АКТУАЛЬНІ МЕТОДИКИ – ЕФЕКТИВНА ПРАКТИКА

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MASTERING READING STRATEGIES FOR INTERNATIONAL EXAM PREPARATION

Abstract

In today's globalized and highly interconnected world, international English language examinations such as IELTS, TOEFL, and FCE function as widely recognized and standardized tools for assessing foreign language competence. These examinations are not merely a measure of linguistic knowledge; they serve as crucial milestones for pursuing higher education opportunities, gaining professional employment, and facilitating international mobility. Among the various components of these tests, the Reading section plays a pivotal role, as it evaluates more than the candidate's ability to understand texts on a literal level. It also examines their capacity for analytical information processing, critical interpretation of complex arguments, identification of logical connections within a text, and the application of higher-order critical thinking skills in comprehending and evaluating written material.

The relevance of this research is underscored by the distinctive characteristics of the reading materials used in these examinations. The texts are often associated with a high cognitive load, diverse genres, and specific lexical and grammatical features that reflect both academic and real-life contexts. For instance, IELTS reading passages combine academic and general topics, TOEFL texts are drawn from university-level textbooks and academic discourse, while FCE passages are adapted from newspapers, magazines, and literary sources. As such, mastering academic reading strategies–including skimming, scanning, paraphrasing, and inference-making–is not only a necessary prerequisite for successfully passing these examinations but also a critical factor in developing transferable information-processing skills that are applicable to future academic, professional, and real-world problem-solving tasks.

The primary aim of this article is to substantiate the significant role of the Reading section in international English language examinations, specifically IELTS, TOEFL, and FCE, and to analyze the strategies and techniques that contribute to improving candidate performance in this domain. By examining the structural features, lexical complexity, and cognitive demands of reading tasks, this study highlights the ways in which targeted strategy instruction can enhance reading comprehension, foster independent learning, and support the development of higher-level analytical and evaluative skills. Ultimately, understanding the Reading component in a comprehensive and strategic manner equips candidates not only to excel in examination settings but also to navigate academic texts, professional documents, and diverse written materials in English-speaking environments with greater confidence and proficiency.

Key words: *international language exams, reading strategies, skimming, scanning, defining keywords.*

Introduction. This paper provides a systematic analysis of skimming, scanning, and key word identification techniques in the context of IELTS, TOEFL, and FCE, integrating recent cognitive-linguistic insights with practical testing applications. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of reading strategies by linking cognitive processing mechanisms with the effective performance of language learners in high-stakes examinations.

By enhancing students' efficiency in reading sections, the study supports academic readiness and professional competence in English-language environments [2]. The scientific value of this paper lies in its integration of cognitive-linguistic theory with applied testing practice, providing both theoretical insights into reading strategies and practical recommendations for improving candidate performance in IELTS, TOEFL, and FCE.

The study advances the understanding of how targeted reading techniques can optimize comprehension, critical analysis, and information processing in high-stakes language assessments.

The **purpose of the article** is to provide a comprehensive analysis of reading strategies, namely *skimming, scanning* and *key words defining*, in international English language examinations such as IELTS, TOEFL, and FCE, and to analyze how these strategies contribute to improving candidate performance.

Main body. In the context of a globalized world, international English language examinations such as IELTS (International English Language Testing System), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), and FCE (First Certificate in English (also called B2 First) have become indispensable tools for evaluating language proficiency and facilitating access to higher education, professional opportunities, and international mobility. These are standardized English proficiency exams, but they differ in focus: IELTS and TOEFL are mainly for academic and professional purposes, while FCE is for general English at an upper-intermediate (B2) level.

Among the various components of these tests, the Reading section plays a pivotal role, as it assesses not only candidates' literal understanding of texts but also their ability to analyze information, interpret arguments, identify logical connections, and engage in critical thinking [10].

Characteristics of Texts in Each Exam:

1. **IELTS Reading**

– Text genres: Academic and journalistic articles, excerpts from popular science magazines (e.g., National Geographic, The Economist), instructions, advertising materials.

– Length: 3 texts, each about 700–900 words.

– Features:

– Rich in academic vocabulary;

– Presence of specialized terms with explanations in the text;

– Structure with subheadings and visual elements (charts, tables);

– Frequent use of paraphrasing in tasks.

