

Iraqi EFL University Students' Use of Compensation Strategies During Speaking Tasks



استخدام طلبة الجامعات العراقيين الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية لاستراتيجيات التعويض
أثناء مهام التحدث

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المستخلص

هدفت الدراسة إلى التعرف على استراتيجيات التعويض التي يستخدمها طلبة المرحلة الرابعة العراقيون دارسو اللغة الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية أثناء مهام التحدث، والكشف عن مدى تكرار استخدام هذه الاستراتيجيات استناداً إلى تصنيف أكسفورد. واعتمدت الدراسة تصميمًا مختلطاً تقاربياً للحصول على بيانات كمية ونوعية حول استخدام المشاركين لاستراتيجيات التعويض. شملت عينة الدراسة (120) طالباً من طلبة المرحلة الرابعة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة المثنى، خلال العام الدراسي 2025-2026، واختير منهم (15) طالباً لإجراء مقابلات شبه منظمة. جُمعت البيانات الكمية باستخدام استبيان لاستراتيجيات التعويض مكون من ثماني فقرات، تمثل كل فقرة إحدى الاستراتيجيات الثماني الواردة في تصنيف أكسفورد. وأظهرت النتائج أن المشاركين استخدموا استراتيجيات التعويض الثماني جميعها، مع وجود تفاوت في مستويات استخدامها. وجاءت استراتيجية الإيماءات ولغة الجسد في المرتبة الأولى بمتوسط حسابي بلغ (4.17)، تلتها استراتيجية التحول إلى اللغة الأم بمتوسط (3.95)، ثم استراتيجية اختيار الموضوع بمتوسط (3.87)، في حين جاءت استراتيجية تجنب التواصل في المرتبة

الأخيرة بمتوسط (3.28). كما استكملت النتائج النوعية نتائج الاستبيان من خلال توضيح كيفية استخدام المشاركين لهذه الاستراتيجيات عند مواجهة صعوبات في التواصل. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن الطلبة المشاركين وظفوا مجموعة متنوعة من استراتيجيات التعويض اللغوية وغير اللغوية للتغلب على الصعوبات والمحافظة على استمرارية التواصل أثناء مهام التحدث.

Abstract

This study investigated the compensation strategies used by fourth-year Iraqi EFL university students during speaking tasks and examined their frequency of use based on Oxford's taxonomy. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed to obtain quantitative and qualitative data on the participants' use of compensation strategies. The study involved 120 fourth-year students from the Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of AL-Muthanna, during the academic year 2025–2026. Fifteen students from the sample were selected for semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were collected through an eight-item compensation strategies questionnaire, with each item representing one of the eight strategies included in Oxford's taxonomy. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews to provide further insight into the participants' use of these strategies during speaking tasks. The findings revealed that all eight compensation strategies were used by the participants, although their levels of use varied. Mimes/gestures ranked first ($M = 4.17$), followed by switching to L1 ($M = 3.95$) and selecting the topic ($M = 3.87$), whereas avoiding communication ranked last ($M = 3.28$). The qualitative findings complemented the questionnaire results by illustrating how the participants employed these strategies when encountering communication difficulties. The study concludes that the participating Iraqi EFL university students employed a range of linguistic and non-linguistic compensation strategies to overcome difficulties and maintain communication during speaking tasks.

1.Introduction

Speaking is an essential component of the acquisition and instruction of foreign languages. According to Lazaraton (2001), language is largely an oral method of communication, and for many people, understanding a language means being able to speak it. Nunan (2001) also underscores that being able to speak a language is frequently perceived as the primary indicator of one's capacity to function in that language. According to Shumin (2002), EFL students frequently encounter challenges in their ability to communicate effectively. It necessitates the ability to communicate effectively in social settings. Consequently, EFL students



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may encounter challenges in effective spoken communication with the target language if they lack fundamental communicative proficiency in it. In Iraqi context, students encounter challenges in speaking, because of various factors, including prescribed textbooks, instructors, and the students themselves. prescribed textbooks, instructors, and the students themselves. In addition, speaking skill is not given sufficient attention, and the exercises in these textbooks lack interactivity (Dehham et

al. 2021). Additionally, Al-Tameem (2017) asserts that there are many challenges.

that Iraqi students encounter while speaking, such as lack of vocabulary, the

inability to engage in conversation, the mispronunciation of words, the experience of pauses and fear of making grammatical errors. Furthermore,

numerous students frequently experience difficulty in articulating their ideas.

and struggle to express themselves. As a result, the classroom environment

becomes less communicative, as students tend to remain mute rather than actively participating in speaking activities.

