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Original Research Article

Communication Strategies used by Omani EFL students

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This study investigated the use of communication strategies (CSs) by 60 students of English as a foreign language (EFL) at Ibri College of Technology in Oman. The study was qualitative in nature. Data elicited from audio recordings of picture description task and semi-structured interview have been categorized according to a taxonomy compiled from various pre-existing taxonomies of such strategies. The results obtained show considerable variation across the range of CSs used by Omani students. Further investigation indicated learners' levels of proficiency influenced the use of communication strategies, with higher proficiency learners making more use of approximation and circumlocution, while lower proficiency learners used more avoidance strategies and L1-based strategies.

Key words: Communication strategies, EFL, English language proficiency, strategic competence.

INTRODUCTION

In non-English speaking countries, learning English is considered to be of crucial importance to meet the demands of the increasingly globalized world. At the same time, it is a very challenging task to equip learners with the necessary receptive and productive skills to perform competently in a non-mother-tongue setting. They need to acquire an in-depth knowledge of grammar, a wide range of lexical items and excellent pronunciation. Arabic speaking learners of English encounter many problems in achieving accuracy and fluency in English. Rabab'ah (2003) has pointed out several of the difficulties faced by Arab learners of English, associated with their limited linguistic resources in the target language. They cannot master all the Lexis in English; therefore they do not always succeed in conveying their intended meaning to others while attempting to communicate in English. Their array of linguistic means may fall short in expressing their ideas. Consequently, they use various strategies to overcome communication problems when they lack adequate competence in the target language. They can achieve their communicative goal by either linguistic or non-linguistic strategies, such as, sound imitation, body language, use of fillers, coining new words, paraphrasing, or code switching. These ways are known as communication strategies (CSs). Learners tend to use several different kinds of communication strategies to ease their communication and to overcome their communication difficulties.

Among Arabic speaking students in Oman, it has been observed that many learners struggle while communicating in English. They cannot express their ideas or interact with other people freely. Many of them are very hesitant to communicate because of their inadequate competence in the target language. Other learners try their best to overcome their communication problems to convey their messages and intended ideas by employing different types of CSs. These can be regarded as devices used by learners to overcome their communication breakdowns. Some students use more than one strategy at a time. Based on established models of communication strategies, the present study aims to investigate the kinds of CSs used by the Omani English as a foreign language (EFL) student at tertiary level, by examining the communication strategies used by Omani EFL students at Ibri College of Technology. The purpose of the study is to identify the communication strategies that are commonly used by Omani EFL students, and measure the extent to which the use and number of these strategies is affected by students' level of proficiency. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the different types of CSs used by Omani EFL learners at tertiary level?
2. Does learners' proficiency level influence the choice and number of the CSs they use?

Many researchers have dealt across a range of recent research dealing with communication problems and error analysis. According to Hua *et al.,* (2012), noted that while there has been much discussion of the various problems of Arab learners of English, there has been very little focus on "the ways of solving these problems or tackling the importance of the development of EFL learners' strategic competence to solve their communication problems" (p.832). The use of effective communication strategies by EFL learners has not been sufficiently investigated so far, particularly in Oman.

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Some observers have suggested that Arab learners of English tend to use avoidance strategies, such as, maintaining silence or changing the topic. Although some learners have a very limited knowledge of the target language, but still they are able to send and receive messages, express their ideas and interact with other people via using communication strategies. With a variety of communication strategies (CSs), many students are unaware that they are taking risks by using some of the strategies that may cause communication failures. At the same time, many students are unfamiliar with more effective strategies that lead to better comprehension and accurate production of the target language forms and structures. It has been also found that EFL learners tend to use various kinds of communication strategies in different contexts.

The study is conducted in an effort to improve and develop the teaching and learning process to benefit the future students of EFL in Oman. While the findings are not expected to be generalizable to other learning contexts, it is hoped the insights gained may be of interest to EFL teachers and researchers elsewhere, particularly in relation to Arabic-speaking learners. The study will yield data which will enable to identify the kinds of communication strategies used by Omani students. This data will familiarize EFL learners and teachers with the most common communication strategies used by Omani EFL students. It is hoped that this will increase teachers' awareness of the value of communication strategies to enhance EFL students' oral communication skills, and to equip EFL teachers to tackle the issue of communication problems by training their students to use the most effective communication strategies as a means to convey the messages and intended ideas whenever they encounter a barrier to communication. This barrier could be a word, a phrase or an expression. There is always a way to bridge this communication gap by using communication strategies.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication problems encountered by EFL learners

According to Ellis (2008), very few, if any learners achieve 100% competence in the L2. Therefore, it is inevitable that L2 learners encounter problems in the process of communication. Rabab'ah (2003) mentioned that EFL learners in several Arabic speaking countries face many problems in all language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. There are many factors that lead to language difficulties, such as lack of target language environment and the learners' lack of motivation. The situation is very similar in Oman. In an in-depth analysis of speaking difficulties by young EFL learners in Oman, Al Hosni (2014) reported that there are many factors cause difficulty in speaking such as linguistic difficulties, mother tongue use and inhibition. Students struggle to find the appropriate vocabulary item when communicating in English; thus these linguistic difficulties lead to the use of mother tongue. They shift to Arabic whenever they do not know how to express their ideas in English. Al Hosni (2014) observed that Omani students participate very little during class discussions and that is because of inhibition. They are either afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates or they are simply shy. In addition to these factors, Al Hosni (2014) stated that Omani EFL students do not have enough opportunities to speak in English outside the classroom. In a similar vein, Rabab'ah (2003) confirmed that Jordanian learners face problems while communicating in English because they do not have enough

exposure to the target language. The only way to learn English in Jordan is through formal instruction and there is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction. In another study, Ugla *et al.,* (2013) clarified that Iraqi students use English only during classroom lessons. It is not surprising, therefore, if they face difficulties in English.

