

Test-taking Strategy Use in Responding to Reading Comprehension Questions in a University Entrance Examination in Japan

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Abstract

The study investigated Japanese EFL learners' use of test-taking strategies in responding to reading-comprehension questions on the National Center Test in Japan as well as how they acquired the strategies. The study identified three types of strategies used by participants and how they acquired the strategies. In addition, the findings demonstrated the relationship between the emergence and use of the strategies. The findings reveal learner's learning process in preparation for university entrance examination of English in Japan and offers implications for the future research on test-taking strategies for the test validation for entrance examinations of English in Japan.

Keywords

University Entrance Examination of English in Japan, Test-taking Strategies,

Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2014) has proposed the plan to encourage four-skills tests in entrance examinations of English in Japan, and the use of external examinations of four skills, such as TOEFL, IELTS. In contrast, however, the traditional examinations currently in use mainly assess reading. Therefore, in order to explore ways for validating the use of the new four-skills tests and to examine the current situation of entrance examinations in the country, further studies of English tests are necessary.

In addition, the focus of such entrance examinations should be on test-taking strategy use in students' responding to currently used items in university entrance examinations. Japan is an EFL context where taking English tests is one of the crucial motivations for students to

study English. Thus, examining what they actually do while taking a test and the process of acquiring test-taking strategies would be beneficial.

Therefore, the purpose of the current study is firstly to collect empirical data on students' test-taking strategy use in university entrance examinations of English in Japan and secondly to investigate the relationship between the use of test-taking strategies and students' learning process of English for university entrance examinations.

1 Literature review

1.1 The current situation of university entrance examinations in Japan.

In Japan, English tests for entrance examinations are basically developed and administered by each university, including national, public and private universities, and most English tests mainly assess reading.

The entrance examination conducted in the largest scale is the National Center Test. The test is compulsory for those who wish to enter national and public universities, and more and more private universities have started to use this test as part of their entrance examinations. As for the content, the National Center Test also mainly comprises reading-comprehension questions.

1.2 Test-taking strategies

Cohen and Upton (2007) define test-taking strategies as "those test-taking processes which test-takers selected and conscious of" (p.4). Additionally, test-taking strategies are classified as three types: language learner strategies, test-management strategies, and test-wiseness strategies (Cohen, 2012, p.2-3). According to Cohen, language learner strategies are related to

four skills; test-management strategies are used for responding to test items meaningfully; and test-wiseness concerns the use of test format.

There are studies of test-taking strategies by Japanese learner on other tests, but few studies for entrance examination of English in Japan has been conducted.

1.3 Research questions

The study addressed three research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What test-taking strategies did high school students use while answering reading questions of English on the National Center Test?

RQ2: How did students acquire the test-taking strategies?

RQ3: What effects of university entrance examinations on students' learning could be found from students' test-taking strategy use?

2 Methodology

2.1 Data collection

Participants were six freshmen in a selective private university in Tokyo, Japan. Think-aloud, observation, and follow-up interview were combined to examine the participants' use of test-taking strategies and to explore how they had acquired the strategies. While responding to reading-comprehension questions in a part of the National Center Test, participants were asked to verbalize what they were thinking. During the thinking-aloud, the author observed the students and took notes of their strategy use. Later, the participants were asked about the strategies they had used and how they had acquired the strategies in the follow-up interview using the author's notes.

2.2 Data analysis

The protocol data and interview data were analyzed by means of the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA), a qualitative analysis method, which explicated the relationship between test-taking strategies the students used and their learning in preparation for university entrance examinations.

3 Findings

Key study findings were summarized in terms of students' test-taking strategy use and emergence of strategies. Based on the findings, a model depicting the relationship of students' test-taking strategy use and the emergence of their

strategies was developed (Figure 1). The model identified three types of strategies and showed that students' learning experiences is the central function that directly affects the emergence and use of test-taking strategies.

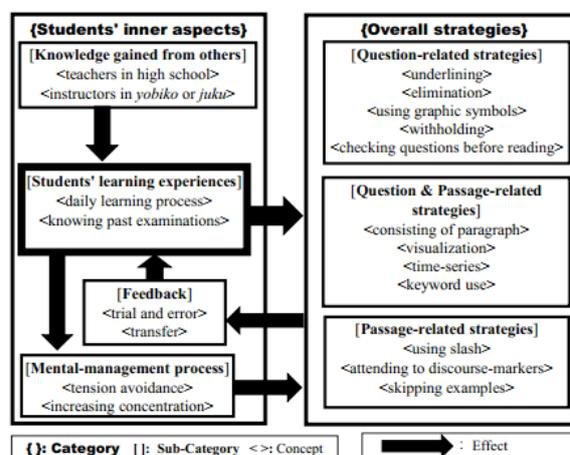


Figure 1: A model on Japanese learners' use of test-taking strategies and their emergence

4 Discussions and conclusions

This study is based on the author's Master's thesis and is revised and developed to offer further implications. Despite the focus on the traditional task type and limited participants with relatively high proficiency, the study provides a baseline data for students' strategy use in traditional entrance examinations of English in Japan.

The study concludes with suggestions for future studies of test-taking strategy use as a test validation and the impact of new four-skills tests by comparing with the findings of the study.

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