

# Effective Reading Strategies for Success in the TOEFL Reading Section: A Comprehensive Review

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## Abstract

This literature review will look at existing research on ways for improving TOEFL reading scores. The reading portion of the TOEFL test assesses non-native English speakers' ability to consume and comprehend academic literature, which is essential for success in an English-language academic setting. This study discusses key strategies for improving reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall exam success, with a focus on the challenges faced by Chinese test takers. This work synthesizes and reviews previous research to give useful insights for educators and students, as well as instructional ideas for TOEFL preparation courses. The research findings aim to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications, resulting in a more targeted and effective method for learning the TOEFL reading exam.

**Keywords:** TOEFL Reading, Reading Strategies, Vocabulary Acquisition, Test-Taking Strategies, Chinese Students

## Introduction

Designed particularly to assess non-native speakers' comprehension and critical analysis of university-level academic texts, the TOEFL iBT Reading component is a vital worldwide assessment of English language abilities for academic purposes (Nikolaieva 2016; Zuhayana 2018). Candidates must exhibit a wide spectrum of sophisticated reading skills including complete reading comprehension, extensive vocabulary understanding, nuanced sentence and paragraph analysis, and the capacity to discern text structure and purpose (Putlack et al., 2020). The portion consists of two 700-word passages from several academic disciplines. Apart from the language test, the TOEFL reading component measures a candidate's potential to absorb knowledge and participate in intellectual conversation (Kurniawati & Fitrawati, 2020; Tauchid & Suwandi, 2021; Kaniadewi & Asyifa, 2022). This involves the capacity to demonstrate understanding of important concepts, supporting data, and basic reasoning as well as the capacity to deduce implied knowledge and appropriately understand academic jargon in context (Jealani et al., 2022; Fitri, 2022).

Though a lot of studies on TOEFL reading strategies, there are still notable differences especially among students from various language backgrounds. The present research

primarily overlook the specific challenges faced by certain language groups, particularly students whose native tongue is Chinese, in favor of general solutions. These pupils find it very difficult to grasp cross-cultural academic environments (Chen & Lin, 2023), negotiate difficult language patterns, and decipher latent meaning. The research aim in this study including three perspectives, first, to compile current research on TOEFL reading skills; second, to look at the subtle problems non-native English speakers have; and finally, to offer specific techniques for raising reading performance. This work has as its primary goals numerous different objectives. This paper aims to provide complex insights for more successful test preparation by methodically analyzing significant competencies including identifying paragraph functions, tracking a text's logical development, and knowing the function of individual sentences inside the larger text argument (Liao, 2018; Maspufah, 2022). Furthermore, this work tackles a significant methodological limitation in previous studies: a lack of long-term effectiveness evaluations of TOEFL reading strategies. While most current studies focus on transient benefits, it is crucial to look at how these techniques become long-term academic language learning and real-world academic reading skills (Pramesti, 2023).

Closing these knowledge gaps will help us to significantly progress our understanding of academic reading skill development in non-native English-speaking countries. Therefore, this study is crucial for addressing gaps in existing research, particularly the unique challenges faced by native Chinese-speaking students in the TOEFL reading section. While there are many studies on reading strategies, most fail to offer tailored guidance for Chinese students. This research aims to propose effective test preparation strategies that help students overcome language and cultural adaptation difficulties, while enhancing their academic vocabulary, grammatical comprehension, and ability to manage test anxiety. Furthermore, current research often focuses on short-term outcomes, neglecting the long-term effectiveness of these strategies. This study will assess how these strategies contribute to the development of lasting academic reading skills, thus laying a foundation for sustained academic success. By offering targeted teaching strategies, this study has the potential to improve educational quality and help students achieve better results in the TOEFL exam.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The TOEFL reading section is a standardized test designed to assess the reading comprehension abilities of non-native English learners in academic contexts. To enhance students' reading proficiency and test performance, researchers and educators often draw on various theoretical frameworks to analyze and develop effective teaching strategies. This paper will explore the issue from two primary perspectives: Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory and Cognitive Load Theory.

#### *Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory*

SLA theory is a key area of study in linguistics and education, focusing on how non-native learners acquire a second language in both natural and instructional settings. The following section will introduce several SLA theories that are closely related to TOEFL reading strategies and explore how they provide theoretical support for reading instruction.