CpSs are indispensable methods for EFL students to overcome the challenges in their linguistic proficiency during communication. A comprehensive framework for analyzing how learners compensate for deficiencies in vocabulary, grammar, or fluency is provided by Oxford's (1990) typology of CpSs. Prior studies, such as Karbalaei&Negin Taji (2014), have shown the effectiveness of CpSs in enhancing the communicative skill of EFL learners. However, little is known about how Iraqi EFL university students use CpSs, especially when it comes to speaking assignments. Furthermore, only a small number of research have integrated questionnaire results with interview data using a convergent mixed-methods methodology. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap.

1.2Aims

This study aims to:

1. Identify the types of CpSs used by fourth-year Iraqi EFL students during speaking tasks.

2. Determine the frequency of use of these strategies based on Oxford's typology..

1.3Research Questions

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1.What CpSs are used by fourth-year Iraqi EFL university students during speaking tasks?

2.How often do Iraqi EFL university students employ CpSs during speaking tasks?

1.4 Limits

The study is limited to fourth-year Iraqi EFL students at the College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Al muthanna, for the academic year 2025–2026.

1.5 Value

1.This study will provide valuable insights into the compensation strategies used by Iraqi EFL university students during speaking tasks.

2.This study will help teachers identify the most frequently used compensation strategies and incorporate them into speaking instruction.

3.This study will contribute to a better understanding of the role of compensation strategies in improving oral communication among Iraqi EFL university students.

4.This study will provide useful implications for EFL teachers, curriculum designers, and researchers interested in developing speaking instruction in Iraq and similar EFL context

1.6 Definitions of Basic Terms

1.Compensation Strategies

CpSs, as defined by Oxford (1990), are the particular tools or strategies that students use to successfully apply something new for understanding or production, even when their expertise is restricted. The current research operatively adopts this definition.

2.Speaking Tasks

Speaking tasks refer to "oral activities or exercises in which language learners are required to use their L2 to communicate. These tasks may involve free conversation, structured discussions, presentations, or other forms of oral output where fluency and accuracy are tested. The performance on these tasks is often a key measure of language proficiency" (Skehan, 2009, p.124). This definition is adopted operationally in the present study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Compensation Strategies

The term CpSs was first used in 1980 by Faerch and Kasper, who defined it as achievement techniques intended to manage problems resulting from limited linguistic knowledge. Poullisse et al. (1984) expand on this term by pointing out that language users use CpSs to express their intended meanings, especially when confronted with linguistic limitations during the pre-production stage of utterances. Expanding on this, Weil and Luo



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(2014) define CpSs as tools that language learners use to remedy performance deficiencies in the target language, such as poor vocabulary or grammatical skills that impede comprehension and communication. According to Bialystok (1983), CpSs are strategies used when there is a lack of mutual understanding between speakers and listeners in addition to language deficiencies.

According to Namaziandost et al. (2019), CpSs help students get beyond language obstacles and advance their general language competency. Language learning strategies (LLSs) and communication strategies (CSs), two key ideas in language learning, guide the development of CpSs. According to Taheri and Davoudi (2016), CpSs and CSs are synonymous names that express the same idea. They also claim that language users frequently use these techniques to convey desired meanings when they lack the linguistic structures required for successful translation. CpSs are classified under direct learning strategies by Oxford (1990), emphasizing their function as a particular subset of more general learning techniques.

