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Research Paper

Test-taking Techniques and the Reading Performance of IELTS Test-Takers across Proficiency Levels: Effects and Percepts

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Abstract
In spite of numerous extant studies on IELTS test-taking techniques, insufficient research has examined the effect of such techniques on reading performance among IELTS test-takers across proficiency levels. Therefore, this study, adopting an explanatory mixed-methods design, investigated the potential effect of test-taking techniques on IELTS reading scores gained by B1 and B2 level learners. The sample comprised 62 B1-level and 63 B2-level learners. The participants were placed into four groups consisting of two experimental and two control groups. In the two experimental groups, 17 reading test-taking techniques were explicitly taught and practiced. The four groups took reading pretest and posttest before and after the treatment. Ultimately, 15 participants from each experimental group partook in semi-structured interviews. The quantitative analysis showed the significant effect of teaching test-taking techniques on both B1 and B2-level learners' reading performance scores with the B1-level learners outperforming their B2-level counterparts. As for the qualitative data analysis, the results yielded eight themes for B1-level learners and seven themes for B2-level learners. Also, the results indicated that B1-level learners earned a notably higher number theme instances than B2-level learners. The results are discussed and implications for language learning, teaching, and testing are provided.

Keywords: IELTS, Test-taking techniques, Reading, Perceptions

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علی‌رغم مطالعات متعدد موجود در مورد تکنیک‌های آزمون آیلتس، تحقیقات ناکافی تأثیر چنین تکنیک‌هایی را بر عملکرد خواندن در بین شرکت‌کنندگان در آزمون آیلتس در سطوح مهارت مورد بررسی قرار داده است. بنابراین، این مطالعه با اتخاذ یک طرح ترکیبی توضیحی، تأثیر بالقوه تکنیک‌های تست‌زنی را بر نمرات خواندن آیلتس کسب‌شده توسط زبان‌آموزان سطوح B1 و B2 بررسی کرد. نمونه شامل ۶۲ زبان آموز سطح B1 و ۶۳ زبان آموز در سطح B2 بود. شرکت کنندگان در چهار گروه شامل دو گروه آزمایش و دو گروه کنترل قرار گرفتند. در دو گروه آزمایشی، ۱۷ تکنیک آزمون خواندن به طور صریح آموزش داده شد و تمرین شد. چهار گروه قبل و بعد از درمان از پیش آزمون و پس آزمون خواندن استفاده کردند. در نهایت، ۱۵ شرکت‌کننده از هر گروه آزمایشی در مصاحبه‌های نیمه ساختاریافته شرکت کردند. تجزیه و تحلیل کمی تأثیر معنی‌دار آموزش تکنیک‌های تست‌زنی را بر نمرات عملکرد خواندن زبان‌آموزان سطح B1 و B2 نشان داد، در حالی که زبان‌آموزان سطح B1 از همتایان سطح B2 خود بهتر عمل کردند. در مورد تجزیه و تحلیل داده های کیفی، نتایج هشت موضوع را برای زبان آموزان سطح B1 و هفت موضوع را برای زبان آموزان سطح B2 به دست آورد. همچنین، نتایج نشان داد که فراگیران سطح B1 تعداد نمونه های موضوعی به طور قابل توجهی بالاتری نسبت به فراگیران سطح B2 کسب کردند. نتایج مورد بحث قرار گرفته و مفاهیم برای یادگیری زبان، آموزش و تست ارائه شده است.

