

Students' Strategies for Taking Classroom Tests

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Abstract: *A good test-taker is always prepared for the test. He knows what to do before, during and after the test. The study under report aimed at exploring students' strategies for taking classroom tests. A set of structured questionnaire was distributed to thirty-six students of an English Department in Surabaya Indonesia. Likert scales were used to measure the students' test-taking strategies. The students' responses were then analyzed to know how well the students used test-taking strategies. The study reveals that in general the students of the English Department are not always well prepared for classroom tests.*

Key words: *test-taking strategy, classroom test, structured questionnaire.*

This study aimed at describing the students' strategies in taking classroom exams. The term strategy used in this study refers to any techniques, tactics or ways, observable or unobservable, utilized to achieve a certain purpose. The term "exam" used in this study refers to a "test". Tests are a part of every class students take in school. They are instruments of evaluation. Sometimes tests are given at the beginning of a course to help the teacher discover what the students know and do not know. Other types of tests, such as quizzes, weekly tests, and mid-term tests are given during the course to measure the students' progress. A final test is given at the end of the course. It is known as an achievement test.

In general, an achievement is designed to measure the students' achievement of the instructional objectives. According to Finochiaro (1993, p. 32), an achievement test is fundamentally used

- (1) to determine (a) whether our teaching methods and techniques are in fact producing learning and (b) which aspects of these are in need of revision.
- (2) to measure students' achievement against previously established objective so that they can (a) be moved to the next higher level, if

feasible, to other more suitable groups within the same level, (b) be certified as ready to be graduated from a school or to qualify for another period of time, (c) be held at the same level for another period of time, or (d) be excluded from the program.

Grondlund (1984, p. 10) states, "The extent to which achievement tests contribute to improve learning is determined largely by the principles underlying their development and use." An achievement test should measure learning outcomes that are in accordance with the instructional objective and cover an adequate sample of the learning tasks included in the instruction. The test items used in the test should be the ones most appropriate for measuring the desired outcomes. An achievement test should be reliable and the result should be interpreted with caution.

Achievement tests can be administered as a take-home exam or a classroom exam. Many teachers, however, tend to prefer a classroom exam than a take-home exam. They believe that a classroom exam is more valid and reliable than a take-home exam. In addition, a classroom exam is easy to administer and to control.

When we ask our students which one they prefer, a take-home test or a classroom test, the answer is clear, they prefer to have a take-home test to a classroom test. They will have enough time to prepare this kind of test. They may also be able to discuss the problem with their classmates. In addition, they stay confident that they will do well on the test that they do at home. On the other hand, many students are anxious and lacking confidence that they will not be able to do well on the classroom test. In addition, the students need to be well prepared for the classroom test since they have to answer a number of test items during some limited time allocated and there is no chance to discuss the test items they may encounter with their classmates. Their anxiety may make them unable to get a good night sleep.

Though many students prefer having a take-home test to a classroom test, a classroom test is unavoidable. Teachers of all levels of education still assign their students to have a classroom test. They may believe that classroom test is able to help them better discover what their students really know and do not know.

Since classroom tests require the students to be well prepared, different strategies may be used to anticipate the test. Some students may review the materials with a group of classmates. Some others may practice doing exercises alone or with their classmates.

Preparation for classroom tests is necessary to perform well. Good preparation is almost the key to confidence. Good confidence will lower down anxiety. To be prepared for classroom tests, Brown (2002, p. 68) suggests students (1) discover everything they can do about the test they are going to take, (2) create a plan of action for review, (3) review the materials (4) take practice tests or do exercises, (5) form a study group, (6) get a good night sleep before a test.

To be able to perform well, students are also advised (1) to get to the classroom early, (2) to look over the whole test, (3) to estimate how much time needed for each part, (7) to focus on the task to be performed, and (5) to work slowly enough to avoid making careless mistakes during the classroom test.