#### *Input Hypothesis*

The Input Hypothesis, a central theory proposed by American linguist Krashen (1981), posits that language learners acquire proficiency by being exposed to comprehensible input that is

slightly beyond their current level of competence (i.e.,  $i+1$ ). This theory is particularly relevant to TOEFL reading instruction, as the texts in the TOEFL reading section often feature complex academic vocabulary and syntactic structures, placing significant demands on students' comprehension and language abilities (Fitria, 2022; Li, 2022).

Krashen (1982) emphasizes the importance of the quantity and richness of input in language acquisition. He argues that for effective learning, input must be abundant and diverse, exposing learners to a wide range of contexts and themes in the target language. The reading materials in the TOEFL test are designed to simulate the academic environment of North American universities. Through these authentic texts, students not only gain exposure to academic content and authentic English expressions but also become familiar with the academic culture and learning processes of North American institutions (Jia, 2020). Based on Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis, teachers can provide students with a variety of academic English texts from different subject areas. This diverse input allows students to gradually build their vocabulary and strengthen their understanding of specialized terms as they engage with a broad spectrum of academic articles. Additionally, as students continue to interact with complex grammatical structures in these texts, their language sensitivity improves. Secondly, Krashen (1982) emphasizes that the quality of input is just as crucial as its quantity in language acquisition. According to his theory, language acquisition is most effectively promoted when learners understand and internalize the input they receive. This view is supported by numerous studies (e.g., Koceva, 2018; Raju & Joshith, 2018; Alahmadi, 2019; Keshmirshekan, 2019; Mason & Krashen, 2019), which demonstrate that providing purposeful, well-planned, and comprehensible input enhances second language acquisition more effectively than simply increasing the volume of input.

This approach helps students gradually improve their reading comprehension skills without overwhelming them. Additionally, Keshmirshekan (2019) suggests using graded reading materials to provide students with texts at varying levels of difficulty ( $i+1$ ). This strategy allows students to progress steadily as they encounter manageable challenges, rather than being discouraged by overly complex texts early on. This incremental approach to input design is more likely to promote steady improvement in students' TOEFL reading abilities. Although Krashen's input hypothesis has had a significant influence on the field of linguistics and has provided a valuable theoretical foundation for modern English teaching, it also has certain limitations. Raju and Joshith (2018) note that while the input hypothesis underscores the critical role of input in language acquisition, relying solely on a large quantity of input is insufficient for effective learning.

### *Metacognitive Theory*

Metacognition Theory is first introduced by American psychologist John H. Flavell in the 1970s (Channa et al., 2015). Flavell (1976) defines metacognition as an individual's ability to recognize and regulate their own cognitive processes. Research has demonstrated that the use of metacognitive strategies can significantly enhance reading comprehension (Bergey et al., 2017).

During reading, students typically employ different strategies across three stages of the task: Pre-reading, While-reading, and Post-reading (Andriani & Mbato, 2021). In this context, metacognitive strategies can be categorized into three main types: planning, monitoring, and

evaluation (Cao & Lin, 2020). Planning involves preparatory activities before reading begins; monitoring helps students stay focused and assess their understanding during reading; and evaluation entails reflecting on and summarizing the content after completing the reading task (Thuy, 2020).

Sania's (2023), study demonstrates that students' strategy planning before reading, strategy monitoring during reading, and self-assessment after reading all positively impacted their reading comprehension performance. Specifically, the use of metacognitive strategies allows students to more flexibly select and adjust appropriate approaches in TOEFL reading, thereby enhancing both their comprehension skills and problem-solving efficiency (Sungatullina et al., 2016). As a result, metacognitive strategies play a crucial role in improving reading comprehension, particularly in second language learning contexts. Integrating metacognitive strategy training into instruction is essential for helping students understand complex texts and fostering their independent learning abilities (Channa et al., 2015). Sania (2023), suggests that TOEFL reading teachers should focus on cultivating students' metacognitive awareness and assist them in learning and applying a variety of effective reading strategies. Additionally, teachers should guide students in continuously adjusting their strategies through self-evaluation and reflection during the reading process, enabling them to effectively navigate different types of reading materials.

