

A Comparative Study on Oral Communication Strategy Use Among Vietnamese Non-English Majors

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Abstract

This paper investigated differences in the use of Communication Strategies among Vietnamese non-English majors of different English proficiency levels at the Creative Language Center, Ton Duc Thang University. A total of 101 undergraduates, at elementary and intermediate levels, answered a 58-item questionnaire, an adapted version of the Oral Communication Strategies Inventory (OCSI) suggested by Nakatani (2006), divided into two sections of Speaking and Listening. In terms of Speaking, “Message reduction and alteration” was the most frequently used category at both levels, with no significant difference between them. Significant differences were found in only two speaking categories: “Social affective”, used more frequently by the intermediate group, and “Message abandonment”, used more frequently by the elementary group. Regarding Listening, the highest-ranked category was “Word-oriented” for the intermediate group and “Negotiation for meaning while listening” for the elementary, though elementary means were higher in both. The differences between two levels were recorded in “Fluency-maintaining”, “Less-active listener” and “Negotiation for meaning while listening”, as the higher level more frequently used “Fluency-maintaining” and the lower-level group resorted to the other two strategies more often. Proficiency was therefore associated with differences in three of the seven listening categories but only two of the eight speaking categories, and in five of the seven listening categories it was the elementary group that returned the higher mean. The findings offer teachers and learners a basis for selecting strategies appropriate to each level, in order to compensate for gaps in language ability and to communicate more effectively.

Keywords: communication strategies, English proficiency, non-English majors, oral communication

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Introduction

Oral communication in a foreign language seems to be as important as, if not more important than, other skills, such as reading and writing (Oweis, 2013). In Vietnam as in many other countries, English is an official subject in the national education system, and the ability to communicate in English is required by many employers. However, a majority of Vietnamese tertiary students struggle with their oral communication skills in English despite significant efforts to revolutionise the Vietnam education system (Phuong & Tran, 2021; Tran, 2013).

It is widely acknowledged that when learners suffer from communication breakdowns (Rabab'ah, 2003), they manage to overcome them by employing what are known as Communication Strategies (CSs) in order to fill in the gap between their communication intentions and the linguistic abilities they have. Rabab'ah (2016) concluded that it is necessary for second language learners to use interactional CSs in second language communication in order to first achieve their communicative goals, negotiate meaning, and finally improve their communicative ability. Therefore, CSs are believed to play an integral part for students to cope with speaking and listening problems in the process of language acquisition.

Some research has been conducted in Vietnam on the use of CSs among tertiary students. Among English majors, T. T. Q. Bui and Intaraprasert (2012, 2013) identified influences on strategy use and Le et al. (2020) found no differences across academic levels; among non-English majors, H. C. Nguyen (2023) and T. T. H. Nguyen et al. (2022) reported benefits of strategy use for communicative competence. These studies are reviewed in detail below.

Despite numerous research conducted in Vietnamese tertiary education, there has been a lack of findings which could compare the differences in the use of CSs among non-English majors of different levels of English proficiency. As a majority of Vietnamese students are non-English majors who have different English proficiency levels, the current paper, therefore, focuses on the comparison of how students of different levels of proficiency, namely elementary-level and intermediate-level, use common CSs, particularly looking at the frequency and the correlation between the CSs used and the corresponding language proficiency.

The research questions were, therefore, formulated as:

1. How do elementary and intermediate non-English majors use CSs in Vietnamese tertiary education?
2. What are the correlations between English language proficiency and the CSs use?

Literature Review

Definitions of Communication Strategies

CSs are defined as strategies a person having difficulties in achieving a communication goal uses intentionally to resolve those difficulties (Corder, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1980; Nugroho, 2019); learners held back by an incomplete linguistic system, or by limitations in knowledge and the overload of working memory, employ them to bridge the gap (Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Oxford, 1990). Oweis (2013) locates CSs in the individual language user, who experiences the problem and decides on a strategic plan for its solution.

A second perspective treats CSs as interactional rather than individual. They are seen as the mutual effort both speakers make to agree on meaning (Tarone, 1980, 1981) and as playing a key role in the effectiveness of communication (Bialystok, 1990; Canale, 1983). Le et al. (2020) combine the two views, defining CSs as verbal or non-verbal means employed by two or more interlocutors to negotiate meaning or resolve difficulties in both speaking and listening, so as to reach agreement on a communication goal.