2.1.1 Communication Strategies

Selinker (1972) coined the term CSs and included it as one of the five stages of interlanguage development in his book "Interlanguage." It is described as the outcome of a learner's effort to use a constrained target language system to communicate meaning via natural speech. The term CSs was first systematically examined by Varadi (1980), who clarifies that a learner may generate interlanguage that is syntactically valid but fails to convey the intended meaning. However, Selinker (1972) employs the term "strategies" to describe specific mistakes made by foreign language learners. He argues that these errors stem from the learners' attempt to express themselves in spontaneous speech despite having a limited comprehension of the target language system.

CSs are often used to solve conversational challenges that arise throughout the process of learning a second language, primarily because of the learners' inadequate proficiency in the target language. When faced with difficulties communicating intended meaning and expressing emotions, they must learn to use successful strategies. Therefore, oral communication relies heavily on the use of CSs (Syarifuddin, 2020).

According to Corder (1981), CSs are deliberate efforts made by the speaker during message encoding and the listener during message decoding to create a shared understanding in order to resolve any potential communication problems and ultimately accomplish the intended communication goal. This is in line with Tarone's (1980) comment on CSs, which asserts that when meaning structures are not shared, two interlocutors should work to cooperatively build an

understanding of meaning. Tarone's view of CSs might be seen as an effort to address the disparity in the target language competency of the speaker and listener in everyday interaction situations. Most communication problems are typically lexical in nature.

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1994), CSs play a particularly significant role in meaning negotiation when a foreign language student and a speaker of the target language do not share linguistic patterns or sociolinguistic principles.

2.1.2 Language Learning Strategies

Cohen (2011) defines LLSs in a way that includes learners' deliberate process choices. These procedures store, retain, remember, and apply language-related knowledge in an effort to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language. Learning strategies are defined in the field of education as "specific actions, behaviors, procedures, or methods employed by students to boost their own learning process." According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992, p.12), these strategies include things like actively looking for discussion partners or encouraging oneself to take on difficult linguistic tasks. \

Learning strategies must be in line with the main goal, which is the acquisition of communicative competence for a large portion of learners. Additionally, the learning environment must support students' growth in independence and self-direction (Oxford, 1990). Three LLS taxonomy models are acknowledged for their role in recognizing language learners' commonly used strategies:

1-Rubin's Taxonomy (1987): In the beginning, Rubin divided strategies into two categories: direct and indirect. The learner's language acquisition is directly affected by the direct strategies. Clarification, monitoring, memorization, guessing, inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning, and practice are some of the cognitive tasks that are included in the process. Practice opportunities are indirectly created when indirect strategies are used in language learning. Using production strategies, including the usage of synonyms, is one such strategy (Lan, 2005).

2-O'Malley and Chamot's (1994) Taxonomy: A three-part strategy taxonomy comprises the second taxonomy of LLSs. Metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring, and assessing, are included in the first part. Cognitive strategies, which fall under the second category, include a variety of methods including gathering information, organizing, taking notes, elaborating knowledge, summarizing deduction or induction, visualizing, aural representation, and drawing conclusions. The third one includes social and emotive strategies, such as asking questions to get clarity, encouraging collaboration, and talking to oneself. It is



crucial to recognize that this categorization is supported by researchers and educators as well as theoretical arguments (O'Malley & Chamot, 1994).

3-Oxford's Taxonomy (1990): Both taxonomies provide information about the possible LLSs used by proficient language learners. Oxford recognizes the value of current taxonomies while pointing out the need to develop a more thorough and wide taxonomy. Based on her research on LLSs in adult learners, Oxford offers a generally accepted taxonomy of LLSs. Six separate types, including compensation strategies, make up the construct of LLSs, according to her taxonomy. Compensation strategies are covered in depth in the section that follows.

3.1.3 Compensation Strategies

When speaking, reading, writing, or listening, learners employ CpSs to fill in knowledge gaps. Using non-verbal clues like body language and gestures during conversations is one way to improve communication abilities. Oxford (1990).