Although metacognitive theory is widely recognized in academia, it still faces challenges in practical evaluation. Ozturk (2017), highlights that students from different cultural and educational backgrounds may exhibit significant variations in metacognitive awareness, which increases the demands on the design of assessment tools. Rahman (2020), observes that students vary in the frequency with which they use different strategies. While they tend to monitor their understanding during reading and adjust strategies when encountering difficulties, they are less likely to engage in strategy use before reading or reflect on their reading afterward. Additionally, studies by Alami (2016), Abusaeedi & Khabir (2017), and Andriani & Mbato (2021) reveal gender differences in the use of metacognitive strategies. As a result, TOEFL reading instructors must take students' individual differences into account, adjust strategy training methods flexibly, and employ a variety of assessment tools to effectively support students in developing and applying metacognitive strategies.

#### *Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)*

TBLT is a teaching method that centers on task completion as the core of learning, with the entire learning process revolving around communicative tasks that are closely aligned with course objectives (Motlagh et al., 2014). Ellis (2014) emphasizes that tasks are not merely simple activities, but processes that require learners to engage in language processing in order to achieve goals by solving problems and bridging information gaps. Studies (Motlagh et al., 2014; Calvert & Sheen, 2015; Ellis, 2017; Wang, 2022; Noroozi & Taheri, 2022; Pratista, 2023) have demonstrated that TBLT not only improves students' language proficiency but also enhances their motivation to learn and increases participation in class.

According to Rahmatillah (2019), task-based language teaching (TBLT) is considered the most effective approach for TOEFL instruction. TBLT is not only applicable to individual tasks, but can also be successfully implemented in paired tasks and whole-class activities. In TBLT classrooms, the role of the teacher shifts from being a traditional knowledge provider to that

of a facilitator and supporter of learning. Teachers are required to design meaningful tasks and provide timely feedback and guidance throughout the task execution process to help students complete tasks efficiently (Van den Branden, 2016; Ellis, 2017). This teaching method maximizes students' opportunities to use language and enhances their motivation and engagement in learning (Nikolaieva, 2016; Ellis, 2017; Chua & Lin, 2020).

For instance, Seyedi & Farahani (2014) propose the use of task-based writing activities—such as summarizing, reviewing, or solving problems—to promote a deeper understanding of texts. These writing tasks not only assist students in analyzing information, but also help them develop the ability to express ideas in their own words. Furthermore, peer feedback and teacher feedback after task completion encourage students to reflect on and improve their work, thereby enhancing their reading comprehension skills. Additionally, Wang (2022) suggests that group collaboration tasks enable teachers to encourage students to critically analyze text content. By asking questions and evaluating the source, purpose, and potential biases of the text, students cultivate critical thinking skills while gaining more opportunities to use language. This process helps them build the skills needed to tackle TOEFL reading materials more effectively.

Although TBLT offers clear advantages in improving students' language proficiency, several studies (such as Douglas & Kim, 2014; Bao & Du, 2015; Ellis, 2017; East, 2017; Bhandari, 2020; Sholeh, 2020; Liu et al., 2021) highlight challenges in its implementation. These challenges primarily include the complexity of task design, the need for teacher training, and issues related to classroom management and time control. Therefore, TOEFL reading instructors must pay close attention to these factors when applying task-based teaching methods. By focusing on effective task design, providing targeted teacher training, and maintaining strong classroom management, teachers can overcome these challenges and maximize the effectiveness of TBLT in enhancing TOEFL reading skills.

#### *Cognitive Load Theory (CLT)*

CLT, proposed by Australian educational psychologist John Sweller (1988), examines how humans process and store information during learning, with a particular focus on the capacity limitations of working memory. According to Sweller, when the complexity of a learning task exceeds the cognitive capacity of students, learning efficiency is significantly hindered. Therefore, CLT emphasizes the importance of considering students' cognitive load when designing teaching activities. By optimizing the presentation of information and guiding students to employ effective learning strategies, teachers can reduce extraneous cognitive load that is not directly related to learning, thereby enhancing overall learning outcomes.

