

EXPLORING TOEFL TAKING STRATEGIES OF HIGH ACHIEVER STUDENTS OF ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT: READING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the reading comprehension techniques employed by top achievers in the University of Mataram's TOEFL reading portion. Twenty English Education students with a TOEFL score of 500 or higher participated in this qualitative case study. Questionnaires and interviews were used to gather data, which was then subjected to a thematic analysis. The findings demonstrated that students used a variety of cognitive and metacognitive techniques, including previewing questions, inferring meaning, scanning, and skimming. Additionally, they displayed time management, emotional regulation, and customized techniques including anticipating responses and paraphrasing challenging language. Overall, the results show that their ability to adapt and combine several techniques in a flexible way during the test contributed to their success.

Keywords: *TOEFL reading, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, high achievers, qualitative study*

A. Introduction

English is widely acknowledged as a global language that promotes professional mobility, academic success, and worldwide communication. It is mostly utilized in official educational settings from junior high school to higher education in Indonesia, where it is taught as a foreign language. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is one of the most popular standardized

assessments used to gauge non-native speakers' English competence. Alek et al., (2019), Rahma et al., (2022), and Friska, (2022) state that the TOEFL is a standard for academic preparedness and is mandated by numerous Indonesian universities, such as the University of Mataram, where students in the English Education Department must obtain a minimum score of 500 in order to graduate.

Still, a lot of students find it difficult to meet this baseline level, especially in the reading comprehension portion. Because it requires students to understand complex texts under time pressure and exhibit abilities such as inference-making and word interpretation, the TOEFL reading test is frequently regarded as the most challenging component. According to Rulyati & Sujana, (2020), students often fall short of competency requirements even after years of studying English. In a similar vein, Girsang et al., (2019) discovered that low motivation, a small vocabulary, and a lack of reading practice all correlate to subpar performance. These results demonstrate a consistent discrepancy between the reading proficiency required by the TOEFL and classroom learning outcomes.

The TOEFL assesses students' proficiency in reading comprehension, writing and structure, and listening, all of which are critical for academic achievement. Since it assesses students' ability to comprehend written texts as well as their ability to evaluate, interpret, and apply knowledge under time limits, the reading comprehension section is sometimes regarded as the

most challenging of these components. Abidin, (2022) highlights that using efficient reading techniques is just as important for success in the reading part as language proficiency. Students who are able to use the right techniques can understand texts and respond to questions more quickly.

Reading comprehension heavily relies on cognitive and metacognitive techniques. According to (Ayu, 2017), cognitive strategies include mental processes such as recognizing key concepts, looking for particular information, and inferring meaning from context. Sungatullina et al., (2016) and Rahman, (2020), on the other hand, stressed that metacognitive methods entail awareness and control of one's comprehension processes, such as planning, monitoring, and assessing understanding. Because they can efficiently manage their time and stay focused during the test, students who combine these tactics typically perform better.

Empirical research further supports the role of strategy use in TOEFL reading success. Hafid et al., (2021) found that non-English majors often rely on guessing, scanning, and focusing on main ideas to overcome

difficulties. Similarly, Zalha et al., (2020) observed that EFL learners used skimming, scanning, and prior knowledge to aid comprehension, while Pramesti, (2023) reported that many still struggle with inference questions and time management despite applying these techniques. These studies show that strategy use enhances comprehension but also reveal a research gap concerning how high achiever students apply such strategies effectively during actual TOEFL performance.

Halim et al., (2020) classified reading comprehension strategies into reading and test-taking strategies, which include techniques such as skimming, scanning, and question prioritization. Yet, limited research has specifically examined how high achiever students those who score above 500 apply these strategies in the TOEFL reading section, particularly in the context of Indonesian higher education.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the reading comprehension strategies used by high achiever students of the English Education Department at the University of Mataram. By identifying how these

students apply cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as skimming, scanning, and inference-making, this study provides insights into the processes that contribute to their success. The findings are expected to enhance understanding of strategic reading behavior in high-stakes testing and offer pedagogical implications for improving TOEFL preparation and reading instruction.

