The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Test-Taking Strategies and Their Relation with Test Performance of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between self-esteem and test-taking strategies of Iranian EFL learners. It also investigated the likely relationship between participants' self-esteem and test-taking strategies with learners' language proficiency. Fifty Iranian learners studying English as a foreign language participated in this paper. They were at intermediate level and included both male and female students. All the participants were asked to complete a self-esteem questionnaire and a test-taking strategy questionnaire. The learners' language proficiency was examined through their performance on final exam. The findings of this study revealed that the learners' self-esteem had significant correlation with their test – taking strategies. The findings of the current paper demonstrated test-taking strategy and self-esteem had significant relationship with the participants' language proficiency in EFL learners' learning process.

Keywords: self-esteem, test-taking strategy, language proficiency

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, one of the significant tools for decision making is test. Individuals of all ages and all groups are evaluated regarding their achievement and abilities. Tests are the most frequent method of evaluation in nearly all educational systems worldwide. Thus, doing well on tests has turned to a great concern for most learners specifically those who are more involved with test situations and are more influenced by the consequence of their performance. Consequently, research on learning processes as a way of helping learners to perform better on tests sounds essential. For this reason, the importance of studies on test-related factors as a way of helping learners do well in their tests seems certain. This is because in tests, ability is not the mere factor that influences learners' performance. Rather, there are various cognitive and psychological factors that affect performances (Hambleton, Swaminathan & Rogers, 1991).

Test-taking strategy is one of those cognitive factors that enable students to apply the characteristics and format of a test to increase scores in a test-taking situation (Rogers & Harley, 1999).Cohen and Upton (2007, p. 211) explain test-taking strategies as "those test-taking processes which respondents have selected and which they are conscious of, at least to some degree". These strategies also can result in increasing test validity and reliability (Dodeen, 2008). But, there are some factors which may influence the employment of test-taking strategies. These elements can differ interpersonally and therefore, cause various ways of test-taking strategies use. So, this variety of use and types may lead to diversity in individuals' achievement. Psychological factors like self-esteem which change from person to person seem to have an impact on test-taking process and strategies.

A large number of studies revealed that teaching test-taking strategies to EFL learners could develop their test performance (e.g., Al-Shalabi & SalmaniNodoushan, 2009; Chiu, 2011; Cohen, 1984; Radojevic, 2009; Scharnagl, 2004). But, the extent to which this training influences learners of different language proficiency levels has not been taken into account up to now. That is to say, the impact of teaching test-taking strategies on the performance of EFL learners of various language proficiency levels has not deeply been dealt with to date.

Stern (1995) asserts that concepts such as self-concept, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-confidence are often used alternatively in the literature. He maintains that the main rational could be that they all introduce various notions about how people perceive themselves. Some researchers consider self-concept and self-efficacy as equivalent structures, but others find them as two disconnected patterns (Choi, 2005).

Huitt (2004) showed the difference between the two concepts namely self-concept and self-esteem and stated that self-concept is concerned with the cognitive aspect of self, but self-esteem is linked to the affective aspect of self, which refers to one's perceptions and viewpoints of self-value.

Miyagawa (2010) distinguished between self-confidence and self-esteem. He stated that self-confidence is related to what we can do of our efforts. He declared that self-confidence improves along with the nature of the attempt and self-esteem is more central and is about the sense of being important.

Erikson (1963) and Stern (1983) stressed the role of affective factors such self-esteem in foreign language learning. They believed that the way people assess themselves would affect on the process of learning a foreign language. Fathi-Ashtiani, Ejei, Khodapanahi, and Tarkhorani (2007) defined self-esteem as a person's view of him/herself, that is, the extent to which an individual finds himself as capable, worthy or efficient.

This survey has pedagogical significance and increases experts' realization of probable relations of learners' self-esteem and their test-taking strategies. By conducting this research, it can be demonstrated whether or not self-esteem is related to EFL learners' test-taking strategies and educators will find the possible association between the

learners' use of test-taking strategies and their reported self-esteem. This study has also psychological importance because self-esteem is one of the psychological factors.

The current study aimed to develop the quality of learning and learners' performance in test situation by examining some factors that seem to have a main role in learning and assessment. The major purpose of the present research is to find a way to increase the EFL learners' and teachers' understanding about the probable relationship between self-esteem and test-taking strategies and academic achievement. Furthermore, it is aimed to remove or lessen difficulties EFL learners experience in their language learning and highlight the important role of self-esteem in foreign language learning.