کلیدواژه ها: آیلتس، تکنیک های تست زنی، ریدینگ، ادراک

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Introduction

The IELTS has many applications, including admission to higher education institutes, immigration purposes, and employment in English-speaking countries (Gagen & Faez, 2024; Hoang, 2019; Ma & Chong, 2022; Read, 2022). In today's testing industry, the IELTS has gained an outstanding status as it is known as a reliable and valid measure of English language proficiency (Hashemi & Daneshfar, 2018; Pearson, 2021; Schoepp, 2018). The IELTS test is aimed at assessing the four language skills to be used in authentic contexts by the L2 users (Moore & Morton, 1999; Shakibaei, 2017). Consequently, such a test is deemed as a crucial tool for international students who seek to study in English-speaking countries, as well as for the professionals who plan to find jobs in English-speaking settings (Chalhoub-Deville & Turner, 2000; Pearson, 2019). Moreover, the IELTS results can be used as a standard measure of language proficiency for research purposes and international comparisons (Moore & Morton, 2005; Moore et al., 2012). Specifically, the reading section measures the extent to which test-takers are able to comprehend English in academic and social contexts (Moore et al., 2012; Nosrati, 2015). However, as reported by a multitude of IELTS test-takers, they encounter difficulties achieving their desired scores, particularly, on the reading section (Khoshsima et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2012; Mousavi et al. 2014; Nosrati, 2015). This can, in part, be attributed to a lack of knowledge and practice in test-taking techniques on the part of learners (Chalmers, J., & Walkinshaw, 2014; Yathip & Chanyoo, 2022). Test-taking techniques are defined as the strategies that make it easier for test-takers to manage their time, figure out the instructions, and provide effective responses to the questions (Cohen, 2012; Estaji & Banitalebi, 2023).

The related literature on IELTS test-taking preparation shows studies conducted on instructors' challenges and the instruction strategies related to IELTS (Roza, 2019), various strategies used by IELTS repeaters (Estaji & Banitalebi, 2023), and contributions to subsequent academic study (Dang & Dang, 2021). Moreover, some studies have explored test-taking techniques with regard to IELTS reading (e.g., Khoshsima et al., 2018; Mousavi et al., 2014; Nosrati, 2015). However, a review of such investigations portrays that the reading component of the IELTS has been examined with a focus on test preparation and test performance. Despite the multiple studies previously carried out on test-taking techniques and IELTS test takers' reading performance, few, if any, empirical investigations have explored the effect of test-taking techniques on the IELTS test-takers' reading performance across proficiency levels. Moreover, few, if any of the extant empirical studies have adopted a mixed-methods explanatory design.

The present study, in an attempt to fill the lacuna in the available literature probed into the impact of test-taking techniques on the IELTS test-takers' reading performance across proficiency levels. The findings of this study can provide important insights for the IELTS teachers and test-takers thereby understanding the important role of test-taking techniques, as well as their contributions to improving IELTS test takers' scores by applying such techniques. Moreover, this study sheds light on how different proficiency levels entail taking different approaches to the teaching of test-taking techniques. Overall, this study makes significant contributions to the enhancement of language testing practices, as well as the improvement of L2 learners' reading performance in general and their reading performance on the IELTS test in particular.

Literature Review

The IELTS Reading Section

The IELTS reading section is designed to assess a range of reading skills through various sub-sections. It consists of three parts, each containing a different type of text, including descriptive, factual, and analytical passages (Yathip & Chanyoo, 2022). These texts are sourced from books,

journals, magazines, and newspapers, reflecting academic and general interest topics (Moore et al., 2012). The section evaluates comprehension through tasks such as multiple-choice questions, identifying information, matching headings, and completing sentences (Chalmers & Walkinshaw, 2014). These tasks test abilities like understanding main ideas, locating specific details, and distinguishing between opinions and facts (Nosrati, 2015). The reading section's format is intended to mirror real-world reading scenarios, thereby assessing candidates' readiness for academic environments (Mousavi et al., 2014). By requiring efficient reading and information synthesis, the IELTS reading test effectively evaluates a candidate's ability to comprehend and interpret written English (Khoshsima et al., 2018).

The IELTS reading section has been extensively analyzed in the literature, highlighting various aspects that impact learners' performance. Yathip and Chanyoo (2022) have discussed the distinctive characteristics of IELTS reading comprehension, providing insights for enhancing EFL reading instruction. Chalmers and Walkinshaw (2014) explored the prevalence and impact of reading strategies on IELTS outcomes, emphasizing their significance in improving test performance. Similarly, Khoshsima et al. (2018) investigated the influence of teaching test-taking strategies on intermediate learners, revealing positive attitudes and improved results in the reading section. Moore et al. (2012) examined the construct validity of the IELTS academic reading test by comparing its requirements with those of university studies, finding significant parallels that justify its academic relevance. Mousavi et al. (2014) focused on the effects of test preparation, noting that targeted preparation can enhance performance in both IELTS and TOEFL iBT reading tests. Additionally, Nosrati's (2015) findings shed light on the strategies employed in the general training IELTS reading test, underscoring the importance of strategic approaches in achieving success. The results of these studies highlight the critical role of effective strategies and preparation in optimizing IELTS reading performance.

