

HIGH- PROFICIENCY AND LOW- PROFICIENCY LEARNERS' COMPENSATION STRATEGIES USE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Tania Tahmina

Department of English, Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

E-mail: taniatahmina1971@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Compensation strategies are vital for foreign language learners to overcome difficulties in acquiring a second language. According to Oxford (1990), these strategies help learners “overcome knowledge limitations in all four skills” (p. 90), making them essential for effective language acquisition. This study investigates the preferred compensation strategies of high- and low-proficiency English learners at Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh, using a mixed-methods approach. Data collection involved the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire designed by Oxford, alongside semi-structured interviews to enrich the qualitative findings. Results indicate distinct preferences based on proficiency levels: high-proficiency learners frequently employed Strategy 6: “If I can’t think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing” (40%). Meanwhile, low-proficiency learners favored Strategy 1: “To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses” (66.66%). These findings highlight the significance of adapting teaching approaches to address diverse learner needs, ultimately enhancing language learning efficiency and effectiveness.

Keywords: *compensation strategies; high-proficiency learners; language learning; low-proficiency learners*

1. Introduction

Language learning often presents challenges for foreign language learners, particularly when their linguistic competence is insufficient to communicate effectively. To address these challenges, learners commonly employ compensation strategies. According to Oxford (1990), these strategies enable learners to “overcome knowledge limitations in all four skills” (p. 90). While typically associated with novice learners, Oxford notes that experienced learners may also resort to compensation strategies when they struggle to articulate their thoughts accurately in the target language. However, the effective use of such strategies often requires training and support, particularly for learners who experience anxiety or reluctance when engaging in communicative tasks, such as speaking or giving presentations in class.

Research highlights that anxiety significantly impedes language learning by reducing learners’ willingness to communicate and affecting their performance (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Compensation strategies can help mitigate this anxiety by equipping learners

with practical tools to navigate linguistic challenges. Teachers play a crucial role in this process, as they can foster a supportive environment and explicitly teach compensation techniques to empower learners (Chamot, 2004).

Compensation strategies are defined as techniques that allow learners to bridge gaps in their language knowledge for comprehension and production. Oxford (1990) explains that these strategies are essential for learners to manage limitations in grammar and vocabulary and cites examples such as "guessing by linguistic or contextual clues, switching to the mother tongue, using gestures, coining words, and employing synonyms or circumlocution" (p. 47). Dornyei and Scott (1997) emphasize that compensation strategies are integral to strategic competence, enabling learners to convey messages effectively even with limited resources.

Effective implementation of compensation strategies not only supports language development but also alleviates learner anxiety, promoting a more confident approach to communication. This study examines the preferences and utilization of compensation strategies among high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners, offering insights into how these strategies contribute to their English language learning journey.

2. Literature Review

The findings of the study of Ahmada and Ismailb (2012) showed that the learners' level of employment of compensation strategies were medium. As they did not use several compensation strategies, they may be taught those unused ones to develop their capability. Pasumbu and Macora (2018) in their descriptive qualitative research found that guessing with prudence is a compensation strategy that motivates the learners and helps enhance their reading comprehension power. Ragab, El-Marsafy, and Abdu-Allah (2021) showed in their research that the experimental group received training on the use of compensation strategies, whereas the control group did not get any. The pre-test and the post-test of both groups showed that the compensation strategies positively impacted the experimental group's performance. Taheri and Davoudi (2016) found that the participants used "self-repetition", "direct appeal for help", and "approximation" strategies frequently, which had a positive impact on their language learning. However, there was no significant relationship between strategy frequency and gender. The successful learners used more compensation strategies than the less successful learners, which are very useful to fill up the gaps in communication in speaking (Syafryadin, Martina and Salniwati, 2020). In a research carried out by Karbalaie , and Taji (2018), it was found that Iranian learners employed various compensation strategies for meaningful communication. A study done by Sahib (2016) showed that there is a relationship between guessing strategies and gender and age in the case of listening and speaking skills. Moreover, the learners' performance was unsatisfactory as they used reduction strategies (giving up and replacement). In this case, teachers can motivate them by teaching the students to make up their linguistic limitations, making them adept in communication.

The high-proficiency learners achieve good scores in language proficiency tests, whereas the low-proficiency learners get poor scores. Burrow, et. al. (2012) termed high achievers as learners who have a high Grade Point Average (GPA).

No researcher has ever researched on the use of compensation strategies by the high-proficiency students of Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. This research will shed light on an unexplored area of learning that will impact the educational field. This study explored the following research questions:

1. What are the high-proficiency learners' preferred compensation strategies in English language learning at Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh?
2. What are the low-proficiency learners' preferred compensation strategies in English language learning at Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh?

3. Research Method

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine compensation strategies used by high-proficiency and low-proficiency English learners at Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. To investigate these strategies, Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire (Oxford, 1990) was utilized. This instrument is well-recognized for assessing language learning strategies and includes six items specific to compensation strategies, rated on a five-point Likert scale: "never true of me," "usually not true of me," "somewhat true of me," "usually true of me," and "true of me."

The participants were categorized based on their final English language test scores from the previous semester. Students scoring 80% or higher were categorized as high-proficiency learners, while those scoring below 80% were classified as low-proficiency learners. Thirty participants were selected, including 15 high-proficiency learners and 15 low-proficiency learners. The questionnaire was distributed among the participants with clear instructions provided by the researcher. Responses were collected and analyzed using descriptive statistical methods.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted to enrich the qualitative findings. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed descriptively to identify recurring themes and insights related to compensation strategies. This mixed-methods design allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the learners' preferences and their implications for English language learning.

4. Discussion

The table below shows the preferred compensation strategies employed by the high-proficiency learners and the low-proficiency learners.

Table 1. Compensation strategies preferred by the high-proficiency learners to develop their language skills.