To show the objectives of this study, the following research questions were formulated:

Q1: Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-esteem and their use of test-taking strategies?

Q2: Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-esteem and test-taking strategies with their test performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Test-taking strategies

"Test-taking skills are cognitive skills that strongly affect students' performance in tests. These skills allow students to undertake any testing situation in an appropriate manner and to know what to do before, during, and after the test." (Dodeen, 2008, p. 35). These skills are transferable and when learners acquired them, they can employ them across different subjects and within various situations and conditions (Sefcik, Bice & Prerost, 2013). Applying test taking strategies help learners to get rid of any feelings of tension and anxiety that prevent them from doing well on a test situation (Austin, Partridge, Bitner, & Wadlington, 1995). Thus, developing learner's test taking strategy can indirectly promote learner's achievement. Using test-taking strategies will positively affect on learner's testing competence and so their academic performance. This is especially true for low-ability learners who perform better than expected (Dolly &Williams, 1986). Therefore, learners who are expected to do well in test do not, either lack testing strategies or apply poor ones (Vatanapath & Jaiprayoon 1999).

Hirano (2009, p. 158) believes that there are mainly different types of strategies that respondents apply as they do language tests: 1) language learner strategies(the way learners operationalized their basic skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing including the related skills of grammar, vocabulary, and translation), 2) test-management strategies ("strategies for responding meaningfully to the test items and tasks"), and 3) testwiseness strategies ("strategies for using knowledge of test formats and other peripheral information to answer test items without going through the expected linguistic and cognitive processes").

Cohen (1998) declares that test-taking strategies consist of language use strategies and testwiseness strategies. Language use strategies involve actions that individuals consciously take to improve the use of a SL/FL in order to do language tasks. Mostly, examinees need to apply four kinds of language use strategies (retrieval, rehearsal, cover, and communication strategies) in a testing situation so that they can store, retain, recall, and apply the information for use during the test. However; testwiseness is not necessarily determined by the examinee's language proficiency. Rather, it is related to his/her knowledge of how to take tests (Brown & Nodoushan, 2015; Johns & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015).

Rezaei (2006, p.155) divides test-taking strategies into two types of "general and specific". General strategies are employed for a wider variety of tests like preparing for the test, reading the directions, the use of time during a test, error avoidance strategies etc. While specific strategies are connected with the exact area of the subject matter that is being tested and deal with taking different kinds of tests such as multiple-choice, matching, fill-in-the-blanks, essay, short answer, true-false, and problem solving.

Vattanapath and Jaiprayoon (1999) investigated the impact of teaching test-taking skills on achieving higher scores in English tests. According to the results of this study, the participating learners achieved higher scores and developed positive attitudes toward the learning of test-taking skills.

Rezaei (2005) examined the effect of knowing and using test-taking strategies on the EFL learners' language test performance taking an achievement language test. The findings of this research showed that there was a high correlation between the participants' total scores in the achievement test and their scores in the questionnaire.

Dolly and Williams (1986) investigated the impact of applying test-taking strategies on multiple-choice test scores. Results indicated that learners who received test taking strategy training for several weeks outperformed their counterparts on tests.

In a study conducted by Hong (2014), a structural equation model of relationships among testing-related motivation variables (test value, effort, self-efficacy, and test anxiety), test-taking strategies (test tactics and metacognitive strategies), gender, and math test performance were investigated. Participants of this survey were 438 learners in 10th grade including 182 males and 256 females. The findings demonstrated that motivation variables influenced the use of test-taking strategies and showed stronger effects on math performance than did test-taking strategies.

Self-esteem

Branden (1994) defines self-esteem as the inclination to find oneself as being capable to manage the obstacles of life and deserving happiness (as cited in Rubio, 2007). Fathi-Ashtiani, Ejei, Khodapanahi, and Tarkhorani (2007) represented self-esteem as a person's opinion of him/herself, that is, the extent to which an individual finds him/herself as capable, worthy or efficient. Young and Hoffmann (2004) assert that "Some people consider self-esteem as the way we perceive and conceive ourselves. It

includes our self-assessment and our recognition of self-esteem. Some researchers believe that self-concept includes nature abilities, and manner of thinking that characterize a person" (p. 55).

