

Test-taking Strategies Used by Successful Iranian Male and Female University Entrance Exam EFL Applicants

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Abstract

This study aimed at identifying the most frequent test-taking strategies used by successful Iranian male and female university entrance exam EFL applicants. To this end, 150 English major male and female freshman students who got admission to three reputable state universities of Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tehran were selected conveniently and purposively. The model used in this study was developed by Barati (2005) consisting of planning, monitoring, evaluation, and test-wisness strategies. After selecting the participants, the modified questionnaire developed based on Barati's test-taking strategy taxonomy was distributed among the participants. Based on the analysis of results, it was revealed that the EFL learners made frequent use of planning, monitoring, evaluation, and test-wisness strategies, but only the level of use of planning and monitoring strategies reached statistical significance. Moreover, male and female EFL learners were only significantly different in their use of evaluation strategies, but in terms of using planning, monitoring, and test-wisness strategies, males and females were not significantly different from one another. The findings of the study bear useful implications for EFL learners, teachers, materials designers, and test constructors.

Keywords: Test-taking strategies, University Entrance Exam, high-stake tests, Iranian freshman EFL students

Introduction

Testing plays a pivotal role in the education process to enhance and strengthen ongoing learning, and has a significant impact on the quality of pedagogy (Cowie & Bell, 1999). As it was well-stated by Pierce, (2002; cited in Kırmızı & Kömeç, 2016), testing is essentially incorporated in any learning and teaching activity. It not only provides vital information for pedagogical decisions which are necessary for a day-to-day course of actions taken by all educational stakeholders and paves the ground for diagnosing learners' weak and strong points related to classroom methodology, but also presents particular feedback to the learners boosting the quality of both learning and teaching. Pierce (2002) further added that immediate feedback is also provided to the instructors forming and regulating their teaching practices according to the learning styles of their learners. Therefore, tests, various types of exams and evaluation models are crucial instruments, employed to measure the learning process.

While as Alderson and Wall (1993) argued, testing reflects what actually happens in classrooms, there is some convincing evidence showing that tests, especially high-stake ones,

have powerful impacts on language teaching and learning that goes on within the classroom as well. Moreover, as Shohamy (1993) noted high-stake tests and public examinations influence the attitude, behavior, and motivation of the teachers and learners. Despite the fact that all tests whether high or low stakes might be of potential effects on teaching and learning processes, the term wash back seems to be associated primarily with high-stake tests, which are mainly employed for making important decisions (Hughes, 2003; Watanabe, 1996; Shohamy, 1993). This point can be the case with the University Entrance Examination (UEE) in Iran, as it serves as a high-stake selection test and is applied for making a decisive educational decision about the test takers. University Entrance Examination (UEE) in Iran as a nationwide high-stake test could affect many aspects of the education system but the nature of its impact on the English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' curricular planning and instruction techniques is not clear. The inspiration and significant motive behind this research project is that some UEE candidates are more successful than others even those who tried hard and prepared themselves for such an exam for months. One reason striking the mind of the researcher was the appropriate use of test taking strategies that might come to the assistance of successful UEE candidates in Iran.

Cohen (2007) defined test-taking strategies as the kind of strategies which respondents use at the time of completing language tests. In fact, test-taking strategies are consciously “selected processes that the respondents use for dealing with both language issues and the item-response demands in the test-taking tasks at hand” (p. 308). In addition, Cohen (1998a), influenced by Fransson's (1984, p. 64) assertion that “test takers may not proceed via the text but rather around it”, suggests that test-taking strategies consist of language use and test-wiseness strategies. He also maintains while language-use strategies may be determined by the learners' proficiency in the language under assessment, test-wiseness strategies may depend on the test takers' knowledge of how to take a test.

Barati (2005) provided a model for test-taking strategies consisting of four major categories presented below:

Planning :test-takers' previewing or over-viewing tasks in order to determine what actions to be done (advanced organization, directed attention and self-management).

Monitoring: a response to ambiguity in comprehending the language (checking comprehension, accuracy and/or appropriateness of action while it is taking place).

Evaluation: Checking comprehension after completion of a receptive language activity, or evaluating language production after it has taken place.

Test-Wiseness: Strategies related to the knowledge of how to take the test.

