

IELTS Reading: Perceived Challenges and Strategies by Vietnamese University English Majors

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Abstract

This study focused on identifying Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) students' perception of their challenges in doing the IELTS reading test and corresponding strategies to cope with these challenges. The study involved eighty-nine English majors at Can Tho University, and data were collected via a questionnaire administered to all participants and interviews conducted with 10 random students. The results showed that Vietnamese EFL students encountered a number of challenges in doing IELTS reading tests, among which lack of vocabulary and time constraint for the tests were two most noticeable difficulties. The results also revealed that the students in the study frequently employed text related, question related, and general practical strategies for doing the reading test in IELTS. Based on the findings, more opportunities to expose students to tests as well as an integration of instruction on test-taking strategies were suggested.

Keywords: EFL Vietnamese students, IELTS reading test, reading strategies, test-taking techniques

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1. Introduction

Reading is an important skill but at the same time it is a big challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The same is true for EFL students at Can Tho University. The difficulties associated with the reading skill become bigger when it comes to doing reading tests, where students additionally need test-related strategies to perform the reading tasks more effectively to gain high scores. Our preliminary observations based on informal talks and reading test results have revealed that students in the high-quality English program at our institution faced a number of challenges. According to the syllabi in the program, those students are supposed to be trained and take IELTS (International English Language Testing System) equivalent tests at the end of the skill courses as well as at the end of the program for graduation. As for IELTS reading tests, many students are still not capable of effectively applying the strategies taught in class into actual performance. During the classroom learning process, teachers might provide necessary and appropriate test-related strategies, but for many students who are used to doing reading exercises intuitively without analyzing the reading passages, these strategies are still quite difficult to apply immediately and effectively. It is because an ability to effectively employ strategies while taking tests is difficult and time-consuming to develop. It is assumed that an awareness of test-related strategies together with an identification of the challenges involved would be helpful for a competent reader and test taker. Therefore, this study was aimed to investigate how the students in the high-quality English program at Can Tho University perceived about the challenges and the strategies needed in performing IELTS reading tests. The study was expected to supply detailed understandings and implications for both the students and teachers in the program, which they could base on to improve the quality of teaching and learning reading in English.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reading Strategies in Learning

Reading is an important skill among the four macro skills in language development namely reading, listening, speaking, and writing. As a receptive skill, reading is a key channel for learners to get exposed to plentiful input necessary for language acquisition. Lexical and syntactical knowledge is gained via reading in the target language, so this skill is believed to be an essential skill to develop and it has interconnected and supporting relations with other skills. At an early stage of learning, reading can simply be a way to associate the written form of language to its sounds. Later, at higher levels of proficiency, reading is synonymous with reading comprehension, where learners are required to be able to interpret the meaning from texts. In other words, reading helps the readers recreate the meaning out of the reading texts. Many authors and researchers consider reading as a non-linear process, involving students' interactivensness with the texts in hypothezing, predicting, and using their prior knowledge to make sense (Carrell & Grabe, 2002; Grabe, 2009; Smith, 2012; Carrell & Grabe, 2013).

Given the complex process of reading, it is necessary for students to use strategies to support their learning. Language learning strategies (LLS) are defined as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Although there have been various definitions and classifications of LLS (Brown, 1987; O' Malley & Chamot,

1990; Oxford, 1990), Oxford’s definition has been among the most cited in the literature and her classification of language learning strategies was seen as the most comprehensive and systematic. According to this classification, language learning strategies belong to two general categories: direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies or the strategies used in learning the new language itself encompass memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies which are applied for general management of the learning process include metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies (See Figure 1).

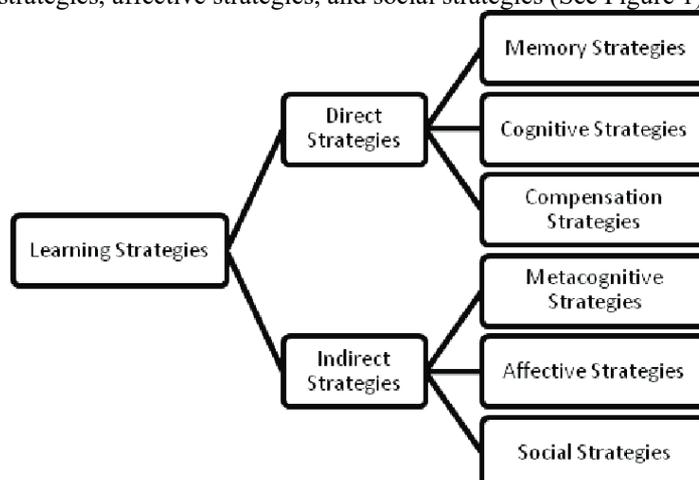


Figure 1. Classification of LLS (Oxford, 1990)