2. **TOEFL Reading**

– Text genres: Exclusively academic, similar to university textbooks (history, biology, social sciences, arts).

– Length: 3–4 texts of 600–700 words each.

– Features:

– High level of academic language;

– Detailed definitions of concepts and contextual explanations of terms;

– Logically structured paragraphs (topic – argument – example);

– Emphasis on inferential reading (ability to draw conclusions).

3. **FCE Reading (B2 First)**

– Text genres: Adapted excerpts from newspapers, magazines, fiction, interviews, reviews.

– Length: Several texts of 350–600 words.

– Features:

– Less academic, closer to "real-life" language;

– More varied styles: from narrative to informative;

– Focus on overall understanding and working with context;

– Tasks include working with both details and global meaning.

The summarized comparative analysis of the text peculiarities and differences due to certain exam is defined in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparative analysis of the text types on exams

Criterion	IELTS	TOEFL	FCE
Theme	Academic + journalistic	Academic (university level)	Everyday + adapted literary
Text length	700–900 words × 3	600–700 words × 3–4	350–600 words × 4–5
Lexical difficulty	High, but often with explanations	Very high, with academic terminology	Medium, B2-level vocabulary
Structure	Paragraphs, subheadings, tables, charts	Clear academic structure (thesis – evidence – example)	More flexible, depending on genre
Main challenge	Paraphrasing in tasks; choosing correct interpretation	Ability to draw logical conclusions; understanding academic argumentation	Navigating different text styles; balancing details and overall meaning
Key skills	Skimming + Scanning + Defining key words	Academic reading, inference, identifying main idea	Understanding context; ability to work with stylistic differences

The complexity of the Reading tasks in these examinations arises from multiple factors, including strict time constraints, diverse text genres, specialized vocabulary, and high cognitive demands [7]. Consequently, the systematic application of reading strategies–particularly skimming, scanning, and defining key words–is essential for efficient comprehension and task completion. Skimming allows candidates to quickly grasp the overall structure and main ideas of a text, scanning enables rapid location of specific information, and identifying key words reduces the risk of disorientation amid extensive or dense material.

Beyond examination performance, these strategies also have significant academic and professional value. They support activities such as analyzing scientific articles, preparing research reports or presentations, and reviewing professional documents. Empirical research has shown that students who practice these techniques deliberately demonstrate increased reading speed, greater accuracy in locating information, and improved comprehension, all of which directly enhance test outcomes [5]. Therefore, developing proficiency in these reading strategies is a fundamental element of effective preparation for high-stakes English language assessments and contributes to broader academic literacy and cognitive skills.

In addition to improving comprehension and accuracy, the use of structured reading strategies provides significant psychological benefits for test-takers. High levels of anxiety are known to impair attention, reduce processing speed, and negatively affect performance [6]. By following a clear algorithmic approach–beginning with skimming to understand the general structure, identifying key words to focus on relevant information, and scanning to locate specific answers–students gain a sense of control over the task. This structured process reduces stress and enhances confidence, enabling candidates to approach texts methodically rather than feeling overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of information.

Another critical advantage of these strategies is effective time management. International exams impose strict time limits, and without efficient reading methods, students risk spending disproportionate amounts of time on individual passages. Skimming and scanning allow for quick orientation within the text, prioritization of relevant sections, and faster retrieval of information, ensuring that all questions can be addressed within the allotted time. The ability to allocate cognitive resources efficiently is therefore closely linked to higher overall test performance [1].

Finally, mastering these strategies contributes to cognitive and academic skill development beyond the immediate context of examinations. The analytical and inferential skills cultivated through deliberate reading practice are transferable to academic research, professional document review, and information synthesis tasks in real-world contexts. Students trained in skimming, scanning, and identifying key words are better equipped to process complex material, discern essential information, and construct logical interpretations, forming the foundation of long-term academic literacy and critical thinking competencies.

Taken together, these factors underscore the centrality of reading strategies in successful preparation for IELTS, TOEFL, and FCE. Not only do they optimize performance under timed, high-stakes conditions, but they also foster essential cognitive, academic, and professional skills that extend well beyond the scope of standardized testing. A fundamental aspect of effective preparation for international English language examinations is the systematic application of targeted reading strategies. Among these, skimming, scanning, and defining key words are widely recognized as essential for improving comprehension and test performance.