B. Research Method

This study used a qualitative case study design to explore the reading comprehension strategies employed by high achiever students in the TOEFL reading section. The case study approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the strategies used by successful test-takers within their real learning context. The participants were 20 high achiever students from the English Education Department at the University of Mataram, consisting of both males and females from batch 2021. They were selected using purposive sampling based on three criteria: being English Education students, having achieved a TOEFL score of 500 or higher, and reaching that score after taking the test at least twice. Permission for data collection

was obtained from the Head of the Language Laboratory at the University of Mataram.

Data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire contained closed-ended statements to identify the frequency of reading strategies. Additionally, the semi-structured interview aimed to explore how these strategies were applied during the TOEFL reading section. Finally, the emerging themes were compared with established TOEFL ITP reading strategies outlined by ETS, (2020), including understanding main ideas, making inferences, scanning for specific information, and recognizing the author's purpose or tone.

C. Findings And Discussion

Findings

The questionnaire results revealed that all reading comprehension strategies listed were applied by high achiever students, though with varying frequency. The mean scores ranged from 3.5 to 4.85, indicating that no strategy was completely ignored. Two strategies such as reading the questions before the passage ($M = 4.85$) and using

contextual clues to guess unfamiliar words ($M = 4.50$) were identified as the most frequently used. These indicate that students were strategic in anticipating question demands and managing comprehension actively. Most other strategies, such as skimming, scanning, rereading for clarification, eliminating incorrect answers, and monitoring comprehension, fell within the moderately used range (3.75–4.5). Only two strategies, avoiding getting stuck on one question ($M = 3.65$) and maintaining focus on long passages ($M = 3.50$), were used less frequently, suggesting that even high achievers occasionally struggle with time pressure and sustained concentration. Overall, the questionnaire results show that high achievers approach the TOEFL reading test flexibly, combining multiple strategies rather than depending on a single dominant method.

The interview findings provided deeper insights into how these strategies were applied in practice. Several recurring themes emerged, including skimming for general understanding, scanning for specific details, inferring meaning from context,

managing confusion and uncertainty, and developing personal strategies. Skimming was widely used as an initial step to build a general sense of the passage. Many students explained that they focused on the first and last sentences of paragraphs to capture the main idea quickly, which helped them approach the questions with clearer expectations. One participant stated that they “look at the first sentence in each paragraph to get the main idea,” illustrating the role of skimming in forming a mental map of the text without reading every line.

Building on this initial understanding, scanning served as an effective complement to skimming, allowing students to locate precise information efficiently. Most participants reported reading the questions before the passage so they could search for keywords such as names, dates, or repeated expressions. This method helped them avoid unnecessary reading and match questions with relevant parts of the text. A student described this process as “finding the important words in the question and connecting them to the text”, highlighting the intentional and targeted

nature of scanning among high achievers.

Inference-making emerged as another important, though selectively applied, strategy. Students generally relied on inference when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary or when the passage required understanding implied meaning. Rather than focusing on word-by-word translation, participants used contextual clues from nearby sentences to make educated guesses. As one student explained, they “read the sentences around the difficult word to guess what it means”, which demonstrate that inference was used to maintain comprehension without losing time over unfamiliar terms.

In dealing with confusion or uncertainty, participants displayed notable metacognitive awareness. They described adjusting their reading pace, rereading challenging sentences, or temporarily skipping difficult questions. These behaviors indicate that high achievers monitored their comprehension and regulated their steps when facing obstacles. One student mentioned that they “skip hard questions first and go back later”, showing an awareness of time

management and cognitive load. Such self-regulation helped them maintain focus and avoid excessive time loss on a single item.