In a different first-language context, Mei and Nathalang (2012) pointed out that Chinese EFL learners face communication problems because they do not have sufficient exposure to English to real-life situations. Therefore, they need to use communication strategies to facilitate their communication.

Communication Strategies

Communication strategies play an important role in second language acquisition. CSs reflect the concept of communicative competence, as proposed by Canale and Swain (1980). Thus, before going any further, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of communicative competence and strategic competence.

Communicative Competence

According to Brown (2000), the notion of communicative competence was originated by Dell Hymes (1967, 1972). Hymes defined communicative competence as "an aspect of our competence that enable us to convey, and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts" (Brown, 2000, p.246). Building on this insight, Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence "minimally includes three main competencies: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p.28). In a later study, communicative competence took a wider scope, when it was determined that Canale and Swain's model was inadequate for a communicative approach to language teaching and learning. Consequently, Canale (1983) revised this framework and added an additional area of competence. As Brown explains (2000, p.264-247), in Canale's (1983) definition, four different components were taken into account to identify communicative competence. These four components are grammatical competence (knowledge of sentence-level grammar), discourse competence (knowledge of intersentential relationships), sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of the social context in which language is used), and strategic competence (the knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies). In other words, the first two components reflect the use of the linguistic system, whereas the last two define the functional aspect of communication.

Strategic Competence

Strategic competence is the fourth component of communicative competence identified by Canale and Swain (1980). They described strategic competence as the ability to employ verbal and non-verbal communication strategies in order to compensate communication breakdowns "due to performance variables or due to insufficient competence" (cited in Brown, 2000, p.247). According to Abunawas (2012) further studies in this field suggested that strategic competence should have a more comprehensive aspect. It is not only limited to compensatory strategies; as a result, Swain (1984) amended the previous notion of strategic competence to include "communication strategies that may call into action

either to enhance the effectiveness of communication or to compensate for breakdowns" (cited in Brown, 2000, p.248). In brief, communicative competence is using communication strategies to solve communication problems or enhance the effectiveness of communication. Brown (2000) summarized the definition of strategic competence as "the way we manipulate language in order to meet communicative goals" (p.248).

Therefore, it is obvious that among these types of communicative competence, the notion of communication strategies was adopted and labeled under strategic competence. In other words, strategic competence refers to the learners' ability to use communication strategies. Thus, it is Canale and Swain's contribution to communicative competence that helps people to employ communication strategies to cope with the difficulties that they may encounter during their communication to achieve a communicative goal.

Definitions of communication strategies

According to Ellis (2008), the notion of "communication strategies" was coined by Selinker (1972) as one of the five process he identified in interlanguage development. Ellis says that the first analysis of communication strategies (CSs) was done by Varadi in 1980. Since then, communication strategies have been widely explored in the fields of linguistics and second language acquisition. This has produced a plethora of definitions proposed for communication strategies, making it difficult to find a rigorous definition. Researchers have distinguished between two broad theoretical approaches to communication strategies. According to Ellis (2008), communication strategies can be viewed as discourse strategies which are involving learners in social interactions, or they can be treated as cognitive processes involved in the use of L2 in reception and production. These two differing theoretical orientations lead to definitions of CSs that vary according to whether they are interactional or psycholinguistic definitions.

Interactional definitions

Varadi and Tarone's early work on CSs showed the interactional view of CSs, according to Ellis (2008), Tarone (1981, p.288) defined CSs as involving "attempts to bridge the gap between the linguistic knowledge of the second language learner and the linguistic knowledge of the target language interlocutor in real communication situations". Ellis (2008) clarified this definition as a reflection of the communicative behaviors that learners employ to make themselves understood in their interlocutors. However, Ellis (2008) pointed out that the original interactional definition of CSs overlapped with other areas of study in the field of second language acquisition. For example, it becomes difficult to decide exactly which interactional phenomena are 'strategic' and which reflect 'non-strategic production process'. Thus, researchers looked for a definition that was designed not only to solve learners' own performance problems, but also to deal with other aspects of problematic L2 production.

