# INFLUENCE OF TASK-TYPE AND PROFICIENCY ON COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES USED BY OMANI EFL LEARNERS

Asfiya Khan, Samia Naqvi, Priya Mathew

Middle East College, Muscat, Oman

**Abstract**. *Communication strategies (CSs), an important component of strategic competence in foreign language learning, are techniques used by language learners to overcome the gap between their knowledge of the language and what they intend to communicate. An in-depth investigation into the factors that affect strategy use has clear implications for foreign language learning and teaching.*

*This quantitative study examines the influence of proficiency and task-type on 27 CSs under three major strategy categories: Communication Flow Maintenance, Interactional, and Compensation. Participants are Omani EFL learners (n = 32) in the General Foundation Program (GFP). Participants performed three oral communication tasks in pairs (proficiency based) which were audio-video recorded and transcribed. The strategies used by each participant were quantified on an oral CSs checklist based on established taxonomies.*

*The findings highlight that the overall use of CSs was more for the high proficiency group compared to the low proficiency group. Further, task characteristics had an influence on the use of CSs. Both proficiency groups used CSs least in the picture story task, more in the abstract art description task, and most in the information-gap task. Proficiency driven differences were noted in the use of individual strategies under each category, across tasks. The findings of this study have implications for designing communicative tasks as a tool to encourage the use of a wide gamut of communication strategies.*

**Key words**: *communication strategies; communication flow maintenance strategies; compensation strategies; interactional strategies*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is offered in Omani schools as a foreign language and acquiring any second language is a complex phenomenon (Mishra & Mishra, 2020). Ever since its inception in the 1970s, many reforms in the curriculum, textbooks, and teaching resources have been implemented in the education system of the country. However, the research underscores the lack of English communicative ability among Omani high school as well as higher education graduates (e.g. Khan & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015, Al Hosni 2014, Al Hinai 2018; Al Riyami 2021,). Private sector employers are reluctant to recruit Omani graduates reporting the lack of ability

to use English for higher-order thinking, communication during meetings and other real-life contexts (Al Riyami 2021). This has dire consequences, as despite the Omanisation drive only 12% of the Omani graduates are employed by the private sector (Al Hinai, 2018), leading to a rise in the unemployment percentage as per the data provided in 2017 by the National Center for Statistics and Information. Therefore, it has become increasingly important for researchers and educators to focus on communicative competence.

The construct of Communication Strategies (CSs) originated in the concept of communicative competence proposed by Hymes (1972). During the course of communication, when the speakers face communication problems due to insufficient target language they employ verbal and non-verbal strategies called CSs (e.g., word coinage, code switching, fillers, literal translation, gestures) to avoid breakdowns in communication (Canale & Swain, 1980). According to Yakut and Bada (2021) CSs "generally emerge when a crisis occurs due to the speaker's inadequate control of the language" (p.611).

Rababah (2002) advocates that all teachers need to understand that successful language learning is not only a matter of developing semantic, grammatical, and sociolinguistic competence but also strategic competence which encompasses the use of CSs to effectively convey comprehensible information. However, in the context of Oman, there is a dearth of research on the CSs used by Omani EFL learners (Al Alawi, 2016) points out. The authors of the current study, who have been teaching EFL in Oman for more than two decades, acknowledge that many of the teachers themselves are not aware of the concept of CSs. This study sets out to investigate the influence of Oral Communication task-type and proficiency on CSs used by Omani EFL learners at the tertiary level. The findings of the study will help teachers gain valuable insights into the strategies used by their Omani EFL learners which will assist them in providing suitable opportunities for enhancing their students' oral communication skills. The following questions guide the study:

1. What are the CSs used in Picture Story tasks by high proficiency and low proficiency Omani EFL learners?

2. What are the CSs used in Abstract Art description tasks by high proficiency and low proficiency Omani EFL learners?

3. What are the CSs used in the Information Gap task by high proficiency and low proficiency Omani EFL learners?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Perspectives and Taxonomies of CSs

Canale and Swain (1980) included CSs as a major constituent in their concept of communicative competence, defining them as "verbal and nonverbal strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (p. 30). Ever since, several definitions of CSs have been proposed by researchers considering different perspectives.

Tarone (1980) from the interactional or sociolinguistic perspective, defines CSs as the "mutual attempts of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in a situation where the requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared" (p.420). Negotiation of meaning as a cooperative effort from the interlocutors is the fundamental concept of the interactional or sociolinguistic approach to CSs (Bialystok, 1990). Although Tarone's (1980) interactional perspective on CSs served as the bases for other studies as well to generate taxonomies for

CSs, it was criticized by some researchers (e.g. Faérch & Kasper, 1983). According to them, in real-life scenarios, there may not be cooperation between language learners and native speakers while in conversation. One possibility may be that native speakers might not offer help for language learners to solve their communicative problems. Another case may be that learners sometimes might want to solve their problems themselves and develop a non-cooperative problem-solving attitude.