CpSs, according to Oxford (1990), are the particular strategies or resources that students use to successfully apply something new for production or comprehension, even when their knowledge is limited. Learners use CpSs to help them understand the language when they don't know enough about it. For the lack of grammatical and lexical proficiency, these strategies work as compensatory measures. People use the method of deducing the intended meaning when they are unfamiliar with words and phrases. Through the process of making a guess, a learner interprets facts by drawing on their own life experiences. In the field of production, CpSs are used to address situations where grammatical knowledge is not fully understood.

According to Oxford (1990, p. 48), "guessing intelligently in listening and reading and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing" are the two categories of compensatory strategies. For both language and non-linguistic information, there are two clever guessing strategies.

1-Using Linguistic Clues.

This is the act of using linguistic signals to deduce the meaning of a text or target language, even in the absence of a thorough understanding of vocabulary, syntax, or other aspects of the target language. Language-based hints may come from a variety of elements of the target language that the student is already acquainted with, either from their mother tongue or from another language. when people negotiate meaning (Oxford, 1990).

2-Using Other Clues.

Non-language clues are used to deduce the text's meaning without depending exclusively on language-based cues. These hints may come from a variety of sources, including the subject, the circumstance, the text's structure, personal relationships, contextual information, and general world knowledge. When dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar, or other aspects of the target language, this strategy comes in handy especially. (Macora&Pasumbu, 2020).

Oxford (1990) lists the following eight sub strategies for overcoming speaking and writing challenges as shown in Table 1:

Table 1

The Summary of Compensation Strategies According to (Oxford, 1990).

Using words in their original language without being translated to the target language and inserting of mother-tongue language endings into words in the foreign language.	1. Switching to the Mother Tongue
Asking someone for help to provide the missing term in the target language.	2. Getting Help
Using mime or gesture in place of words that express the appropriate idea.	3. Using Mime or Gesture
Avoiding communication completely or partially, reducing communication, and avoiding specific words or topics when issues are expected	4. Avoiding Communication Completely or Partially
Picking a conversation subject that is in line with one's own interests while also considering one's vocabulary and grammatical proficiency to participate in the discussion.	5. Choosing the topic
Changing the discourse means leaving out specific details, simplifying concepts, or making minor changes that preserve the same meaning	6. Adjusting or Approximating the Message
Creating new lexical units to effectively convey a certain notion.	7. Coining Words
Using a synonym that has a similar meaning or by circumlocution, which entails giving a thorough explanation.	8. Using a Synonym or Circumlocution

Section Three: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive convergent mixed-method research design, which mixes both quantitative and qualitative methods within a single analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2 The Population and the Sample

This study's population consists of fourth-year students in the English Language Department of the College of Education for Human Sciences at



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the University of AL-Muthanna during the academic year 2025/2026. The total number of students is 280. Simple random selection was used to choose 120 students as the research sample. The sample represented about 43% of the total study population.

3.3 The Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study:

3.3.1 Compensation Strategies Questionnaire

A questionnaire encompassing the eight main compensation strategies defined in Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of compensation strategies was developed to evaluate the compensation strategies that students use in their everyday communication. Eight questions made up the questionnaire, with one item representing each strategy. Using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, and 5 = Always), participants were asked to evaluate how frequently they used each strategy. Quantitative information on the participants' regular usage of compensation strategies was obtained from this self-report measure.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interview

In addition to the self-report questionnaire, a semi-structured interview was carried out with 15 people from the research sample. The interview was intended to elicit further insight into how participants used compensation strategies in speaking tasks. Participants were asked to discuss a number of assigned topics that provided opportunities for spontaneous speech and the use of compensation strategies when communication difficulties occurred.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were examined with reference to the eight compensation strategies included in Oxford's taxonomy: mimes/gestures, switching to L1, selecting the topic, circumlocution/synonym, coining words, getting help, adjusting/approximating the message, and avoiding communication. The interview data were used to complement the questionnaire findings and provide qualitative evidence of how participants employed compensation strategies during speaking.

3.4 Face Validity

To establish face validity, the questionnaire and interview were submitted to a panel of experts in TEFL methodology to evaluate their clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the purposes of the study. Their comments and recommendations were considered in preparing the final versions of the instruments.