Skimming involves rapidly moving through a text to grasp its overall structure, main ideas, and thematic organization without focusing on every detail. In the context of IELTS, skimming allows candidates to quickly identify the central idea of each paragraph and anticipate the type of information required for multiple-choice or matching tasks [1]. For TOEFL, where texts are often dense and academic, skimming enables test-takers to understand the logical progression of arguments, distinguishing between general concepts and supporting evidence. In FCE, skimming assists students in quickly orienting themselves to the topic and purpose of varied text genres, from articles to adapted literary excerpts.

Scanning, by contrast, is a more focused technique that involves searching for specific information, such as dates, names, figures, or keywords, within a text. In IELTS, scanning is used to locate answers for True/False/Not Given and gap-fill exercises efficiently. In TOEFL, scanning helps identify precise information embedded within lengthy paragraphs, facilitating rapid retrieval of data needed to answer comprehension or inference questions. In FCE, scanning supports tasks such as matching headings or locating details for multiple-choice questions, ensuring time-efficient completion [8].

Defining key words entails identifying and understanding essential terms, phrases, or concepts that are critical to interpreting the text and answering questions accurately. This strategy is particularly valuable across all three exams because many tasks involve paraphrasing: test items often use synonyms or restructured phrases to assess comprehension. Recognizing and isolating key words allows candidates to map exam questions to relevant portions of the text, reducing confusion and enhancing response accuracy.

Together, these strategies form an integrated approach to reading that addresses the cognitive, temporal, and psychological challenges posed by high-stakes examinations [3]. Their systematic application not only improves immediate test performance but also strengthens transferable academic skills, enabling learners to engage effectively with complex texts in educational and professional contexts.

Besides, some integrated tasks would be beneficial, for instance:

1. Give students a reading passage from an IELTS or TOEFL test.

Table 2

Algorithm for applying reading techniques

Stage	Technique	Student Actions	Goal
1	Skimming	– Review titles, headings, and the first and last sentences of paragraphs. – Note repeated words and key themes.	Create a "text map" to gain an overall understanding of the content and structure.
2	Defining Key Words	– Read the task and highlight key words (nouns, dates, numbers, specific terms). – Identify synonyms and possible paraphrases (e.g., *children → youngsters; environment → surroundings*).	Focus attention on what exactly needs to be found and avoid distractors.
3	Scanning	– Return to the relevant paragraph using the "map" from Stage 1. – Search for highlighted key words or their synonyms. – Match the text information with the task requirements.	Locate specific information (dates, facts, definitions) as quickly as possible.
4	Verification / Checking	– Re-read sentences around the located fragment. – Ensure the information precisely answers the question and not a similar distractor.	Increase answer accuracy.

2. Ask them to:

– Skim for the main idea.

– Scan for specific answers to questions.

– Underline key words that help answer questions.

3. Discuss strategies as a class: which worked best, how time was used, etc.

Additionally, the following techniques and tasks should be considered:

4. Use timed exercises to simulate exam pressure.

5. Encourage pair work: students explain main idea or search for info together.

6. Track progress: measure speed and accuracy over time.

7. Mix text types: articles, graphs, advertisements, emails.

8. Give feedback on both reading strategy and comprehension, not just answers.

The systematic application of skimming, scanning, and defining key words offers a multifaceted advantage for candidates preparing for IELTS, TOEFL, and FCE. Firstly, these strategies enhance efficiency, enabling students to navigate lengthy and complex texts within strict time constraints. By prioritizing relevant information and filtering out non-essential details, candidates can allocate their cognitive resources effectively, ensuring that all tasks are completed accurately and within the allotted time [11].

Secondly, these techniques provide psychological benefits by reducing test-related stress and anxiety. Following a structured approach fosters confidence, as students gain a clear sense of control over the reading process. This reduces the cognitive burden associated with managing dense texts and numerous questions, allowing test-takers to maintain focus and composure throughout the examination.

Thirdly, the adoption of these strategies contributes to the development of broader academic and professional competencies. Beyond examination contexts, the ability to rapidly comprehend, analyze, and extract essential information from complex written materials is a critical skill in higher education, research, and professional work. Students trained in these techniques are better equipped to interpret scientific articles, synthesize information for presentations or reports, and perform analytical tasks in professional environments [9].