According to the psycholinguistic perspective, CSs are the problem-solving behaviour that language learners employ in the process of target language communication. Færch and Kasper (1983) define CSs within a psycholinguistic theoretical framework as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual present itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (p.36). Under this perspective, CSs are viewed as a form of self-help that does not involve any intervention from the interlocutor. Problem-orientedness, consciousness, and intentionality are the criteria for defining CSs under this perspective (Mei and Nathalang, 2010).

Integrating psycholinguistic and interactional perspectives is the integrated perspective which considers a wide range of CSs in an attempt to integrate problem-solving devices "to the various pre and post-articulatory phases of speech processing" (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998, p. 350).

Scholars have not yet reached a consensus on the definition of CSs and various competing taxonomies have emerged based on different perspectives (Dörnyei & Scott,1997). Although there exist different taxonomies one may notice that the difference is in the terminology used to refer to strategies, the overall functionality and the substance of the specific strategies are the same (Bialystok, 1990).

## 2.2. Factors affecting the use of CSs

Studies have revealed that various factors affect the type and frequency of CSs like proficiency, gender, culture, nature of tasks, and so on.

Paribakht's study (1985) on Persian EFL learners investigated the relationship between proficiency and choice of communication strategies. All participants had to explain abstract and concrete concepts to a native speaker. It was found that all participants frequently used circumlocution for concrete concepts. The high proficiency group varied strategies depending on the type of content i.e., abstract and concrete concepts. Further, transliteration of L1 idioms and proverbs and idiomatic transfer were the only L1 based strategies used by the participants. Paribakht attributed this trend to the vast language distance between the participants L1 (Persian) and L2 (English) which meant that learners could not use other L1 based strategies like foreignizing or work coinage. Conversely, the study by Ting et.al. (2017) on Malaysian EFL learners revealed that low proficiency learners made intensive use of L1-based strategies compared to L2-based strategies.

According to Bialystok (1983), "language proficiency biases the learner to select differentially between L1 and L2 based strategies but does not predict the selection of specific strategy" (p. 110). Bialystok's study suggests that advanced proficiency students used considerably more L2-based strategies (e.g. semantic contiguity), whereas the average or less than average proficiency students resorted mostly to L1-based strategies (e.g. code-switching). Bialystok (1990) suggested that the strategies that make linguistic demands may be too complex for the less advanced language learner to employ.

According to Poulisse and Schils (1989), the most advanced subjects used fewer compensatory strategies than the least proficient ones. The researchers explain this result in terms of the inadequate vocabulary of the latter group, compelling them to resort more frequently to compensatory strategies. Khanji's (1996) study reported the trend of advanced learners focusing on semantic contiguity and topic shift while low proficiency learners used repetition and message abandonment.

Liskin-Gasparro (1996) found that higher-intermediate speakers mostly employed L1 based communication strategies; conversely, advanced level speakers called upon a range of L2-based strategies. None of the advanced level speakers resorted to message abandonment strategies. Chen (1990) claims that advanced proficiency learners have better abilities to predict and solve problems in the planning phase and are hence more economical and competent in communicating their message. Tuan (2001) further adds that high proficiency learners employ fewer CSs to convey meaning and claims that more command over L2 helps the speaker to coherently process thoughts in that language and hence convey meaning more effectively. Rababah (2002) concurs that lower proficiency learners applied more CSs than higher level proficiency learners. Learners with low proficiency used more avoidance strategies than high proficiency learners as evident in Rababah's study on Jordanian students.

Though studies on CSs are rare in the context of Oman, Al-Humaidi's (2002) study which investigated the CSs in the oral discourse of Omani EFL students echoed the findings of the study of Rababah (2002). The low proficiency group used CSs more often. The low proficiency group recurrently used semantic approximation, clarification requests, message alteration, and code switching; the high proficiency group, however, used confirmation checks more frequently.

Nakatani's (2006) study on Japanese students, found the high proficiency learners used CSs which were more effective in maintaining the conversation flow and reaching the communication goal. On the other hand, low proficiency students employed message abandonment and less active listener strategies. Similar results were found in Li's (2010) study of EFL learners in Taiwan. The proficient students utilized CSs more frequently, especially social, negotiation for meaning, and accuracy-oriented strategies.