In particular domains, different authors scrutinized these strategies into skill-specific models and developed corresponding strategy scales for measurement. Well-known are the seminal series of research by Vandergrift and her MALQ (Meta-cognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire) for the listening skill (Vandergrift et al., 2006). Similar research and scale development studies were done for the reading skill, noticeably Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) with the MARSIS (Meta-cognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory). It is worth noticing that metacognitive strategies form the group of learning strategies that have been receiving much attention from researchers, because it is this group of strategies that are powerful in developing students’ self-directedness and self-regulation necessary for life-long learning (Nguyen & Trinh, 2011; Do & Phan, 2021).

The MARSIS which has 30 items is mostly used to measure learners’ awareness in three groups of specific metacognitive reading strategies: global, support, and problem-solving (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). Later, in 2018, Mokhtari and his associates revised the inventory, basing on factor analysis. The new version reduced the numbers of items in each category and so consisted of 15 items in total. It was called the MARSIS-R and has been used as a convenient tool for research purposes. (See Table 1 for the complete MARSIS-R by Mokhtari et al., 2018).

Table 1. Description of the Items in the MARSIS-R (Mokhtari et al., 2018)

Item	Description
Global reading strategies (GRS)	
GRS 1:	Having a purpose in mind when reading
GRS 2:	Previewing text to see what it is about before reading
GRS 3:	Checking to see if the content of the text fits my purpose for reading
GRS 4:	Using typographical aids like bold face and italics to pick out key information
GRS 5:	Critically analyzing and evaluating the information read
Problem solving strategies (PSS)	
PSS 1:	Getting back on track when getting sidetracked or distracted
PSS 2:	Adjusting my reading pace or speed based on what I’m reading
PSS 3:	Stopping from time to time to think about what I’m reading
PSS 4:	Re-reading to help ensure I understand what I’m reading
PSS 5:	Guessing the meaning of unknown words or phrases
Support reading strategies (SRS)	
SRS 1:	Taking notes while reading
SRS 2:	Reading aloud to help me understand what I’m reading
SRS 3:	Discussing what I read with others to check my understanding
SRS 4:	Underlining or circling important information in text
SRS 5:	Using reference materials such as dictionaries to support my reading

2.2 Reading Strategies in Doing Tests

In order to perform a test effectively, however, knowledge and ability are not sufficient. While reading strategies

are generally helpful, additional strategies specific to tests are also needed. According to Rogers and Harley (1999), test-taking strategies are processes in which learners purposely take advantage of their understanding of the test's features and format to perform the given tasks effectively. Therefore, besides the general learning strategies mostly associated with language use, test-takers need what Cohen (1998) refers to as testwiseness strategies. These testwiseness strategies include specific practical techniques such as “reading the rubrics and instructions carefully, planning the allocated time properly, making use of key words in the questions, delaying answering complex and difficult questions, and rereading and evaluating the work in order to check the answers” (Nosrati, 2015, p. 136).

2.3 The IELTS Reading Test

In an IELTS reading test, test takers are given 60 minutes to read three different passages. The passages are relatively equal in length, making up a total of about 1,500 to 2,500 words (IELTS Handbook, 2007). There are around 40 questions in the test. Loughheed (2016) listed out the common types of questions in IELTS reading tests, specifically multiple-choice questions, true/false/not given, matching information, classifying information, matching headings, sentence/summary/note/chart completion, matching sentence endings, diagram label completion and short answer. As for text genres, the passages are taken from various sources for example books, magazines, and newspapers, so they mainly fall into three common categories: descriptive, narrative, and argumentative. According to Holi et al. (2020), the IELTS reading tests are designed to test a wide range of students' reading skills including “reading for gist, reading for main ideas, reading for details, skimming, understanding the logical argument, and recognizing writers' opinions, attitudes, and purpose” (p. 1623).