Once the test is over, most students easily forget it. However, the best students make sure that tests are learning experience (Brown, 2002, p. 70). They use a test and the feedback they get to help them to continue to improve their mastery. Therefore, Brown (1970) suggests students, after the classroom tests, (1) check on anything they think they might not have done correctly, (2) ask the teacher about specific points, (3) pay attention in class to whether the teacher says about the test answers, and (4) make a plan to pay special attention.

Many researches on tests have been done on the approaches, test validity, and reliability. Research on how to anticipate classroom tests so far has not been done. This study is therefore aimed at discovering (a) how good classroom test takers the students are, and (b) what strategies the students may use to anticipate classroom tests they have to do. Thus this study addressed the following questions:

- a. What kinds of classroom test takers are the students?
- b. What strategies do the students employ before classroom tests?
- c. What strategies do the students employ during classroom tests?
- d. What strategies do students employ after classroom tests?

METHODOLOGY

To obtain the data for the study a set of structured questionnaire was distributed to thirty-six³⁶ students of an English department in Surabaya Indonesia. The questionnaire was first introduced by Brown (2002) to measure students' strategies for taking classroom test. The strategies employed by the students were measured using Likert scales ranging from

5 to 1 referring to “always”, “often”, “sometimes”, “seldom” and “never” respectively. Their responses were then scored and analyzed to determine how good or what kinds of classroom test takers the students were. Brown’s parameter was then employed in the study as stated in table 1.

Table 1. The parameter of test-taking strategy users

No.	Score	Categories of test-taking strategy users
1	16 – 32	Low user of test-taking strategies
2	33 – 48	Average user of test-taking strategies
3	49 – 64	Moderate user of test-taking strategies
4	65 – 80	High user of test-taking strategies

Following Brown’s parameters as stated in Table 1, the students were classified into the following four categories of test-taking strategy users.

- a. low users of test-taking strategies (who scored 16 to 32),
- b. average users of test-taking strategies (who scored 33 to 40),
- c. moderate users of test-taking strategies (who scored 49 to 64) and
- d. high users of test-taking strategies (who scored 65 to 80)

The responses to the questionnaires were also analyzed to determine the strategies taken before, during and after classroom tests.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis are presented below. The presentation is divided into four parts. The first part presents what kinds of classroom test takers the students were. The second part describes the strategies employed by the students before taking classroom test. The third part describes the strategies taken during the test. The last part presents the strategies taken after the test.

Categories of Test-Taking Strategy Users

The study, as presented in Table 2, reveals that 5.55% of the students belong to the low users of test-taking strategies. 77.78% of the students under study belong to the moderate users of test-taking strategies. Only 16.67% of them belong to the high users of test-taking strategies. It means that most of the students under study knew how to anticipate the classroom

test they have to take. They moderately knew what to do before the exam, during the exam and after the exam.

Table 2. Categories of Test-taking strategy Users

No.	Score	Categories of Test-Taking strategy Users	Number	%
1	16 – 32	Low user of test-taking strategies	0	0
2	33 – 48	Average user of test-taking strategies	2	5.55
3	49 – 64	Moderate user of test-taking strategies	28	77.78
4	65 – 80	High user of test-taking strategies	6	16.67

Strategies before the Test

The study, as shown in Table 3 below reveal that there were only 5.56% of the respondents who always tried to discover anything they could about the test before taking classroom test. 52.78% of them sometimes tried to discover anything they could about the test before taking classroom tests.

A good test-taker, as Brown states, creates a plan for a review. The study, however, reveals that only 11.11% of them always create a plan for a review.

Reviewing the material thoroughly before taking classroom tests is another characteristic of a good test-taker. The study, however, reveals that there were only 19.44 of the student respondents who tried to review the materials thoroughly. 2.76% of them reviewed the materials thoroughly with their classmates. And 35.11% of them never reviewed the materials with their classmates.

As recorded in Table 3 there were only 19.76% of the student respondents who took practice tests before classroom test. 13.89% of them seldom took practice and 8.33% of them never did practice exercise.

The study also uncovers that most students tended were anxious before the test and tried to tell themselves to relax and feel confident. Some of them were so tense before the exam that they could not sleep. 33.33% of the student respondents, however, were able to have a night sleep before classroom test although they were not well prepared for the test.