Psycholinguistic definitions

The psycholinguistic approach was illustrated by the work of Faerch and Kasper (1983), who defined CSs as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (p. 36). According to Ellis (2008), Faerch and Kasper located

communication strategies within a general model of speech production. Abunawas (2012) explained that Faerch and Kasper used the word "individual" rather than "learner" in their psycholinguistic definition of CSs, for the important reason that usage of the word "individual" means that it can be applied to both L1 users and L2 learners. Hence, this definition does focus on the communicative problems and the solutions that individuals seek to solve their communicative problems. It is noticeable; however, that most definitions share elements that support the claim that communication strategies are employed when the second language learners (L2) encounter difficulties or breakdowns in communication. In this regard, Faerch and Kasper (1983) pointed out that most definitions share two main characteristics, which they called problematicity and consciousness. That is, CS definitions focus on problems that L2 learners face when they strive to use the target language. Accordingly, communication strategies are considered to be useful means when there are breakdowns in communication and CSs may be used consciously (Rabab'ah, 2003). Likewise, Faerch and Kasper's definition of CSs focuses on the problems experienced by the learner in speech reception, and in the planning and implementation of speech production.

On the other hand, Bialystok criticized Faerch and Kasper's claim that CSs are "potentially conscious". She argued that there is no independent means to decide which plans fall into this category and which ones do not. Bialystok (1990) added a third element which is 'intentionality'. According to Bialystok (1990), intentionality refers to the learner's control over communication strategies in a way that the learner can select a particular strategy from a range of options and deliberately apply it to achieve certain effects. More importantly, Bialystok (1990) noted that the widely employed defining criterion for CSs, problematicity, is a strategy used "only when a speaker perceives that there is a problem which may interrupt communication" (Bialystok, 1990, p.3). This implies that there must be some conscious awareness. In a similar vein, Brown (2000) compared that the research of the previous decade, which paid more attention to the "compensatory" nature of communication strategies, with more recent approaches that consider communication strategies as elements of an overall strategic competence. In this regard, learners need to draw upon all possible facets of their growing competence in order to send clear messages in the target language. He added that such strategies may or may not be "potentially conscious", as presented in Faerch and Kasper's Psycholinguistic definition. Communication strategies also need to be distinguished from learning strategies. According to Ellis (2008), CSs are strategies that are "employed to meet a pressing communicative need"(p.515). Thus, CSs are short-term solutions to a problem, whereas learning strategies are "directed at addressing a perceived gap in knowledge or skill and therefore are directed at a long-term solution" (Ellis, 2008, p.515). Brown (2000) suggested that the best way to understand the concept of communication strategies is to look at a typical of list of CSs, which will be discussed in the section below.

Taxonomies of Communication Strategies

Both theoretical and empirical studies have dealt with the identifications and classifications of CSs as well as with various problems encountered by researchers in their investigation of these strategies. A review of the literature shows that there are many examples of CSs taxonomies, most of them sharing some similarity. According to Rabab'ah (2003), there is no agreement among researchers over taxonomy of communication strategies; new taxonomies are proposed and

developed from time to time, often reflecting conflicting views about conceptualizing CSs. However, most of the literature on CSs has, to some extent, similar conceptions of CSs and the resulting taxonomies overlap considerably. Generally speaking, most of the CSs discussed and adopted by researchers are based on a taxonomy proposed by Torne (1970) or one that was adapted from it (e.g., taxonomies listed in Ugla, *et al.,* 2013). Other descriptions and taxonomies of CSs from the 1970s are mentioned by Ellis (2008).

Abunawas (2012) explained that Bialystok's (1983) taxonomy classified CSs into L1-based Strategies and L2-based Strategies. L1-based strategies are those that depend on the learner's L1 knowledge: code switching, foreignizing and literal translation; L2-based strategies are those where the learner attempts to use the resources of the L2: approximation, word coinage, and circumlocution. Other attempts at classifying CSs are based on previous taxonomies suggested by Tarone (1977; 1980), Tarone *et al.,* (1983), Bialystok (1983), Faerchand Kasper (1983), and subsequent taxonomies up till the present date. Dörnyei (1995) divided CSs into avoidance strategies and compensatory strategies. The first type, avoidance strategies, can be broken down into several subtypes, such as phonological avoidance, syntactic or lexical avoidance and topic avoidance. Among these subtypes, topic avoidance may be the most frequent employed strategy: it involves avoiding topic areas or concepts that pose language difficulties. Another avoidance strategy is message abandonment: leaving a message unfinished because of language difficulties. Ya-ni (2007) pointed out that these strategies could be effective in interaction, but not a beneficial way for EFL students to learn a foreign language.

The second category is compensatory strategies. Compensatory strategies involve compensation of missing knowledge. Dörnyei (1995) provided eleven types of compensatory strategies in a very comprehensive way (cited in Brown, 2000, p128). These types are circumlocution, approximation, use of all-purpose words, word coinage, prefabricated patterns, non-linguistic signals, literal translation, foreignizing, code switching, appeal for help and stalling or time-gaining strategies. Circumlocution is describing or exemplifying the target object of the action (e.g. "the thing you open bottles with" for corkscrew or "I get red in my face" for shy). Another common strategy is an approximation which is using an alternative term that expresses the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible (e.g. ship for sailboat/ work table for workbench). Extending a general, empty lexical item to contexts where specific words are lacking (e.g., the overuse of thing, stuff, what-do-you call–it, thingie) can be described as the use of all-purpose strategy. Whereas word coinage strategy is creating a non-existing L2 word based on a supposed rule (e.g. air ball for balloon). One of the compensatory strategies identified by Dörnyei is the use of