2.4. Prominent Studies on Strategies Used in IELTS Reading Tests

A number of studies have been carried out that reported common challenges test takers faced and their strategies to handle these difficulties. Text-related difficulties are among the major challenges. Specifically, they include advanced specialist vocabulary, complicated sentence structures, and discourse organization (Alghail & Mahfood, 2016). Time constraints are also an important concern (Chalmers & Walkinshaw, 2014). In addition, Chowdhury (2009) mentioned unfamiliar topics, cultural differences, and insufficient preparation as further difficulties for many test takers.

Effective solutions and strategies are, therefore, necessary. An ability to manage the time well is believed to be of help. Students are advised not to stick with a difficult question, but strategically move on to answer easier questions. Efficient test takers do not read every word. On the contrary, they just need to process the texts quickly and focus on specific information needed for particular questions (Hughes, 2003). Other tips include noticing key words appearing both in the questions and the texts; reading important parts of a text (for example introduction, topic sentences, concluding sentences); reading carefully and re-reading relevant sections; looking for highlighted or signposted content; and so on (Chalmers & Walkinshaw, 2014).

2.5 Relevant Studies in Vietnam

Reading strategy use by EFL learners have been researched in several studies in Vietnam. Do and Phan (2021), for example, focused on strategies used by university students. They also made comparisons between groups different in gender, reading competence, and metacognitive awareness. Their study involved 123 English majors who reported on their frequencies of using global, problem solving, and support strategies in reading. The study found that while there were minor differences among male and female students in strategy use, most of the Vietnamese EFL students utilized reading strategies at a medium level of frequency with problem solving as the most often used, followed by support and global strategies. Also, proficient learners used reading strategies more often than less proficient ones. The authors suggested that it was important to raise an awareness regarding developing all the three types of strategies.

Focusing on IELTS preparation in all four skills, the study by Luu and Luu (2022) involved 120 university students. Through questionnaire and interview, the study gained useful information about how learners should study to get ready for the demanding IELTS. The advice and tips include the following methods and techniques: practice with English pronunciation and communication, listen to audios and watch videos in English, learn grammar and read samples of writing. The authors also highlighted a need for self-study besides attending preparation courses, frequent practice with IELTS mock tests, search for support from teachers, and so forth.

In another study, Phi and Vu (2021) investigated the test-taking strategies used by high scorers in IELTS reading tests and how these strategies correlated with test performance. The study included 100 students who reported on their employment of strategies through a questionnaire and a limited number of interviews (N = 6). The findings revealed that these Vietnamese students had a medium use of strategies across the three types: general, text-related, and question-related strategies. Close correlations were also found between test performance and each of the three categories of reading strategies. The authors suggested that IELTS test-taking strategies should be integrated into training courses, because they are necessary for better results.

In the Vietnamese EFL context, while learning strategies and reading strategies in particular have been widely

researched, test-taking strategies and especially those connected to IELTS reading tests are found to be extremely under-researched. The study by Luu and Luu (2022) as reviewed above supplied helpful understandings and implications regarding IELTS preparation for all four language skills. Findings in Phi and Vu (2021) provided insights of Vietnamese EFL students' use of strategies on-test and the positive impact of such strategies on test performance. Nevertheless, little is known about the on-site challenges confronted by Vietnamese test takers in IELTS reading and none is known about how IELTS reading test-taking strategies are developed. The current study is therefore motivated by these concerns and aimed to address the following two questions.

RQ1. What are the challenges faced by students of high-quality English program at Can Tho University when taking the IELTS reading tests?

RQ2. To what extent do these students perceive the important role of strategies used in IELTS reading tests?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In this study, quantitative and qualitative methods were combined. It aimed at identifying the difficulties that students encountered, and examining their perception of the importance of strategy employment in IELTS reading tests. To that end, a questionnaire was used, followed by a limited number of interviews for confirmation and further details.

3.2 Participants

The participants were 89 students from Cohort 47 in the high-quality English studies program at Can Tho University. Of these 89 students, 10 were randomly and conveniently selected for a follow-up interview to have a more in-depth view of the research problem. The participants' age varied from 20 to 22. The students were similar in terms of English proficiency which ranged from the CEFR B2 to C1. Upon graduation, they are expected to achieve an average band score of 7.0 on the 1-9 scale of IELTS. All the participants had experience with the IELTS, either by taking official tests or equivalent tests delivered by their teachers in their program.