Classification of Communication Strategies

In respect of the classification of CSs, it also appears that different classification systems have been used. There is no complete agreement on what CSs are, how many exist, or how they should be classified, since past research has varied in setting, population, method and focus. The classifications of oral CSs (T. T. H. Nguyen et al., 2022) can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Classifications of Oral Communication Strategies

Faerch and Kasper (1980)	1. Reduction strategies: Formal reduction; Functional reduction 2. Achievement strategies: Compensatory strategies or non-cooperative strategies; Retrieval strategies
Tarone (1981)	1. Paraphrase: Approximation, word coinage, circumlocution 2. Borrowing: Literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, mime. 3. Avoidance: Topic avoidance, message abandonment.
Bialystok (1990)	1. First language-based strategies 2. Second language-based strategies 3. Non-language strategies 4. Analysis-based strategies 5. Control-based strategies
Dörnyei (1995)	1. Avoidance or reduction strategies 2. Message abandonment 3. Topic avoidance 4. Achievement or compensatory strategies 5. Approximation 6. Use of all-purpose words 7. Word coinage 8. Use of non-linguistic means 9. Literal translation 10. Foreignizing 11. Code switching 12. Appeal for help 13. Time-gaining strategies 14. Use fillers or hesitation devices

Corder (1983)	1. Message adjustment strategies 2. Resource expansion strategies
Rabab'ah (2003)	1. First language-based strategies (literal translation and language switch) 2. Second language-based strategies (avoidance strategies, word coinage, circumlocution, self-correction, approximation, mumbling)
Nakatani (2006)	Speaking 1. Social affective 2. Fluency-oriented 3. Negotiation for meaning while speaking 4. Accuracy oriented 5. Message reduction and alteration 6. Nonverbal strategies while speaking 7. Message abandonment 8. Attempt to think in English Listening 1. Negotiation for meaning while listening 2. Fluency- maintaining 3. Scanning 4. Getting the gist 5. Nonverbal strategies while listening 6. Less active listener 7. Word-oriented

Note. Adapted from T. T. H. Nguyen et al., 2022

Communication Strategies Used and Language Proficiency

Several papers have explored how English learners use CSs in various contexts. Mirzaei and Heidari (2012) explored the use of oral CSs by fluent and non-fluent L2 speakers at Shahrekord University, Iran. They noted that because fluency is related to communicative effectiveness, it has received considerable attention in L2 research. The ability of less proficient L2 learners to maintain the conversation flow is a worthwhile capacity because they have the chance to receive more language input by keeping a conversation going and thus to improve their L2 proficiency.

Similarly, Jindathai (2016) observed that students at the College of General Education and Languages, Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology, Bangkok, Thailand, regardless of their proficiency level, often used “Message reduction and alteration strategies” to address speaking challenges, and frequently negotiated for meaning while listening to overcome oral difficulties. These students also relied on “Social affective, Circumlocution, and Fluency-oriented strategies”, to handle communication difficulties. More research was done to highlight the correlation between CSs use and language proficiency. La-Ortip (2003) reported that less fluent English majors at Rajabhat Institute Nakhon Ratchasima used CSs more frequently overall. More fluent students used English language-based strategies and avoided none, while weaker speakers used non-linguistic, L1-based and avoidance strategies more often. Chen (2009) and

Mirzaei and Heidari (2012) found that fluent speakers commonly used “Social affective, Fluency-oriented, Negotiation for meaning, and Accuracy-oriented strategies”, while less fluent speakers favoured “Message reduction and alteration, and abandonment strategies”. Ansarin (2003) studied 50 first-year and 50 final-year students at the University of Tabriz, Iran, and found no significant overall difference in CS use among Iranian learners of varying proficiency levels, although lower-level learners gave up more easily, while intermediate learners employed more approximation and general words to maintain interaction. Ting and Lau (2008), studying 14 pairs of Malaysian ESL learners, found that proficient speakers used lexical repetition and other discourse-based strategies to maintain conversations, while less proficient learners relied far more heavily on improvisation and avoidance, repeatedly restructuring their messages and abandoning them when restructuring failed; clarification requests and comprehension checks were used at a similar rate by both groups.