The TOEFL reading test requires candidates to process a large volume of academic texts within a limited time (Maizarah, 2019; Fajri, 2019; Mawarni & Usman, 2022; Pramesti, 2023), which significantly challenges their cognitive load. To address this, candidates must employ efficient reading strategies to reduce cognitive burden and improve reading efficiency. Studies by Dhillon et al. (2020), Kamil (2020), and Fatmawan et al. (2023) have shown that skimming is an effective strategy. By quickly skimming through the entire text to identify the main ideas and key points, students can rapidly grasp the overall structure and core concepts of the article, setting the stage for further detailed searching (Dhillon et al., 2020). Scanning, in contrast, focuses on locating specific information, allowing students to quickly find keywords

or specific data, thereby avoiding unnecessary content and saving time (Fatmawan et al., 2023). Research has demonstrated that skimming and scanning are commonly used in the TOEFL test because they enable students to quickly identify the main points and key information under time constraints (Setiawan, 2019; Zalha et al., 2020).

Additionally, studies by Jordan et al. (2020), Thalmann et al. (2019), Lewis (2016), and Paas & van Merriënboer (2020) have found that chunking information into meaningful units can reduce cognitive load and enhance learning. This involves breaking down complex information into smaller, more manageable pieces, which allows learners to process information more efficiently and alleviates the burden on working memory. In the context of TOEFL reading, teachers can apply this principle by dividing long passages into smaller paragraphs for analysis and comprehension. This approach helps students digest information gradually throughout the reading process, ultimately reducing the cognitive load on their working memory.

Therefore, based on CLT, when designing TOEFL reading preparation strategies, teachers should guide students in optimizing their information processing techniques. By implementing effective time management and adjusting strategies appropriately, students can avoid excessive cognitive load during the reading process.

In summary, the Input Hypothesis, Metacognitive Theory, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) offer systematic theoretical guidance for TOEFL reading instruction. The integration of these theoretical frameworks not only helps teachers design more scientific and structured teaching plans, but also provides students with practical strategies and methods to enhance their TOEFL reading comprehension and test performance. In future teaching practice, teachers should apply these theories flexibly, offering students diverse and targeted training to comprehensively improve their academic reading skills.

## **Findings**

### *Effective TOEFL Reading Strategies*

Successful preparation for the TOEFL reading section requires candidates to master a range of effective reading strategies that enhance reading comprehension, improve problem-solving speed, and enable them to complete all questions within the time constraints. In the following, we will review and analyze proven TOEFL reading strategies across three key stages: Pre-reading strategies, While-reading strategies, and Post-reading strategies.

Pre-reading strategies refer to quick techniques that candidates use to gather an overview of a text's content and structure before engaging in a detailed reading. These strategies help students prepare for more focused reading and improve overall comprehension (Rondon & Tomitch, 2020). Fitria (2022) highlights skimming as an effective pre-reading technique. Before reading a TOEFL passage in detail, students can quickly grasp the main ideas and structure by reviewing the title, the first sentence of each paragraph, and key terms (Fitria, 2024). During this process, candidates can make predictions based on the information obtained through skimming, which provides clues for inferring the article's content and arguments. Additionally, students should activate background knowledge related to the topic to make more accurate predictions. By leveraging prior knowledge, students can make

informed inferences about the text, which not only enhances their interest in the article but also improves comprehension and sets a solid foundation for subsequent detailed reading (Ardiana et al., 2024).

During the while-reading stage, students should actively engage with the text using various reading strategies. They should focus on key words, topic sentences, and supporting details in each paragraph, while also paying attention to the overall structure of the article and the author's logical argumentation (Badu, 2020; Zarnis et al., 2021; Ismail & Fata, 2021; Fitria, 2022). Additionally, marking important information—such as taking notes—can help students track key points and clarify the relationships between different ideas (Ismail & Fata, 2021). By activating their background knowledge, students can make connections to unfamiliar concepts, thereby enhancing their understanding of complex content (Zalha et al., 2020). Moreover, students should continually compare the article's content with their initial predictions and adjust their understanding based on new information (Khataee & Davoudi, 2018). When encountering unfamiliar or difficult vocabulary, candidates should try to infer its meaning from the context or, if necessary, skip it, avoiding frequent stops to look up words in order to maintain reading fluency (Gorelova et al., 2015; Dharmawan & Desfitranita, 2018; Fitria, 2022).

These active reading strategies help students not only grasp the main ideas of the article but also critically evaluate and integrate the information they encounter, ultimately improving both their reading comprehension and overall information processing efficiency.