3.3 Research Instruments

The research tools included a questionnaire in the form of 5-level Likert Scale and interviews. There were two aspects of investigation in the questionnaire. The first was the difficulties they encountered when doing the IELTS reading tests, and the second was the students' perception of applying strategies in doing the tests. The questionnaire consisted of 34 items which we constructed based on the relevant literature. Part A consisted of 8 items adapted from Rugsakorn et al. (2013). In part B, the 28 items on test-taking strategy perception were mainly adapted from the questionnaire by Phi and Vu (2021). We consulted with two English teachers to ensure clarity and validity of the questionnaire. The reliability was appropriate with a Cronbach's Alpha of .805. The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 26.0 software was used for descriptive data. Additionally, we conducted individual interviews with 10 students. The interview was semi-structured with a set of five open ended questions. Students' responses in the interviews were transcribed and interpreted thematically to reconfirm, compare, and contrast with the quantitative information gained by the questionnaire. The complete questionnaire and interview questions can be found in the appendices.

4. Results

4.1 Findings from the Questionnaire

4.1.1 Challenges in Doing IELTS Reading

Table 2 displays the results of the students' answers to the first eight items in the questionnaire. As can be seen, time constraint (item A4) and limited vocabulary (item A5) are the biggest problems ($M=4.01$ and $M=4.40$ respectively). A consequent difficulty due to time limit is also revealed in item A6 (*I did not have enough time to check my answers*) with a mean of 3.54. Text understanding problems result in failing to find the answers (item A8, $M=3.83$), having to translate into Vietnamese (item A2, $M=3.46$), and skipping some questions (item A3, $M=3.84$). Understanding of questions and instructions is not a big problem for the test takers (Means of items A7 and A1 are 2.98 and 2.18 respectively).

Table 2. Perceived Challenges in IELTS Reading Tests

Item	Challenge	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
A1	I didn't understand the instructions.	89	1	5	2.18	1.09
A2	While reading, I had to translate into Vietnamese.	89	1	5	3.46	1.17
A3	I had to skip some questions because I didn't understand the reading texts.	89	1	5	3.84	1.02
A4	The time for reading texts was not long enough.	89	1	5	4.01	0.92
A5	The lack of vocabulary was a problem in the test.	89	1	5	4.40	0.66
A6	I didn't have enough time to check my answers.	89	1	5	3.54	1.05
A7	I didn't understand the questions.	89	1	5	2.98	1.24
A8	Having understood the questions, I was still unable to find the answers.	89	1	5	3.83	0.99

4.1.2 General Test-taking Strategies

As for general strategies presented in Table 3, the students showed a frequent use of techniques to locate relevant details necessary for answers, for example, underlining key words (item B4, M=4.39); highlighting important information (item B5, M=4.30); looking for synonyms and paraphrases (item B6, M=4.15); scanning for outstanding details such as numbers, proper names, and so on (item B7, M=4.08). Items with mildly high mean scores included practical techniques: having a reading purpose (item B1, M=3.34); making predictions based on clues like pictures and bold words (item B3, M=3.85); following the order of questions to identify corresponding information in texts (item B8, M=3.76); avoiding reading every word (item B9, M=3.74); summarizing after reading (item B10, M=3.36). The lowest mean was connected to item B2 (I managed my time well), which was only 2.75.

Table 3. General Reading Strategies

Item	Questions	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
B1	I had a purpose of reading to answer the question only.	89	1	5	3.34	1.27
B2	I managed my time well.	89	1	5	2.75	1.05
B3	I made predictions about what I was going to read by looking at any pictures with the text and bold word in title.	89	1	5	3.85	0.82
B4	I underlined key words in the questions.	89	2	5	4.39	0.71
B5	I highlighted important information as I read the text.	89	2	5	4.30	0.72
B6	I looked for key words in the questions and words or phrases with similar and related meanings in the texts; I looked for a paraphrase of each statement.	89	1	5	4.15	0.82
B7	I scanned quickly for numbers, names, dates and words around them to get the answers.	89	1	5	4.08	0.93
B8	I remembered that the questions followed the order of the passage.	89	1	5	3.76	1.04
B9	I didn't try to read every word.	89	1	5	3.74	0.97
B10	I tried to summarize after I read.	89	1	5	3.36	1.18

