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Article

Test-Taking Skills and Academic Performance in English of Grade 7 ESL Learners

Abegael Villanueva Acosta[1], Shienna Marie L. Caparas, LPT, PhD[2]

1. Student Researcher: University of Cabuyao (Pamantasan ng Cabuyao), Katapatan Mutual Homes, Brgy. Banay-banay, City of Cabuyao, Laguna 4025
2. Research Adviser: University of Cabuyao (Pamantasan ng Cabuyao), Katapatan Mutual Homes, Brgy. Banay-banay, City of Cabuyao, Laguna 4025

* Correspondence: [1]abegaelvillanuevaacosta@gmail.com, [2]smlcaparas@pnc.edu.ph

Abstract: This study examines the impact of test-taking skills on the English academic performance of Grade 7 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in District V of the City Schools Division of Cabuyao. The research evaluates learners' competencies in reading comprehension, interpreting test instructions, managing time and pacing, and employing analytical reasoning and strategic approaches. A total of 303 learners from three public secondary schools participated. Findings reveal that test-taking skills are moderately developed overall, with strengths in reading comprehension and notable deficiencies in time management. Students grade in the third quarter ranged from satisfactory to very satisfactory, with considerable variation across sections. Correlation analysis identifies a strong relationship between test-taking skills and academic achievement while instructional practices and classroom environment contributed substantially to score variability, underscoring the need for structured strategy and targeted interventions. This study is anchored on theoretical perspectives including the Strategic Self-Regulation (S2R) Model, Cognitive Load Theory, Testing Effect Theory, and Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) Theory. Collectively, these frameworks affirm that comprehension, regulation, and strategic use are critical determinants of academic success in ESL contexts and provide the conceptual foundation for designing interventions that strengthen learners' test-taking competence.

Keywords: Test-Taking Skills, Academic Performance, ESL Learners, Reading Comprehension, Time Management, Analytical Reasoning and Strategic approach.

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1. Introduction

Strategies for taking tests are significant in supporting learners' academic performance, particularly when it comes to learning ESL. These skills are cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies that students can use in order to better understand assessment items, manage their time and avoid careless mistakes while taking tests, and reduce test anxiety. When it comes to English tests, students must not only have a good command of grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension skills, but also strategies to find ideas, details and eliminate incorrect choices. This is particularly helpful for 7th-grade learners, who are still acquiring more complex lessons, tests, and lesson loads. For students in the Philippines, where the K to 12 curriculum emphasizes "critical thinking, communication and performance-based activities", these skills are particularly important for them to do well in English.

This study aligns itself to the Strategic Self-Regulation (S2R) Framework that explains how taking a test is not merely a process of attempting questions but of engaging

in strategic and active use of these in the service of performance [1]. Under this framework, test-taking skills are framed as self-regulation strategies enabling ESL students to strategies in order to cope with the test-taking demands in terms of language, and cognitive load. These skills are captured in the present study in three areas: the comprehension of reading passages and test instructions, pacing and time management, and applying strategies and reasoning skills. These areas reflect the cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies test-takers apply during tests, which can impact their English test performance.

The study also builds on Cognitive Load Theory where learners have only a limited amount of "space" in their working memory that can be used while they process information [2]. For ESL learners in Grade 7, English tests can be made more challenging the presence of unfamiliar words, complicated sentence structure and unclear test instructions, which increase the load. In this case, low exam performance is not necessarily due to a lack of learning, but due to the low amount of attention that the learner can focus on answering the test questions. That's why test-taking strategies like understanding test directions, time management and step-by-step strategies for answering questions are essential. Similarly, the Testing Effect Theory states that learning through repeated practice sets, quizzes and tests will enhance recall and performance more than reviewing the lessons, while low-stakes tests can also reduce anxiety and increase confidence [3].