Table 3. Strategies before the Tests

No. Activities	5	%	4	%	3	%	2	%	1	%
1. Discovering everything they can about the test	2	5.56	8	22.22	19	52.78	6	16.67	0	0
2. Creating a plan for a review	4	11.11	9	25.00	14	38.89	8	22.22	1	2.78
3. Reviewing the material thoroughly	7	19.44	9	25.00	16	44.44	1	2.78	3	8.33
4. Taking practice tests or doing practice exercise	7	19.44	9	25.00	12	33.33	5	13.89	3	8.33
5. Reviewing with a group of classmates	1	2.76	4	11.11	5	13.89	13	36.11	13	36.11
6. Telling themselves to relax and feel confident	14	38.89	9	25.00	11	30.56	1	2.78	1	2.78
7. Getting a good night sleep	13	36.11	8	22.22	12	33.33	2	5.56	1	2.78

Strategies during the Test

Good test takers know what to do during the test. They always (1) arrive at school early, (2) quickly look over the whole test before answering anything, (3) estimate how much time each part of the test will take before answering anything, (4) concentrate very carefully, and (5) leave enough time at the end to check all their answers

The study reveals that most of the student respondents did not know what to do during the test. Table 4 says that 52.78% students under study always arrived at the school early during the test. Only 5.56% students never arrived at school early. During the classroom test only 44.44% of them quickly looked over the whole test before answering the problems in the test. 27.78% of the students never estimated how much time each part of the test would take before answering the given problems. Only 19.44% of them tried to estimate the time needed to answer the test. The study also reveals that the student respondents were able to concentrate very carefully to the test. 66.44% of them always concentrated very carefully during the test. In observing what students did after completing the given problems in the test, the study reveals, as recorded in Table 4, there were only 25% of the respondent students who always left enough time to check all the answers. 38.89% of them sometimes left enough time to check all their answers of the problems, while 5.56 % of them never checked the answers after completing the problems.

Table 4. Strategies during the Test

No	Activities	5	%	4	%	3	%	2	%	1	%
1.	Arriving at the school early	19	52.78	8	22.22	4	11.11	3	8.33	2	5.56
2.	Quickly looking over the whole test before answering anything	16	44.44	8	22.22	7	19.44	4	11.11	1	5.56
3.	Estimating how much time each part of the test will take before answering anything	7	19.44	5	13.89	10	27.78	4	11.11	10	27.78
4.	Concentrating very carefully	25	69.44	7	19.44	3	8.33	3	8.33	0	0
5.	Leaving enough time at the end to check all my answer	9	25	12	33.33	14	38.89	0	0	0	0

Strategies after the Test

Good-test takers, as Brown states, always (1) think of the test as an opportunity to learn something, (2) look up questions that they think they might have missed, (3) pay attention to their teachers' feedback on the test (4) use the test experience to be better prepared for the next test. Many of the student respondents in the study, however, do not know what to do after the test. As recorded in Table 5, there are only a few students who know what to do after the test. (1) 27.78% of student respondents always think that taking a test is an opportunity to learn something, (2) 50% of them always look up questions that they think they might have missed, (3) 44.44% of them always pay attention to the teacher's feed back on the test, and (4) 47.22 % of them always Using the test experience to be better prepared for the next test.

The study also reveals that 44.48% of the students sometimes thought that taking a test was an opportunity to learn something. 5.6% of them did not care of the test they had done; they did not care whether or not they had missed them. 8.33% of them seldom paid attention to the teacher's feedback.

The study also reveals that not all students under study used the test experience to be better prepared for the next test. The table shows that 38.89 % of the students often used the test experience to be better for the next test. 8.33% of the respondents sometimes used the test experience to be better prepared for the next test, and 5.56% of them seldom used it to be better prepared for the next test.