Communication Strategies Studied in Vietnam

Research in Vietnam has focused mainly on the relationship between learners’ language proficiency and their use of CSs. T. T. Nguyen and Nguyen (2016) examined intermediate non-English majors through recordings of a group discussion task and informal interviews, and found that “Foreignizing”, “Approximation”, “Circumlocution”, “Repetition” and “Expressing non-understanding” were not used at all, the most common strategies being fillers and hesitation devices, followed by self-repair, self-repetition and code-switching. T. T. H. Nguyen et al. (2022) found message reduction and alteration and accuracy-oriented techniques to be the least frequently used among tertiary students, and H. C. Nguyen (2023) reported that speaking strategies had a beneficial influence on the communicative competence of pre-intermediate undergraduates. Tuan and Mai (2015) point to limited practice in spoken English, and Trinh and Mai (2018) to the difficulty of running pair and group work with learners unfamiliar with such pedagogies.

Among English majors, Le et al. (2020) found fluency-oriented, message reduction and alteration and negotiation for meaning while speaking to be the most commonly employed speaking strategies, and “Negotiation for meaning while listening”, “Non-verbal while listening” and “Scanning” the most common listening strategies; no significant differences emerged across academic levels, which the authors read as evidence of the universality of these strategies. T. T. Q. Bui and Intaraprasert (2013) found a strong association between attitudes towards speaking English and CS use, but only a minor one between CS use and exposure to oral communication.

Examining a range of learner factors, M. H. Bui (2016) found significant relationships between CS use and motivational orientation, English language proficiency, academic major and university setting, with qualitative data further linking Coping-CS and Developing-CS use to gender, cultural background and prior experience of language teaching and learning. In a large-scale study, T. T. Nguyen and Nguyen (2016) also surveyed teachers’ views on the treatment of CSs in ESL textbooks and on whether CSs should be incorporated into the teaching of spoken English.

Materials and Methods

Research Setting

The study took place at the Creative Language Center, Ton Duc Thang University, which provides English programmes for non-English majors at levels ranging from elementary to advanced. Placement tests are used to assign students to appropriate classes and so minimise differences in language ability within a class. Each level covers all macro skills, with additional practice materials depending on the target exam, such as the Preliminary English Test (PET) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

Participants

The participants, mostly second-year students, were drawn from two groups of proficiency, elementary and intermediate, and completed the same questionnaire. The numbers of students in each group were 50 and 51, respectively. Participants were selected in two stages: students were first assigned to a level by the Center's placement test, and their class teachers were then consulted to identify those whose classroom performance clearly matched the CEFR descriptors for that level. The sampling was therefore purposive rather than random.

Instrument and Data Analysis

The survey used in the present study was adapted from the Oral Communication Strategies Inventory (OCSI) suggested by Nakatani (2006) including 58 items, divided into 8 categories for coping with speaking problems and 7 for coping with listening problems, all of which are named in Tables 2 and 3. The items are translated into Vietnamese for students' better understanding and convenience as answering the questions.

In terms of data analysis, descriptive statistics Mean (M) of each item and category were processed. The following 5-point Likert scale was used to interpret the data: Never ($M \leq 1.80$); Rarely ($M = 1.81-2.60$); Sometimes ($M = 2.61-3.40$); Often ($M = 3.41-4.20$); Always ($M = 4.21-5.00$). Differences between the two proficiency levels, elementary (E) and intermediate (I), were examined using Pearson correlations. Because proficiency level is dichotomous, this is a point-biserial correlation and is mathematically equivalent to an independent-samples t -test on the same data: both return the same two-tailed significance value, while r gives the direction and magnitude of the group difference. Reporting r rather than t places the direction and size of every group difference on one standardised scale, comparable across the fifteen categories and with the correlational studies reviewed above. Tables 2 and 3 therefore report r and its two-tailed significance rather than duplicating the t statistic, and this significance value is the one referred to throughout. Because fifteen categories were tested at the .05 level, the two-tailed values were additionally adjusted with the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995) to control the false discovery rate, and both the uncorrected value and the adjusted q are taken into account before a difference is described as significant. Coefficients are read against Cohen's (1988) benchmarks of .10, .30 and .50 for small, medium and large effects.

To assess whether the items constituting each strategy category could reasonably be aggregated, the internal consistency of every subscale was examined. For the twelve multi-item subscales, Cronbach's alpha ranged from .458 to .793, six of them meeting the conventional .70 criterion (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994); one improved from .588 to .66 once

a single item with a very low corrected item–total correlation ($r = .06$) was removed, so that 57 of the 58 items entered the analyses, and no other deletion improved consistency. Because alpha is deflated for very short scales, the three two-item subscales were examined using the inter-item correlation, which ranged from $-.04$ to $.55$ and was adequate for one of them. Internal consistency therefore reached an acceptable level for seven of the fifteen categories. All categories were aggregated into category means.