Aryana (2010) comes to this conclusion that learners who feel more confident about themselves are not concerned and they have higher academic achievement unlike those who do not have confidence in themselves. In the same way, Naderi, Abdullah, Aizan, Sharir, and Kumar (2009) stated that research has persistently indicated a positive correlation between how people value themselves and the level of their academic achievements. According to their findings, it was determined that those who feel confident, generally achieve more, while those who lack confidence in themselves achieve less. Pullman and Allik (2008) disclosed that high self-concept significantly promotes academic achievement. Additionally, in a study conducted to find the role of self-efficiency, self-regular, and self-esteem in high school learners' academic achievement, Amini (2004) explores a positive and significant relationship between self-esteem and academic attainments.

Regarding the association between self-esteem and EFL learners' achievement in second language situations, Hayati and Ostadian (2008) revealed that EFL learners' listening comprehension was significantly influenced by their self-esteem. Their study showed that Iranian EFL learners' self-esteem affected their listening comprehension significantly. In other words, self-esteem was seen as a psychological factor that had a positive relationship with learners' English language listening comprehension. Pramita (2012) investigated the probable association between self-esteem and the learners' English proficiency. The results of this research demonstrated that there was positive and significant relationship between self-esteem and the learners' English proficiency for second year learners. In other words, the learners with higher self-esteem had better English proficiency in comparison to the learners with low self-esteem.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 50 Iranian EFL learners studying English in three language institutes located in Sabzevar, Iran. The first language of them was Persian and they consisted of both male and female learners. The number of male learners was 30 (60%), where as that of the female learners were 20 (40%). All of them were in the intermediate level of proficiency and the age range of them was between 15 and 25. All the participants had successfully passed the achievement test of the last semester and were qualified to attend language course of the current semester. Moreover, all of them had successfully passed a standardized placement test designed and run by institutes and also a proficiency interview to have the permission to continue at this level or to move from pre-intermediate to intermediate. Consequently, they were expected to be experienced in taking language tests.

Instruments

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

The RSES is a well-known scale presented in 1965 by Rosenberg, consisting of 10 items that refer to self-respect and self-acceptance rated on a 4-point Likert-type test, setting from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree). Items 1, 3, 4, 7, and 10 are positively worded, and items 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9 negatively (as cited in Martín-Albo, Núñez, Navarro & Grijalvo, 2007). The rating scale was a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), and its inner consistency, examined by means of the Cronbach coefficient, that was .84. For the analyses, the five negative items were reversed.

Test-taking strategy questionnaire

To gauge participants' test-taking strategies, a 5-point Likert rating-scale questionnaire: 1 (Never) to 5(Always) adopted from Rezaei (2006) was applied to elicit information about the subjects' general background knowledge in the scope of test-taking strategies. The participants were required to choose the option which exactly illustrated the degree of applying or not applying the specific strategy introduced in that statement while answering the questions of a language test. This inventory included 22 multiple-choice items. Its reliability was calculated by running Cronbach's Alpha to the results through a pilot study with 15 learners. The value of Cronbach's Alpha was 0.78 which shows that the instrument could be viewed as the suitable tool for the main study.

Achievement test

The achievement of learners was examined through their performance on final test of that course. This English language exam included two parts. The two parts consisted, i.e., vocabulary and grammar that investigated learners' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary points which they acquired during the semester. All the essential steps of test development process were considered to design this achievement test. Also, learners' ability in dealing with general reading passages was investigated through this test. All the scores were considered as a criterion to assess learners' language performance.

Procedure

Data collection

In order to check the level of learners' self-esteem and test-taking strategies, all the subjects were asked to complete the related questionnaires during the course. The final exam was administered to the learners in the last session of the semester.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the two questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), version 19. Data analysis procedures for this step of the study

involved calculating descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations for the whole sample. In order to examine any relationship between self-esteem and test-taking strategies, a Pearson product moment correlation was run.

RESULTS

The estimated the normality of data is a prerequisite for many statistical tests because normal data is an underlying assumption in parametric testing.

Table 1. Tests of normality of self esteem & test-taking strategies

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
self esteem	.931	50	.126
test-taking strategies	.907	50	.109

In the above Table 1 the Sig**.** value of the Shapiro-Wilk test is greater than 0.05, therefore the data of self - esteem and test-taking strategies are normal. So the distribution of data is normal.