According to Mei and Nathalang's (2010) study of Chinese learners, high proficiency students employ generalisation strategies more often than their counterparts. The researchers attributed this trend to the larger repertoire of CSs that the high proficiency students possess. They further underscored that, since generalisation and approximation are interlanguage (IL) based strategies, they are overall more operative in expediting understanding than L1-based strategies.

Hua et al., (2012) investigated the CSs of international students in Malaysia. The study reported that low proficiency learners used more CSs than high proficiency ones. Further, the low proficiency learners used more code switching, whereas the high proficiency used more self-repair. In the study conducted by Nguyen et.al. (2022), the findings state that Vietnamese learners with high proficiency use communication-maintaining strategies and negotiation for meaning as compared to their counterparts.

In a recent study on Omani EFL learners, Al Alawi (2016) stated that the low proficiency learners used more CSs than high proficiency learners. They resorted to L1-based strategies (code switching and literal translation). Overall, circumlocution and approximation were the most used strategies while word coinage and topic avoidance were the least used ones. Similarly, Abunawas (2012) reported that Jordanian EFL students extensively used approximation and circumlocution. In the study of Ugla et al.,

(2013), the Iraqi low proficiency learners employed ineffective strategies such as message abandonment whereas the high proficiency learners used the most appropriate communication strategies.

However, Chen's (2009) study on the oral CSs used by Taiwanese pursuing English majors in Taiwan revealed that, although speaking proficiency is related to the use of oral communication strategies, no direct relationship exists between them. The study of Kaivanpanah, Yamouthy, and Karami (2012) on Iranian EFL learners indicated that language proficiency did not influence the frequency of CSs. However, the nature of the task had a significant impact on the type of CSs employed. Similarly, Uztosun and Erten (2014) reported limited use of CSs by Turkish EFL learners and that proficiency did not influence the choice of CSs.

The affective role that tasks play in the selection of CSs is reflected in the study of Poulisse and Schils (1989). The CSs used by Dutch EFL learners were investigated with regard to both proficiency and task. The study highlighted that task-related factors played an important role where the selection of CSs was concerned while the effect of proficiency was only marginal.

Conclusions are difficult to draw due to the differences in the design of the studies conducted, the taxonomies used, task-type or the context in which strategies are elicited, the cultural setting, the data collection methods and so on. However, in general, the review of the literature reveals that proficiency, gender, and task all influence the use of communication strategies.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Setting and Participants

The participants of the study were 32 Omani EFL learners enrolled in the General Foundation Program (GFP), a pre-university tertiary level program at a higher education institution in Muscat, Oman. They were selected based on two sampling approaches: criterion sampling and convenience sampling. They met the predetermined criteria of : a) proficiency levels (low and high), b) studying English as a foreign language c) Arabic L1 learners, and d) willingness to communicate. As per convenience sampling the participants: a) were available on campus for the stipulated duration of the study, b) were easily accessible, c) were willing to work in pairs, d) were not camera conscious and, e) consented to be video recorded while performing the tasks.

The institutional placement test had already categorised learners on the basis of their proficiency: the GFP English Levels 1, 2, and 3 respectively. For the purpose of this study, learners enrolled in Levels 1 and 3 were chosen. There was an equal distribution of the 32 participants between Levels 1 and 3. Within each of these groups, participants chose their partners and the pairs remained the same for all three tasks.

### 3.2. Data Collection Procedure

#### 3.2.1. Instruments

Khan (2010) recommends using different tasks to elicit a variety of strategies, instead of just manipulating the dimensions of the same task. Therefore, in this study, three different oral communication tasks were employed.

The picture story task had twelve frames. In pairs, the participants were given alternate frames in sequence and were asked to narrate a detailed story in an interesting manner, taking turns.

The abstract art description task was designed in the form of a role play where participant 'A' was a famous artist. Participant 'B' had to find out about their partner's artwork. Once they completed the task their roles were reversed using a different piece of art.

The information-gap task involved a picture of a room, with a variety of day-to-day use items randomly placed across the room. Participant 'A' was given a copy of the picture in which eight items in the room were circled and numbered. They had to describe these items marked in the picture one by one in a manner that would facilitate their partner to identify and circle them correctly in their copy of the picture. Participant 'B' was instructed to identify and circle the eight items with the help of the description provided by their partner. They were allowed to ask questions to gain more clarity on which item needed to be circled. The activity was continued with participant 'B' who had to describe the different items to their partner in the same way.

An oral CSs checklist was used in the study, based on established taxonomies covering 27 CSs under the three broad categories: communication flow maintenance strategies, interactional strategies, and compensation strategies. In preparing the checklist, the current study employed an extended approach combining the different theoretical perspectives thus covering a wide range of CSs, especially in relation to different tasks.