3.5 Reliability

3.5.1 Reliability of the CpSs Questionnaire

The reliability of the CpSs questionnaire was established using the test-retest method with a pilot sample of 30 students who were excluded from the main study. After administering the questionnaire twice at two-week intervals, the reliability coefficient was 0.854, indicating adequate stability over time.

3.5.2 Reliability of Interview Coding

Oxford's eight compensation strategies were employed as predetermined categories to evaluate the reliability of the qualitative analysis through independent coding by the researcher and a second coder. The kappa coefficient of Cohen found $\kappa = 0.905$, which suggests nearly perfect agreement. Any disagreements were subsequently discussed and resolved before finalizing the coding.

4.1 Results

To achieve the aims of the study, a questionnaire on compensation strategies was administered to the study sample. The quantitative data were then analyzed using SPSS software. Means and standard deviations were used to determine the level of use of each compensation strategy. The strategies were then ranked in descending order according to their means to identify the most and least frequently used strategies among the students. Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, rankings, and levels of use of compensation strategies among the sample.

Table 2

Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and Rankings of the Compensation Strategies

Interpretation	SD	M	Item	Rank
High	0.71	4.17	I use gestures or body language to help explain what I mean when I cannot find the words in English.	1
High	0.82	3.95	I switch to my mother tongue when I cannot find the right word in English.	2
High	0.76	3.87	I choose to speak about topics I am familiar with to avoid language difficulties.	3
High	0.80	3.74	I use other words or describe the meaning when I don't know the exact word in English.	4
High	0.88	3.61	I create new words or combine existing ones when I am unable to find the exact word I need in English.	5
Moderate	0.93	3.55	I ask others for help when I don't know the right	6



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			word in English.	
Moderate	0.89	3.43	I simplify my message or change the way I say things when I cannot express the idea fully in English.	7
Moderate	0.96	3.28	I avoid speaking about certain topics in English if I am unsure how to express them.	8

Table 2 indicates the varying use of compensatory strategies by students when speaking English. The use of gestures and body language ranked first, with a mean of (4.17) and a standard deviation of (0.71), followed by switching to the native language with a mean of (3.95) and a standard deviation of (0.82), and then topic selection with a mean of (3.87) and a standard deviation of (0.76). These strategies demonstrated a high level of use. In contrast, the strategies of asking for help, modifying or approximating the message, and avoiding communication showed a moderate level of use, with the avoidance strategy recording the lowest mean of (3.28) and a standard deviation of (0.96).

4.1.1 Findings from the Semi-Structured Interviews

Additional information about the participants' usage of compensation strategies while speaking English was revealed through interviews. When the participants found it difficult to articulate their thoughts, they replied to the given topics in various ways. Particularly when participants struggled to find suitable words, gestures and body language were often employed to enhance verbal representation. When some participants could not remember the necessary English terms, they also switched to Arabic. In other instances, participants focused the discussion on well-known subjects or conveyed their intended meaning through explanations, synonyms, and alternative phrasing. When the necessary vocabulary was not accessible, some participants tried to come up with new phrases or expressions, while others sought for assistance directly. Additionally, participants used more generic terms rather than exact language to simplify or approximate their ideas. In certain cases, avoidance was also noted, especially when participants stopped responding, remained silent, or refrained from responding when they found it extremely difficult to articulate an idea in English.

4.1.2 Integration of Questionnaire and Interview Findings

The questionnaire responses were compared with the data collected from the semi-structured interviews in order to combine the quantitative and qualitative findings. The purpose of this integration was to ascertain if the compensating strategies that the participants in the questionnaire revealed

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were also apparent in their speaking performance. Table 3 presents the integration of findings from both data sources.