This study is also informed by Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) Theory, which emphasizes the ways in which students regulate their thoughts, feelings and behaviors to achieve learning goals [4]. Zimmerman's cyclical model illustrates that students engage in three interrelated processes: forethought, in which learners set goals and prepare for a test; performance, in which learners regulate and monitor their performance during a test; and self-reflection, in which learners reflect on their learning after a test. This is aligned to the test-taking skills studied in this research. Recent research also continues to demonstrate that SRL is a key factor in second language learning that makes students more motivated, self-disciplined and efficient learners [5], [6]. Overall, these theories explain why test-taking skills are important and how they might affect the academic achievement of our Grade 7 ESL students in English.

1.1. Test-Taking Skills and Academic Performance in English

The literature advances the notion that test-taking skills are not just test-taking strategies but a mix of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective skills that allow learners to translate their knowledge into performance. This is particularly crucial for ESL students as their success in English tests is not only dependent on knowledge of English but also on their ability to comprehend test instructions and questions, manage their thoughts, and choose effective strategies when under duress. Researchers characterize these strategies as deliberate and observable actions that stimulate understanding, decision-making, and self-monitoring to achieve performance goals. This perspective is supported by Cognitive Load Theory and Self-Regulated Learning, which describe students' success in tests if they can manage their cognitive load, monitor their comprehension and evaluate their performance during testing [7], [8], [9].

The review also identifies a major issue in the Philippines: many Grade 7 students are also not equipped with solid reading and strategy skills to take English tests given the English proficiency of many learners in the Philippines. Philippine research indicates that many students continue to be at the frustration level in their reading skills, thus impairing their abilities to comprehend test tasks and answer questions correctly and efficiently. Research also reveals that cognitive and metacognitive strategies are important predictors of academic performance; and specific interventions like clue-finding, decoding, and comprehension support are effective in assisting low-performing learners. Without these strategies, students tend not to evaluate their test performance and optimize their time, further compounding this problem. Conversely, students who make the effort to use

cognitive strategies such as previewing questions and using context clues perform better in tests of grammar and vocabulary [10].

Another key message of the review is that intelligence is not the only determining factor for test performance. Students may have the capacity to reason, store information, and solve problems, but it also requires them to self-regulate and develop discipline to use these skills during examination. What is known is that students who have relatively strong working memory, reasoning and problem-solving ability tend to perform better in school, but such performance might be improved if learners also have self-control, concentration and on-going study habits. When it comes to Grade 7 English as second language (ESL) learners, this means that English may be difficult for them not only because they have a smaller vocabulary and lower language ability, but also because they lack effective cognitive strategies making it challenging to understand texts, retain information and respond rationally during tests.

There is also considerable attention to the metacognitive dimension, which is students' knowledge and regulation of their thinking. Put simply, metacognition allows students to think about a test before it begins, during the test, and after it is over. These include skills like skimming the instructions, thinking about the time allocation for each section, understanding questions and double checking answers. We see that these practices are associated with higher grades, as they encourage students to be more organized, reflective and goal oriented during test-taking. Other studies also confirm that students who use planning, monitoring and reviewing skills are more likely to perform well in testing, but poor students often underperform because they do not use these metacognitive skills [11], [12].

Also, there's the affective domain, which relates to emotions like self-confidence, motivation, and anxiety. The review suggests that despite content knowledge, when faced with negative emotions, it can hinder the ability to think and apply effective test strategies. Test anxiety, for instance, can diminish concentration, working memory, and block students from completing test questions. Particularly for Filipino students, research showed that foreign language anxiety levels can be apparent through both physiological and mental symptoms in tests. In contrast, positive feelings, self-confidence, and positive classroom cultures promote deeper engagement in self-regulatory processes, communication, and better academic performance. Strategies such as relaxation, positive affirmation and training on emotional intelligence were also effective in minimizing anxiety and readiness for examination [13], [14], [15].

