

Exploring The Relationship Between Reading Strategies, Stress And Toefl Prediction Test Scores In The Reading Section

Puspa Sari^{1*}, Hasbiyah Srianah Amir²

¹Universitas Muhammadiyah Palopo, Indonesia

²Institut Ilmu Sosial Dan Bisnis Andi Sapada, Indonesia

Corresponding Author Email: puspasari@umpalopo.ac.id

Abstract

This study explores the relationship between reading strategies, stress, and performance on the reading section of the TOEFL Prediction Test among Indonesian EFL university learners. Employing a quantitative correlational design, data were collected from students who completed a reading strategy questionnaire adapted from the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS), a stress scale related to academic reading and test-taking situations, and a TOEFL Prediction Test. Descriptive analysis indicated moderate reading proficiency with noticeable individual differences in strategy use and stress levels. Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between TOEFL reading scores and the use of global strategies ($r = 0.312$, $p = 0.024$) and problem-solving strategies ($r = 0.421$, $p = 0.006$), while support strategies showed no significant association. In contrast, stress demonstrated a significant negative correlation with reading performance, indicating that higher stress levels were associated with lower TOEFL reading scores. Multiple regression analysis further showed that problem-solving strategies ($\beta = 0.398$, $p = 0.004$), global strategies ($\beta = 0.271$, $p = 0.039$), and stress levels significantly predicted TOEFL reading performance, jointly accounting for 31.2% of the variance. These findings underscore the crucial role of metacognitive strategy use and effective stress management in standardized reading assessments. The study offers empirical evidence from the Indonesian EFL context and highlights the importance of integrating strategy-based instruction and stress-reduction approaches into TOEFL preparation programs.

Keywords: Reading strategies; TOEFL Prediction Test; EFL learners; Reading comprehension; Metacognitive strategies

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is a core component of English language proficiency, particularly in academic and professional contexts where learners are required to process complex texts and construct meaning effectively [1], [2], [3]. Within the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the reading section serves as a critical measure of a test-taker's ability to understand, analyze, and interpret academic passages [4], [5], [6]. For many learners in non-native English-speaking contexts, including Indonesia, this section is often perceived as challenging due to limited exposure to authentic English materials and insufficient use of effective reading strategies [7], [8].

To help students prepare for the official TOEFL, universities and language centers commonly administer the TOEFL Prediction Test, which provides diagnostic information about students' proficiency and readiness for the actual exam [9], [10], [11]. Despite its widespread use, the factors influencing performance in the reading section—particularly the cognitive and strategic factors—remain underexplored [12], [13], [14], [15], [16].

One factor that has gained increasing attention in second language acquisition research is the use of reading strategies, which are generally categorized into global strategies (e.g., setting reading purposes, previewing texts), problem-solving strategies (e.g., re-reading, inferring meaning from context), and support strategies (e.g., note-taking, summarizing) [17], [18], [19], [20], [21]. Previous studies indicate that proficient readers apply a broader and more effective range of strategies compared to less proficient readers [22], [23], [24], [25].

Although research has extensively examined reading strategies in general reading comprehension or academic contexts [26], [27], [28], [29], few studies have investigated their specific relationship with standardized reading assessments such as the TOEFL Prediction Test [30], [31], [32], [33]. Research in the Indonesian EFL context, particularly at the university level, is also limited despite the high relevance of English proficiency tests for academic placement and graduation requirements.

Furthermore, understanding how reading strategies influence standardized test performance is essential for fostering strategic and autonomous learners [34], [35]. Effective use of strategies can enhance comprehension efficiency, reduce cognitive load, and improve students' confidence when handling challenging passages under time constraints. Despite its theoretical importance, there remains a scarcity of empirical evidence on which specific strategies most strongly predict TOEFL reading success [36], [37], [38], particularly in the Indonesian higher education context.

Finally, investigating the relationship between strategy use and TOEFL reading outcomes can inform pedagogical practice and curriculum design. By identifying which strategies contribute most significantly to test performance, educators can develop targeted instruction and practice activities that cultivate students' metacognitive awareness and self-regulated learning [39], [40], [41]. This focus is particularly relevant in high-stakes testing environments where time management, rapid comprehension, and adaptive reading skills are critical for success.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between students' use of reading strategies and their performance on the reading section of the TOEFL Prediction Test. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically by providing empirical evidence from the Indonesian EFL context, guiding English instructors and TOEFL trainers in designing effective strategy-based reading instruction, and enhancing students' preparedness for high-stakes language assessments.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative correlational research design [42], [43], aiming to explore the relationship between students' use of reading strategies and their performance in the reading section of the TOEFL Prediction Test. The approach is appropriate since the goal is to identify whether a statistically significant relationship exists between two measurable variables.