Test Taking Techniques

Test-taking techniques have to do with the strategies whereby learners know the test format, test content, test instructions; moreover, they are provided with a chance to answer the question items efficiently and effectively (Cohen, 2011). Some examples of such techniques for reading are using skimming and scanning, knowing how to answer different question types, matching sections of the text with the test questions, managing stress by acknowledging that the whole text does not need to be understood, identifying synonyms that match the meaning between the question and the text, and using the first two sentences of a paragraph to identify its main idea (Cohen, 2011, 2012; Estaji & Banitalebi, 2022, 2023). These techniques can be essential for standardized tests like IELTS, whose format and content are predictable. As a result, the instruction of test-taking techniques can improve test-takers' performance and also reduce their anxiety (Golchi, 2012; Winke & Lim, 2014).

Some investigations have sought to investigate the effect of test preparation on test performance. For example, Ostovar-Namaghi (2016) conducted a study to probe the possible contribution that using test taking strategies can make to increasing EFL learners' listening proficiency gains. The analysis of the results revealed that the learners who had undergone instruction on test-taking strategy significantly performed better than those who had not. Allen (2016) examined the occurrence of washback to the learner from the IELTS test in the Japanese tertiary context. The study focused on washback upon learners' test preparation strategies and score gains. The findings showed that the participants who reported intense preparedness for the test obtained better scores on listening and speaking. Nguyen (2007) studied the impact of test preparation on the IELTS and TOEFL iBT listening tests, with the results showing the positive effect of test preparation on both tests. A study was conducted by Trenkic and Hu (2021) on the effect of coaching on IELTS performance, with the results showing the effectiveness of coaching

on the IELTS scores. The studies previously conducted (e.g., Golchi, 2012; Winke & Lim, 2014) have also yielded evidence that there is a relation between test-taking strategies and listening anxiety. Tavakoli et al. (2012) examined if there is any correlation between the learners' metacognitive awareness and their scores on the listening section of IELTS. The results showed a positive relationship between metacognitive awareness and test-takers' IELTS listening scores.

Proficiency Levels and L2 Learning

According to Grant and Ginther (2000), studies have examined the relation between proficiency level, as an important variable associated with various dimensions of L2 learning and syntactic complexity measures (Ortega, 2003). To this end, they have used computer-tagged linguistic features, providing diverse measures for several writing proficiency levels (Verspoor et al., 2012), motives and foreign language enjoyment (Zhang et al., 2020), the role of gender in writing and writing fluency (Al-Saadi, 2020), socioeconomic status (SES) in regard to English-medium instruction (EMI) (Muttaqin et al., 2022), collective EFL storytelling tasks (Huang et al., 2017), students' willingness to engage in interaction with the peers (Dao & McDonough, 2018), and student engagement with teacher written feedback (Cheng & Liu, 2022). However, a review of literature shows a lack of studies investigating the contribution of test-taking techniques to improving learners' performance on the IELTS reading section.

Given the foregoing discussion, the literature provides ample evidence that the instruction of test-taking techniques enhances IELTS test-takers' reading performance, reducing test anxiety. However, the extent to which these techniques are effective depends on the proficiency level of the test-takers. Thus, investigating the effects of test-taking techniques instruction on different proficiency levels can provide invaluable insights whereby teachers can provide tailored instruction for IELTS test-takers. Also, it is necessary to examine the test-takers' perceptions and attitudes towards test-taking techniques. Furthermore, examining the matches and/or mismatches between the perceptions of different proficiency levels can provide insights into the effectiveness of test-taking techniques. This makes it easier for educators to design more effective instruction. Therefore, this study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does teaching test-taking techniques affect Iranian B1-level learners' reading performance on the IELTS test?

RQ2: To what extent does teaching test-taking techniques affect Iranian B2-level learners' reading performance on the IELTS test?