In summarizing the review, it is apparent that cognitive, metacognitive, and affective factors all contribute to academic performance in English. Global and local research consistently demonstrates that students perform better when they are not only knowledgeable of content information, but also learn how to strategically plan, monitor, regulate, and manage emotional states during their tests. Moreover, studies indicate that high-achieving learners are more strategic and reflective and have better emotional readiness than the passive learners who rely on the simple learning method of being exposed to lessons. This is even more important in the Philippines given that many learners are still unprepared in reading, strategy use, and psychological preparedness for tests. The literature on test-taking skills paints a strong case for investigating the test-taking skills of Grade 7 ESL learners and to develop interventions that can make them better test-takers and more successful in English.

1.2. Research Questions

This research aims to evaluate the relationships between the test-taking skills and academic performance of Grade 7 ESL students in English, particularly in the schools from District V. Specifically, the researcher sought to answer the following sub-problems:

1. What is the level of Test-taking skills of Grade 7 ESL learners in terms of:
   1.1. Reading comprehension and understanding test instructions

1.2. Time management and pacing during assessments
1.3. Analytical reasoning and strategic approach in answering test items.
2. What is the academic performance in English of Grade 7 ESL learners?
3. Is there a significant correlation between test-taking skills and academic performance?
4. Based on the results of the study, what intervention or output can be developed?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

A descriptive-correlational design was applied in this study to investigate the test-taking skills and academic performance in English of Grade 7 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. This design is fitting because not only did it enable the researcher to describe the learners' level of test-taking skills but to also determine if these skills were tied with their academic performance in English. The design is justified by the findings of Caparas and Yango, who also used the same design in identifying factors affecting student engagement in the local context, by stressing the need to study how different learning gaps may eventually affect student achievement. This study used two sources of data: first, in asking the learners to answer the researcher-developed, modified, and content-validated questionnaire, they were able to report their ability to comprehend and understand the instructions and questions on the test, the pacing strategy and time management skills, and the analytic reasoning and strategies they take in answering test items; and second, the learners' English grades for the third quarter, as documented by the subject teachers, were used to determine their academic performance. The study then applied descriptive statistics to describe the learners' test-taking skills, comparative analysis to determine whether there was a difference in skills across the learners of different groups and correlational analysis to test the association of the learners' test-taking skills and English performance.

2.2. Respondents of the Study

Three hundred three (303) Grade 7 English as a Second Language (ESL) students, regardless of their academic ability, from Pulo National High School, Diezmo Integrated School and Casile Integrated National High School in District V were randomly selected to determine variations in test-taking skills and achievement in English.

To improve the generalizability, students of different ability levels were included to ensure a broader understanding of the relation between test-taking skills and English achievement. This enabled more valid comparisons and correlations among the sample.

2.3. Sampling Design

The research was done in three public high schools in District V of the City Schools Division of Cabuyao City, Laguna—Pulo National High School, Pulo Diezmo Integrated School, and Casile Integrated National High School—to get a real scenario for investigating the test-taking skills and English performance of Grade 7 ESL learners in the said city. The researcher applied proportional stratified random sampling to ensure that the sample would represent the Grade 7 population in the three schools, allowing a representation of the population in each school. The sample size (N=303) was based on 1,420 as the Grd. 7 population using the Raosoft online sample size calculator, with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by School.

School	Population (N)	Percentage (%)	Sample (n)
Pulo National High School	1,174	82.68	251
Pulo Diezmo Integrated School	148	10.42	32

Casile Integrated National High School	198	6.9	21
Total	1420	100	303

Table 1 shows that the majority of the respondents (251) were from Pulo National High School, and 32 from Pulo Diezmo Integrated School and 21 from Casile Integrated National High School. To minimise sampling error and to ensure representation of the population, the researcher used a two-stage stratified sampling method: proportionate allocation of the number of respondents per school followed by a random selection of respondents from different sections per school with equal representation from each class. Once the respondents per section were determined, simple random sampling via the lottery or fishbowl method was employed to give each pupil equal and independent chances of selection. This sampling design aided in the validity of the study, as the sample was fairly representative of the Grade 7 population of the three involved schools.