Lastly, numerous students recounted creating different approaches, such as removing implausible possibilities or guessing potential replies before reading the selections. These self-created tactics demonstrate autonomy and adaptability; two characteristics frequently connected with effective test takers. For example, one participant stated that they "remove answers that are clearly wrong before choosing", suggesting strategic decision-making beyond traditional reading tactics. These individualized changes indicate that great achievers not only use recognized cognitive and metacognitive tactics, but also adjust them to their specific preferences and strengths.

Discussion

The results show that rather than depending on a single dominant technique, high achiever students used flexible and adaptive strategies to approach the TOEFL reading section. These strategies combined cognitive and metacognitive processes. To effectively handle different question

types, they used techniques such as scanning, inference-making, self-regulation, elimination, and skimming. This supports Zhang & Liu, (2019), who noted that proficient readers are characterized by their ability to shift strategies depending on the question types. The questionnaire results showed that none of the strategies were used infrequently, confirming that the participants possessed a wide strategic repertoire. Interview data further demonstrated that students consciously adapted their approaches based on question type, text difficulty, and time constraints, showing strong metacognitive control in monitoring and adjusting their comprehension processes.

A notable pattern in the data is how these students managed the reading test as a purposeful activity rather than a random process. Their frequent use of previewing questions before reading illustrates a goal-oriented reading approach, aligning with Pahrizal et al., (2025) emphasized that previewing enhances focus and efficiency by giving readers a clear purpose. Similarly, Annury et al., (2019) observed that high-level readers integrate comprehension and task

management, which was also evident in this study. Skimming and scanning emerged as the most dominant techniques for efficiency, while inference and contextual guessing were used selectively when deeper comprehension was required. This finding resonates with Tuyen & Huyen, (2019), who argued that inferring meaning from context is vital for handling academic vocabulary in standardized tests. Students' strategic balance between efficiency and depth underscores their ability to regulate attention and time under exam conditions core features of metacognitive awareness.

Another important theme concerns emotional and personal regulation. Many participants reported calming themselves or paraphrasing difficult sentences to manage anxiety and confusion, which aligns with (Abubakar, 2020) found that emotional regulation enhances reading comprehension performance. Furthermore, several students developed personalized techniques such as predicting answers or rephrasing complex ideas reflecting what Alkhaleefah, (2023) described as metacognitive refinement among

proficient readers. These personal strategies were not substitutes but extensions of well-known reading approaches, demonstrating internalization and adaptation to individual cognitive styles. Taken together, these findings suggest that success in TOEFL reading comprehension derives not merely from knowing numerous strategies but from using them flexibly, managing emotions, and personalizing approaches. This supports the TOEFL framework ETS, (2020), which emphasizes integrated reading subskills such as understanding main ideas, making inferences, and interpreting vocabulary in context. Therefore, effective instruction should move beyond teaching discrete strategies and instead cultivate metacognitive awareness, emotional regulation, and adaptive strategy use among learners.

D. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study conclude that high achiever students of the English Education Department at the University of Mataram applied a wide range of reading comprehension strategies during the TOEFL reading section, combining both cognitive and metacognitive approaches. The

questionnaire results showed that reading the questions before the passage (85%) and using contextual clues to guess unfamiliar words (75%) were the most frequently used strategies, while other strategies such as skimming, scanning, rereading, and eliminating incorrect answers were used moderately, and only a few strategies such as avoiding getting stuck on one question and maintaining focus on long passages were less frequent. Interview data further revealed that most students (90%) relied on skimming and scanning to locate main ideas and details efficiently, while others used inference, rereading, or skipping questions to manage comprehension and time effectively. Some participants also personalized their strategies by predicting answers or simplifying difficult sentences, reflecting autonomy and adaptability. Overall, the combination of these findings suggests that the success of high achievers in TOEFL reading comprehension lies not in mastering one dominant strategy but in flexibly integrating multiple strategies, managing time and emotion effectively, and adapting their reading behavior according to task demands.

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