This study is quantitative in nature. To capture the communication strategy used, the participants were video recorded while performing the communicative tasks in pairs. The videos were transcribed for strategy identification. The strategies used by each participant were recorded and quantified on the CSs checklist. These were cross-tabulated against proficiency levels and tasks to determine the influence of proficiency level and task on the choice and number of CSs used.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Communication flow maintenance strategies used across tasks

Communication flow maintenance strategies are used for maintaining or enhancing the flow of conversation without the speaker resorting to the use of the mother tongue.

In the picture story task, lexicalized filler was the most frequently used strategy (32%) by the high proficiency group (see Table 1), used exclusively by this group. For the low proficiency group, self-repetition was the most used strategy (51.0%). Elaborating gestures was the second highest strategy used by both groups.

The overall use of communication flow maintenance strategies in the picture story task is much more for the high proficiency group ($f = 253$) compared to the low proficiency group ($f = 61$).

In the information-gap task, both groups did not use the maintaining conversation strategy. The use of other-repetition is also low for both groups. Both proficiency groups used self-repetition and elaborating gestures more compared to other strategies. On the whole, in the information-gap task, the high proficiency group used more communication flow maintenance strategies ($f = 144$) compared to the low proficiency group ($f = 65$).

Table 1 Frequency and percentage of CSs used across tasks
by high and low proficiency groups.

| | High Proficiency | | | | | | Low Proficiency | | | | | |
| | Picture Story | | Abstract Art | | Information-gap | | Picture Story | | Abstract Art | | Information-gap | |
| Communication Strategies | f | % | f | % | f | % | f | % | f | % | f | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I Communication Flow Maintenance Strategies** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 Lexicalized fillers | 80 | 32% | 80 | 19% | 12 | 8% | 0 | 0% | 2 | 1% | 1 | 2% |
| 2 Gesture (elaborating) | 62 | 25% | 46 | 11% | 49 | 34% | 23 | 38% | 13 | 7% | 30 | 46% |
| 3 Self-repair | 28 | 11% | 34 | 8% | 24 | 17% | 5 | 8% | 8 | 4% | 8 | 12% |
| 4 Self-repetition | 57 | 23% | 68 | 16% | 58 | 40% | 31 | 51% | 43 | 24% | 23 | 35% |
| 5 Other  repetition | 6 | 2% | 4 | 1% | 1 | 1% | 2 | 3% | 6 | 3% | 3 | 5% |
| 6 Maintaining conversation | 20 | 8% | 200 | 46% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 110 | 60% | 0 | 0% |
| **II    Interactional Strategies** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7 Comprehension check | 2 | 5% | 3 | 2% | 93 | 16% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 33 | 10% |
| 8 Clarification by circumlocution | 5 | 12% | 11 | 9% | 107 | 18% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 46 | 14% |
| 9 Clarification by repetition | 2 | 5% | 5 | 4% | 31 | 5% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 11 | 3% |
| 10 Clarification request | 4 | 9% | 4 | 3% | 72 | 12% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 115 | 36% |
| 11 Asking for repetition | 1 | 2% | 0 | 0% | 8 | 1% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 14 | 4% |
| 12 Confirmation check | 0 | 0% | 7 | 6% | 125 | 21% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 53 | 16% |
| 13 Interpretive summary | 3 | 7% | 9 | 7% | 16 | 3% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 14 Circumlocution | 26 | 60% | 83 | 68% | 139 | 24% | 4 | 100% | 3 | 100% | 51 | 16% |
| **III   Compensation Strategies** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 15 Appeal for help | 1 | 1% | 2 | 1% | 5 | 2% | 3 | 2% | 18 | 6% | 4 | 1% |
| 16 Message abandonment | 2 | 1% | 3 | 2% | 2 | 1% | 15 | 8% | 19 | 7% | 30 | 6% |
| 17 Code switching | 1 | 1% | 2 | 1% | 2 | 1% | 55 | 28% | 117 | 41% | 263 | 54% |
| 18 Word coinage | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 1% | 1 | 0% | 1 | 0% |
| 19 Foreignising | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 20 Gesture (Substituting) | 0 | 0% | 3 | 2% | 2 | 1% | 1 | 1% | 1 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 21 Long pause | 7 | 4% | 11 | 7% | 11 | 5% | 63 | 32% | 77 | 27% | 114 | 23% |
| 22 Restructuring | 53 | 34% | 53 | 31% | 56 | 28% | 17 | 9% | 16 | 6% | 35 | 7% |
| 23 Literal translation | 27 | 17% | 21 | 12% | 30 | 15% | 10 | 5% | 5 | 2% | 11 | 2% |
| 24 Mumbling | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 8 | 4% | 10 | 4% | 8 | 2% |
| 25 Omission | 9 | 6% | 11 | 7% | 5 | 2% | 6 | 3% | 2 | 1% | 3 | 1% |
| 26 Retrieval | 8 | 5% | 11 | 7% | 8 | 4% | 6 | 3% | 9 | 3% | 7 | 1% |
| 27 Approximation | 50 | 32% | 52 | 31% | 82 | 40% | 11 | 6% | 9 | 3% | 14 | 3% |
| NB: f = frequency; % = percentage | | | | | | | | | | | | |