In the present study, Barati's model was used to probe into the appropriate test taking strategies which have been used by successful UEE candidates on English section of this important high-stake test in Iran.

A number of studies have been conducted on test-taking strategies (e.g. Anderson, Bachman, Perkins & Cohen 1991; Barati, 2005; Cohen, 2010, Block 1992; Phakiti 2003; 2008; Purpura 1998;). Barati (2005) for instance assessed test-taking strategies in adult EFL learners. In that study, he employed quantitative and qualitative research designs to examine the effect of test-taking strategies on the EFL learners ' reading test performance. The results showed significant effect of test-taking strategies on the reading skills test performance of all ability

groups who participated in that study. Barati, however, suggested that strategies did not always have positive effects on the test takers' performance but rather there were cases where they affected the test results significantly negatively (e.g. test wiseness). The findings of that study also indicated that using test-wiseness strategies were significantly employed by less successful test-takers more frequently than other ability groups.

In another study, Salehi (2011) investigated test-taking strategies of 40 Iranian test-takers in the reading section of University of Tehran English Proficiency Test. The purpose was to see if there was any concordance between the type of strategies and the item types in the reading comprehension passages. For instance, if the strategy of guessing was used on inference items, this would put the validity of the item at risk because there was a mismatch between the purposes of test-makers and those of test-takers. The findings of that study revealed that for most item types the expected strategies were used.

In a more recent study, Kashkouli, Barati, and Nejad Ansari (2015) examined the test-taking strategies employed to answer the Iranian National University Entrance Exam for MA in TEFL. The findings demonstrated that from among all participants, the intermediate group used test-taking strategies more than others. The results also showed that monitoring and evaluation were used significantly more than other strategies. Those researchers came to the result that test-takers relied more on their academic reading skills for both specific and general comprehension of the texts rather than on their background knowledge or test-wiseness strategies.

To achieve the purposes of this study, the following research questions were posed:

Q1. What are the most frequently used EFL test taking strategies by successful Iranian university entrance exam applicants?

Q2. Does gender have any significant impact on EFL test-taking strategies used by Iranian university entrance exam applicants?

Methodology

Participants

The major assumption in this study was that those who got admission to major state universities in Iran were successful university entrance exam applicants, thus, the researchers managed to meet those EFL students who have been accepted in three reputable state universities of Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tehran. These universities were selected because they needed a higher rank in the exam to enter. The sampling was purposive convenience method. It was purposive in that those students who got accepted in the state universities were selected. It is considered as convenience for the reason that only those who were willing to take part in the study were included. The participants were 150 English major male and female freshman students ranging in age from 18 to 22 years old. Freshman EFL students were selected due to the fact that they have recently taken the UEE and they had a fresh mind on the test taking strategies utilized.

Model of Extracting Test-taking Strategies

The model used in this study was developed by Barati (2005). This model was chosen due to the fact that it has been confirmed in the relevant literature and it included some practical test-taking strategies enumerated below. The taxonomy of test-taking strategies put forward in this model is illustrated below:

Planning: test-takers' previewing or overviewing tasks in order to determine what actions to be taken (Phakiti, 2003), advanced organization, directed attention and self-management.

Monitoring: a response to ambiguity in comprehending the language (Anderson, 1983), checking comprehension, accuracy and/or appropriateness of action while it is taking place.

Evaluation: Checking comprehension after completion of a receptive language activity, or evaluating language production after it has taken place (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Test-Wisness: Strategies related to the knowledge of how to take the test (Cohen, 2013). Test-Wisness Strategies are related to the knowledge of how to take the test (Cohen, 2013).

Instruments

The following two instruments were used for the purpose of collecting the required data:

Test-taking Strategy Questionnaire

A test-taking strategy questionnaire was developed based on Barati's (2005) taxonomy. This questionnaire consisted of 27 items each of which presented a statement about the use of one strategy. According to Barati (2005), from the total of 27 items, 6 items asked for planning strategies, 13 items asked about test takers' use of monitoring strategies, 4 items addressed evaluation strategies, and 4 items focused on test-wisness strategy. The test-taking strategy questionnaire designed by Barati was translated into Persian to be in the participants' native language and avoid any ambiguity. In this instrument the Likert scale was used: 1 = never; 2 = sometimes; 3 = often; 4 = usually, and 5 = always. The participants were asked to mark the questionnaire in a way that it indicated how frequently they used each strategy. Because the original model was basically focusing on reading strategies, some modifications were made to suit various skills tested in UEE. The reliability of the translated and modified questionnaire was estimated in a pilot study on 10 English students using Cronbach alpha formula ($r=0.72$) and the validity was checked with three experts in the field. It is worth mentioning that the reliability and validity of the English version were reported by Barati. To make sure about the appropriateness of translation, back translation technique was used.