Retaining the weaker subscales was deliberate. The fifteen categories are Nakatani's published taxonomy, not factors derived from these data, and dropping some would make the results incomparable with the studies discussed below, all of which report the inventory in full. Alpha is also a lower bound, deflated by short scales and multidimensionality rather than by noise alone. Because measurement error attenuates observed correlations, the significant differences are conservative estimates, whereas the non-significant ones are ambiguous and are not evidence that the groups behave alike. All category-level comparisons should therefore be read as indicative, and this is acknowledged as a limitation.

Results and Discussion

Results

The Use of Communication Strategies Among Different English Proficiencies

Table 2 presents the use of Speaking strategies.

Table 2
The Use of Speaking Strategies

Strategies	Levels	Mean	Std. Deviation	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Social affective strategies	E	3.30	.59264	.445**	<.001
	I	3.83	.49020		
Fluency-oriented strategies	E	3.59	.63323	.164	.101
	I	3.79	.58134		
Negotiation for meaning while speaking strategies	E	3.61	.84860	.116	.248
	I	3.79	.68699		
Accuracy-oriented strategies	E	3.16	.67701	.127	.206
	I	3.33	.61035		
	E	4.12	.66796	.035	.728

Strategies	Levels	Mean	Std. Deviation	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Message reduction and alteration strategies	I	4.17	.68236		
Non-verbal strategies while speaking	E	3.59	1.09173	.118	.240
	I	3.82	.86542		
Message abandonment strategies	E	3.39	.82088	-.359**	<.001
	I	2.71	.94000		
Attempt to think in English strategies	E	3.87	.84472	-.099	.325
	I	3.70	.81025		

Note. E = elementary ($n = 50$); I = intermediate ($n = 51$). Proficiency level was coded E = 1 and I = 2, so that a positive correlation indicates more frequent use by the intermediate group and a negative correlation more frequent use by the elementary group. Sig. values are two-tailed. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

As can be seen in Table 2, “Message reduction and alteration strategies” were the most frequently used strategies at both the elementary and the intermediate level ($M = 4.12$ and 4.17 respectively), and no statistically significant difference was found between the two groups in the use of these strategies (Sig. = .728). “Accuracy-oriented strategies” were the least frequently used by the elementary group ($M = 3.16$) and the second least frequently used by the intermediate group ($M = 3.33$), again with no statistically significant difference between them (Sig. = .206). In addition, “Message abandonment strategies” were the least frequently used category among students with higher language ability ($M = 2.71$). Both group means fall within the “sometimes” band, but the elementary group used these strategies considerably more often ($M = 3.39$), producing a significant difference between the two groups (Sig. < .001). “Social affective strategies” also showed a significant difference in the frequency of use (Sig. < .001), being more frequently applied by the intermediate group ($M = 3.83$, often) than by the elementary group ($M = 3.30$, sometimes). The four remaining strategies were often used by both groups ($M = 3.59$ to 3.87) with no significant difference (Sig. = .101 to .325).

Table 3 presents the use of Listening strategies.

Table 3
The Use of Listening Strategies

Strategies	Levels	Mean	Std. Deviation	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Negotiation for meaning while listening	E	4.10	.61614	-.279**	.005
	I	3.70	.77500		
Fluency-maintaining	E	3.46	.71931	.218*	.029
	I	3.74	.57511		
Scanning	E	3.82	.71146	-.117	.244
	I	3.65	.73276		
Getting-the-gist	E	3.58	.74303	.013	.897
	I	3.59	.68646		
Non-verbal while listening	E	4.02	.84188	-.190	.057
	I	3.73	.67218		
Less-active listener	E	3.84	.86396	-.288**	.003
	I	3.30	.94583		
Word-oriented	E	3.92	.57855	-.086	.392
	I	3.81	.62042		

Note. E = elementary ($n = 50$); I = intermediate ($n = 51$). Proficiency level was coded E = 1 and I = 2, so that a positive correlation indicates more frequent use by the intermediate group and a negative correlation more frequent use by the elementary group. Sig. values are two-tailed. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