Table 3

Integration of Questionnaire and Interview Findings on Compensation Strategy Use

Integration	Interview Evidence	Rank	Strategy
Convergence	Participants used gestures and body language when they experienced difficulty expressing their intended meaning verbally.	High	Mimes/ Gestures
Convergence	Participants switched to Arabic when they were unable to retrieve the appropriate English words during speaking.	High	Switching to L1
Convergence	Participants tended to direct the conversation toward familiar topics when they encountered linguistic difficulties.	High	Selecting the Topic
Convergence	Participants used descriptions, alternative expressions, or synonyms when they could not retrieve the precise words needed to convey their intended meaning.	High	Circumlocution/ Synonym
Convergence	Some participants created new English-based words or expressions to compensate for gaps in their vocabulary.	High	Coining Words
Convergence	Participants directly requested assistance when they were unable \ to recall the appropriate English word.	Moderate	Getting Help
Convergence	Participants used more general or approximate expressions when the precise words needed to communicate their intended meaning were unavailable.	Moderate	Adjusting/ Approximating



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Convergence	Some participants remained silent, discontinued their responses, or avoided answering when they encountered considerable difficulty expressing their ideas in English.	Moderate	Avoiding Communication
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Note. Convergence indicates that a strategy reported in the questionnaire was also evident in the interview data; it does not indicate correspondence between quantitative ranks and the frequency of strategy occurrence in the interviews.

As shown in Table 3, the findings from the two data sources generally converged. The compensation strategies reported in the questionnaire were also evident in the interview data, although their levels and ranks were determined only from the quantitative results. The interview findings complemented these results by illustrating how the participants employed the strategies when encountering difficulties during speaking. Overall, the integration of the two data sources provided a more comprehensive account of the participants' use of compensation strategies.

4.2 Discussion of Results

The findings of the present study showed that fourth-year Iraqi EFL university students employed the eight compensation strategies included in Oxford's taxonomy during speaking tasks. The questionnaire findings indicated the use of mimes/gestures, switching to L1, selecting the topic, circumlocution/synonym, coining words, getting help, adjusting/approximating the message, and avoiding communication. These findings were further supported by the interview findings, which demonstrated how the participants implemented these strategies when they encountered challenges in articulating their intended meanings. This suggests that the students utilize both linguistic and non-linguistic resources to sustain communication.

The results indicated that the eight compensation strategies exhibited variation in terms of the frequency of strategy use. Mimes/gestures were the most frequently used non-verbal resources by participants when they encountered difficulty expressing themselves verbally, as evidenced by their mean score of 4.17. Switching to L1 ranked second ($M = 3.95$), suggesting that the students also relied considerably on their mother tongue when appropriate English expressions were unavailable. Selecting the topic ranked third ($M = 3.87$), followed by circumlocution/synonym ($M = 3.74$) and coining words ($M = 3.61$). These findings demonstrate



that the students employed different ways of maintaining communication, ranging from non-verbal behavior and use of the mother tongue to modifying their linguistic output when their available English resources were insufficient.

Getting help ($M = 3.55$), adjusting/approximating the message ($M = 3.43$), and avoiding communication ($M = 3.28$) showed comparatively lower levels of use, with avoiding communication ranking last among the eight strategies. The relatively lower use of avoidance may indicate that the participants were more likely to employ strategies that enabled them to continue communicating rather than withdraw from interaction when difficulties occurred. This pattern is broadly consistent with Taheri and Davoudi (2016), who reported the use of active strategies such as appeal for help and approximation among EFL learners. However, differences in the relative frequency of individual strategies across previous studies may be attributed to differences in participants, proficiency levels, speaking contexts, and data collection procedures.

The quantitative and qualitative findings collectively address the two research questions by demonstrating the frequency of use of the participants' compensation strategies and identifying the strategies they employ. The results indicate that Iraqi EFL university students employ a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic strategies to address communication challenges. The most frequently reported strategies are mimes/gestures, transitioning to L1, and selecting the topic.

4.3 Conclusions

According to the study's findings, fourth-year Iraqi EFL university students use a variety of compensatory strategies when they find themselves running into problems with speaking tasks. The participants reported using all eight of the strategies, however their use varied. Avoiding communication was the least common strategy, while mimes and gestures were the most common, followed by switching to L1 and choosing the topic of conversation. The questionnaire results were further supported by the interview findings, which demonstrated the implementation of these strategies while speaking. In general, the results show that students use both linguistic and non-linguistic resources to get around constraints on the amount of English they can use and continue to communicate while speaking.

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