Procedure

To achieve the purposes of the study, 150 English major freshman students accepted in Universities of Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz were selected conveniently and purposefully. Because one variable of the study was gender, the participants were both male and female. After briefing the participants about the objectives of the study, the modified questionnaire developed based on Barati's (2005) test-taking strategy taxonomy was distributed among them. It must be noted that some received the questionnaire in a face to face meeting, but due to the difficulty of meeting all, the majority were sent the questionnaire via email.

Results

For the ease of presentation, the following tables address the four parts of the questionnaire (planning, monitoring, evaluation, and test-wisness strategies) separately. Table 1 presents the results for EFL learners' responses regarding the use of planning strategies. Since each choice in this Likert-scale questionnaire had a point (*Always* = 5, *Usually* = 4, *Often* = 3, *Sometimes* = 2, and *Never* = 1), the mean score of each questionnaire item was compared with the average score of the choices (that is 3.00). This would mean that if the mean score of a questionnaire item was less than 3.00, the respondents tended to disagree with that statement. On the other hand, a mean score greater than 3.00 indicated the respondents' inclination to agree with that item.

Table 1. *EFL Learners' Use of Planning Strategies*

No	Items	Alwa ys	Usual ly	Ofte n	Sometim es	Neve r	Mean
1	I was aware of the need to plan a course of action.	32	63	26	18	11	3.58
2	Before beginning the test, I tried to identify easy and difficult parts of the test.	44	48	31	19	8	3.67
3	Before I started the test I decided to leave difficult questions for later.	51	68	19	7	5	4.02
4	I looked for the points for each sub-test before starting the test.	27	44	56	21	2	3.48
5	I looked for the sub-tests which I thought were more important before starting the test.	34	49	34	18	15	3.46
6	I read the test items before reading the texts in each section to search for their answers in the text.	33	46	31	29	11	3.40

The surveyed EFL learners agreed most with items # 3 ($M = 4.02$) and 2 ($M = 3.67$), which stated that before they started the test, they identified the easy and difficult parts of the test and decided to leave difficult questions for later. They also agreed with all the other items related to planning strategies: Through Items # 1 ($M = 3.58$), 4 ($M = 3.48$), 5 ($M = 3.46$), and 6 ($M = 3.40$) they concurred respectively that (a) they were aware of the need to have a plan, (b) they looked for the points for each sub-test before starting the test, (c) they looked for sub-tests that they thought were more important before starting the test, and (d) they read test items before reading the text in each section to search for their answers in the text. EFL learners' use of test-taking strategies pertinent to the use of monitoring strategies is presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2. *EFL Learners' Use of Monitoring Strategies*

No	Items	Alwa ys	Usual ly	Ofte n	Sometim es	Neve r	Mean
7	I answered shorter text's items before longer ones.	32	34	28	33	23	3.12
8	Before answering the items, I planned how to complete the test and followed my plan throughout.	30	51	36	21	12	3.44
9	I made short notes and underlined keywords while completing the test.	38	52	33	16	11	3.60
10	I translated the questions and	23	39	22	32	34	2.90

	responses into Persian.							
11	I spent more time on difficult questions.	39	41	24	33	13	3.40	
12	I read the questions and choices several times.	26	39	35	27	23	3.12	
13	I thought carefully about the meaning of the test items before answering them.	38	56	39	17	0	3.76	
14	I used my background knowledge to answer the questions.	31	54	39	15	11	3.52	
15	During the test, I was well aware of what I was doing and how I was doing it.	37	53	33	16	11	3.59	
16	I checked my answers to pervious questions while completing the test.	39	48	29	27	7	3.59	
17	I corrected my mistakes immediatly after I found them.	59	59	32	0	0	4.18	
18	To find clues to the responses I did not know, I asked the tutor for clarification.	0	11	81	22	36	2.44	
19	At any time during the test, I was aware of how much of the test remained to be completed.	39	57	28	19	7	3.68	