In the abstract art description task, maintaining conversation was the most frequently used strategy by the high and low proficiency groups ($f = 200, f = 110$, respectively). The high proficiency group used more lexicalized fillers, self-repair, and elaborating gestures compared to the low proficiency group. Hence, overall, the high proficiency group used considerably more communication flow maintenance strategies in the abstract art description task ($f = 432$) compared to low proficiency group ($f = 182$).

The findings of this study show that the high proficiency group used more communication flow maintenance strategies in all the tasks compared to the low proficiency group. Since communication flow maintenance strategies are mostly L2 based strategies, this finding is supported by researchers like Paribhakt (1995) who claim that advanced learners employ more L2 based strategies.

However, the pattern of use of communication flow maintenance strategies across tasks by both proficiency groups was the same. These strategies were used the least in the information-gap task, more in the picture story task, and most in the abstract art description task. There were variations though in the degree of use of the strategies within communication flow maintenance category across the three tasks by the two proficiency groups.

*Lexicalized filler* was the communication flow maintenance strategy which was used almost exclusively by the high proficiency group. Encoding L2 verbal messages consumes more time than those in L1 because of the series of processes involved in doing so. Lexicalized fillers serve as lexicalized pauses (filled with L2 words such as *well, you know,* and *you see* rather than sounds like *'er', and 'em'*) which are used as a strategy to gain more time for processing how to deliver the message in the L2.

The low proficiency group barely used this strategy compared to the high proficiency group which indicates that they may not have been familiar with lexicalized fillers in the L2 and resorted to self-repetition as a communication flow maintenance strategy.

However, the high proficiency group used fewer lexicalized fillers in the information-gap task compared to the other two tasks. This could be due to the nature of the task. In the information-gap task, they had to help their partner locate the item that they were describing; hence, they resorted to self-repetition rather than lexicalized fillers. Self-repetition could have been more effective as it helps in communication flow maintenance as well as reiterating information.

*Maintaining conversation* as a strategy involves providing active responses and is characterized by comments like *Oh My God*, *It sounds exciting*, *Yes, yes, Hmm*, or repeating the interlocutor's preceding utterance. For both the proficiency groups, it was noted that maintaining conversation was used by them most in the abstract art description task, though the high proficiency group used it more frequently than the low proficiency group. In this task, as stated earlier, participants had to talk about their abstract art paintings to their partners. The partners as active listeners provided responses to show their interest in the conversation; hence, greater use of maintaining conversation strategies is seen in this task.

*Elaborating gestures* accompany the utterance of the speaker to elaborate on what the speaker is saying. They can be categorised under communication flow maintenance strategy and are different from substitution gestures which are gestures used in place of a word or phrase. Substitution gestures fall under the compensation strategies as the speaker compensates for lexical deficits by substituting language with gestures. An important finding in this study is that both the proficiency groups used elaborating gestures very frequently across the three tasks. The reason for this could be to make their utterances better understood and thus maintain the flow of the conversation. The low proficiency group used more

elaborating gestures, especially in the information-gap task. Even though participants were not facing each other and were sitting back-to-back, they were tempted to use elaborating gestures. This could be because, in this task, almost all the information had to be conveyed in terms of spatial position (*above the book in the corner*) size, and shape (*small flower, circle*), which prompted the use of gestures. More use of gestures was also reported in Khan's (2010) study, in which Spanish EFL learners used more gestures in the information-gap task.

*Self-repetition* involves the repetition of the speaker's words or phrases. It was used extensively by both the proficiency groups to maintain the communication flow. This strategy seems to be more convenient for the participants as the speaker has to just repeat their own words and, hence, it helps them maintain the flow of the conversation. Most use of self-repetition was evident in both groups in the abstract art description task. Due to the abstract nature of the picture to be described, participants would have required more time to think and to keep the conversation going so they would have employed self-repetition as a communication flow maintenance strategy. This finding supports the belief that the degree of abstractness influences learners' choice of strategies (Khan, 2010). The *other repetition* strategy involves repeating what others have said, and this strategy has been used less often by both groups.