 The first research question of the study survey whether there is any significant relationship between self esteem and test-taking strategies of Iranian EFL students? In order to exam this research question, Pearson correlation analysis was directed. Pearson's Product Correlation Coefficient (r) utilized to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between self esteem and test-taking strategies of Iranian EFL students. Before discussing the results of Pearson correlation, the descriptive statistics analysis were valued and showed in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for self esteem & test-taking strategies

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
self esteem	50	6	30	20.02	6.610
test-taking strategies	50	12	95	61.26	20.44
Valid N (listwise)	50				

As the data at Table 2 showed, the number of Iranian EFL students who filling out self-esteem and test taking strategies questionnaire were 50. The maximum grade were 30, 95 and the minimum grade were 6, 12 respectively. In order to answer the first research question the Pearson correlation is used. Table 3 revealed the results of relationship between students test taking strategies and self-esteem questionnaires.

Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficients between self-esteem & test-taking strategies

		self esteem	test-taking strategies
self - esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	.891**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	50	50

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A rapid survey at Table 3 showed that there was a positive correlation (r =.891, p=.000) between Iranian EFL students' self-esteem and their test taking strategies. The result was significant at the 0.01 level.

 The second research question assessed the relationships between Iranian EFL learners' self-esteem and test-taking strategies with their test performance. Pearson correlations were used. Relationships between test-taking strategies, self-esteem and their performance in the last test are calculating by Pearson correlations. The correlation coefficients and their corresponding significance levels were recorded at below in Table 4.

Table 4. Pearson correlation coefficients between self esteem, test-taking strategies and their performance on test

		Self esteem	Test-taking strategies
	Pearson Correlation	.793**	.827**
Test performance	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	50	50

The relationship between students' self esteem and their performance on final test of course was positive and statistically significant (r = .79). Similar results were achieved for the relationship between students' test-taking strategies and their performance on final test. The relationship test-taking strategies with students' performance of test was also positive and statistically significant(r = .82); but it was even stronger than the relationships with students' self-esteem. Based on the results, it can be interpreted to mean that students who show high ability in their final test are likely to have positive attitudes towards employing test-taking strategies.

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to recognize the relationship among self esteem, test-taking strategies, and looked at how these related to their performance on test. Analyzing the gathered data with regard to the association between these variables, conclusion could be made that Pearson's Product Correlation Coefficient (r) showed there is a significant relationship between them. Initially, the scores of the RSE Scale and test-taking strategy questionnaire were examined. Pearson correlation was statistical procedure to analyze the data of the relationship between these two variables and the results in the last showed that there was statistically positive significant relationship between students' self-esteem characteristic and their test-taking strategy. In follow, to understand the relation of these variables with students' performance test score the same analyzing process was applying and result reveals that there was positive significant relationship between students self-esteem, test taking strategies and learners' test performance scores; but the correlation between test taking strategies and students' performance test scores was even stronger than the relationships with students' self esteem. The previous research surveyed the relationship of test taking strategies with different aspects of language proficiency as reading comprehension. As Pourdana, Bornaki, Moayedi Fard and Sarkhosh (2012) who expanded their research in this domain and the results showed that the scores in reading comprehension test did not have any significant correlations with using the majority of test-taking strategies; they had a relatively low and negative but significant correlation with test management strategy. But, the result in the current study revealed the positive relationship between EFL

learners' test taking strategies with their language test performance. Mohammadi and Amirian, (2016) examined the relationship between EFL learners' self-efficacy and test-taking strategy. One hundred and fifty Iranian EFL learners studying English as foreign language participated in this study. Findings revealed that there is a significant positive correlation between learners' self-efficacy and their test-taking strategy use. Besides, to assure of the participants attitudes towards employing these strategies the teacher presents an interview with ten items. Interviewees with students at the end of the study reveals that participants with high level of self-efficacy seemed to have more strategies in their disposal and inclined more to employ test-taking strategies.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of whether or not the researchers believe lower self-esteem is connected to lower academic success, there was no research found that claimed that higher self-esteem is harmful to academic success or lowers it in any way. But, founding relationship between various strategies to improve learners' ability in learning foreign language and self-esteem could be applicable to improve the learning process. The investigation in the current study showed that there was a positive significant relationship between test taking strategies and self- esteem which can be improved participant success; in follow, the survey reveals that both of the variables (test taking strategies and self-esteem) have positive significant relationship with students test performance at the end of the course. Therefore, employing test taking strategies and improving learners' self-esteem could improve learners' language proficiency in the learning process.

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