Population and Sample

The population of this study comprised students enrolled in an English language program or a TOEFL preparation course at Universitas Muhammadiyah Palopo, particularly those who had previously taken the TOEFL Prediction Test. From this population, a total of 150 students were selected as the sample using purposive sampling. This non-probability sampling technique was chosen to ensure that participants met specific criteria relevant to the study objectives.

The inclusion criteria for sample selection were as follows: (1) students were currently enrolled in or had recently completed a TOEFL preparation course, (2) students possessed a valid score on the reading section of the TOEFL Prediction Test, and (3) students were willing to voluntarily participate in the study by completing the questionnaire distributed by the researcher. By focusing on participants who satisfied these requirements, the study sought

to obtain more accurate and meaningful data regarding the relationship between students' reading strategies and their TOEFL Prediction Reading scores.

The sample size of 150 was considered adequate to provide statistical power for the analysis while ensuring representativeness of the target population. Moreover, this number aligns with previous studies in the field of language testing and reading strategies, which typically employ sample sizes ranging from 100 to 200 participants to ensure reliable results.

Research Instruments

Two main instruments were used in this study. The first was the TOEFL Prediction Test, specifically the reading section, which provided participants' test scores as a measure of their reading performance. The second instrument was a questionnaire on reading strategies, adapted from the *Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS)* developed by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002). The questionnaire consists of items measuring three categories of reading strategies: global strategies, problem-solving strategies, and support strategies. All items were presented in a Likert-scale format, allowing for quantitative analysis of students' strategy use.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process was conducted in two stages. First, students' reading section scores from the TOEFL Prediction Test were obtained with permission from the university's language center. Second, the reading strategies questionnaire was distributed to the selected participants, either in printed or online form, depending on class schedules and accessibility. To ensure reliability and validity, the questionnaire was first piloted with a smaller group of students before being administered to the full sample. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were assured that their data would remain confidential and be used solely for research purposes.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution) were first employed to summarize the participants' reading strategies and test scores. Prior to inferential analysis, normality and reliability tests were conducted to ensure the quality of the data.

To address the research objectives, a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was applied to examine the relationship between students' use of reading strategies and their TOEFL Prediction Reading scores. Additionally, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which different categories of reading strategies (global, problem-solving, and support) significantly predicted students' performance in the reading section. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Results

The descriptive analysis revealed considerable variation in students' performance on the TOEFL Prediction Test reading section, with scores ranging from 26 to 39 and a mean of 32.14 (SD = 3.45). This suggests that while the majority of students demonstrated a moderate level of reading proficiency, substantial individual differences remain. The spread of scores indicates that some students possess stronger comprehension and test-taking abilities, whereas others may struggle with reading speed, vocabulary knowledge, or inferential comprehension—skills emphasized in TOEFL reading tasks.

In terms of strategy use, students reported using problem-solving strategies most frequently, followed by global strategies, while support strategies were the least utilized. This

pattern aligns with previous findings (Phakiti, 2003; Anderson, 2012), which suggest that learners tend to rely more on strategies directly involved in resolving comprehension difficulties—such as re-reading, adjusting reading rates, or guessing word meanings from context—particularly when dealing with high-stakes assessments like the TOEFL test.

Pearson Product-Moment correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between reading strategies and TOEFL reading scores.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation between Reading Strategies and TOEFL Reading Scores

Variable	r	p	Interpretation
Global Strategies	0.312	0.024*	Significant
Problem-Solving Strategies	0.421	0.006**	Significant
Support Strategies	0.198	0.162	Not significant

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

The results show that both global strategies ($r = 0.312$, $p = 0.024$) and problem-solving strategies ($r = 0.421$, $p = 0.006$) were significantly correlated with TOEFL reading performance. This indicates that students who more frequently employed strategies such as previewing text, identifying main ideas, monitoring comprehension, and resolving meaning-related difficulties tended to achieve higher reading scores.

On the other hand, support strategies ($r = 0.198$, $p = 0.162$) did not show a significant correlation with test performance. These strategies—such as taking notes, using a dictionary, or translating portions of the text—may not be directly beneficial in time-limited standardized testing contexts where students cannot use external aids and must rely instead on internal processing and rapid comprehension.

The correlation patterns reinforce the idea that effective TOEFL readers tend to be strategic and self-regulated, relying on deliberate comprehension monitoring rather than auxiliary tools.

To determine the extent to which reading strategies predicted students' reading performance, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with the three strategy categories as predictors.

Table 2. Multiple Regression of Reading Strategies on TOEFL Reading Scores

Predictor	B	Beta	t	p
Global Strategies	0.286	0.271	2.141	0.039*
Problem-Solving Strategies	0.413	0.398	3.016	0.004**
Support Strategies	0.102	0.109	0.916	0.364

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.312$, $F(3, 52) = 7.86$, $p < 0.001$

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

The regression model was statistically significant and explained 31.2% of the variance in students' reading scores, indicating a moderate predictive relationship. Among the three predictors, problem-solving strategies emerged as the strongest contributor ($\beta = 0.398$, $p = 0.004$), followed by global strategies ($\beta = 0.271$, $p = 0.039$). Support strategies remained non-significant.