RQ3: Is there any significant difference between the effects of test-taking techniques on Iranian B1 and B2 level learners' reading performance on the IELTS test?

RQ4: What are the B1-level learners' perceptions concerning the effectiveness of test taking techniques on their reading performance on the IELTS test?

RQ5: What are the B2-level learners' perceptions concerning the effectiveness of test taking techniques on their reading performance on the IELTS test?

RQ6: What are the matches and/or mismatches between the B1 and B2-level learners' perceptions concerning the effectiveness of test taking techniques on their reading performance on the IELTS test?

Method

Participants

The sample of this study was comprised of both male and female EFL learners at B1 and B2 levels, who were selected using a non-random convenience method. The initial sample included 102 pre-intermediate and 110 upper-intermediate learners, who took the IELTS test for purpose of selecting the final sample. Out of 102 learners in the pre-intermediate group, 62 learners whose

IELTS scores fell in 4 and 4.5 bands were categorized in B1-level group. Also, 63 upper-intermediate learners who earned the scores between 6 and 6.5 were categorized in B2-level group.

Instruments
IELTS
It was ensured that learners were homogenous in terms of language proficiency, using the IELTS general module. Such a module is aimed at evaluating the four language skills, namely, listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Four parts consisting of 40 questions (each section has 10 questions) constitute the listening section. The learners need to complete this section withing 30 minutes, plus an additional 10 minutes to complete the answer sheet. As for the reading section, 5 to 6 texts in each one of three parts constitute this section (a total of 40 questions). These questions should be answered in an hour. Two tasks constitute the writing section: a 250-word essay and a 150-word letter that need to be completed in 40 minutes and 20 minutes, respectively. The speaking section, lasting 11 to 14 minutes, entails the learners to respond on various topics.

Reading Pretest and Posttest
The reading scores earned by the participants on the IELTS were used as the pretest. The reading scores earned by the same participants on a different version of the IELTS following the treatment served as the posttest. The reading pretest and posttest were divided into three sections, each featuring a different type of passage: descriptive, factual, and analytical.

Semi-structured Interviews
To elicit participants' attitude towards the contributions of test taking techniques to improving their reading performance on the IELTS, a set of semi-structured interview questions was developed. Initially, a set of six questions was developed with reference to the literature. This was followed by consulting with three TEFL PhD holders whose expert opinion was elicited. Given the expert comments, two questions were deleted as they contained overlapping content with other questions. Then, the list of four questions was piloted on 10 participants, selected randomly from among the pool of participants. Ultimately, necessary revisions on wording and grammar were made based on their comments to improve the readability and clarity of the questions.

Data Collection Procedure
At the outset, 102 pre-intermediate and 110 upper-intermediate learners took the IELTS. This led to the identification of 62 learners whose scores fell in 4 or 4.5 bands. They were categorized as B1-level learners. Also, 63 learners scoring 6 or 6.5 were identified as B2-level learners. The B1 learners formed a 32-memeber experimental group and a 30-memebr control group. In the same fashion, the B2 learners were divided into an experimental group of 32 and a control group of 31. The learners in the experimental groups took part in 16 sessions with a focus on the techniques aimed at enhancing the IELTS takers' ability to take the reading test. These techniques were incorporated in the session by drawing on Estaji and Banitalebi (2023), as well as Cohen's strategies. Table 1 displays the reading test-taking techniques used and practiced in the experimental groups.

Table 1
Reading Test-taking Techniques Implemented in the Experimental Groups

No	Test-Taking Technique
1	Use skimming and scanning.

2	Know how to answer different question types.
3	Match sections of the text with the test questions.
4	Manage stress by acknowledging that the whole text does not need to be understood.
5	Identify synonyms that match the meaning between the question and the text.
6	Use the first two sentences of a paragraph to identify its main idea.
7	Look for an option that seems to deviate from the others (it is special or different).
8	Select a choice that is longer or shorter than the others.
9	Take advantage of clues appearing in other items in order to answer the item under consideration.
10	Double-check my answer to see if it is not awkward in context.
11	Select an option even though it is not understood, out of a vague sense that the other options couldn't be correct.
12	Use clues in other items to answer an item under consideration.
13	Select the option because it appears to have a word or phrase from the passage in it – possibly a keyword.
14	Manage time carefully.
15	Read all questions before reading the texts.
16	Highlight keywords.
17	Take into consideration the position of the correct options among the choices (a, b, c, or d) to find a pattern.