All the mean scores in Table 2 (except for items # 10, $M = 2.90$ and # 18, $M = 2.44$) received mean scores above the average value of the choices, which shows that the surveyed EFL learners agreed with all the propositions in the items of this part of the questionnaire (except for items # 10 and 18). Items # 17, 13, 19, and 9 with the mean scores of 4.18, 3.76, 3.68, and 3.60 had the highest mean scores in this questionnaire section. Through these four items, the learners expressed that (a) they corrected their mistakes immediately after they found them, (b) they carefully thought about the meanings of questions before answering them, (c) anytime during the test, they kept track of time and of how much of the test remained to be completed, and (d) they made short notes and underlined keywords while completing the test. Items # 10 and 18, with which the learners disagreed stated that (a) they translated the questions and their choices into Persian, and (b) they asked the tutor/proctor to find clues to the responses they did not know. The EFL learners' responses to the evaluation strategies section of the questionnaire are reproduced in the following table (Table 3):

Table 3. *EFL Learners' Use of Evaluation Strategies*

No	Items	Alwa ys	Usual ly	Ofte n	Someti mes	Neve r	Mean
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20	I tried to understand the questions very well before attempting to answer them.	49	66	35	0	0	4.09
21	I answered some items by finding clues in other items.	42	53	28	19	8	3.68
22	If no choice (in multiple-choice items) appeared correct to me, I had a pre-determined choice to mark.	17	24	44	39	26	2.78
23	I made sure I understood what had to be done and how I was to do it.	34	64	43	9	0	3.82

EFL learners expressed their agreement with three of the propositions in Table 3, where item # 20 ($M = 4.09$) had the largest mean score. In this item, the learners concurred that they tried to understand the questions very well before attempting to answer them. On the other hand, they disagreed with item # 22 ($M = 2.78$), which said that the learners had a pre-determined choice to mark in case no choice appeared correct to them. Table 4 demonstrates the results for the learners' use of test-wiseness strategies:

Table 4. *EFL Learners' Use of Test-wiseness Strategies*

No	Items	Alwa ys	Usual ly	Ofte n	Someti mes	Neve r	Mean
24	I carefully watched my progress to complete the test on time.	35	56	42	17	0	3.72
25	I checked the accuracy of my responses as I progressed through the test.	37	52	45	16	0	3.73
26	At the end of the test, I answered the unanswered items randomly (without referring to the questions).	0	0	59	47	44	2.10
27	I carefully checked my answers before submitting the test.	54	67	29	0	0	4.16

The EFL learners were found to disagree with item # 26 ($M = 2.10$), which stated that they answered the unanswered items randomly at the end of the test, without referring to the question items. On the other hand, they agreed that they carefully checked their answers before submitting the test (item # 27, $M = 4.16$), they checked the accuracy of their responses as they progressed through the test (item # 25, $M = 3.73$), and they carefully watched their progress to complete the test on time (item # 24, $M = 3.72$).

As the last step in analyzing the EFL learners' responses to the questionnaire, the researchers found for which types of test-taking strategies, on the whole, the learners expressed their agreement, and whether their agreement reached a statistically significant level or not. Thus,

the mean scores for the questionnaire sections above were used to run a series of one-sample t tests in SPSS, the results of which are in view in Table 5:

Table 5. *One-Sample t Test Results for Learners' Test-taking Strategies*

	Test Value = 3				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	T	df	Mean	$Sig.$ (2-tailed)	Lower	Upper
Planning	6.51	5	3.60	.00	.36	.83
Monitoring	3.40	12	3.41	.00	.14	.67
Evaluation	2.08	3	3.59	.12	-.31	1.49
Test-wiseness	.94	3	3.42	.41	-1.01	1.87

The overall mean scores for each of the questionnaire sections are shown in Table 5. All these overall mean scores are larger than average, which shows that EFL learners agreed that they used planning, monitoring, evaluation, and test-wiseness strategies on the whole. For planning and monitoring strategies, the learners' levels of agreement reached statistical significance as the p value under the $Sig.$ (2-tailed) column for these two types of test-taking strategies were less than the alpha level of significance ($p < .05$). However, for evaluation and test-wiseness strategies, although the learners expressed and agreed that they used them, their levels of agreement were not of statistical significance since the p values corresponding to evaluation ($p = .12$) and test-wiseness ($p = .41$) were found to be larger than the significance level.