2.4. Research Instrument

The primary tool used was a researcher-developed and revised questionnaire (called the Test-Taking Skills Assessment Tool [TSAT]) that aimed to assess students' test-taking skills. The tool was initially constructed in the Turkish language but translated into English and Filipino for the understanding of Grade 7 respondents and to enable them to better answer the items, making the instrument linguistically authentic and culturally sensitive. The instrument was rigorously evaluated to ensure its validity and reliability. The items were first modified based on the study's variables and the characteristics of the Grade 7 class and the draft version was then validated through content and face validation with three experts in English Language Teaching and educational research. Their feedback on the relevance, clarity and technicalities of the items informed the revisions to the instrument. It was then piloted to 47 Grade 7 learners who were not part of the main study, but the first reliability test was lower than the acceptable level, so the test was again validated by a new set of experts and revised according to their suggestions. This time, the researcher tested the tool's reliability with 30 learners finding it to have an acceptable internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.754. The study used the students' official teacher-assigned English test or exam grades in the third quarter as secondary data to determine their academic performance for the period, so learners' self-reported test-taking skills could be compared with their academic achievement. In terms of the interpretation of the learning data, the study adhered to recent methodological advice on Likert-type scales, which includes the suggestion that equal interval scaling and sequenced verbal descriptors can be validly applied in instruments designed by researchers (Salleh & Sulaiman, 2026). As such, equal interval scaling was used to interpret the results and these were expressed using the labels Very High, High, Low and Very Low.

Table 2. Interpretation Scale for Test-Taking Skills.

Range of mean	Descriptive Rating	Interpretation
3.26 - 4.00	Very High	The student always applies specific test-taking skill.
2.51 - 3.25	High	The student often applies specific test-taking skill.
1.76 - 2.50	Low	The student sometimes applies the specific test-taking skill.
1.00 - 1.75	Very Low	The student never applies the specific test-taking skill.

Table 3. Interpretation Scale for Academic Performance (Based on DepEd Order No. 8, s. 2015).

Grading scale	Descriptive Rating	Interpretation
90 – 100	Outstanding	The student has exceeded the core requirements.
85 – 89	Very Satisfactory	The students met the requirements very well.
80 – 84	Satisfactory	The student has met the core requirements.
75 – 79	Fairly Satisfactory	The student has met the minimum requirements.
Below 75	Did not meet expectations	The student needs additional support/remediation

2.5. Data Gathering Procedure

The data collecting process in this study has been done in a systematic and ethical way, in order to have accurate and valid data, and to respect the rights of the participants. Prior to the gathering of data, approval was first obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent of the City of Cabuyao, as well as the school principals from the target schools Pulo National High School, Diezmo Integrated School, and Casile Integrated National High School. Once these permissions were granted, informed consent was then secured from the parents or guardians of the Grade 7 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners and assent was also obtained from the learners themselves, following the ethical guidelines for conducting research studies. Following this, a proper orientation was given which explained to the participants the goals and objectives of the study; assured them of the confidentiality of their responses; and gave them directions on how to answer the questionnaire eliciting information about their test-taking skills. Participants were informed that their respondents were purely for research and that it would not have any bearing on their grades. The questionnaire was distributed in the classroom while the researcher was present to provide guidance to participants and they were given plenty of time to complete it. Following the questionnaire administration, the academic performance of the respondents was obtained from their English teachers, based on their official grades for the third quarter, with permission from the school principals. In the end, the completed questionnaires were gathered, validated, coded and were ready for data analysis; all personal information were kept confidential and securely stored to maintain the confidentiality of the study participants.

2.6. Statistical Treatment of Data

All data collected were statistically treated to represent the sample. To gauge the respondents' overall test-taking skills, the weighted mean was applied to describe their Likert-scale responses with regard to the skills required in reading comprehension and understanding test instructions, managing test time, and analytical reasoning and strategic thinking. This gave us a total score that represented the central tendency in the test-taking skills of the group. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to test if the continuous data were normally distributed. This was important because it indicates whether the normality assumption of data sets required for the use of parametric tests is valid or not. Once it was confirmed that the data were normally distributed, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (Pearson r) was employed to determine the strength and direction of the association between test-taking skills and academic performance in English. This enabled us to determine if, among the respondents, a higher level of test-taking skills was related to higher academic achievement.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 4. Reading comprehension and understanding test instructions.