The experimental groups were administered the following procedures as treatment:

    • They were introduced to the technique in question.

    • The learners' attention was drawn to a practice reading from the IELTS, with the teacher demonstrating the technique and explaining it at the same time.

    • Aiming to ensure the learners' comprehension of the technique and its application, the teacher asked them concept-check questions.

    •The teacher encouraged the learners to ask for clarifications in case the techniques were not clear to them.

    • The learners formed paired groups and they were provided with a sample IELTS reading. The learners in these groups were instructed to practice the technique collaboratively.

    • The teacher monitored the learners' progress while they proceeded with practicing the techniques. This was to ensure that they were fully acquainted with the technique and its application.

    • Then, the teacher encouraged the learners to complete IELTS reading task on their own and individually.

    • This was followed by the evaluation of each participant's performance by the teacher, who provided feedback on the use of the targeted technique.

    • In the final stage, the learners were provided with a new sample from the IELTS reading section and asked to put to use the targeted technique once more.

    Whereas, the learners in the control groups underwent the conventional instruction, using no IELTS-related tasks or test-taking strategies. Following 17 treatment sessions, all four groups took a different version of the IELTS reading section. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants from each experimental group to elicit their views on the extent to which test-taking techniques were effective in improving their reading performance on the IELTS exam.

Results

Quantitative Results
The First Research Question
To answer the first research question, an ANCOVA was run on the reading pretest scores earned by the B1-level groups. However, given the violation of the assumptions of homogeneity of both variances and regression slopes, each group's gain scores were moderated by subtracting the pretest scores from the posttest scores. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the reading gain scores obtained by the B1 level learners in the experimental and control groups.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of the Reading Gain Scores for the Experimental and Control Groups at the B1 Level

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
								Std.		Std.
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Error	Statistic	Error
Gain EXP B1	32	1.00	2.00	1.3438	.29614	.088	.194	.414	-.518	.809
Gain CONT B1	30	.00	.50	.1833	.24507	.060	.583	.427	-1.984	.833

As Table 2 shows, the Kurtosis related to the control group's gain scores turned out to be out of the range of +/-1.96, signaling the violation of the normality assumption. Therefore, the non-parametric test of Mann-Whitney U was run (Pallant, 2020) to examine the possible effect of test-taking techniques on the B1-level learners' IELTS reading scores (see table 3).

Table 3
Mann-Whitney U Test for the Reading Gain Scores for the Experimental and Control Groups at the B1 Level

Total N	62
Mann-Whitney U	.000
Wilcoxon W	465.000
Test Statistic	.000
Standard Error	68.615
Standardized Test Statistic	-6.996
Asymptotic Sig.(2-sided test)	.000

As table 3 shows, the difference between the experimental groups' reading scores means and those of the control group was statistically significant ($U =0.00$, $z = -6.99$, $p = .000<.001$). It follows that the instruction of test-taking techniques has had a significant effect on Iranian B2-level learners' reading performance in regards to the IELTS test.

The Second Research Question
As with the first research question, given the violation of the assumptions of ANCOVA, the B2-level experimental and control groups' gain scores were calculated. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the reading gain scores earned by the B2 level leaners in the experimental and control groups.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics of the Reading Gain Scores for the Experimental and Control Groups at the B2 Level

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
									Std.		Std.
		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Error	Statistic	Error
Gain B2	Exp	32	.00	1.50	.9375	.27679	.077	-1.293	.414	4.155	.809
Gain B2	Cont	31	.00	.50	.0968	.20080	.040	1.631	.421	.702	.821

As Table 4 shows, the Kurtosis ratio related to the experimental group turned out to be outside the range of +/-1.96. Therefore, given the violation of the normality assumption, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007) to investigate the possible impact of test-taking techniques on the B2-level learners' IELTS reading scores (see table 5).