In the Post-reading stage of the TOEFL reading section, candidates should employ a series of effective strategies to ensure both accurate answers and a deep understanding of the article's content. First, when answering the questions, candidates should read them carefully and refer back to the passage to locate the relevant sections, avoiding answers based purely on memory (Fitria, 2022). For detail questions types, it is important to directly quote the relevant content from the text, while for inference questions, candidates should draw conclusions based on implicit information presented in the article (Fitria, 2024). Candidates can mark the paragraphs related to the questions to facilitate quick reference when responding (Zarnis et al., 2021).

Secondly, effective time management is crucial. Given the time constraints of the TOEFL reading section, candidates should estimate the amount of time needed for each passage before starting the questions, and adjust their time allocation as needed based on the difficulty of the questions. If a particularly difficult question arises, candidates should consider skipping it temporarily to avoid spending excessive time on one question, which could impact their ability to answer subsequent questions (Nurhayati & Nehe, 2016; Dharmawan & Desfitranita, 2018; Fitria, 2022).

Finally, after completing all questions, candidates should take time to review their answers. During this review process, they should verify that their responses align with the content of the article to ensure accuracy and avoid any omissions or misunderstandings (Muliawati et al., 2020; Chen & Lin, 2023).

### *Challenges for Chinese Test-Takers*

In the TOEFL reading section, in addition to answering reading comprehension questions, candidates must also master a range of test-taking strategies to handle various question types, optimize answering efficiency, and mitigate the impact of time pressure. The findings give key strategies for the TOEFL reading test, including techniques for addressing different question types and effective elimination methods.

### *Strategies for Answering Different types of Questions*

The TOEFL reading section features a range of question types, each requiring specific answering strategies. By understanding and mastering these strategies, candidates can enhance both the accuracy and efficiency of their responses. Factual Information and Negative Factual Information questions typically require candidates to extract direct, explicit details from the passage, focusing on specific facts and data (Kamal, 2018). To answer these questions, candidates often employ a scanning technique, searching for keywords such as names of people, places, and dates, which help them quickly locate relevant paragraphs or sentences. This strategy enables candidates to find the necessary information rapidly and make accurate judgments within a short timeframe. Research indicates that scanning for keywords is particularly effective for detail questions, as these questions rely on specific information that is clearly stated in the passage (Kamal, 2018; Kamil, 2020; Zalha et al., 2020; Karimullah & Mukminatien, 2022).

Inference questions require candidates to draw conclusions based on implicit information in the text, rather than directly extracting answers from the passage. These questions typically ask students to interpret the deeper meaning of the article, inferring the author's intentions or conclusions that are not explicitly stated, using context clues, tone, word choice, and other indicators. Such questions assess a candidate's critical thinking skills and ability to understand underlying messages in the text (Kamal, 2018). Furthermore, Zalha et al. (2020) and Kamil (2020) noted that intensive reading is an effective strategy for answering inference questions. However, due to the time-intensive nature of this approach, many students find it challenging to fully apply it under the pressure of a timed exam (Zalha et al., 2020; Kamil, 2020).

Rhetorical Purpose questions require candidates to understand the author's intent behind including specific information in the passage. These questions ask test-takers to consider the reasoning or purpose behind the content presented. For this type of question, it is not the literal meaning of the material that is most important, but rather its function within the text. Students should focus on understanding how the information presented in specific paragraphs or sentences relates to the overall purpose or intention behind it (Putlack et al., 2020).

Vocabulary questions usually require the test-taker to choose a word that is closest in meaning to a highlighted word or phrase (Putlack, Poirier, & Jacobs, 2020). Rather than directly testing the definition of a word, these questions require test takers to infer the meaning of a word or phrase by analyzing the context (Suyatman & Rachman, 2017; Zalha et al., 2020). In addition, candidates can use their knowledge of word roots, prefixes, and suffixes to infer the meaning of vocabulary, a strategy that is particularly useful for dealing with some complex vocabulary, especially when students are familiar with common word roots and affixes (Rachman, 2017).



Insert Text questions require candidates to determine the most appropriate location for inserting a sentence within the passage (Li, 2022). To answer these questions effectively, candidates should assess where the sentence will best fit, ensuring it flows naturally with the surrounding sentences and contributes to the overall structure and coherence of the text. This task requires candidates to consider several factors, including grammar, logical consistency, transitional phrases, and overall flow, when selecting the optimal placement for the new sentence (Putlack et al., 2020).

