

Enhancing IELTS Reading Performance through Strategic Instruction

Xalimova Dilshunos Zohidjon qizi, Mannonova Shahnoza Inomjonovna
ALUWED English teacher

Abstract. This article examines the role of reading strategies as a key component in the development of students' reading proficiency. Although reading comprehension strategies are widely recognized as essential for successful reading, many teachers do not possess a sufficiently strong methodological foundation for teaching them effectively. As a result, learners often struggle to apply appropriate strategies when working with complex academic texts, particularly in high-stakes examinations such as IELTS. To address this issue, the article emphasizes the importance of teacher preparation in developing, selecting, and systematically teaching effective reading comprehension strategies. It explores a range of practical techniques aimed at enhancing learners' ability to understand, analyze, and interpret texts commonly encountered in IELTS reading tasks. By focusing on strategy-based instruction, this article seeks to support both teachers and learners in improving reading performance and overall outcomes in IELTS classes.

Key words: IELTS Reading, reading comprehension, reading strategies, academic reading skills, test-taking strategies, English language proficiency, non-native English learners, IELTS Academic, IELTS General Training, reading assessment.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has witnessed a significant increase in the number of young people achieving high scores on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). According to data provided by the British Council and IDP and cited by Alisher Sadullayev, Director of the Youth Affairs Agency, approximately 53,000 candidates scored 5.5 or higher in 2024, representing a fivefold increase compared to 2020 (Sadullayev, 2024; British Council & IDP, 2024). Despite this notable progress, the reading component of the IELTS continues to pose considerable difficulties for many candidates.

The IELTS assesses English language proficiency across four core skills: Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking (IELTS, 2023). Among these, the reading section is frequently regarded as the most challenging due to strict time constraints, a wide range of task formats, and the complexity of the texts (Alderson, 2000; Grabe, 2009). This module evaluates candidates' ability to comprehend diverse written materials, infer implicit meaning, and accurately interpret information in both Academic and General Training contexts (Weir & Khalifa, 2008). Achieving a high score therefore requires not only basic reading skills but also the effective use of reading strategies and sustained, focused practice.

As emphasized by educational researchers, reading is a foundational skill and a prerequisite for learning across all academic disciplines (Anderson, 2008). Strong reading competence is particularly crucial for non-native English speakers, as it directly influences academic achievement and professional development (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). The IELTS reading section is divided into two formats: Academic and General Training. The Academic module includes three extended passages drawn from books, journals, and encyclopedias, while the General Training module consists of

extracts from everyday texts such as advertisements, notices, and informational brochures (IELTS, 2023). Successful performance in this section requires a well-developed vocabulary, solid grammatical knowledge, and the ability to quickly locate specific information, identify main ideas, and critically analyze content within a limited timeframe (Nation, 2013). Common challenges faced by candidates include unfamiliar lexical items, time pressure, and a variety of task types, such as True/False/Not Given, Matching Headings, Summary Completion, Multiple Choice, and Short-Answer questions (Cambridge IELTS, 2022). This paper therefore outlines practical reading strategies and offers targeted instructional approaches aimed at improving learners' reading comprehension from Pre-Intermediate to Upper-Intermediate and Advanced proficiency levels.

The IELTS Reading test is designed to assess candidates' overall reading proficiency through a range of essential sub-skills. Specifically, it evaluates how effectively test-takers can read for gist, identify main ideas, locate specific details, and understand implied meanings and logical inferences. In addition, the test measures candidates' ability to recognize a writer's opinions, attitudes, and communicative purpose, as well as their capacity to follow the logical development of an argument across a text. These skills reflect real-life academic reading demands and are crucial for successful study in an English-medium environment.

The IELTS Reading test consists of three passages with a total length of approximately 2,500 words. These texts are selected from authentic sources such as books, academic journals, magazines, and newspapers and are written for a non-specialist audience (Gabb, 2000). The topics are of general academic interest and cover a wide range of disciplines, including science, history, agriculture, astronomy, and social studies. As a result, candidates are required to engage with unfamiliar subject matter while demonstrating their reading competence.