Table 5
Mann-Whitney U Test for the B2-level Learners' Experimental and Control Groups

Total N	63
Mann-Whitney U	30.500
Wilcoxon W	526.500
Test Statistic	30.500
Standard Error	67.587
Standardized Test Statistic	-6.887
Asymptotic Sig.(2-sided test)	.000

As presented in Table 5, the difference between the reading scores means obtained by B2-level learners in the experimental group and those of the control group ($U =30.50$, $z = -6.88$, $p = .000 < .001$) was statistically significant. As a result, it is concluded that the instruction of test-taking techniques has had a significant effect on Iranian B2-level learners' reading performance on the IELTS test.

The Third Research Question
As with the first two research questions, the examination of the third research question involved computing the gain scores obtained by the B1 and B2 level learners as the ANCOVA assumptions were not met. Table 6 gives a summary of the descriptive statistics of the reading gain scores earned by the B1 and B2-level learners in the experimental groups.

Table 6
Descriptive Statistics of the Reading Gain Scores for the Experimental Groups at the B1 and B2 Levels

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
									Std.		Std.
		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Error	Statistic	Error
Gain B1	EXP	32	1.00	2.00	1.3438	.29614	.088	.194	.414	-.518	.809

Gain Exp32 B2		.00	1.50	.9375	.27679	.077	-1.293	.414	4.155	.809

Given that the Kurtosis ratio value for the B2 experimental group was outside the range of +/-1.96, the normality assumption was not met. Therefore, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test had to be used to examine any significant difference between the effects of test-taking techniques on Iranian B1 and B2 level learners' reading performance on the IELTS test (see Table 7).

Table 7
Mann-Whitney U Test for the B1 and B2 level Learners' Experimental Groups

Total N	64
Mann-Whitney U	345.000
Wilcoxon W	873.000
Test Statistic	345.000
Standard Error	64.663
Standardized Test Statistic	-2.583
Asymptotic Sig.(2-sided test)	.010

As demonstrated in Table 7, the difference between the reading score means earned by the B1 learners and those earned by B2 learners in the experimental groups was statistically significant (U =345, z = -2.58, p = .010<.05). Therefore, one can conclude that the instruction of test-taking techniques has differently affected Iranian B1 and B2-level learners' reading performance on the IELTS test, with the B1-level learners having a better performance than the B2-level learners.

Qualitative Results
The Fourth Research Question
The fourth research question aimed to explore B1-level learners' perceptions concerning the effectiveness of test taking techniques on their reading performance on the IELTS test. Table 8 portrays the emerging themes and their frequency and percentage for B1 level test-takers.

Table 8
Emerging Themes and Their Frequency and Percentage for B1 Level Test-Takers

No	Theme	Frequency	Percentage
1	Effectiveness of skimming and scanning	11	73.33%
2	Understanding question types	11	73.33%
3	Stress management techniques	12	80%
4	Importance of contextual clues	14	93.33%
5	Time management strategies	14	93.33%
6	Utilizing patterns in answer choices	15	100%
7	Improving engagement	15	100%
8	Reducing anxiety	15	100%

As indicated in the above table, eight themes emerged from the results of content analysis for B1 level learners. The first and second themes, *effectiveness of skimming and scanning*, and *understanding question types* were each mentioned by 11 out of the 15 interviewees (73.33%). The third theme, *stress management techniques*, was expressed by 12 out of the 15 B1 level learners (80%). The fourth and fifth themes, *importance of contextual clues and time*

management strategies, were each voiced by 14 out of 15 interviewees (93.33%). Finally, the last three themes, *utilizing patterns in answer choices, enhancing engagement, and reducing anxiety*, were each mentioned by 15 out of the 15 participants (100%).

The Fifth Research Question

The fifth research question aimed to examine B2-level learners' perceptions concerning the effectiveness of test taking techniques on their reading performance on the IELTS test. Table 9 portrays the emerging themes and their frequency and percentage for B2 level test-takers.