Sentence Simplification questions require candidates to choose a sentence that best paraphrases a highlighted sentence in the passage (Li, 2022). In answering these questions, test-takers need to identify the key points in the original sentence and ensure that these points are accurately conveyed in the rewritten sentence, which should use different words, phrases, and grammatical structures (Putlack et al., 2020).

Prose Summary questions require candidates to identify the main points of the article and select sentences that highlight these key ideas. The answer choices often include irrelevant details from the passage. To effectively answer this type of question, candidates must understand the overall structure of the article, grasp the central idea of each paragraph, and accurately identify the option that best aligns with the article's theme (Putlack et al., 2020).

### *Elimination Strategy*

In the TOEFL reading comprehension section, the elimination strategy is a widely used problem-solving technique, particularly effective when test-takers encounter uncertain answers. The core principle of this strategy involves analyzing the answer choices and systematically eliminating those that are clearly inconsistent with the information in the passage, thereby increasing the likelihood of selecting the correct answer. Specifically, candidates begin by carefully reviewing each option, identifying those that are obviously irrelevant or logically invalid in relation to the text, and then progressively narrowing down the choices (Rachman, 2017; Pramesti, 2023; Wicaksono & Jatmiko, 2024).

However, Dharmawan & Desfitranita (2018) caution that while the elimination strategy can be effective in discarding incorrect options, excessive reliance on it may lead students to overlook the importance of thoroughly understanding the passage, particularly when dealing with questions that require critical reasoning. Therefore, the research suggests that students should complement the elimination strategy with other techniques, such as intensive reading and reasoning, to ensure a deeper comprehension of the text and thereby enhance the accuracy of their answers.

In the TOEFL reading section, the candidate's answering strategy plays a crucial role in improving test performance. By employing effective strategies, candidates can address various question types more efficiently, enhancing their understanding and analysis of the passage. Among these strategies, the elimination strategy is commonly used. When candidates are uncertain about an answer, eliminating strategy can significantly increase the likelihood of selecting the correct one. Therefore, mastering and strategically applying these methods not only improves the accuracy of reading comprehension but also boosts problem-solving speed and confidence, ultimately optimizing overall performance in the TOEFL reading section.

### Test-Taking Strategies

Chinese students encounter a distinct set of challenges when preparing for the TOEFL reading section. The findings give several common difficulties they face, including vocabulary issues, reading comprehension struggles, challenges with sentence structure and grammar, reading speed, time management, and test anxiety. By understanding these obstacles and adopting effective strategies to address them, students can significantly improve their performance in the TOEFL reading section.

### *Vocabulary Challenges*

Research has shown that vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role in enhancing Chinese students' English reading comprehension skills (Jeon & Yamashita, 2014; Zhang & Yang, 2016; Dong et al., 2020). However, the inability to use vocabulary flexibly, particularly when faced with complex texts, remains a significant barrier preventing Chinese test-takers from achieving higher scores in the TOEFL reading section (Li, 2022).

Dong et al. (2020) highlight that Chinese students often demonstrate clear deficiencies in both the depth and breadth of their vocabulary, which directly impacts their TOEFL reading performance, especially when it comes to understanding academic texts. Specifically, Jeon & Yamashita (2014) note that many students struggle with vocabulary decoding, spelling rules, and understanding word forms. For instance, when encountering unfamiliar words, students often lack effective decoding strategies, leading to slower reading speeds and diminished comprehension. Additionally, the stark contrast between Chinese characters and the Latin alphabet system makes it difficult for many students to master English spelling rules, contributing to frequent spelling errors and word recognition issues. Although some students have expanded their vocabulary, their understanding of word roots, prefixes, and suffixes remains superficial, limiting their ability to infer the meanings of new words. Beyond these vocabulary-related challenges, studies have also found that Chinese students tend to struggle with academic and technical terminology (Zhang, 2022), further hindering their ability to comprehend TOEFL academic passages.

To address the vocabulary challenges faced by Chinese students in TOEFL reading comprehension, Samad et al. (2017) suggest that students should first focus on improving their vocabulary decoding skills. This can be achieved by systematically teaching word formation rules, such as roots, prefixes, and suffixes, which enables students to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words based on their structure. Mastering these skills can enhance both the speed and depth of vocabulary decoding. Additionally, students can use contextual clues to understand unfamiliar words. However, research indicates that this approach is not always reliable, particularly when dealing with highly academic texts (Dharmawan & Desfitranita, 2018; Fajri, 2019; Zarnis et al., 2021; Pramesti, 2023). While these strategies may not always provide completely accurate meanings, they remain essential tools for students to cope with new vocabulary (Lubis & Siregar, 2022).