4.1.3 Text-Related Strategies

Table 4 below displays the results of the questionnaire's items from B11 to B19. Generally, all items corresponding to text-related strategies had fairly high ratings with all the mean values were equal and higher than 3.03. The students demonstrated that they were strategic in taking advantage of the text features to understand the passages. Specifically, they concentrated on the first sentence of each paragraph (item B11, M=3.58); paid special attention to the first part of the passage (item B15, M=3.53); looking at how the text was organized (item B12, M=3.03); looked for short sentences (item B16, M=3.34); and looking for context clues to guess meaning (item B19, M=3.99). The students also showed an ability to employ practical strategies to form ideas while reading (item B17, M=3.73); to relate the present text to their prior knowledge (item B18, M=3.98); to understand the gist of each paragraph (item B14, M=3.67); and to understand the author's intended meaning (item B13, M=3.89).

Table 4. Text-Related Strategies

Item	Question	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
B11	I read the first sentence of each paragraph for the main idea.	89	1	5	3.58	1.20
B12	I looked for how the text was organized and ignored details.	89	1	5	3.03	1.14
B13	I tried to predict where the author's points were leading.	89	1	5	3.89	0.76
B14	I got the gist of each paragraph.	89	1	5	3.67	0.99
B15	I paid special attention to the first part of the passage.	89	1	5	3.53	1.17
B16	I found short sentences within paragraphs.	89	1	5	3.34	1.08
B17	I formed ideas about the text while reading.	89	1	5	3.73	0.97
B18	I related what I read to what I already knew.	89	1	5	3.98	0.85
B19	I looked for context clues for the meaning of unfamiliar or difficult words.	89	1	5	3.99	0.87

4.1.4 Question-Related Strategies

As can be seen in Table 5, all mean scores for the items in the group of question-related strategies were high ranging from 3.69 to 4.43. This indicated that the students in the study were test wise users of the relevant techniques. They made good use of the questions' features for example avoiding too specific or too broad answer options (item B21, M=3.69) and chose to answer easy questions first (item B20, M=4.43). They also applied guessing techniques where appropriate, specifically, guessing meaning of words in the stem (item B23, M=4.00) and guessing to select the most seemingly possible answer (item B25, M=4.03). In addition, careful checking for answers was employed by choosing consistent and evident options (items B22 & B26, M=3.91 & 3.80 respectively), and by using previously known knowledge (item B24, M=3.74).

Table 5. Question-Related Strategies

Item	Questions	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
B20	I answered the questions I knew first.	89	2	5	4.43	0.63
B21	I avoided answers that were too specific or too broad.	89	2	5	3.69	1.09
B22	I always looked for answers that sounded consistent with the idea in the text.	89	1	5	3.91	0.96
B23	I guessed the meaning of any word in the stem I did not know.	89	1	5	4.00	0.89
B24	I used prior knowledge to answer questions.	89	1	5	3.74	1.12
B25	I guessed if I could not find the answer.	89	1	5	4.03	1.02
B26	I made sure I found evidence in the text to answer the question; I tried not to use what I thought was true.	89	1	5	3.80	1.01

4.2 Results from the Interviews

The students responses from the interviews were transcribed and presented in two major themes: the challenges they faced in doing IELTS reading tests (answers to questions 1-2), and how their test-taking strategies as reported in the questionnaire were developed and affecting their test performance (answers to questions 3-5).

In terms of difficulties in IELTS reading tests, 100% the interviewees (10/10) mentioned time pressure and lack of vocabulary as the most challenging. The vocabulary in IELTS was said to be *complex, high-level, specialized, unfamiliar, new, or academic*. Text complication and length were also reported to cause problems in reading and comprehension. The followings are transcribed extracts from the students' answers.

There is too much information than what I needed, there are some of the topics of the tests that I don't like and have any vocabulary about them. (Student 4)

I think it is the length of the article, there is too much misleading information and academic vocabulary on new topics. (Student 9)

For specific task types that cause challenges, a majority of the students identified True/False/Not Given, Yes/No/Not Given as the most challenging, where they had problems differentiating between Not Given and False.

True false not given or yes no not given is the part that makes me lose the most points because sometimes I get confused by filling in "no" or not "given" answers. (Student 7)

The other two common forms of task questions posing challenges for test takers were Gap Filling and Heading Matching. This was revealed in the following extracts in which the interviewed students also explained the reasons behind these difficult tasks.