Prefabricated patterns which is using memorized stock phrases, usually for "survival" purposes (e.g., Where is the ___? where the morphological components are not known to the learner). Another important strategy is using non-linguistic signals like mime, gesture, facial expression, or sound imitation. Another proposed strategy is Literal translation, which is translating literally a lexical item, idiom, compound word, or structure from L1 to L2. Foreignizing is using an L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonology (i.e., with a L2 pronunciation) and/or morphology (e.g., adding to it an L2 suffix). Code switching is the insertion of a word or phrase in a language other than the TL. (e.g. "balon" for "balloon" or "tirtil" for "caterpillar"). Appeal for help strategy is asking for aid from the interlocutor either directly (e.g., what do you call…?) or indirectly (e.g., rising intonation, pause, eye contact, puzzled expression). The last strategy proposed by Dörnyei is Stalling or time-gaining strategies which is using fillers or hesitation devices to fill pauses and to gain time to think (e.g., well, now, let's see, uh, as a matter of fact).

Tarone's (1977) taxonomy cited in Ellis (2008); however, is much simpler and has divided into more categories that are (avoidance, paraphrase, conscious transfer, appeal for assistance, mime). The first category is avoidance which can be further broken down into subtypes; topic avoidance and message abandonment. The second category is paraphrase, which compromises three sub-categories: approximation, word coinage, circumlocution. Conscious transfer compromises literal translation, language switch. The last two categories are appealing for assistance and mime. There is also another comprehensive taxonomy, which was developed by Dörnyei and Scott (1997). According to Ellis (2008) Dörnyei and Scott (1997) developed a comprehensive CSs taxonomy consisting of 33 individual CSs. Their taxonomy consisted of three main categories: direct strategies (strategies used by a speaker to achieve mutual understanding which includes the CSs identified in Tarone's taxonomy), interactional strategies (strategies used by a speaker to prevent communication breakdowns and keep the channel of communication open includes negotiation for meaning strategies like comprehension check and asking for conformation) and indirect strategies (strategies used by a speaker to manage the communication but without the actual use of L2 like use of fillers).

Brown (2000) highlighted that not all of these strategies are frequently employed by learners and the list of CSs is not limited to the CSs mentioned above. He added that learners can benefit from other strategies like asking for repetition and seeking for clarification. Since the present study aims to identify the kinds of CSs used by Omani EFL learners, it is difficult to depend only on taxonomy from the literature. The taxonomy presented in Table 1 was adopted for the present study after a list of categories was derived from the existing literature.

Communication strategy	›	›	Description of strategy
1. Avoidance			
› A. Topic Avoidance			Avoiding reference to a salient object for which learner does not have the necessary vocabulary
› B. Message abandonment			Leaving a message unfinished because of language difficulties.
2. Paraphrase (L2-based strategies)			
A. Approximation			Using an alternative term which expresses the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible (e.g. ship for sailboat)
› B. Word Coinage			Creating a non-existing L2 word based on a supposed rule (e.g. air ball for balloon).
› C. Circumlocution			Describing or exemplifying the target object of action (e.g. the thing you open bottles with for corkscrew).
3. Conscious transfer (L1-based strategies)			
› A. Literal translation			Translating literally a lexical item, idiom, compound word, or structure from L1 to L2.(e.g. These are very...very long buildings for these are very high buildings)
B. Code switching			Insertion of a word or phrase in a language other than the TL.
› C. Foreignizing			Creating non- existent or contextually inappropriate TL words by applying L2 morphology and/or phonology to L1 lexical items. (e.g. Halwa for an Omani traditional sweet)
4. Appeal for help			Consulting some authority- a native speaker, a dictionary

Table 1: CSs used for the present study

Learners' choices and use of communication strategies

Several studies have examined the use of CSs by EFL students, and the factors influencing learners' choices of CSs. Although these studies vary in research methodology, methods of data collection, types of analysis, types of learners and language involved, they have pointed to some important factors to take into consideration for the present study. Bialystok (1990) identified three potential factors that influence the choice of CSs, which are: proficiency level of learner's, features of communicative situation, and the task. Kaivanpanah *et al.,* (2012) illustrated that different tasks elicit different CSs. In their study of Iranian EFL students, they found out that the task type influences the frequency of CSs. For example, the number of circumlocution strategies employed by Iranian EFL students in object description tasks is higher than the number of circumlocution strategies used in speaking tasks. Additionally, Mei and Nathalang (2012) revealed that the use of CSs by Chinese students was influenced by three variables: task type, English proficiency level, and academic major. Their study showed that the students tend to use IL (Interlanguage)-based strategies (paraphrase, restructuring, generalization, word coinage, approximation) when they performed a one-way task (describing words), while they used IL-negotiation strategies (clarification request, repetition and comprehension check) when they performed two-way tasks (role play). In regard to proficiency level, they found that high proficiency learners use IL-based strategies more often and avoidance strategies less often. The same study also investigated the role of academic major, and found that Science learners tend to use clarification requests more frequently than learners in Arts subjects.