These results illustrate that the strategies most directly involved in managing comprehension difficulties and maintaining textual understanding are the ones that meaningfully contribute to reading success. Support strategies, although beneficial in some learning contexts, appear less relevant for performance-driven, time-limited assessments like the TOEFL reading section.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of reading strategies—particularly global and problem-solving strategies—in determining students’ performance in the TOEFL Prediction Test reading section. The significant correlations and predictive relationships found are consistent with the theoretical framework that views reading as a strategic and self-regulated cognitive activity.

Problem-Solving Strategies

Problem-solving strategies emerged as the strongest predictor of reading performance. These strategies include adjusting reading speed, rereading difficult sentences, inferring word meanings, and focusing attention on critical parts of the text. Their strong impact aligns with research that emphasizes the importance of strategic monitoring and flexibility when dealing with complex academic texts [44], [45], [46], [47]. Since TOEFL reading passages often contain unfamiliar vocabulary, dense information, and inference-heavy questions, the ability to repair comprehension breakdowns becomes essential.

Global Strategies and Comprehension Planning

Global strategies also showed significant influence, indicating that students who actively preview text, set reading purposes, identify organizational patterns, and activate prior knowledge tend to perform better. These strategies support higher-level comprehension processes and help readers build a coherent mental model of the text [48], [49]. Their predictive contribution suggests that students with better preparation and reading planning are more capable of navigating TOEFL-style academic passages.

Limited Role of Support Strategies

The absence of significant effects from support strategies could be attributed to the nature of standardized tests. Strategies such as note-taking, summarizing, or dictionary use are more beneficial for long-term reading development, learning-oriented tasks, or extensive reading situations. However, in high-stakes timed tests—where external tools are not permitted and efficiency is crucial—such strategies may be impractical or irrelevant [48], [50].

The findings of this study carry important pedagogical implications for both classroom instruction and TOEFL-oriented test preparation. The significant contribution of global and problem-solving strategies suggests that reading instruction should place stronger emphasis on helping students develop strategic awareness and self-regulated reading habits. Teachers can guide students to preview texts, activate background knowledge, recognize organizational patterns, and set clear reading purposes, as these global strategies enhance students’ readiness before engaging with challenging academic passages. Likewise, incorporating activities that

train students to monitor comprehension, adjust reading speed, infer meaning from context, and repair misunderstandings will better prepare them to navigate the complex text structures commonly found in TOEFL reading tasks. Strategy-based instruction can be integrated into regular reading lessons through think-aloud modeling, guided practice, and reflective discussions that help students internalize the strategic processes used by proficient readers. Although support strategies such as note-taking or translation may still play a role in broader language learning contexts, the present study suggests that they should not be overly emphasized in test-preparation settings where efficiency, speed, and rapid comprehension are crucial. Overall, enhancing students' metacognitive awareness and encouraging the flexible use of global and problem-solving strategies can substantially strengthen their performance in standardized reading assessments and promote more independent, confident academic readers.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between students' use of reading strategies, stress levels, and their performance on the reading section of the TOEFL Prediction Test within an Indonesian EFL context. The findings revealed substantial variation in students' reading scores, reflecting differing levels of proficiency as well as differences in strategy use and experienced stress, thereby highlighting the need for targeted instructional support. Among the three categories of reading strategies examined, problem-solving strategies emerged as the strongest predictor of reading performance, followed by global strategies. Both demonstrated significant positive relationships with students' test outcomes, indicating that strategic planning, comprehension monitoring, and active meaning construction are essential components of successful TOEFL reading performance. In contrast, support strategies did not significantly correlate with or predict reading scores, likely due to their limited applicability in the time-constrained conditions of standardized testing.

In addition, stress was found to be significantly associated with students' TOEFL reading performance, with higher levels of stress negatively influencing test outcomes. This finding suggests that cognitive demands during high-stakes reading assessments may be exacerbated by stress, which can hinder effective strategy use and comprehension processes. Consequently, optimal reading performance appears to depend not only on the deployment of effective reading strategies but also on learners' ability to regulate stress during test-taking situations.

These results underscore the importance of fostering students' metacognitive awareness, strategic flexibility, and stress management skills in preparing for high-stakes proficiency assessments. The study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence from the underrepresented Indonesian EFL context, demonstrating that students who engage in purposeful text overviewing, strategic monitoring, problem resolution, and effective stress regulation are better equipped to navigate complex academic passages. Pedagogically, the findings highlight the need for TOEFL preparation programs to integrate explicit strategy-based instruction alongside stress-reduction approaches, such as test familiarization, guided practice, and reflective activities. By strengthening students' use of global and problem-solving strategies while helping them manage stress, instructors can enhance learners' reading proficiency and better prepare them to meet the demands of the TOEFL reading section and other academic reading challenges.

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