In addition, given the differences between Chinese characters and the Latin alphabet system, it is especially important to cultivate students' awareness of spelling and understanding of spelling rules. Spelling exercises and speech recognition activities can help students overcome challenges such as spelling errors and difficulties in word recognition (Jeon & Yamashita, 2014). Building on this, to address vocabulary barriers, Abdullah Hammad, (2021) and Chen

& Lin (2023) recommend that teachers should prioritize the systematic teaching of academic vocabulary in TOEFL preparation courses, concentrating on high-frequency academic terms, to help students broaden their vocabulary and enhance their ability to comprehend complex academic texts.

Finally, Fitria (2022) emphasized that students should take the initiative to enhance their vocabulary, particularly by learning more complex words. During the reading process, students are encouraged to record unfamiliar words and use dictionaries to look up their precise meanings. Additionally, students can expand their vocabulary through online learning platforms, focusing on advanced terms that they may not have encountered before. By integrating these strategies, students can effectively overcome vocabulary challenges in TOEFL reading and improve their reading comprehension skills.

### *Sentence Structure and Grammar Challenges*

TOEFL reading passages often feature long sentences, multiple clauses, and complex grammatical structures (Abdullah Hammad, 2021; Chen & Lin, 2023). Due to the syntactic differences between Chinese and English, students may face challenges when processing English sentences. Specifically, while Chinese has a relatively flexible word order, English follows stricter and more fixed grammatical rules. As a result, when students encounter complex sentence structures, such as attributive clauses or adverbial clauses, their Chinese syntactic habits may interfere with their comprehension of English texts (Tong et al., 2022). In addition, Li (2022) points out that Chinese students often tend to rely on memory and direct translation during TOEFL reading, which limits their flexibility and accuracy in language use. As Iqbal and Ahmad (2015) mention, some students cope with reading tasks by simply memorizing words and sentence structures. Although this approach may be effective in the short term, it is insufficient when faced with complex grammatical and contextual relationships. Due to over-reliance on memorization and literal translation, students often stay at the superficial level of information, lack in-depth critical thinking and reasoning skills, and find it difficult to fully understand the main points and details of the article (Hayikaleng et al., 2016).

To help students better understand complex sentences, Chen & Lin (2023) suggest that teachers should strengthen the teaching of grammar and sentence patterns, especially the analysis skills of long sentences, clauses, and sentence structure. Particularly for more academic articles, students need to master how to analyze long and complex sentences to better understand the content of the article. In addition, teachers should focus on cultivating students' syntactic awareness and help them better understand the syntactic structures in different languages, thereby improving their cross-language reading comprehension ability (Tong et al., 2022).

### *Lack of Background Knowledge*

Duan (2019) finds that approximately 60% of the passages in TOEFL reading materials are related to American cultural topics, including areas such as American dance, culture, painting, historical figures, and the development of the American West. While ETS has gradually included more content from other countries in recent years, American cultural references still dominate the majority of TOEFL reading passages and questions. For Chinese students, the lack of a deep understanding of Western social and cultural contexts poses significant

challenges when reading and answering questions (Liao, 2018). In particular, when passages involve aspects of Western culture, students often require additional time to grasp the cultural background and context, which can hinder both their reading speed and overall comprehension (Lee, 2015).

To help students overcome the comprehension difficulties caused by cross-cultural differences, teachers should systematically introduce Western cultural background knowledge, help students become familiar with cultural topics related to reading materials, and guide them to effectively process this cultural information during the reading process (Lee, 2015; Liao, 2018; Rahman et al., 2021). By engaging in interdisciplinary learning, students can understand texts within a broader knowledge framework, thus enhancing their overall comprehension of academic articles (Chen & Lin, 2023). Additionally, Li (2022) suggests that students should build their academic background knowledge by extensively reading academic articles, enabling them to better navigate the challenges of the TOEFL reading section. Once students have mastered the relevant cultural context, they will not only develop a greater interest in the text but also be more motivated to learn, ultimately improving their reading comprehension effectiveness (Liao, 2018).