The range of communication strategies by EFL learners has also been studied. For example, Abunawas (2012) investigated the communication strategies used by Jordanian EFL students, and found that, while Jordanian EFL students tend to use various kinds of CSs to achieve their communicative goals, they rely heavily on approximation and circumlocution strategies. In an attempt to find out the relationship between the choice of communication strategies and the proficiency level of learners, Abunawas (2012) revealed that advanced level students depend more on approximation and circumlocution strategies in communicating their intended message. They tend to use similar words, phrases and get round the forms and items more than intermediate and low level students because they have enough linguistic resources to find alternative ways of expressing things in the target language. Another study in this field was conducted by Uztosun and Erten (2014). They reported that Turkish EFL learners have limited use of CSs. They tend to use CSs such as 'use of fillers' not because of their inadequate competence but to gain time in conversations. Their study also showed that proficiency is not a factor influencing the choice of CSs; however, there were significant differences in the use of three CSs (mime, message reduction and topic avoidance). For example, low proficiency learners rely more on message reduction and topic avoidance strategies; whereas high proficiency learners employ mime and body language strategies more effectively. Likewise, Hua *et al.,* (2012) also investigated the differences in the use of communication strategies between high and low proficient speakers in oral group discussion by international students at a public university in Malaysia. The findings of their study revealed that the total number of strategies employed by low proficiency level outnumbered the CSs used by high proficiency level. They added that the use of CSs appeared to be influenced by different levels of oral proficiency. For example, the most employed strategy by low proficiency learners was code switching, whereas self-repair was the most employed strategy by high proficiency learners.

THE MAIN STUDY

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the current study are to examine and analyze the collected data from the participants to discover the different kinds of CSs used by them, with the aim of reaching a better understanding of the usage of CSs by Omani EFL students. The study will reveal possible answers to the following questions: What are the different types of CSs used by Omani EFL students at tertiary level? Does students' proficiency level influence the choice and number of the CSs they use? Is there any relationship between the choices of CSs and learners'

proficiency level? Does their mother tongue impact their choices of CSs? Does the use of CSs depend on the task and the context? What are the types of communication strategies that Omani EFL learners use in the course of their communication practices? What are the most commonly used and least used strategies?

It is hoped that this study may contribute toward improving and developing the teaching and learning process to benefit future students of EFL in Oman. Increasing our understanding of the use of communication strategies by learners can help teachers to encourage more effective use of existing strategies, and develop others. These strategies can act as an aid to overcome their English language obstacles. By doing so, learners will be able to raise their self confidence and self-esteem while communicating in English.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

All participants are from the same cultural and linguistic background. Their mother tongue is Arabic. Arabic is the official language in Oman; however, English is not the medium of instruction at school, but it is a mandatory subject from the first grade at school. Moreover, English is the primary medium of instruction at some universities and colleges. Therefore, all participants have been learning English for 12 years at school before joining a college. Participants are either from foundation program or post foundation program. Foundation program has four different levels; pre-elementary, elementary, intermediate and advanced. Post foundation program involves specialized students in 'Information Technology', 'Business Studies' and 'Engineering'. A total of 60 participants from Ibri College of Technology, which is a sufficient number to compare strategies used across three levels of proficiency, were chosen randomly based on their willingness to participate and on their level of proficiency in the English language. They were fully informed of the purpose of the research and their rights as participants. The table below shows the number and the proficiency level of the participants.

Instruments

The study is qualitative in nature. To enhance reliability, the study includes two tasks. With permission from the Head of English Language Center at Ibri College of Technology, a picture description task and semi-structured interview were conducted as instruments to collect data. The performance was audio-recorded and later transcribed and coded for analysis. The participants were free to say as much or as little about these topics as they feel comfortable with. They were also reminded that their participation is purely voluntary and they can stop at any time if they become anxious or uncomfortable.

Picture description task

Pictures of a landscape, a market scene, and a city were given to participants, who were asked to describe in English what they can see in the pictures. Some additional open-ended prompts weregiven to encourage further description, for example," Can you describe what this person is wearing?", "Can you tell me what you think this person might be saying?", and "What are these people doing?"

Semi-structured interview

One to one semi-structured interview was conducted. The interview aimed at finding more about the kinds of communication strategies used by the participants in relation to their proficiency level. The participants were asked to respond in English to several questions. The initial question was "What is your favorite place? Can you describe it?" There were also some additional open-ended prompts to encourage further description (e.g. "Can you tell me about what things you like to do there?", "Can you tell me about the last time you went there?")

Procedure and time frame

The data for the present study was collected at Ibri College of Technology which is located in Ibri, Sultanate of Oman, between May-June 2015. The recorded qualitative data were analyzed manually. The actual use of communication strategies by the participants was categorized according to the adopted CSs taxonomy (Table 1).

Data Analysis

After collection, the data were analyzed according to the taxonomy of communication strategies in Table 1, and these were cross-tabulated against proficiency levels to determine the influence of proficiency level on choice and number of CS used. The students' overall application frequency of the communication strategies are shown in the table below.

RESULTS

Students' overall communication strategies use

The overall communication strategies employed by the participants are illustrated in terms of frequency rank, frequency of occurrence are presented in Table 3.