“Negotiation for meaning while listening” strategies were the most frequently used by elementary students ($M = 4.10$), significantly more often than by their intermediate counterparts ($M = 3.70$; Sig. = .005), for whom the most frequently used category was “Word-

oriented" ($M = 3.81$), although the elementary mean for that category was higher still ($M = 3.92$). A further difference, significant before correction for multiple comparisons, was found in "Fluency-maintaining" (Sig. = .029), which intermediate students used more frequently than elementary students ($M = 3.74$ and 3.46 , respectively), while the difference in "Non-verbal while listening" fell short of significance ($M = 4.02$ and 3.73 ; Sig. = .057). The largest difference was found in "Less-active listener" (Sig. = .003), as elementary students often used such strategies ($M = 3.84$) while the intermediate group used them only sometimes ($M = 3.30$). "Scanning", "Getting-the-gist" and "Word-oriented" were used comparatively frequently by both groups ($M = 3.58$ to 3.92) with no significant difference (Sig. = .244, .897 and .392).

Correlations Between English Proficiency Levels and Oral Communication Strategies Use

Tables 2 and 3 report the point-biserial coefficients in full, so only their interpretation is given here. Two of the eight speaking categories and three of the seven listening categories were significantly correlated with proficiency level at the conventional threshold. Positive coefficients indicate more frequent use by the intermediate group and negative coefficients more frequent use by the elementary group. Read against Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, the association approaches large for "Social affective", is medium for "Message abandonment" and approaches medium for "Less-active listener" and "Negotiation for meaning while listening", while it is small for "Fluency-maintaining"; "Non-verbal while listening" ($r = -.190$) fell short of significance (Sig. = .057). After Benjamini-Hochberg adjustment across the fifteen tests, the first four remain significant ($q = .000$ to $.018$), whereas "Fluency-maintaining" ($q = .086$) falls outside the threshold and is treated as provisional below.

Calculated from the means and standard deviations in Tables 2 and 3, the 95% confidence intervals for the four robust differences are $[0.32, 0.74]$ for "Social affective", $[-1.03, -0.33]$ for "Message abandonment", $[-0.90, -0.18]$ for "Less-active listener" and $[-0.68, -0.12]$ for "Negotiation for meaning while listening", with $d = 0.98, -0.77, -0.60$ and -0.57 respectively. Where a category is described as most or least frequently used, the ranking should be read alongside these intervals, since adjacent categories often differ by a tenth of a scale point or less.

Discussion

Speaking Strategies

Only two of the eight speaking categories distinguished the groups: "Social affective" strategies, used more often by the intermediate group ($r = .445$), and "Message abandonment" strategies, used more often by the elementary group ($r = -.359$). The other six were statistically indistinguishable ($r = -.099$ to $.164$, Sig. = .101 to .728), although the intermediate group returned the higher mean in six of the eight. This converges with Ansarin (2003), who reported no significant overall difference between proficiency levels while locating differences in particular strategy types, and it qualifies M. H. Bui (2016): the relationship between proficiency and CS use appears category-specific rather than general.

The advantage in "Social affective" strategies was the largest coefficient recorded in the study and converges with Mirzaei and Heidari (2012), Demir et al. (2018) and Nakatani (2005). Chen (2009) attributed four categories to fluent speakers, namely social affective, fluency-oriented, negotiation for meaning and accuracy-oriented, but only the first separated the groups here (Sig. = .101, .248 and .206 for the other three). Within this proficiency range, the affective and

interpersonal dimension of speaking strategy use appeared to track proficiency more closely than the linguistic-processing dimension did.

The elementary group's heavier use of "Message abandonment" is consistent with Nakatani (2006), La-Ortip (2003), Ansarin (2003) and Bien (1999), and the intermediate mean of 2.71 was the lowest figure recorded for any speaking category. "Message reduction and alteration", however, did not follow: it was the most frequently used category at both levels ($M = 4.12$ and 4.17) and showed no difference at all ($r = .035$, $\text{Sig.} = .728$). Chen (2009), Mirzaei and Heidari (2012) and Nakatani (2006) treat reduction and abandonment as a single low-proficiency cluster, yet here they behaved in opposite ways. The result aligns with Jindathai (2016) but stands against T. T. H. Nguyen et al. (2022), who placed message reduction among the least used by Vietnamese tertiary students. Simplifying the message may therefore remain a low-cost repair as proficiency grows, and may not be a marker of low ability.