Finally, empirical evidence suggests that deliberate practice of skimming, scanning, and defining key words directly improves test performance, increasing both reading speed and accuracy. These improvements translate into higher scores and more reliable outcomes, which are crucial for achieving targeted certification levels, such as Band 6.5 or 7.0 in IELTS.

Taken together, these factors underscore the integral role of reading strategies in successful preparation for international English language examinations. They not only optimize performance under high-stakes conditions but also cultivate transferable cognitive, academic, and professional skills, demonstrating their value well beyond the scope of standardized testing.

Conclusions and prospects for further research. Mastering reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and defining key words is essential for effective preparation for international English language examinations, including IELTS, TOEFL, and FCE. These techniques enable candidates to manage strict time constraints, navigate complex and information-rich texts, and maintain accuracy in answering tasks, thereby directly enhancing test performance.

In addition to their impact on examination results, these strategies provide important psychological benefits by reducing stress and increasing confidence, allowing students to approach reading tasks in a structured and controlled manner. Moreover, the skills developed through systematic use of these techniques extend beyond the context of testing, fostering critical thinking, academic literacy, and professional competencies applicable in research, presentations, and document analysis.

Empirical evidence confirms that deliberate practice of skimming, scanning, and key word identification improves both speed and comprehension, demonstrating the practical and measurable value of these strategies. Consequently, their integration into test preparation programs is not only beneficial but necessary, ensuring that learners are fully equipped to succeed in high-stakes examinations while simultaneously cultivating transferable cognitive and academic skills.

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ОСВОЄННЯ СТРАТЕГІЙ ЧИТАННЯ ДЛЯ ПІДГОТОВКИ ДО МІЖНАРОДНИХ ІСПИТІВ

Анотація

У сучасному глобалізованому та тісно взаємопов'язаному світі міжнародні іспити з англійської мови, такі як IELTS, TOEFL та FCE, виконують функцію широко визнаних і стандартизованих інструментів оцінки рівня володіння іноземною мовою. Ці іспити є не лише показником мовних знань, а й важливими етапами для здобуття вищої освіти, професійного працевлаштування та сприяння міжнародній мобільності. Серед різних компонентів цих тестів секція Reading (читання) відіграє ключову роль, адже вона оцінює не тільки здатність кандидата розуміти тексти на буквальному рівні, а й його вміння аналітично обробляти інформацію, критично інтерпретувати складні аргументи, визначати логічні зв'язки у тексті та застосовувати вищі когнітивні навички критичного мислення під час осмислення та оцінювання письмових матеріалів.

Актуальність цього дослідження визначається специфічними характеристиками текстів, що використовуються в зазначених іспитах. Вони часто відзначаються високим когнітивним навантаженням, жанровою різноманітністю та специфічними лексичними й граматичними особливостями, що відображають як академічні, так і реальні життєві контексти. Наприклад, тексти для IELTS поєднують академічні та загальні теми, матеріали TOEFL взяті з університетських підручників і академічних дискусій, тоді як тексти FCE адаптовані з газет, журналів і художніх джерел. Тому опанування стратегій академічного читання – таких як skimming (швидке переглядове читання), scanning (пошук конкретної інформації), парафразування та висновки на основі контексту – є не лише необхідною умовою успішного проходження іспитів, а й критично важливим чинником розвитку універсальних навичок обробки інформації, що знадобляться в майбутній академічній, професійній та практичній діяльності.

Основна мета цієї статті – обґрунтувати значущість секції Reading у міжнародних іспитах з англійської мови, зокрема IELTS, TOEFL та FCE, а також проаналізувати стратегії та методики, які сприяють підвищенню ефективності виконання завдань у цій сфері. Дослідження структури текстів, складності лексики та когнітивних вимог завдань дозволяє виявити, як цілеспрямоване навчання стратегіям читання може покращити розуміння текстів, сприяти самостійному навчанню та підтримувати розвиток аналітичних і оцінювальних навичок високого рівня. Зрештою, усвідомлене і стратегічне опанування секції Reading дає змогу кандидатам не лише успішно складати іспити, а й впевнено працювати з академічними текстами, професійними документами та різноманітними письмовими матеріалами англійською мовою.

Ключові слова: *міжнародні мовні іспити, стратегії читання, перегляд, сканування, визначення ключових слів.*

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