Level of proficiency	Male	Female	Total
Elementary	9	12	21
Intermediate	10	7	17
Advanced	8	14	22
Total	27	33	60

Table 2: Subjects of the study

The subjects of the study are from different specializations and different levels of English proficiency. As shown in the table above, they are elementary, intermediate and advanced.

Freq. rank	Type of strategy	Frequency of occurrence	Percentage
	Approximation	195	27%
	Circumlocution	120	17%
	Literal Translation	112	16%
	Foreignizing	90	13%
	Message Abandonment	68	9%
	Code Switching	60	8%
	Appeal for help	42	6%
	Topic Avoidance	25	3%
	Word Coinage	5	1%

Table 3: Frequency of occurrence, percentage and frequency rank of CSs

As shown in the Table 3, nine types of communication strategies were used by the participants of the study. These strategies have been arranged according to their frequency of occurrence. It is important to note, however, the study does not take into consideration mime strategies and stalling or time gaining strategies, which is among the compensatory strategies proposed by Dörnyei (1995). These strategies are nonverbal strategies such as using fillers or hesitation devices to fill pauses and to gain time to think, such as "*well, ummm, now let's see*".

It is obvious from the above table that "approximation" was the most employed strategy, followed by "circumlocution". The students also used other strategies quite often like "foreignizing", "message abandonment" and "code switching; however, the least employed strategy was "word coinage" preceded by "topic avoidance".

Kinds and frequency of CSs

1. Approximation

The majority of the participants used "approximation" significantly greater than other strategies. They used it 195 times accounting for 27% of all the instances of strategies identified in the study. When they were unable to produce the accurate forms or structures, they resorted to alternative ones which share some semantic elements in common with the meaning of the target lexical item. Tarone (1977) explains it as "the use of a single target language vocabulary item or structure, which the learner knows is not correct, but which shares enough semantic features." (c in Ya-ni, 2007, p.46). The participants chose vocabulary from their available options in order to convey the meaning as closely as possible. For example, they used *"trees"* for "palm trees", "*telephone*" for "*mobile phone*", "*more people in this place*" for "*a crowded place*", "*big houses*" for "*big buildings*", "*bag*" for "*shopping bag*","*Al Buraimi is my country*" for "*Al Buraimi is my city*". They

used the terms "*park*", "*lake*", "*beach*", "*sea*", "*water*"for "*valley*". In order to convey the intended message, they tried to search for alternative terms which express the meaning of the target lexical item as closely as possible.

2. Circumlocution

The second most employed strategy was "circumlocution". It was registered 120 times accounting for 17%. The participants described and exemplified the target object or action instead of using the appropriate target language (TL) structure. For instance, they said "*The drivers use this road to drive fast*", "*The drivers use this road to reach places in a short time*" and "*the road on the top is much better*". In the previous examples, the participants wanted to use the terms "*Highway*" and "*the main road*" but they failed to find the appropriate words. Other participants also referred to the "*service road* "by saying "*the drivers take the small road to go to the shops*". In addition to these, they said "*There are not many cars*" which means "*there is no traffic jam*". Another example is that one of the participants said "*people use it to put the things they bought in it*". Here the student gave the function of "*trolley*" because he was not able to recall the exact word. Tarone's (1977) typology of communication strategies classified 'approximation' and 'circumlocution' under paraphrase strategies (cited in Ellis, 2008)

3. Literal Translation

Due to the influence of native language (NL), the students tended to translate word for word from their NL (Arabic) into English. This is considered as a kind of transfer strategy (L1-based strategy). This strategy was used 112 times accounting for 16%. The following examples taken from the corpus illustrate this strategy:

1. *SouqNizwa same souqMattarah*. In this example, the learner translated literally from Arabic into English.
2. "*Some families visit this place to change the weather*"."*Change the weather*" is an Arabic expression which means *'to refresh your mind'*.
3."*They put fruits and vegetables in a basket yellow*". Many students used in the picture description task the adjective after the noun as in Arabic structure.
4. "*I can see very long building*". They used "*long*" instead of "*tall*" because "*long*" is the only expression in Arabic for both "*long*" and "*tall*".

4. Foreignizing

This strategy was used 90 times accounting for 13% of the total strategy use.   Foreignizing is categorized under compensatory strategies in Dörneyi's (1995) taxonomy and he defines it as "using an L1 word by adjusting it to L2 phonology" (cited in Brown 2000).

The following examples taken from the corpus illustrate this strategy:
1. The men are wearing dishdasha. "*Dishdasha*" is the traditional Omani clothing for men.
2. "*I like this wadi*". "*Wadi*" is the Arabic term for "*valley*" and they used it often to describe the landscape picture.
3. "*People go to the Souq to buy and sell things*". "*Souq*" is the Arabic term referring to the "*open market*".

5. Message Abandonment

This strategy was registered when the students began to refer to an object or to talk about a concept, but they gave up because it was too difficult. This strategy was used 68 times by all the instances constituting 9%. For instance, many students started to describe saying: "*I can see in this picture a …… a …….. (long pause)* "then they gave up and described something else. Others, they just gave up, shook their heads and stopped talking as in "*there are many trees…these trees are …um …um …I don't know*".