The four remaining categories were used often by both groups ($M = 3.59$ to 3.87) with no significant difference. "Attempt to think in English" runs counter to Huang and Van Naerssen (1987), the elementary group scoring numerically higher ($M = 3.87$ against 3.70 ; $\text{Sig.} = .325$). "Negotiation for meaning while speaking" reproduces the direction reported by Mirzaei and Heidari (2012) without reaching significance ($\text{Sig.} = .248$), as does "Fluency-oriented" against Demir et al. (2018) and Nakatani (2005) ($\text{Sig.} = .101$). None of these categories therefore showed more than a numerical trend, although the literature predicts a proficiency effect in the productive mode.

Listening Strategies

Three of the seven listening categories separated the levels, against two of the eight speaking categories, and the direction is reversed: the elementary group returned the higher mean in five of the seven listening categories and in two of the three significant ones. This echoes La-Ortip (2003), who found a higher overall frequency of CS use among less fluent learners. Since the OCSI measures compensatory behaviour rather than listening ability, the elementary group's heavier reported use is best read as an index of greater difficulty in comprehension rather than of greater skill.

"Negotiation for meaning while listening" was the elementary group's most used category ($M = 4.10$) and was used significantly more often than by the intermediate group ($M = 3.70$; $r = -.279$, $\text{Sig.} = .005$), showing greater effort to request clarification, simplification, slower speech and repetition. This runs against Mirzaei and Heidari (2012) and is not predicted by Ting and Lau (2008), whose Malaysian data showed clarification requests and comprehension checks used at a broadly similar rate by both proficiency groups. The OCSI items in this category ask about compensatory responses to a comprehension failure rather than the collaborative meaning-building measured in speaking, which may explain the divergence. The same construct in the productive mode did not distinguish the groups at all ($\text{Sig.} = .248$), so the direction of the effect depends on the modality in which it is measured.

"Fluency-maintaining" was the only listening category in which the intermediate group's higher mean reached significance ($M = 3.74$ against 3.46 ; $r = .218$, $\text{Sig.} = .029$), and it was the least used category among elementary students, in line with Demir et al. (2018) and Nakatani (2005), though the difference does not survive correction across the fifteen tests, while its speaking counterpart did not differentiate the groups ($\text{Sig.} = .101$). "Non-verbal while listening" was used more often by elementary students ($M = 4.02$ against 3.73 ; $r = -.190$),

though the difference did not reach significance (Sig. = .057); its direction is consistent with Mirzaei and Heidari (2012) and La-Ortip (2003), and “Non-verbal while speaking” likewise showed no difference (Sig. = .240). This may suggest that higher-level students attend to rhythm, intonation and pronunciation while the lower level relies on gesture, eye contact and facial expression to compensate for the language it lacks, although the questionnaire records reported frequency of use rather than attention itself.

The largest listening difference was “Less-active listener” ($r = -.288$, Sig. = .003), used often by elementary students ($M = 3.84$) but only sometimes by the intermediate group ($M = 3.30$). This confirms Huang and Van Naerssen (1987), whose claim about thinking in English was not borne out in the speaking data.

“Scanning”, “Getting-the-gist” and “Word-oriented” showed no significant difference ($M = 3.58$ to 3.92 ; Sig. = .244, .897 and .392, respectively). The groups were almost identical on “Getting-the-gist” ($M = 3.58$ and 3.59), unlike Mirzaei and Heidari (2012). The three differences that did emerge all fall on the interactional and compensatory side of listening. The text-processing categories yielded no detectable difference, which, given the ambiguity of the non-significant results, cannot itself be read as evidence that the two groups behave alike.

Contribution of the Study

Le et al. (2020) found no significant differences in CS use across academic levels among Vietnamese English majors. Grouping non-English majors by proficiency instead, the present study finds differences in five of the fifteen categories, distributed in a patterned rather than a diffuse way. Three contributions follow.

First, and most securely, the study decouples message reduction from message abandonment. The two are commonly treated as a single avoidance cluster attributed to less proficient learners (Chen, 2009; Mirzaei & Heidari, 2012; Nakatani, 2006). Here they behaved in opposite ways: message abandonment was the second strongest correlate of proficiency in the speaking set ($r = -.359$, Sig. < .001), while message reduction and alteration was the most frequently used category at both levels and showed essentially no association with proficiency ($r = .035$, Sig. = .728). The contrast rests on positive observations rather than on an absent difference: a substantial coefficient for abandonment, and for reduction the highest category mean at both levels. This makes it the firmest of the present findings. Abandoning a message and simplifying it therefore appear to be distinct behaviours, and treating them as a single construct obscures the difference.