I often have difficulty with the type of essay that fills in keywords with the passage, which requires

students to use their ability to analyze the information in the passage to find the right keywords. (Student 2)
The types of reading passages that I find the most difficult are diagram label completion, which are the types of reading that require me to find the correct answers to the graphs and map or paragraph summarizing the entire text. (Student 5)

I think it is the heading form – find the right heading because the number of headings for the article is always larger than the number of paragraphs and some headings seem quite similar so we have to consider very carefully to choose the right heading. (Student 9)

As for explanation of the strategies used, through the interviews, 90% of the students reported that these test-taking techniques were either taught directly to them by their teachers or developed personally by themselves but based on their teachers' instruction. Only one student (Student 7) maintained that her strategies were formed as a result of self-exploration of the Internet resources. Extract of her response was enclosed below.

For me, self-study is more effective. Because of the limited time with the teacher, the teacher will only be able to show you the basic ways you need to know such as scanning or skimming. Also, through self-study, practicing a lot of exercises, going on the internet to find more methods, will make you learn the dynamics of learning and be exposed to many different ways of many people everywhere. (Student 7)

However, most of the students shared a consensus that a combination of what teachers teach and personalized strategies was the most helpful. Teachers were believed to be experienced learners, so they could provide strategic tips and tricks regarding test-taking techniques. At the same time, each student needed to apply, examine, and see which specific strategies could fit their learning styles and work effectively for them. This point of view was reflected in the following excerpts.

I will combine both of these methods, as each of them has their own strengths. With the teachers' methods, they will help you get higher scores in classes and it can be used in any types of IELTS reading test. With your own method, you can do anything you feel comfortable with the test as it gives you more time to deal with the readings and less stress. (Student 4)

At the beginning of the process of learning IELTS, teacher's methods are more suitable and waste less time because I had not known more detailly and teacher can help me to recap all the basic information. Then, when I have enough background knowledge, I can practice doing tests and correct them to reflect my weaknesses to improve my reading skill by myself. So self-study may be more appropriate with me. (Student 1)

5. Discussion

The study found that Vietnamese EFL students faced various challenges in doing the IELTS reading test. This finding was in line with a number of previous studies (e.g. Chowdhury, 2009; Chalmers & Walkinshaw, 2014; and Alghail & Mahfood, 2016). The two areas that posed the biggest challenges were related to time management and vocabulary knowledge. The timing issues could be understood in terms of the difficulty level of the test. IELTS is an advanced proficiency test with demanding requirements, so to perform well, test takers have to work hard under high time pressure. Therefore, EFL students should be encouraged to acquaint themselves by more practice and experience with the test sub-components (e.g. reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Learning more academic words, both as active and passive vocabulary, is another suggestion. Development of specialized, subject-specific, and authentic lexical knowledge is also recommended, probably through engaging reading activities in class as well as applying extensive reading. Furthermore, students should be advised to lessen the use of dictionaries and an dependence on them.

The study also indicated that the Vietnamese EFL university students with some degree of familiarization with the IELTS had developed practical and efficient strategies for the test. While learning strategies are necessary in the learning process, specific testwise strategies make an essential addition (Hughes, 2003; Chalmers & Walkinshaw, 2014). The Vietnamese EFL students investigated in the study had shown to be strategic test takers in that they could apply strategies to handle general test problems, as well as specific problems related to texts and questions.

Sharing similar findings with the results of the study by Phi and Vu (2021), the current study identified the strategies that were most frequently employed by Vietnamese students. These strategies included those that involved guessing meaning in contexts to facilitate comprehension, and those that helped locate important information for answering questions. Other test wise techniques such as answering easy questions first, skimming for general ideas, scanning for specific details, and avoiding reading every word were also applied. It could be implied and in fact it was confirmed by the students' responses in the interviews that these practical strategies were developed during the learning process with the facilitation of teachers' instructions. Nevertheless, the fact that the students in this study showed a lower preference for techniques related to noticing passage structure and organization, noticing short sentences and topic sentences, etc. suggested that there is a need to explicitly teach these helpful strategies to the students.

The disparity of students' perception of particular strategies as seen in the means and standard deviations could be explained by the fact that not all strategies work effectively for every individual. This suggests that while

a variety of techniques should be introduced, students ought to select the ones that fit them personally. This is also evident from the students' answers in the interviews in which they expressed a unitary preference over a combination of teachers' guidance and self-internalization when it comes to effective test-taking strategies.