Indicator	Mean	Interpretation
1. I use clues in the text (such as examples or signal words) to help me answer.	3.1650	High
2. I reread the paragraph or question if I don't understand it the first time.	3.5116	Very high
3. I guess the meaning of new words by looking at their parts, for example, the word "unhappy" combines the prefix "un" (meaning "not" with the word "happy" to mean "not happy".	2.6238	High
4. I underline keywords and important sentences while reading.	2.6535	High
5. I read the question again to make sure my question matches what is being asked.	3.4059	Very high
General Assessment	**3.0719**	**High**

Table 5. Time management and pacing.

Indicator	Mean	Interpretation
1. I count the number of questions before I begin.	2.4158	Low
2. I plan how much time to spend on each part of the test.	2.3432	Low
3. I skip it and answer other questions first if a question is difficult	3.2739	Very High
4.I check the time often to stay aware of how long I have left.	2.8548	High
5. I finish early so I can review and check my answers.	2.769	High
General Assessment	**3.0719**	**High**

Table 6. Analytical Reasoning and Strategy.

Indicator	Mean	Interpretation
1. I read all the answer choices before picking one.	3.4818	Very High
2. I remove the choices that I know are clearly wrong.	3.2277	Very High
3. I looked at two choices very closely to see if they look the same.	3.2475	Very High
4. I make sure my answers match the passage or question.	3. 4389	Very High
5. I think carefully and choose the one that makes the most sense when only two answers seem possible.	3.396	Very High
General Assessment	**3.0719**	**High**

The results reveal that the Grade 7 English-as-second-language (ESL) learners by and large showed high reading comprehension and instructions test-taking skills, with a mean of 3.0719. The learners seem to have relied most heavily on the strategy of rereading to comprehend questions, with super-high responses in returning to the paragraph/question if they didn't understand it at first and rereading to check if their response answered the question. This means that the learners are patient and thorough - a good thing. But their low use of other reading processes such as highlighting, analysing new vocabulary and using clues to infer meaning suggests that many of them may still rely more on rote memorisation strategies. This finding supports the notion that being persistent is only one of the critical ingredients for successful reading performance and that the students also need to adopt more analytical processing of text during the test.

Of those who took the reading tests, time management and pacing were also quite advanced, with a mean of 2.7314. They had particularly good practices by simply skipping questions they don't know and coming back to it later, which is indicative of being flexible and keeping going during the test rather than being stuck on each question. They also frequently looked at the time and attempted to complete the test to have some time to go back and check their answers. This is offset by one critical finding: many students did not consistently count the questions before the test or anticipate what time they should spend on different sections of the test. So, while they are fairly effective at adapting to testing situations, they are less effective at making plans. That is, they are generally reactive in managing time. This is in line with previous research which indicates that performing well in tests requires more than being flexible during the examination, test takers also need to practise before the test.

Of the three areas, the students' greatest strength was in analytical reasoning and strategic thinking, with an overall mean of 3.3584 (very high). All indicators within this area rated very high, revealing that the learners tended to be good thinkers and thorough when responding to test questions. Many of them indicated they had read all the answer choices first, checked their answers were consistent with the information in the question or passage, thought carefully about what made the most sense, compared similar options and eliminated obviously incorrect answers. These answers indicate that the students are already applying common-sense reasoning and strategies to make their answers more accurate and less reliant on guessing. These kinds of self-regulations are supported in the literature, in which it is noted that reasoning and elimination strategies are helpful for improving accuracy and reducing test anxiety. Similarly, more analytical reasoning is acknowledged as one of the foundations for developing problem solving and critical thinking in the classroom in the Philippines, which are both crucial for improving academic achievement in English; both these processes are necessary to succeed in English education. Based on the results, the learners demonstrate good persistence, adaptability, and reasoning abilities, but could undergo more support to enhance their deep reading strategies and to respond more actively to time management.