Table 5. Strategies after the Test

No.	Activities	5	%	4	%	3	%	2	%	1	%
1.	Thinking of the test as an opportunity to learn something	10	27.78	9	25	16	44.48	1	2.78	0	0
2.	Looking up questions that they think they might have missed	18	50	5	13.89	9	25	2	5.56	2	5.56
3..	Paying attention to their teachers' feedback on the test	16	44.44	9	25	8	22.22	3	8.33	0	0
4.	Using the test experience to be better prepared for the next test	17	47.22	14	38.89	3	8.33	2	5.56	0	0

The study aimed to uncover the strategies utilized by the students in preparing classroom tests. The study revealed that in general the students under study did not prepare their classroom tests seriously. Only a few of them did it seriously. During the test most students did not know what to do. They did not apply the correct strategy as Brown suggested, that is. (1) getting to the classroom early, (2) looking over the whole test, (3) estimating how much time needed for each part, (7) focusing on the task to be performed, and (5) avoiding making careless mistakes. In addition, they never learned from their test experience to be better in the next exams.

For the students, an achievement test measures their learning mastery and learning strategies. The study, however, indicates that most students under study are not aware that a test is for them. They can learn which parts of the teaching materials have been mastered and which parts have not been mastered. In addition, they can learn whether their learning strategies are really effective or not.

The success in taking classroom test is not solely determined by the mastery of teaching material but also the strategies the students take. Applying appropriate strategies for taking classroom tests is therefore crucial. Most students under study, however, are not aware of the importance of applying appropriate strategies in taking classroom tests. It is therefore imperative that teachers train their students to use appropriate test-taking strategies before, during and after the tests.

In educational setting the major use of a test is to provide information for making decision that is for evaluation. Evaluation itself comprises the

following two components (a) information, and (b) value judgment or decision. In order to justify the use of evaluation, the quality and accountability of the information that tests provide must be considered. In educational setting the decision made are generally about people, and have some effects on their lives. It is therefore essential that the information upon which teachers base this decision be as reliable and as valid as possible. Good assessment information provides accurate estimates of student performance and enables teachers or other decision makers to make appropriate decision. Great efforts therefore must always be made in developing appropriate instruments (tests) that demonstrate the test scores as reliable and as valid as possible.

The reliability and validity of the test scores, however, are not only determined by the instrument or the test itself. How seriously the students do the test is a key factor that cannot be ignored in making decision about the students. When the students are not well prepared in doing the tests the information provided by the test may be invalid and unreliable. Thus the test scores obtained by the students under study were not valid and reliable information for making decision about their performance because they did not do the test seriously. Many teachers, however, are not aware of the invalid and unreliable scores from the students under study. They take for granted that the students are serious and well prepared for the classroom exams and that the decision made based on those scores are accountable.

Every student knows that classroom exams are very important in determining their passing grades. They are also aware of the importance of good preparation for the tests. But why are they unprepared for the classroom exams? What makes them unprepared for classroom exams? Do they have negative attitudes to classroom exams? Are their teachers too lenient to them, in giving marks, in giving problems for the classroom exams? These are big questions that we, teachers, have to find the answers.

Both teachers and students should be well informed that tests are part of teaching-learning process. In addition, they should be aware that tests are just subsets of assessment; they are not the only form of assessment that a teacher can make. Tests can be useful devices, but they are only one among many procedures and tasks that teachers can ultimately use to assess students (Brown, 2004, p. 4).

Thus in order that decision made about the students are accountable, other instruments, such as quizzes, informal observation and a writing prompt with a scoring rubric can be employed.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The study reveals that most of the students under study belong to the moderate users of test-taking strategies. They were not good test takers. They were not well prepared for taking classroom tests. Most of them did not know what to do before, during and after classroom tests. They were not aware that to be prepared before taking classroom tests is very important. They were not aware either that classroom tests are for them and that the result of classroom test gives them feed back for their learning mastery as well as their learning strategies.

Since appropriate strategies are important in taking classroom tests, it is imperative that students be well informed with the right strategies to be taken in taking classroom tests. In addition the teacher should train students what to do before, during and after taking classroom tests.

Another study can also be done to find out the factors that make the students are not well prepared for classroom tests and find the solutions to overcome the problems.

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