **Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01.
     * Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05.

As can be seen in Table 3, among four sub-factors of test taking strategies, Personal knowledge has the highest correlation (r=.42, *p*<.05) and guessing has the lowest correlation (r=.09, *p*>.05) with reading score. Moreover, there is a weak positive significant relationship between reading score and total strategies in passage in condition (r=.27, *p*<.05). Figure 3 shows the results of path analysis between EFL learners' intelligence, test-taking strategies and their IELTS reading score in passage-out group. As can be seen in Table 4, the chi-square value (744.232), the chi-square/df ratio (4.04), GFI (.770), and CFI (.650), all the fit indices except RMSEA (.221), do not lie within the acceptable fit thresholds. Hence, it can be concluded that the proposed model 3 does not fit with the empirical data in passage-out group.
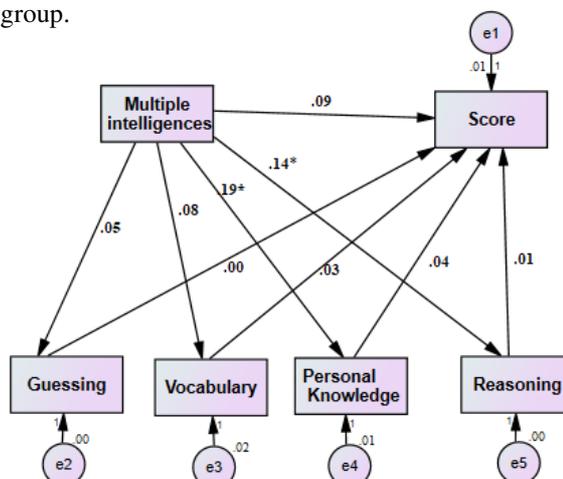
Figure 3. Path analysis between EFL learners' intelligence, test-taking strategies and their IELTS reading score in passage-out group

As indicated in Figure 3, there is no significant path from four sub-constructs of test-taking strategies to reading score in passage-out condition: Reasoning (β=.01, *p*>0.05), personal knowledge (β= .04, *p*>0.05),

vocabulary (β=.03, p>0.05), and guessing (β= .00, p>0.05).

In addition, Pearson correlation test was conducted. Table 4 indicates the results of correlation test between Iranian EFL learners' use of test taking strategies and students IELTS reading score under the passage-out conditions.

Table 4

Correlation between use of test taking strategies and IELTS reading score under the passage-out conditions

	Reasoning	Personal Knowledge	Vocabulary	Guessing	Total Strategies
Reading Score	.04	.02	.05	.03	.06

As can be seen in Table 4, none of four sub-factors of test taking strategies has a significant correlation with reading score. Moreover, there is no significant relationship between reading score and total strategies in passage out condition (r=.06, p>.05).

5. Discussion and conclusions

To get a clear picture of the results, each research question is discussed in the followings. Results of dependent-sample t-test indicated that there is a significant difference between the passage-out, and passage-in conditions in terms of IELTS reading comprehension. The mean score of IELTS reading comprehension in passage-in groups is higher than the passage-out group. It means that students could not answer IELTS reading comprehension questions correctly when the associated passages were not available. It can be concluded that IELTS Reading comprehension test measures students' understanding of what they have read; selecting a correct answer depends entirely on information acquired from the associated reading passage.

Passage dependency is the extent to which answers to reading comprehension questions depend on information in the reading passages. Therefore, it can be concluded that performance on the reading comprehension items of IELTS seemed to depend substantially on the accompanying passages. As there is not any study found in the literature regarding Passage dependency of IELTS reading comprehension, comparatively discussing this result is not possible. It is hoped that the present research will be a pioneer in this field that will facilitate further research.

Furthermore, results of SEM and Pearson correlation indicated that IELTS reading score is predicted by all four sub-constructs of test-taking strategies except guessing in passage-in condition. Besides, a Pearson correlation was conducted to find the relationship. Accordingly, among four sub-factors of test taking strategies, personal knowledge has the highest correlation and guessing has the lowest correlation with reading score. Moreover, there is a weak positive significant relationship between reading score and total strategies in passage in condition. It can be concluded that the students at the higher levels of reading proficiency used overall test-taking strategies more frequently than did the students at the lower levels of reading proficiency. This finding is in line with a number of other studies (Cohen & Upton, 2007; Ghafournia & Afghari, 2017; Weir, 2005; Yamashita, 2003).The findings provide empirical evidence for Bachman's (1990) model for the factors affecting test performance as well as Bachman and Palmer's (2010) conceptual framework of language use showing the interaction between test performance and use of test-taking strategies.

The utilization of test-taking strategies can be deliberated as one main source of error of measurement according to Bachman's (1990) classical true score measurement theory and Bachman's context for the aspects affecting test performance. As revealed earlier, reading skill is expected meaningfully by test-taking strategies. Therefore, the impact of test-taking strategies on the test taking procedure cannot be passed over, and the observed scores are not thoughtful of the real skill of language learners all on their own.

Similar outcome was established by Yamashita (2003). He discovered test takers' own viewpoint on the cognitive procedure of taking a reading comprehension gap-filling test by EFL Japanese university students who

had to take the test and present simultaneous think-aloud oral protocols. The results established that by applying text level information, the test inclined to swift all the test takers to activate their cognitive procedure. The more proficient test takers applied text level information and broader range of textual restrictions more frequently than did the less proficient test takers. The conclusions exposed that the test-taking procedure was dissimilar in more proficient and less proficient test takers. The more proficient test takers were capable to provide appropriate weight to dissimilar information foundations to extract the meaning and understand the text. Instead, the less proficient test takers put heavier importance on local grammatical information but were less capable to utilize textual level information.

Furthermore, Cohen and Upton (2007) originate similar outcome. They investigated how test takers' reading abilities and test taking strategies cooperate in the procedure of completing the reading tasks of a TOEFL test by a number of progressive non-native speakers of English. The research pursued to conclude whether there was any difference in the kind of strategies applied when answering three comprehensive classifications of questions, containing traditional single selection, new selected-response, and reading to learn multiple-choice items. The participants first took the reading segment of the TOEFL test, and then expressed their test-taking procedures. The conclusions discovered that through applying suitable test-taking strategies, the test takers were capable to comprehend the texts, expectations of the questions as well as the meanings and associations of dissimilar options to discover correct responses. In addition, the strategies used by the test takers were reliable with their academic reading skills, necessary to obtain both local and general considerate of the texts. In a similar research, Weir (2005) also highlighted the significance of discovering what test takers really do when taking language tests to develop the validity of the tests.

From the results of the current research, it can be established that performance on the reading comprehension items of IELTS appears to be influenced considerably on the associated passages. IELTS reading test specified high passage dependency and Stakeholders can choose this standard reading test. Furthermore, it was originating that learners' intelligence cannot have impact on their reading performance in passage-out circumstance. In other words, students with high and low level of intelligence accomplished the same in passage-out circumstance. Eventually, it was established that there is a weak positive important association between reading score and total strategies in passage in circumstance.

In conclusion, this research applied a rather small number of items from IELTS tests. A much larger number of items from this test require to be encompassed for any common claim to be probable regarding any test. Upcoming researches can be shown with a developed design to collect more data regarding the participants' thinking procedures in both passage-out and passage-in circumstances. Furthermore, the usual practice of applying the same items and passages on the same group of participants in the two circumstances is believed to introduce aspects that might distort the outcomes.

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