## 4.2. Interactional strategies

Interactional strategies, which are problem management strategies, come into play during the post-articulatory monitoring of one's own or the interlocutor's speech. These strategies are used to manipulate the conversation and to negotiate shared meaning for mutual understanding.

In the picture story task, the low proficiency group did not use any interactional strategies except circumlocution; the frequency of use was low ($f = 4$). The high proficiency group used all strategies except the confirmation check. Circumlocution (60%) was the most used interactional strategy for the high proficiency group. On the whole, in the picture story task, the high proficiency group used more interactional strategies ($f = 43$) compared to the low proficiency group ($f = 4$).

In contrast to other tasks in the information-gap task, the low proficiency group used all interactional strategies, except *Interpretive Summary*. *Clarification request* was the most frequently used strategy by the low proficiency group ($f = 115$, 36%), followed by confirmation check ($f = 53$, 16%), circumlocution ($f = 51$, 16%), and clarification by circumlocution ($f = 46$, 14%). Circumlocution was the most used strategy ($f = 139$, 24%) by the high proficiency group followed by confirmation check ($f = 125$, 21%), clarification by circumlocution ($f = 107$, 18%), and comprehension check ($f = 93$, 16%). Overall, the high proficiency group used more interactional strategies ($f = 591$) in the information-gap task compared to the low proficiency group ($f = 323$).

In the abstract art description task, the low proficiency group did not use any interactional strategies except circumlocution, the use of which was low though ($f = 3$). The high proficiency group used all strategies in this category except asking for repetition. For them, circumlocution was the most used (68%) interactional strategy. On the whole, in the abstract art description task, the high proficiency group used considerably more interactional strategies ($f = 122$) compared to the low proficiency group ($f = 3$).

While the high proficiency group used more interactional strategies on all tasks compared to the low proficiency group, the pattern of use was the same for both groups:

less frequent in the picture story task, more in the abstract art description task, and the most in the information-gap task. More use of Interactional strategies on the information-gap task was also confirmed in the study conducted by Khan (2010) on Spanish EFL learners. The participants in her study used fewer interactional strategies in the picture story and abstract art description task than in the information-gap task. The reason for both the proficiency groups in this study using considerably more interactional strategies in the information-gap task as compared to the other two tasks is related to the nature of the task. Studies focusing on interactional dimensions of tasks (e.g., Gass, 2002; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Yule & McDonald, 1990) have claimed that tasks like information-gap create greater scenarios for interaction and negotiation of meaning.  If we recollect, the picture story had very few elements, all from real-life and contextualized. On the other hand, the information-gap had a greater number of elements, and these were not contextualized. The picture story had frames that were sequenced and, hence, did not require much reasoning, complex justifications, or the need to use more interactional strategies. Most importantly, the picture story was the most one-way task in that it did not necessitate negotiation as information was shared through pre-established turn-taking.  The same was not true for the information-gap task.  It was the least one-way task. Since the information was split between participants, they had to continually interact with each other to seek information and negotiate meaning. In the abstract art description, the artist would explain things to their friend and the curious friend would ask more questions.  This nature of interaction made it relatively less one-way compared to the picture story.

As noted in this study, the high proficiency group has, overall, used more interactional strategies across tasks compared to the low proficiency group. This could be due to the high level of interest and motivation of the high proficiency group as we have seen in their perceptions of this task and, hence, the urge to be well understood by their partners which led them to use more interactional strategies. This is evident in the length of the performance of the tasks; the high proficiency group took more time while performing each task compared to the low proficiency group.

*Circumlocution* is defined as exemplifying, illustrating, or describing the properties of the target object or action. This is a resource deficit strategy and is different from clarification by circumlocution which is an interactional strategy in response to an expression of non-understanding. In this study, the high proficiency group used circumlocution more than other interactional strategies in the three tasks. Further, the use of circumlocution was the highest in the information-gap task. Other studies also support this finding (Kaivanpanah et al., 2012; Dörnyei, 1995; Poulisse & Schils 1989) as they claimed that participants use more circumlocution in tasks which involve the description of objects. According to Poulisse and Schils (1989), in a story telling task there is no problem to be solved, the participants are given a context and, therefore, they tend to use fewer analytical strategies like circumlocution.  In addition, there was no time constrain on the participants to finish the task, which could have encouraged them to use circumlocution to convey their message effectively. Another supportive claim is that of Paribhakt (1985) as according to her the more learners advance in proficiency level the more inclined they are to use L2-based strategies (e.g. circumlocution).