6. Code Switching

Many students used Arabic words or phrases and embedded these words in their communication tasks. Some of them resorted to Arabic unconsciously using words likeبت ﻟ/li:t/ for light "س ﻳ/ bəs/" which means "*that's all*" ,"/læ/ ﻻ which means '*no*", "/jʔni: / ﻲ ﻌ ﻨ" which is "*it means*" and /khlæs/ خﻼص which means "done". On the other hand, some learners resorted to their NL consciously by transporting an Arabic word or phrase as it is with no attempts to translate it into English. For example, one of the participants said"*this is* □□□□ □□□ □ □/*ʃærʔmʊzdəwəg/ (Arabic words for Dual carriageway)*

and "*I can see*□□ □□/*nəkhi:l/*" (Arabic word for palm trees). This strategy was used 60 times accounting for 8%.

7. Appeal for Help

This strategy was registered when the participants asked the researcher for help. The following examples taken from a corpus to illustrate the strategy:
1."*What does it mean*?"
2. "*What do we call this?*"
3. "*How to say it in English?*"
4. "*Is this NizwaSouq*?"
As can be seen from the above examples, the students asked the researcher for assistance either directly, as in examples 1 and 2, or indirectly, as in example 3. This strategy was employed 42 times accounting for 5% of all the cases examined.

8. Topic Avoidance

This is an avoidance strategy, in which the participants avoided the whole topic entirely. Either they did not respond at all to the questions, or they changed the topic. For example, in the picture description task, when they faced difficulty to express their ideas, they just described the next picture. This strategy was used 25 times accounting for 3% of all instances noted. It was the second least frequently used strategy in the corpus.

9. Word Coinage

This strategy has been the least frequently used strategy in the corpus. It was used 5 times accounting for 1% of the total strategy used. It was registered when the students made up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept. For example, "It is ungood place". Here one of the participants creates "ungood" for "notgood". Also, another example taken from the corpus is constructing the word "souqman" and here a reference to "shop keeper". In addition to theses, some participants came up with words as a consequence of over generalizing the rule of the past tense for instance, "My brother's swimmed in this wadi" and "I drived to Muscat last week".

The influence of proficiency level on the choice and number of CSs

Having established the types and frequency of CSs in the data, the next stage of analysis examined the distribution of strategies across the three proficiency levels, as shown in Table 4.

Strategy	Freq. of occ. (Elementary)	%	Freq. of occ. (Intermediate)	%	Freq. of occ. (Advanced)	%
Approximation	35	18%	69	35%	91	47%
Circumlocution	22	18%	46	39%	52	43%
Literal Translation	59	53%	31	28%	22	19%
Foreignization	37	41%	29	32%	24	27%
Message Abandonment	31	46%	26	38%	11	16%
Code Switching	33	56%	18	30%	9	14%
Appeal for Help	21	55%	14	30%	7	15%
Topic Avoidance	15	60%	6	24%	4	16%
Word Coinage	3	60%	2	40%	0	0%
Total	256	36%	241	33%	220	31%

Table 4: Frequency of occurrence and percentage of CSs by proficiency level

As can be seen from this table, the total number of communication strategies used by elementary level is more than the total number of communication strategies used by intermediate and advanced level. The table also showed advanced level, high proficiency learners tended to employ "approximation" and "circumlocution" more than other strategies. The approximation gets the highest mean score (47%) by advanced learners whereas 35% and 18% are the percentages for "approximation" used by intermediate and elementary groups respectively. Additionally, the table also showed that elementary level; low proficiency learners resorted more to avoidance strategies (message abandonment and topic avoidance) and L1-based strategies (literal translation and code switching). Both elementary and intermediate groups tended to "appeal for help "and "word coinage" more than advanced group.

Another important result drawn from table 4 is that the advanced group employed fewer avoidance strategies (message abandonment and topic avoidance). For example, the percentage of "message abandonment" is 16% for advanced level while it is 38% for intermediate level and 46% for elementary level. On the other hand, the percentage for "topic avoidance" used by advanced level is 4%, while it is 6% for intermediate level and 15% for elementary level. In addition, word coinage was the least employed strategy. It was only used by intermediate and elementary learners. In brief, the table above showed that the level proficiency of the learners can influence the number and the use of communication strategies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data reveals several important findings:

1. The extent to which Omani EFL students resorted to communication strategies indicated that they try their best to compensate their missing knowledge and use various strategies to convey their intended ideas.
2. The total number of CSs used by low proficient learners was higher than the intermediate and high proficient learners. It shows that low proficient learners own very limited resources of the target language and they tend to employ CSs whenever they cannot express their intended messages in English.
3. The participants relied mostly on "approximation" which was the most employed strategy and "circumlocution" which was the second most