The texts vary in style and purpose, ranging from descriptive and factual passages to discursive and analytical texts. This diversity requires candidates to adjust their reading strategies according to the text type and task demands. Some passages are accompanied by visual information such as diagrams, graphs, or illustrations, and candidates are expected to demonstrate their ability to interpret and integrate this visual data with the written content. Overall, the IELTS Reading test places strong emphasis on strategic reading, time management, and the ability to process complex information efficiently under exam conditions.

Teachers are therefore encouraged to introduce a variety of effective reading techniques and ensure that students master them through guided exercises and targeted questions. Initially, instructors should model these techniques by working through the first question as a demonstration, particularly highlighting paraphrasing strategies. Subsequently, students can be encouraged to practice the remaining questions independently or collaboratively with a partner. This approach promotes learner autonomy while reinforcing strategic reading skills.

Encouraging students to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words

Unknown vocabulary often presents a significant challenge for readers. For this reason, students should be trained to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words rather than relying on direct definitions. Teachers are advised to avoid immediately explaining new lexical items and instead guide learners to use contextual clues. In IELTS Reading passages, unfamiliar words frequently appear as technical or specialized terms, which are often explicitly defined within the text. In other cases, logical connectors, parallel structures, synonyms, antonyms, and collocational patterns can provide sufficient information to deduce meaning. Developing this skill enhances reading fluency and confidence.

Setting realistic and achievable goals

Teachers should also help students establish realistic performance goals. Expecting learners to answer all 40 questions correctly is generally impractical. Achieving approximately 27 correct answers requires effective time management and strategic decision-making. It is important to emphasize that a score of 30 correct answers out of 40—equivalent to an IELTS Academic band score of 7.0—is already considered a strong result. Students should therefore be encouraged to focus on accurately

completing the easier and more accessible questions rather than spending excessive time on the most challenging items.

Distinguishing between academic and technical vocabulary

Given the academic nature of IELTS Reading texts, students inevitably encounter a large number of unfamiliar words. One of the teacher's key responsibilities is to help learners identify which vocabulary items are essential to learn. Vocabulary can generally be categorized into three main groups. The first group consists of mainstream vocabulary, which includes approximately 2,000–3,000 high-frequency words used in everyday communication and typically already familiar to most learners. The second group is formal or academic vocabulary, comprising around 1,000 word families, including many verbs and adjectives that are less common in spoken language but frequently appear in academic texts. The third group is specialized or technical vocabulary, which forms a substantial portion of IELTS Reading passages but is usually explained or defined within the text itself.

Teachers should guide students in distinguishing between academic and technical vocabulary and encourage them to prioritize the acquisition of academic vocabulary, as it has broader applicability across texts and contributes more significantly to overall reading comprehension and exam success.

In conclusion, the IELTS Reading test presents significant challenges for many learners due to its academic nature, time constraints, and wide range of task types. However, these challenges can be effectively addressed through systematic instruction in reading strategies and careful pedagogical planning. As discussed in this paper, success in the IELTS Reading module depends not only on learners' general language proficiency but also on their ability to apply strategic reading skills such as skimming for gist, scanning for specific information, paraphrasing, inferring meaning from context, and managing time efficiently.

The role of the teacher is therefore crucial in guiding students to develop these skills through explicit instruction, modeling, and sustained practice. Encouraging learners to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words, setting realistic and achievable performance goals, and helping students distinguish between academic and technical vocabulary can significantly enhance reading comprehension and test performance. Moreover, prioritizing academic vocabulary acquisition equips learners with transferable skills that extend beyond exam preparation and support their broader academic and professional development.

Ultimately, a strategy-based approach to IELTS Reading instruction fosters learner autonomy, confidence, and efficiency. By integrating these methods into classroom practice, teachers can better prepare students to meet the demands of the IELTS Reading test and achieve meaningful, attainable outcomes, thereby contributing to their long-term success in English-language learning.

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