*Clarification reque*st is an interactional strategy used for requesting an explanation when something is not understood properly from the other person's preceding utterance. As reported in this study, clarification request stands out as the most used interactional strategy by the low proficiency group in the information-gap task.  In the information-gap

task used in this study, there were many similar looking items which were not easy to distinguish from one another. This could have led the low proficiency participants to use more clarification requests as their partners from the same proficiency level could not have described the items discretely enough to distinguish one from another.

*Confirmation check* is requesting confirmation that one heard or understood something correctly. No confirmation check and asking for repetition were used in the picture story by either proficiency groups. No confirmation check and asking for repetition was used by the low proficiency group in the abstract art description task and very few instances of confirmation check were recorded for the high proficiency on the abstract art description task. Due to the interactional nature of the task both groups used confirmation check in the information-gap task. The participants had to identify items based on the description provided by their partners. Hence, they used confirmation check frequently to elicit the correct answer. Their confirmation check led their partners to use interactional strategies like clarification by circumlocution, clarification by repetition, comprehension check in the information-gap task. According to Robinson (2001) more comprehension check and clarification requests are used by learners on tasks involving more elements such as a map task.

In the picture story task, the participants were required to narrate the story based on the frames each one had and there was no right or wrong response in the way they could narrate it. Hence, there was no need to use interactional strategies like confirmation check and asking for repetition. Moreover, the story was sequenced and the elements were contextualized; hence all the more reason to not use these strategies. The abstract art description task, on the other hand, had the scope for the use of interactional strategies compared to the picture story task.

*Interpretive summary* is an extended paraphrase of the interlocutor's preceding message. The speaker uses this strategy to check if they understood the interlocutor's message correctly. This strategy was not used at all by the low proficiency group in any of the three tasks. This strategy is heavily dependent on L2 resources which could be a reason that the low proficiency participants did not use it. Even in other studies (Khan, 2010; Khanji, 1996; Oxford et al., 2004), the findings revealed that low proficiency learners hesitate to use more cognitively challenging strategies.

### 4.3. Compensation strategies used across tasks
###      by high and low proficiency learners

In this study, compensation strategies are the last category under communication strategies.  Compensation strategies are used mainly to overcome L2 lexical deficits. These strategies include L1 based strategies, where learners use their L1 to overcome their resource deficits: code switching, word coinage, literal translation, and foreignising. They also comprise avoidance-based strategies, in which the learner abandons trying to get their message across by not appealing for help, message abandonment, omission, and mumbling. They also include L2-based strategies, in which the learners continue with their original plan, using existing L2 knowledge to adapt the message: retrieval, approximation, and restructuring. Long pause is another compensatory strategy that compensates for resource deficits by providing the learner with more time to process information. Substituting gestures is yet another compensatory strategy as it doesn't involve the overt use of L1.

In the picture story task, the low proficiency group used long pauses the most (32%) followed by code switching (28%). The high proficiency group used more restructuring

(34%), approximation (32%), and literal translation (12%). On the whole, in the picture story task, the low proficiency group used more compensation strategies ($f = 196$) as compared to the high proficiency group ($f = 158$).

In the information-gap task, code switching was the most used strategy by the low proficiency group which amounts to 54% of all strategies used in this category. Long pauses were the second most used strategy by the low proficiency group ($f = 114$), followed by restructuring (7%), and message abandonment (6%). Approximation was the most used compensation strategy by the high proficiency group (40%), followed by restructuring (28%), and literal translation (15%).

In the abstract art description task, the strategies had a similar pattern of use as in the picture story task. The low proficiency group used code switching the most (41%) followed by long pauses (27%). The high proficiency group used more restructuring (31%), approximation (31%), and literal translation strategies. Foreignising was not used at all by both groups. Overall, in the abstract art description task, the low proficiency group used more compensation strategies ($f = 284$) compared to the high proficiency group ($f = 169$).

We have seen in the findings that the high proficiency group had, overall, used more communication flow maintenance strategies and interactional strategies compared to the low proficiency group. However, the same is not the case with compensation strategies. These were used more by the low proficiency group across tasks compared to the high proficiency group. This finding tends to support other studies (Chen, 1990; Poulisse, 1993; Liskin-Gasparro, 1996; S.Khan, 2010;  Nguyen et.al. 2022) who claimed that learners with low proficiency faced more lexical challenges compared to higher proficiency learners due to their limited L2 lexical resources. The fact that the compensation strategies are less cognitively demanding than the other categories of CSs makes them accessible for the low proficiency learners to readily employ.