Table 7. Academic Performance of Grade 7-ESL -Learners.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Did Not Meet Expectations	7	2.3	2.3	2.3
Fairly Satisfactory	56	18.5	18.5	20.8
Satisfactory	71	23.4	23.4	44.2
Very Satisfactory	74	24.4	24.4	68.6
Outstanding	95	31.4	31.4	100
Total	303	100	100	

The results indicate a positive picture in the academic achievement of the 303 students, with the majority of the learners getting high grades in English. A large percentage (over 50%) of the learners were in the Very Satisfactory and Outstanding groups, which means that the majority are doing well, and they are likely also doing well because of the educational environment as well as test-taking strategies. At the same time, the trend for the Fairly Satisfactory and Did Not Meet Expectations groups indicates that all students may not be receiving the support they need and some of them may require higher academic support. This means that while many students are perhaps already progressing well, there is still a need for strategies to help lower performing learners develop skills such as strategic time management, analytical reading and reasoning, and ways to challenge the top performing students to build deeper reasoning. This analysis is consistent with research which suggests that achievement is more influenced by the use of

effective strategies than sociodemographic variables, and that good instruction and strategy use can enhance performance among different cohorts of students.

Table 8. Significant Correlation Between the Test-Taking Skills and Academic Performance.

Variables	Correlation r-value	Strength of relationship	p-value	Interpretation
Reading comprehension and understanding of test-instructions	0.267	Weak Relationship	0.00	Reject Ho: Significant
Time management and pacing during assessments	0.217	Weak Relationship	0.00	Reject Ho: Significant
Analytical reasoning and strategic approach in answering test items	0.313	Moderate Relationship	0.00	Reject Ho: Significant

Correlation Value (r)	
± 0.00 to ± 0.10	No or very weak
± 0.10 to ± 0.30	Weak
± 0.30 to ± 0.50	Moderate
± 0.50 to ± 0.70	Strong
± 0.710 to ± 1.0	Very strong

Table 8 displays the results of correlation analysis between academic performance and test-taking skills of the 7th ESL learners. The results show that the skills to comprehend test instructions and questions ($r = 0.267$, $p = 0.00$) and manage time and pace of test items ($r = 0.217$, $p = 0.00$) have a low and significant correlation with academic performance. We reject the null hypothesis because p-values are less than the alpha level (0.05). This suggests that the acquisition of these skills is related to the acquisition of academic performance, albeit through a moderate correlation, which suggests that there may exist other factors that play a role in determining learners' academic performance. However, the analytical skills and test strategies in responding to test items ($r = 0.313$, $p = 0.00$) has a moderate and significant correlation with academic performance. This suggests that learners who are more effective in understanding of questions and approaches in responding to test items are more successful in their academic performance.

Bouckaert noted in a recent OECD assessment that critical thinking and analytical skills are crucial for the success of students in all education systems as they help to successfully evaluate, integrate and transfer knowledge. Likewise, according to the International Baccalaureate, employers and teachers see analytical thinking skills as the most significant skill for success in the information age, not only in the long term, but also in academic performance. These findings indicate that while all dimensions of test-taking skills are significant predictors of academic achievement, analytical reasoning and strategic thinking skills have a greater impact, and as such, should be the primary focus of educational intervention.

Project A.B.E.G.A.E.L.: Advancing Basic English Growth through Analytical and Effective Learning Strategies

Introduction:

Test-taking skills are crucial for Grade 7 ESL students. This study, Test-Taking Skills and Academic Performance in English of Grade 7 ESL Learners examined the role of these skills in students' overall academic performance. Students demonstrate high-level critical thinking skills, but need support in pre-test planning, time management and reading skills.