Discussion

In order to answer the first research question of the study, the modified version of Barati's (2005) test taking strategies questionnaire was distributed among the University freshmen who recently took the UEE and got admission to state universities. As it was mentioned before there were four sections in the questionnaire addressing planning, monitoring, evaluation, and test-wiseness strategies.

Concerning the first section, namely, planning strategies, most of the students believed that the applicants need to be familiar with planning strategies in the sense that they need to take a glance at different parts of the test, separate easy items from the difficult ones and manage the time to handle simple items first and deal with the more complicated ones later. Another helpful planning strategy favored by the students was reviewing the test items before reading the passages in the reading comprehension part of the EFL test. This would orient the test takers towards the relevant and significant parts of the passage helping them not to waste time reading redundant and irrelevant parts of the text. In sum, most of the successful applicants were of the idea that without planning for the test the final results would not be promising.

The second type of strategies included in the questionnaire was related to monitoring the test. Like the previous section, the majority had the idea that during the test, considering time limitations, the responses need to be reviewed and whenever there is a problem it has to be removed immediately, otherwise, neither the time nor the complexity of the items would allow the applicant to get back and deal with wrong answers. One very significant point highlighted by the applicants was that meaning-focused strategies work better than form-focused ones. Thus, it

is much more logical to understand the meaning of the items rather than be satisfied with the form and try to answer based on clues related to linguistic forms. Another intriguing and practical monitoring strategy mentioned by the respondents was item-response management in the sense that while one is engaged in answering different parts of the test, an eye should be on the rest of the test. This way the applicant can manage not to lose items whose answers are known. The students also believed that they need to be aware of different sections of the test meaning that during exam preparation they have to check previous year's similar tests to be cognizant of different sections so that at the time of the test they go through items with open eyes.

As it was highlighted in the theories of language learning like the one put forward by Ausubel in 1963, learning is enhanced when new items are meaningfully related to old ones. This is in line with the effectiveness of background knowledge, and many applicants claimed that relevant background knowledge was an asset in this regard. Some other strategies that were all helpful in monitoring the test were taking notes during the test. They stated that the notes help them a lot to understand the gist of ideas and more importantly manage the time. Barati (2005), however, suggested that strategies did not always have positive effects on the test takers' performance but rather there were cases where they affected the test results significantly negatively. A case in point in this study is that almost all the successful UEE applicants believed that translation of the questions and their choices into Persian would not be useful at all and must be seriously avoided.

Use of Evaluation Strategies formed the third section of the questionnaire completed by successful UEE applicants. The analysis of the responses revealed that understanding the questions well before trying to answer them was the most favored evaluation strategy. This strategy indicates that most of the items are conceptual and they need to be understood well before being answered. One practical strategy which is in most cases helpful is detecting some clues in other items to answer a very specific one. Smart students are aware of this interesting strategy and have a keen eye in detecting clues.

The last part of the questionnaire was devoted to test-wiseness strategies which is also a practical and useful type of strategies. The successful respondents unanimously checked their answers and the way they went through the test before delivering their papers. They believed that final check out can reveal many points that have been left unnoticed. Checking accuracy of responses and taking track of one's progress during the test were also mentioned by the students. They believed that most of the unsuccessful test takers fail to apply such strategies properly. Some may be aware of them, but appropriate application is a different story.

Comparing the various strategies included in the questionnaire using one-sample t-test, one can realize that planning and monitoring strategies were considered as more practical and useful than evaluation and test-wiseness strategies. This is most probably due to the fact that first steps in understanding and answering the questions are the most vital ones. It is very much similar to the way buildings are constructed. Each structure needs to be planned first to have a robust foundation. Then each step of construction should be monitored professionally before the project comes to an end. The process of taking test seems to be similar to building constructions, they need to be planned properly in initial steps and then accurately monitored to be a success at the end.