Table 9
Emerging Themes and Their Frequency and Percentage for B2 Level Test-Takers

No	Theme	Frequency	Percentage
1	Improving engagement	6	40%
2	Effectiveness of skimming and scanning	9	60%
3	Reducing anxiety	12	80%
4	Understanding question types	10	66.66%
5	Strategic use of keywords	11	73.33%
6	Adaptability in answer selection	10	66.66%
7	Reflective double-checking	8	53.33%

As exhibited in the above table, seven themes emerged from the results of content analysis for B2 level learners. The first theme, *improving engagement,* was mentioned by 12 out of the 15 interviewees (80%). The second theme, *effectiveness of skimming and scanning*, was expressed by 9 out of the 15 B2 level learners (60%). The third theme, *reducing anxiety,* was voiced by 12 out of 15 interviewees (80%). The fourth and fifth themes, *understanding question types* and *strategic use of keywords* were expressed by 10 (66.66%) and 11 (73.33%) out of 15 participants. Finally, the last two themes that is *adaptability in answer selection* and *reflective double-checking* were mentioned by 10 (66.66%) and 8 (53.33%) out of the 15 B2 level interviewees, respectively.

The Sixth Research Question

The sixth research question sought to uncover the matches and/or mismatches between the B1 and B2-level learners' perceptions concerning the effectiveness of test taking techniques on their reading performance on the IELTS test. Table 10 compares the results of content analysis for B1 and B2 level learners.

Table 10
Comparison of the Results of Content Analysis for B1 and B2 Level Learners

	B1 Learners	B2 Learners
Number of Themes	8	7
Total Theme Mentions	107	66
Number of Common Themes	4	4
Number of Specific Themes	4	3

As seen in the above table, the number of themes for the B1 level learners and that of B2 level learners are 8 and 7, respectively, which are approximately the same. However, the number of theme instances for the B1 level learners equals 107 which is substantially higher than 66 for B2 level learners. The four common themes for the two groups were effectiveness of skimming and scanning, understanding question types, enhancing engagement, and reducing anxiety.

Moreover, four themes consisting of stress management techniques, importance of contextual clues, time management strategies, and utilizing patterns in answer choices belonged specifically to the B1 level group while three themes including strategic use of keywords, adaptability in answer selection, and reflective double-checking belonged specifically to the B2 level group.

Discussion

This study investigated the effect of teaching test-taking techniques on Iranian B1-level and B2-level learners' reading performance on the IELTS test. The results of statistical analysis indicated that teaching test-taking techniques significantly improved both groups' performance on the reading section of the IELTS. The results of qualitative data analysis demonstrated eight themes for the B1-level learners consisting of effectiveness of skimming and scanning, understanding question types, stress management techniques, importance of contextual clues, time management strategies, utilizing patterns in answer choices, enhancing engagement, and reducing anxiety. The results also revealed seven themes for the B2-level learners. From among the seven themes for B2-level learners, four were common with the B1-level learners and three themes encompassing strategic use of keywords, adaptability in answer selection, and reflective double-checking belonged specifically to the B2 level test-takers.

The findings of this study regarding the positive effect of test-taking techniques instruction on the IELTS reading performance of both B1 and B2-level learners lends support to the previous studies (e.g., Allen, 2016; Nguyen, 2007; Ostovar-Namaghi, 2016; Trenkic & Hu, 2021), indicating the effectiveness of test-preparation made possible by test-taking techniques and coaching on IELTS scores. The study conducted by Ostovar-Namaghi (2016) showed the positive effect of strategy instruction on IELTS test scores. Allen's (2016) study showed that the participants with more intense preparation for the test outperformed the other group in terms of listening and speaking performance. Nguyen (2007) demonstrated the positive effect of test preparation on the IELTS and TOEFL tests as a result of teaching test-taking techniques. In the same vein, Trenkic and Hu's (2021) study indicated the positive effect of coaching on the IELTS test scores.

The results of this study can be attributed to the effect of test-taking techniques on test-takers, helping the participants to figure out the structure of the IELTS reading test. Such knowledge of test format can help test-takers to improve their reading scores. Moreover, such knowledge helps the learners to predict the types of the questions to be encountered, the types of responses they should provide, as well as the strategies they should use to respond to the questions effectively (Cohen, 2011; Estaji & Banitalebi, 2023). Being able to predict, test-takers would feel more confident and less anxious while taking the test, which can positively influence their performance (Winke & Lim, 2014). As revealed by the results of previous investigations (e.g., Barzegar & Hadidi, 2016; Loghmani & Ghonsooly, 2012), reading anxiety can adversely influence the performance of IELTS test takers' performance on the reading comprehension section.