General Objective:

The aim of Project A.B.E.G.A.E.L. is to enhance students' assessment and English language skills through a targeted intervention. The focus of this intervention is on addressing identified skill gaps of the initial (original) Grade 7 cohort who are now incoming Grade 8 students. The project is also an early intervention program for incoming Grade 7 students to enhance their basic reading, pacing and critical thinking skills, and prepare them for academic demands.

Target Participants:

Project A.B.E.G.A.E.L. plans on engaging the original placement test participants in Pulo National High School who were in Grade 7 ESL, and will transition to Grade 8 next year. The program specifically targets the test-taking difficulties that were revealed in their diagnostic test and has components that include active-reading strategies and time management.

The intervention can also be used to assist new students in Grade 7. Early test-taking intervention will allow new learners to practice and practice these skills before they are asked to tackle more challenging tasks. It ensures that the identified skill gaps don't occur in new students.

By including students from both Grade 8, where the original respondents first participated, and Grade 7, where the new learners begin, the program offers an opportunity to support remediation (for individuals with skill gaps) and prevention (for the new students entering the program) but also enables consistency of skills development, positive reinforcement of learner confidence, and target improvements for academic achievement and resilience in junior high. This helps to extend the flow-on effects of the program across school years.

Timeline:

This course aims to strengthen the junior-high students' understanding for pacing, reasoning and reading skills. Utilizing a 12-week program, the program will begin in June 2016, with a diagnostic stage in early June assessing students' reading, pacing, and reasoning abilities. The first cycle takes place in June-July and it covers active reading. The second cycle, late July to early September, will focus on pacing. And the third cycle, from September to October, enhances analytical reasoning. The five-month program includes regular support, enrichment and reflection activities to support a range of learning styles. The program is scheduled to allow students who transition from Grade 7 to Grade 8 in our initial cohort move to the program's enrichment activities and new Grade 7 students do basic exercises. This enables outgoing Grade 8 students to continue to build skills as they advance to their next grade, and new Grade 7 students to develop their test-taking skills during early junior high.

Narrative:

Project A.B.E.G.A.E.L. is a response to the Test Taking Skills and English Academic Performance of Grade 7 English as Second Language (ESL) Learners study. While our findings indicate more than half of the survey participants rated Outstanding or Very Satisfactory, the study also highlighted certain areas of test taking skills in need of improvement such as time management, active reading and planning to take a test. Such skill gaps persisted in high performing students, showing that even though students can achieve their expected grade, their test taking processes need to be developed further. Tunç and Şenel point out that test taking strategies are teachable and impact learners' interpretation and understanding of test instructions. Likewise, Fakhli and Sawai note that explicit strategy teaching allows students to better manage their time and tackle test items more precisely.

Their intervention enhances learners' test taking skills and English language learning through classroom activities. This program provides intervention for two cohorts:

previous Grade 7 students in Grade 8 who require intervention and new Grade 7 students who will benefit from learning strategies early in their learning journey. This two-pronged approach allows for remediation and prevention, retaining skill momentum across year levels.

The program is from June to October 2026 and has three cycles of instruction. The first cycle focuses on active reading strategies, such as key word searches, annotation exercises, identifying and using clues and context, think-aloud modeling and guided reading. Duke and Cartwright demonstrate that explicit teaching of reading strategies leads to better comprehension and test scores based on reading. McKeown and others (2020) are able to show that think-aloud modeling enhances metacognition, by teaching students how expert readers approach material.

The second cycle focuses on time management and pacing. This includes time-management workshops, previewing tests, timed test practice, skip and solve strategies and proofreading. Putwain et al. report pacing instruction alleviates student test anxiety and increases student completion. Kim and Lee also found that practise under a time constraint helps accuracy and efficiency in assessments.

The third cycle enhances analytical skills. It involves workshops that analyse tests, elimination drills, answering using textual evidence and simulations of strategic thinking. Cabardo and Camacho show elimination and distributor analysis skills increase the success of multiple-choice tests. McKenna and Robinson share students who argue their answers with their textual evidence develop critical thinking and reasoning skills.