The findings of the study were in line with the majority of the ones reported in literature. A case in point is the study done by Kashkouli, et.al. (2015). They examined the test-taking strategies employed to answer the Iranian National University Entrance Exam for MA in TEFL. The findings revealed that test taking strategies were used by different groups of test takers. Those researchers came to the result that test-takers relied more on their academic reading skills

for both specific and general comprehension of the texts rather than on their background knowledge or test-wiseness strategies.

Khoshsima and Mousaei (2018) explored the effect of strategy teaching- namely wash-back effect on reading section of academic IELTS on intermediate learners in Iran. Besides, learners' attitude toward the strategy teaching was investigated as well. According to the descriptive statistics and t-test results, those learners who received strategy teaching outperformed those who had not received strategy teaching in reading section of IELTS.

Another study conducted by Nikneshan and Barati (2019) on test-taking strategies and EFL learners' performance on the reading sub-test of Iranian Universities PhD entrance exam demonstrated that monitoring and evaluation strategies were used significantly more than other strategies by all ability groups. Moreover, the results indicated that the high ability group of test takers were more successful compared with others in maneuvering among different types of strategies.

In order to answer the second question of the study comparing the four test taking strategies using independent samples t test, the obtained results indicated that only male and female students were statistically different in using evaluation test taking strategies, and regarding the other strategies, no significant difference has been explored. Thus, it can be claimed that, no matter whether the test takers are male or female, the successful ones use almost the same types of test taking strategies.

A review of previous studies on gender differences in relation to test taking strategies uncovered mixed paradoxical results. As instances of the studies whose results have been in line with the present one, the research conducted by Baldige (2014) on gender differences in using guessing strategies can be mentioned. He found few statistically significant differences between the genders, and no consistent differences across test forms for any of the strategies. The similarity between males and females with regard to the frequency of use of various strategies (correlations of the rank order of frequency of use) was generally very strong.

Another study whose results were consistent with this study was done by Powers (1995). In his study on gender differences in test-taking strategies few relatively small (and often inconsistent) differences between male and female test takers were detected. They concluded that males and females employed quite similar approaches to standardized test taking.

There are also some studies whose results are not in line with those of the current research. For example, Wei (2009) conducted research into gender differences in reading comprehension. The findings presented that female learners preferred to utilize top down strategies, while male learners tended to use bottom-up strategies in reading. In Bacon's (1992) study, the results demonstrated that males used more translation strategies than females. Besides, Zoubir-Shaw and Oxford (1995) found that there was a significant difference between the use of guessing and contextualization by male and female learners. Yang (1999) also found that female learners had more strategy awareness than male learners.

Despite the fact that controversial results have been obtained from this study and similar previous ones, no one can deny the effect of gender on various aspects of language education including test taking strategy. What can be inferred lastly from the analysis of the results and comparisons made is that this line of research is still in its infancy and more profound investigations are required to better understand about the role of gender in language studies in general and test taking strategies in particular.

Conclusion

Iran UEE, most commonly called Konkour, is considered a very important high-stake test. A large number of young tertiary education enthusiasts compete with each other each year to manage their way to state universities. Some are successful and many are not. Test taking strategies as important elements shaping this success might be an asset in this regard. Thus, this study set out to uncover the most frequently used test taking strategies utilized by successful UEE applicants who got admission to reputable state universities in Iran. Gender as one of effective factors in foreign language studies was also examined in the research. The findings unearthed that test taking strategies play a significant role in success of UEE applicants. The more they are cognizant of the proper use of such strategies, the better they will be able to cope with complexities of such exams.

However, gender did not represent a significant effect on the proper use of test taking strategies. Despite the fact that there have always been differences between males and females in terms of language learning, they are in the same arena to enter universities. Therefore, they have to try to be familiar with such strategies in the same way. Reconsidering the results, one might realize that the members of both gender groups attempted in the same way to handle this important high stake test. The enthusiastic applicants should know what effective strategies in UEE are and how to apply them properly. The teachers also need to be familiar with such strategies and also update themselves regarding the recent investigations targeting such strategies. They have to teach the strategies to the students in high schools preparing them for the competition. One important point inferred from the findings of this study is that gender does not play a significant role in utilizing and learning these strategies. This is an important point that teachers need to notice as they train their learners.

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