#### *Slower Reading Speed*

The passages in the TOEFL reading comprehension section are usually long and information-dense (Zarnis et al., 2021), requiring test takers to read and comprehend quickly and effectively within a limited time (Zhang, 2022). However, Li (2022) points out that native Chinese-speaking test takers often exhibit some unfavorable behaviors when preparing for the TOEFL test, such as over-reliance on word-for-word translation, a habit that significantly reduces their reading speed. Therefore, many Chinese test takers face the challenge of completing the reading task within the specified time in the TOEFL reading test (Zhang, 2022). To cope with the time constraints of the TOEFL reading section, students are advised to adopt skipping and scanning strategies, which are considered to be effective ways to improve reading speed and test-taking efficiency (Samad et al., 2017; Dharmawan & Desfitranita, 2018; Fajri, 2019; Lubis & Siregar, 2022). In addition, teachers should encourage students to take more mock tests to enhance their time management skills in the actual exam and help students become familiar with the question types in the TOEFL reading section, thereby improving their reading speed (Zarnis et al., 2021; Pramesti, 2023).

#### *Test-Taking Anxiety*

Anxiety is a significant issue faced by Chinese students during TOEFL preparation (Jiang, 2020). As TOEFL scores play a crucial role in university admissions for studying abroad, many students experience intense pressure to perform well on the exam. This pressure is particularly evident in the reading section, where students often worry that poor performance will negatively impact their overall scores and application outcomes (Samad et al., 2017). Such an intense focus on test results can lead to heightened anxiety, which in turn has a detrimental effect on students' reading performance. Anxiety is especially disruptive when students encounter long, complex sentences or highly academic texts. It can exacerbate emotional stress, thereby impairing both their comprehension and accuracy in answering questions (Zhu, 2021; Muliawati et al., 2020).

In addition to providing academic and language training, teachers should also prioritize students' psychological preparation, particularly when they are facing standardized tests (Muliawati et al., 2020). Educators need to be attuned to students' emotional needs and offer support through positive reinforcement and encouragement to help alleviate anxiety, especially during high-pressure academic reading tasks (Zhu, 2021). Furthermore, Karimullah and Mukminatien (2022) suggest that students can manage anxiety during the exam by practicing relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, which can help them remain calm and enhance their performance.

In general, Chinese students encounter challenges in language, culture, grammar, reading speed, and psychological factors when preparing for the TOEFL reading section. To overcome these challenges, candidates can enhance their reading comprehension by focusing on vocabulary development, improving reading speed, and strengthening syntactic analysis skills. By addressing these areas, students can significantly improve their ability to understand and analyze complex reading materials.

### **Conclusion and Significance**

The TOEFL reading section is a critical component in evaluating candidates' academic English proficiency, presenting both challenges and opportunities, particularly for non-native English speakers such as Chinese-speaking students. By reviewing effective strategies, common challenges, and related literature on the TOEFL reading section, this study reveals multiple ways to improve TOEFL reading scores and emphasizes that students need to adopt appropriate strategies based on their language background and cognitive characteristics during TOEFL reading preparation.

In the literature review, a variety of effective TOEFL reading strategies are identified, including pre-reading strategies, marking key points during reading, vocabulary inference techniques, and post-answer review. In addition, the study provides corresponding strategies for the specific challenges faced by Chinese students in the TOEFL reading section, such as mastering academic vocabulary, understanding English grammatical structures, and managing test anxiety. In particular, by enhancing vocabulary comprehension, strengthening cultural adaptation, and cultivating rapid reading skills, students can more effectively overcome these challenges and ultimately improve their test scores.

This study provides valuable insights and practical teaching strategies for educators and test takers by comprehensively analyzing existing research on improving TOEFL reading scores. The TOEFL reading section evaluates non-native English speakers' ability to comprehend academic texts, a crucial skill for success in an English-language academic environment. Focusing on the specific challenges faced by Chinese test takers, this study explores key strategies to enhance reading comprehension, expand vocabulary, and improve overall test performance. By integrating theoretical frameworks with practical applications, it seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering a more targeted and effective approach to TOEFL preparation. Beyond helping candidates achieve higher scores, this research also provides a scientific foundation for educators to refine their teaching methods, ultimately advancing the development of TOEFL reading strategy instruction.

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