The nature of the tasks played a role in the pattern of use, as both groups used these strategies the least in the picture story task, more in the abstract art description task, and the most in the information-gap task. The number of unknown lexical items in the information gap task was more compared to the picture story task or the abstract art description task; this triggered the use of compensation strategies for both groups. Unfamiliarity with the lexical items in a task is a factor that increases the use of compensatory strategies (Littlemore's, 2001).

*Code switching* is using L1 words with L1 pronunciation in L2 speech. Code switching may involve stretches of dialogue ranging from single words to whole chunks and even complete turns. As we have seen, code switching was the most used strategy by the low proficiency group. In this study, from the picture story to the abstract art description task, the low proficiency participants' use of code switching was twice that of the high proficiency group. Code switching was the most frequently used strategy in the information-gap task.

Apart from code switching, the low proficiency group used more long pauses, message abandonment, appeal for help, and mumbling especially in the information-gap tasks. *Long pause* was a compensatory strategy as it compensates for resource deficits by providing the learner with more time to process information. Among the other compensation strategies, most of the strategies used by the low proficiency group were either L1 based strategies where learners use their L1 to overcome their resource deficits (e.g. Code switching), or *avoidance-based strategies*, in which the learner abandons trying to get their message across (e.g. appeal for help, message abandonment, mumbling). A similar pattern of the use of these strategies by Omani low proficiency learners was seen in Al Alawi's study (2018). *Restructuring and approximation* are mostly L2-based strategies, in which the learners continue with their

original plan, using existing L2 knowledge to adapt the message. The high proficiency group used more of these strategies, a finding in line with Al Alawi's study on Omani EFL learners. Other researchers have also claimed that high proficiency learners use more L2 based strategies (Paribakht, 1985; Ting & Phan, 2008; Nguyen et.al.2022).

*Word coinage* involves creating a non-existing L2 word by applying a supposed L2 rule to an existing L2 word. It is important to note that compensation strategies like *word coinage* were barely used by both groups in the three tasks. Al Alawi's study (2018) also reported the least use of this strategy by Omani EFL learners.  According to Paribakht (1995) the greater the distance between the participants' L1 and L2, the more challenging it is for the learner to use these strategies. In this study, there is a vast distance between the participants' L1 (Arabic) and L2 (English), hence, they have barely used these strategies.

### 5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the influence of proficiency and task type on the use of CSs by Omani EFL learners. It is evident that proficiency rather than task characteristics determine which individual category of CSs would be used more or would be used relatively less in a task. In each task, participants from both proficiency groups adjusted their CSs in the same manner according to the task. This finding aligns with the literature regarding the role of tasks in the selection of CSs (Poulisse and Schils, 1989; Kaivanpanah et al., 2012). The high proficiency group, overall, used more communication flow maintenance strategies, less interactional strategies, and least compensation strategies across tasks. The low proficiency group, overall, used more compensation strategies, less interactional strategies, and the least communication flow maintenance strategies across tasks. As discussed in the literature review, Nakatani's (2006) study reported that, unlike low proficiency learners, the high oral proficiency learners use CSs which were more effective in maintaining the conversation flow and reaching the communication goal: fluency-oriented, and negotiation of meaning strategies.

In the current study, it was also noticed that the overall use of CSs was more for the high proficiency group than the low proficiency group.  This is attributed by Mei and Nathalang (2010) to the larger repertoire of CSs that high proficiency learners possess.

This study strongly supports the use of oral communication tasks in developing communicative competence among Omani EFL learners. Communicative tasks in the form of face-to-face interactions and role plays based on authentic situations promote real life communicative competence and enhance the quality of learner output.

We have seen that the use of interactional strategies was high in the information-gap task. It leads to increased output and effective negotiation of meaning, thus facilitating the acquisition of new knowledge. However, learners of the same proficiency level during the negotiation of meaning supply each other with simplified feedback which might not add to their learning and may lead to fossilization, when language errors become permanent features in a learner's inter-language system (Canale & Swain ;1980). Conversely, negotiation of meaning between a low proficiency learner and a high proficiency learner, or between the high proficiency learner and a native speaker, is a more lexically enriching experience. Therefore, care should be taken in pairing learners on such tasks. The use of code switching or other L1 based strategies does not lead to interlanguage development and may limit communicative competence. Hence, providing training to learners on the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of strategies in language acquisition should be taught to EFL learners. The low

proficiency participants in this study have not used lexicalized fillers at all. They can be taught to use lexicalized fillers instead of awkward pauses or self-repetition. These findings suggest that EFL instructors need to be aware that not all CSs are relevant from a pedagogical point of view. They should carefully select the ones that will facilitate learners' communicative competence depending on situational factors such as mother tongue, proficiency level, and purpose.

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