The consistent use of remediation, enrichment, portfolio building and reflective journals in each cycle ensures differentiation and individualised support. Zimmerman and Moylan note that reflective and self-regulated learning strategies encourage retention of strategies and enhanced learning outcomes. The latter undertake more complex phases while the former undertake basic activities. This approach meets immediate and long-term objectives.

The Project A.B.E.G.A.E.L. is a targeted evidence-based intervention to address problems in the study. It targets important test taking skills, accommodates learners across a range of achievement levels, and fosters high levels of academic performance, through the junior high school years.

Project A.B.E.G.A.E.L. included rubrics to set transparent, consistent standards for the different ways in which learners can read, manage time and critique analyses. Panadero explains that the use of rubrics helps students understand learning goals and regulate their learning, and are therefore they are valuable tools to support performance in skill-based interventions, such as Project A.B.E.G.A.E.L.

4. Conclusion

1. Grade 7 ESL learners are overall strong test takers in terms of thinking skills (planning and reflecting) and analytical reasoning, are satisfactory in terms of reading comprehension, understanding test directions, and time management. But many continue to use more repetitive and passive skills, rather than active reading and planning skills.
2. Grade 7 ESL learners (in general) perform satisfactorily to exceptionally in English, which indicates that the sample group has positive academic performance.
3. Students' test-taking skills play a critical role in English academic performance, and analytical reasoning and strategic thinking skills are the best predictors of performance.
4. These patterns of strengths and weaknesses point to a multi component, systematic intervention, such as Project A.B.E.G.A.E.L. This will focus on developing reading comprehension, time management and strategic thinking skills, given the frequent weakness in active reading and planning skills, while continuing to develop the higher

academic proficiency of these students in analytical reasoning. The approach in this way offers speedy intervention and remediation for the Fairly Satisfactory and Did Not Meet Expectations group while stimulating the more able learners to stretch their active strategic test taking ability and achievement.

5. Recommendation

Following the study's findings, the need to propose recommendations that translate the proposed intervention in a well-defined, responsive way to learners' needs is crucial. The following recommendations are recommended to facilitate the successful implementation of Project A.B.E.G.A.E.L. to improve teaching and lesson planning and aid in the continued development of learners' test taking skills.

5. Educators may increase opportunities for learners to practice proactive and purposeful test-taking skills, such as reading comprehension, test instruction comprehension and time management. While the test-taking skills of Grade 7 ESL learners are generally high, more focus may also be given on active reading skills (e.g., underlining, looking for context clues, breaking up big words) and planning skills (e.g., previewing test questions, allocating time) before taking tests. These may enable learners to be more strategic, skillful and confident test takers.
6. Schools and English teachers may continue to nurture and enhance the relatively positive academic achievement of Grade 7 ESL learners with ongoing teacher guidance, engagement and support, effective learning activities and when necessary, intervention strategies. Most learners are currently performing at satisfactory to excellent levels in English, so for those who are meeting standards, enrichment activities may be offered to help maintain their academic performance while for those who are struggling, remediation and other academic support may continue to be offered. This may promote inclusive and progressive academic achievement.
7. Similarly, English teachers can also develop test-taking skills in the classroom through teaching and assessment practices, such as through the teaching of strategic thinking and logical analysis skills. Given the correlation of these skills with English academic achievement in the current study, teachers can incorporate activities requiring logical analysis, consideration of different options and reasoning grounded on evidence. This way, test-taking skills may be developed not only as test-taking techniques, but also as significant academic skills that enhance overall English performance.
8. The systematic elements of Project A.B.E.G.A.E.L. can be introduced into the classroom to nurture test-taking skills. As the program addresses deficiencies in active reading, time management and decision-making, the program cycles, which include Active Reading, Budgeting Time and Evaluating Choices, can be incorporated into a lesson plan. The program's worksheets, pacing strategy guides, and checklists assist learners to engage in these strategic behaviors and practice them during assessments.

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