6. Conclusion

In short, reading is one of the important language skills and EFL learners need to be instructed with, highly aware of, and frequently apply strategies in their learning process. When it comes to testing situations, those strategies really need to be accompanied with additional test-taking techniques. Focusing on the IELTS reading test and attempting to incorporate interviews for detailed qualitative information, the current study is expected to provide insights into the limited literature about how Vietnamese EFL students experience this high stake test. The study found that while Vietnamese students had a considerable number of challenges, they could learn to be strategic testwise test takers, by applying helpful techniques including general, text-related, and question-related strategies. One pedagogical implication is that EFL reading teachers should incorporate teaching test techniques and reading strategies into their regular instruction. Also, EFL learners should be exposed more to practicing with IELTS tests to get themselves familiarized, and concentrate on lexical acquisition to be able to improve the two most challenging areas of this gatekeeper test: time management and vocabulary.

The number of participants in this study was relatively small (N=89). Therefore, generalizability of the results was limited. Also, this study had a restricted scope, specifically focusing on a homogeneous group of motivated and advanced English-majors in a higher education context. Further investigation is therefore needed, for example, in school settings with younger participants, because the IELTS is becoming popular and relevant for a variety of test takers.

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Appendix A. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:

Telephone number & Email:/.....

(Recall the most recent IELTS reading test that you did, and answer the questions below.)

A/ Problems with reading test

Mark X to the most appropriate level of your agreement with each statement.

(1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: strongly agree)

	Questions	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA
1	I didn't understand the instructions.					
2	While reading, I had to translate into Vietnamese.					
3	I had to skip some questions because I didn't understand the reading texts.					
4	The time for reading texts was not long enough.					
5	The lack of vocabulary was a problem in the test.					
6	I didn't have enough time to check my answers.					
7	I didn't understand the questions.					
8	Having understood the questions, I was still unable to find the answers.					

B/ Reading test-taking strategies

Mark X to the most appropriate level of your agreement with the statement.

(1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: strongly agree)

	Questions	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA
1	I had a purpose of reading to answer the question only.					
2	I managed my time well.					
3	I made predictions about what I was going to read by looking at any pictures with the text and bold word in title.					
4	I underlined key words in the questions.					
5	I highlighted important information as I read the text.					
6	I looked for key words in the questions and words or phrases with similar and related meanings in the texts; I looked for a paraphrase of each statement.					

	Questions	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA
7	I scanned quickly for numbers, names, dates and words around them to get the answers.					
8	I remembered that the questions followed the order of the passage.					
9	I didn't try to read every word.					
10	I tried to summarize after I read.					
11	I read the first sentence of each paragraph for the main idea.					
12	I looked for how the text was organized and ignored details.					
13	I tried to predict where the author's points were leading.					
14	I got the gist of each paragraph.					
15	I paid special attention to the first part of the passage.					
16	I found short sentences within paragraphs.					
17	I formed ideas about the text while reading.					
18	I related what I read to what I already knew.					
19	I looked for context clues for the meaning of unfamiliar or difficult words.					
20	I answered the questions I knew first.					
21	I avoided answers that were too specific or too broad.					
22	I always looked for answers that sounded consistent with the idea in the text.					
23	I guessed the meaning of any word in the stem I did not know.					
24	I used prior knowledge to answer questions.					
25	I guessed if I could not find the answer.					
26	I made sure I found evidence in the text to answer the question; I tried not to use what I thought was true.					

Appendix B. Questions for Interviews

1. In your opinion, what difficulties do you often face while learning for the IELTS reading test?
2. What types of tasks do you usually struggle with when taking the IELTS reading test?
3. When taking the IELTS reading test, do you apply the methods that you have learned in class or just follow your intuition?
4. How do the reading strategies you learned in class make your test performance more efficient?
5. Which strategies are more effective? The ones learned in class or the ones you developed yourself?

About the Authors

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Nguyen Thi Bich Nhi has been working as a lecturer at Can Tho University for 20 years. She has taught various courses in English for different kinds of learners. Currently, she is a Ph.D student at Can Tho University, Vietnam. She is a promising new researcher whose expertise develops in the field of English language education. Her current research focuses on exploring English as a foreign language learner development, with a specific emphasis on English as a foreign language learner mindsets in Vietnamese educational setting.

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