employed strategy. Whereas the least employed strategy was "word coinage" preceded by "topic avoidance". It is an indicator that Omani EFL learners have the strong desire to communicate in English in spite of their linguistic difficulties.
4. Arabic speakers are able to "foreignize" some words; whereas in some languages it appears more difficult to employ this strategy. Ya-ni (2007) found that Chinese speakers find it difficult to use a Chinese character to substitute the pronunciation of an English word because Chinese and English are very different types of language.
5. Although Kaivanpanah's *et al.,* (2012) study on examining the effects of proficiency on the use of communication strategies highlighted that language proficiency does not influence the frequency of the CSs, the findings of the current study indicated that the learners' proficiency level play an integral part in the choice of communication strategies and their frequency of occurrence.
6. Elementary level, low proficiency learners face difficulties in communication. Because they do not have enough exposure to the target language, they rely on their native language to carry on the intended message; therefore, they employ L1- based strategies (literal translation and code switching strategies).
7. Due to lack of linguistic competence, low proficiency learners tended to use avoidance strategies (topic avoidance and message abandonment) greater than high proficiency learners; advanced level. They were very hesitant to communicate and they gave up very easily. This result is consistent with Ugla *et al.,* (2013), who found that Iraqi low proficiency learners depend on ineffective strategies such as message abandonment strategies. On the other hand, high proficiency learners try to get the message across by other means rather than avoid the topic or abandon the message. Their linguistic knowledge allows them to choose the most appropriate communication strategies. Ya-ni (2007) explained that the learners tend to employ avoidance strategies because they have not acquired the basic knowledge of English and they seldom practice English.
8. Abunawas' (2012) study yielded substantially similar results. He found that Jordanian EFL students managed to communicate their intended meaning by employing different CSs especially "approximation" and "circumlocution". His study confirmed that the

choice and use of CSs were influenced by students' proficiency level. On the contrary, another study on this field was conducted by Ugla *et al.,* (2013) revealed that "approximation" was the least frequently used by Malaysian ESL students. Their study also stated that Malaysian ESL students use most of CSs in low level because they do not face many difficulties or breakdowns during their communication in English.

9. By knowing the kinds of communication strategies used by Omani EFL students, the teachers can assist their students to use some effective ways to compensate their inadequate competence of the target language. For example, the current study revealed that the percentage for "appeal for help" strategy was only 6%. However, many studies asserted that students can achieve their linguistic competence by seeking help. A study in this field was conducted by Rabab'ah (2003) and it reported that communication strategies can lead to learning by eliciting unknown lexical items, especially in the "appeal for help" strategy. According to Mei and Nathalang (2012), learners can improve their communicative competence by developing an ability to use specific CSs that enable them to compensate for their target language limitations.

Implications

The findings of the study have many implications for teaching and learning English as a foreign language at tertiary level. First of all, teachers should pay more attention to students' oral communication. Teaching linguistic content is not enough to facilitate the students' communication process, it is important to pay more focused on the ways that influence learners to communicate. It is advisable, therefore, to alter the teaching approaches and methods to involve students in real-life communicative activities. Besides, in order to reduce or eliminate the use of avoidance strategies (topic avoidance and message abandonment) and L1-based strategies (literal translation and code switching), teachers can help their students to select the most appropriate strategies and teach them how to use these strategies in an efficient way.

Furthermore, students should be given more opportunities to participate in their classes in English. They can be encouraged to use compensatory strategies and meaning negotiation strategies rather than avoidance strategies and this can be achieved through a proper guidance from the teachers. Ugla *et al.,* (2013) recommended that it's important to incorporate CSs into English language programs in order to enhance students' ability to communicate in English. In addition, it is recommended to incorporate these CSs into a course or part of a communication skills course. Hua *et al.,* (2012) suggested that there is a need to raise awareness among teachers and learners about the benefits of employing CSs to overcome communication problems. They also recommended that CSs should be included as a part of the teaching agenda.

Limitations of the study

In considering the findings of this study, some limitations should be taken into account. First of all, the study is limited to a fairly small sample from a single college; therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized to all cases in Oman. It could be that if the study was conducted in different contexts with the wider population, it would have different results. Moreover, the study doesn't deal with the effectiveness of training and teaching communication strategies. In addition to these, the study might yield different results if another task type was applied, because researchers have found that the task type can influence the use of communication strategies. The most important limitation is that the range of potentially useful communication strategies is not limited to the strategies discussed here. My recommendation for future researchers is that further study in this field could be fruitful, especially for other communication strategies that were not discussed in this study, and to examine other factors that might influence the use and frequency of communication strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to examine the kinds of communication strategies used by Omani EFL students at Ibri College of Technology. Both picture description task and semi-structured interview were conducted in this study to elicit the use of communication strategies from the participants. Findings from the study reveal that Omani EFL students face difficulties in communication; therefore they tended to use communication strategies to overcome their communication breakdowns. They are likely to use different communication strategies in order to convey their intended ideas and remain in a conversation. The result shows that the participants used nine CSs which are: approximation, circumlocution, literal translation, foreignizing, message abandonment, code switching, and appeal for help, topic avoidance and word coinage. Approximation followed by circumlocution were the most employed strategies whereas word coinage proceeded by topic avoidance were the least employed strategies. In an attempt to study the influence of learners' level of proficiency, it was found that different levels of proficiency influenced the choice and number of communication strategies. The study advised that teachers should focus on oral communication and assist students to choose the most appropriate communication strategies. Attention should be paid to help students to build up their strategic competence, so they can avoid their hesitancy and fear of not able to interact with people. Teachers should not only encourage their students, but also to train them to use the most effective communication strategies to enhance EFL students' oral communication skills. It is highly recommended, therefore, to incorporate these CSs into a course or part of a communication skills course.

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