Also, these results can be accounted for by the role played by teaching test-taking techniques in helping test-takers to develop their reading skills. Such techniques include a diverse range of activities, including note-taking, predicting answers, and identifying key words and phrases (Estaji & Banitalebi, 2023). Working on these techniques, test-takers enhance their ability to understand reading and figure out relevant information from it (Chalmers & Walkinshaw, 2014; Khoshsima et al., 2018; Mousavi et al., 2014; Nosrati, 2015). Also, teaching test-taking techniques enables test-takers to have a better time management while taking the test (Estaji & Banitalebi, 2023). The IELTS reading test is subject to exact timing, and test-takers need to complete all sections with a time limit. Benefitting from these techniques, test-takers are able to quickly spot relevant information, avoiding focusing too much on irrelevant details. This

time management skill enables test-takers to complete the test within the specified time and avoid rushing through it. This, namely, time management was also mentioned as one of the themes extracted from the interviews.

The findings of this study showing the significant difference between the B1 and B2 level learners in terms of their reading scores on the IELTS due to the teaching of test-taking techniques mirror the findings of the previous research (e.g., Dao & McDonough, 2018; Grant & Ginther, 2000; Ortega, 2003; Verspoor et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2020). These studies show the influence of proficiency level on various aspects of language learning. Cheng and Liu (2022) indicated that proficiency level had a moderating effect on students' engagement. These results are notably important here as this study showed that B1 level learners reported 15 theme instances for improved engagement, while such a theme was brought up by B1 level learners only six times.

The more effective performance of B1 level learners on the IELTS reading test due to their knowledge of test-taking techniques can be due to the possibility that B1 level learners may possess less developed reading skills than B2 level learners. Therefore, the teaching of test-taking techniques may have been more beneficial to their reading skills development. Whereas, B2 level learners may have already in their disposal more advanced reading kills. This could limit the effectiveness of the test-taking techniques instruction. Also, the more effective performance of B1 level learners on the IELTS reading test due to test-taking techniques can be attributed to B1 level learners' higher motivation to improve their reading skills. As lower-level learners, they may have been cognizant of the importance of enhancing their overall English proficiency; therefore, they considered the test-taking techniques training as an opportunity to do so. On the contrary, B2 level learners may have had in their disposal a certain level of proficiency and may have lacked the strong motivation to improve their skills.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, teachers can benefit from test-taking techniques as a pedagogical tool to improve learners' reading performance. Such an improvement can be due to the capacity of such techniques to enhance the effectiveness of strategies used by learners to approach reading tasks. Drawing on the findings of this study, teachers should do well to benefit from test-taking techniques to improve their students' reading performance. Also, students can reap benefits by being exposed to such techniques as these techniques can help them enhance their reading skills and overall English proficiency. This study showed that while training was beneficial to both B1 and B2 level learners, B1 level learners outperformed their B2-level counterparts, suggesting that the effectiveness of test-taking techniques may be mediated by the learners' proficiency level which warrants further investigation. This study also has implications for language testing institutes offering IELTS courses. These institutes can provide test-taking techniques training to test-takers to improve their performance on the test. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that IELTS should consider revising its reading section to make sure that it assesses reading skills rather than test-taking skills.

As a final conclusion, this study suggested the significant role of test-taking techniques in language teaching and learning. Similarly, it yields evidence that test-taking techniques significantly enhanced learners' reading performance. Moreover, this study also calls for more investigations on the effectiveness of test-taking techniques across different contexts. Prospective research can compare the impact of test-taking techniques on learners' performance on other language proficiency tests. Also, studies can examine the generalizability of test-taking techniques to other language skills, including speaking and writing. Another strand of studies is recommended to investigate the effect of test-taking techniques on learners' motivation and

engagement in L2 learning. Studies can be carried out to examine the effectiveness of test-taking techniques on learners with different levels of anxiety. Examining the effect of the incorporation of test-taking techniques into language teaching materials and curriculum design on learners' overall language development is another avenue of research.

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