Second, proficiency was associated with differences in three of the seven listening categories but only two of the eight speaking categories, and in opposite directions: the intermediate group stood out in one speaking category, the elementary group in two of the three significant listening categories. Studies in the reviewed literature report both skills without contrasting the two profiles (Jindathai, 2016; Le et al., 2020; Mirzaei & Heidari, 2012). Negotiation for meaning illustrates the point directly, differentiating the groups in the listening mode (Sig. = .005) but not in the speaking mode (Sig. = .248); since Nakatani’s (2006) inventory provides parallel categories in both modes, this asymmetry would be invisible to studies reporting a single combined figure. Because the claim rests partly on absent differences, and unreliable measurement can produce absences, it requires replication before it is treated as established.

Third, the study describes OCSI category use for a population the Vietnamese literature has addressed only indirectly, having examined English majors (T. T. Q. Bui & Intaraprasert, 2012,

2013; Le et al., 2020), a single proficiency level among non-English majors (T. T. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2016; H. C. Nguyen, 2023), or mixed populations without a level-based contrast (T. T. H. Nguyen et al., 2022). Social affective and fluency-maintaining strategies are plausible instructional targets at elementary level, while the persistence of message reduction at intermediate level suggests that higher-proficiency learners also need support in expanding rather than simplifying their intended messages.

These contributions should be read alongside the reliability limitations reported under Instrument and Data Analysis. Internal consistency was acceptable for only seven of the fifteen categories, so every category-level comparison is indicative rather than conclusive. The differences that were detected stand on firmer ground than those that were not, since attenuation works against them.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting these findings. First, the study was conducted at a single language centre in one university, with 101 participants drawn from two proficiency levels, so the results cannot be generalised to Vietnamese non-English majors as a whole. Second, participants were selected purposively rather than randomly: students were assigned to levels by the Center's placement test and were then identified by their class teachers as clearly matching the CEFR descriptors for that level. This procedure was adopted to ensure that the two groups were genuinely distinct in proficiency, but it means that the sample is not representative of all students at each level. No formal check of agreement between teachers was carried out, so the level assignments retain an element of subjective judgement. Third, proficiency was treated as a two-level category rather than as a continuous variable, which limits what the correlational analysis can show. A standardised test score would allow the relationship between proficiency and strategy use to be modelled more precisely. Fourth, demographic variables such as gender and year of study were not recorded, so the differences reported here cannot be separated from any imbalance between the two groups on those variables.

Further limitations concern the instrument and the data. The study relied entirely on self-report: students indicated how frequently they believed they used each strategy, which may not correspond to their actual behaviour. As reported under Instrument and Data Analysis, internal consistency was acceptable for only seven of the fifteen categories and cannot be attached to any individual row of Tables 2 and 3, so establishing the reliability of each category separately, on a larger sample, is a necessary step before these differences are treated as settled. Future research could include advanced-level learners, combine the questionnaire with recorded speaking and listening tasks or stimulated-recall interviews, and draw on larger samples across several institutions. Intervention studies on explicit strategy training would also be valuable.

Conclusion

This study compared how elementary and intermediate non-English majors use oral communication strategies. Of the eight speaking categories only two differentiated the groups: intermediate students used "Social affective" strategies significantly more often and elementary students used "Message abandonment" significantly more often, while "Message reduction and alteration" was the most frequently used category at both levels with no significant difference. Of the seven listening categories, three differentiated the groups: elementary students used "Negotiation for meaning while listening" and "Less-active listener"

more often, whereas intermediate students used “Fluency-maintaining” more often. Proficiency was thus associated with more apparent group differences in listening than in speaking, although the numerical asymmetry rests on a listening difference that did not survive adjustment for multiple testing, and among the listening categories the difference lay predominantly with the elementary group. For teaching, CSs should be introduced explicitly and practised in class (Dörnyei, 1995), with the strategies targeted chosen according to what learners at each level already do and under-use.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that Claude, an AI assistant developed by Anthropic, was used in preparing this manuscript to check the consistency of the reported results and references, to draft and revise parts of the discussion, and to condense, edit, and format the text. The research design, data collection, and analysis are the authors’ own. The authors reviewed and approved all text and take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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