No.	Compensation Strategies preferred by the High-Proficiency Learners	1 (Never or almost never true of me)	2 (Usually not true of me)	3 (Somewhat true of me)	4 (Usually true of me)	5 (Always or almost always true of me)
1.	"To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses".	1	0	1	8	5
2.	"When I can't think of a word during a conversation in the SL, I use gestures".	0	1	5	4	5
3.	"I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in the SL".	3	0	3	7	2

4.	"I read SL without looking up every new word".	2	6	0	2	5
5.	"I try to guess what the other person will say next in the SL".	0	5	3	6	1
6.	"If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing".	0	0	3	6	6

Table 1 demonstrates the compensation strategies used by the high achieving students in their English language performance. It indicates they used the following compensation strategy most frequently: "If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing" (Item no. 6: 40%). Then they used Item no. 1: "To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses" (33.33%), Item no. 2: "When I can't think of a word during a conversation in the SL, I use gestures" (33.33%), and Item no. 4: "I read SL without looking up every new word" (33.33%).

Table 2. Compensation strategies preferred by the Low-Proficiency learners to develop their English language skills

No.	Compensation Strategies preferred by the Low-Proficiency Learners	1 (Never or almost never true of me)	2 (Usually not true of me)	3 (Somewhat true of me)	4 (Usually true of me)	5 (Always or almost always true of me)
1.	"To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses".	0	0	2	3	10
2.	"When I can't think of a word during a conversation in the SL, I use gestures".	1	2	6	2	4
3.	"I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in the SL".	0	0	4	6	5
4.	"I read SL without looking up every new word".	1	3	3	3	5
5.	"I try to guess what the other person will say next in the SL".	1	5	3	4	2
6.	"If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing".	0	0	4	4	7

Table 2 demonstrates that the low achieving students' most preferred strategy was Item no. 1: "To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses" (66.66%). The following preferred strategy was Item no. 6: "If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing" (46.66%). The third position holder strategies were Item no. 3: "I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in the SL" (33.33%) and Item no. 4: "I read SL without looking up every new word" (33.33%).

Table 3

Item no. 1 ("To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses")

Proficiency	"Never or almost never true of me"	"Usually not true of me"	"Somewhat true of me"	"Usually true of me"	"Always or almost always true of me"
High Proficiency Learners	1	0	1	8	5
Low Proficiency Learners	0	0	2	3	10

30.33% high-proficiency learners prefer Item no. 1 : "To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses", while 66.66% low-proficiency learners always or almost always use this item.

Table 4

Item no. 2 ("When I can't think of a word during a conversation in the SL, I use gestures")

Proficiency	"Never or almost never true of me"	"Usually not true of me"	"Somewhat true of me"	"Usually true of me"	"Always or almost always true of me"
High Proficiency Learners	0	1	5	4	5
Low Proficiency Learners	1	2	6	2	4

30.33% high-proficiency learners always or almost always employ Item no. 2 : "When I can't think of a word during a conversation in the SL, I use gestures", while 20.66% low-proficiency learners frequently use this item.

Table 5

Item no. 3 ("I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in the SL".)

Proficiency	"Never or almost never true of me"	"Usually not true of me"	"Somewhat true of me"	"Usually true of me"	"Always or almost always true of me"
High Proficiency Learners	3	0	3	7	2
Low Proficiency Learners	0	0	4	6	5

13.33% high-proficiency learners always or almost always employ Item no.32: “I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in the SL”, while 30.33% low-proficiency learners use this item.

Table 6

Item no. 4 (“I read SL without looking up every new word”)

Proficiency	“Never or almost never true of me”	“Usually not true of me”	“Somewhat true of me”	“Usually true of me”	“Always or almost always true of me”
High Proficiency Learners	2	6	0	2	5
Low Proficiency Learners	1	3	3	3	5

30.33% high-proficiency learners prefer Item no. 4 :“I read SL without looking up every new word” most, while 30.33% low-proficiency learners always or almost always use this item.

Table 7

Item no. 5 (“I try to guess what the other person will say next in the SL”)

Proficiency	“Never or almost never true of me”	“Usually not true of me”	“Somewhat true of me”	“Usually true of me”	“Always or almost always true of me”
High Proficiency Learners	0	5	3	6	1
Low Proficiency Learners	1	5	3	4	2

6.33% high-proficiency learners always or almost always employ Item no. 5:“I try to guess what the other person will say next in the SL”, while 13.33% low-proficiency learners frequently use this item.

Table 8

Item no. 6 (“If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing”)

Proficiency	“Never or almost never true of me”	“Usually not true of me”	“Somewhat true of me”	“Usually true of me”	“Always or almost always true of me”
High-Proficiency Learners	0	0	3	6	6
Low-Proficiency Learners	0	0	4	4	7

40.00% high-proficiency learners prefer Item no. 4: "I read SL without looking up every new word", while 46.66% low-proficiency learners always or almost always use this item.

Qualitative Results

The interview data supported the quantitative data. The high-proficiency learners' most preferred compensation strategy was Item no. 6: "If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing" (40%). Regarding this item, the participants' responses complied with the quantitative data.

"It helps to express the topic." (High-Proficiency Learner 2)

"I often do it, because it's an alternative idea." (High-Proficiency Learner 12)

"It supports me to maintain the instant communication." (High-Proficiency Learner 5)

"When I got stuck in the conversation, I use this strategy." (High-Proficiency Learner 1)

The next frequently used strategies were Item no. 1: "To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses" (33.33%), Item no. 2: "When I can't think of a word during a conversation in the SL, I use gestures" (33.33%), and Item no. 4: "I read SL without looking up every new word" (33.33%).

Item no. 1: "To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses".
"Every time it is not possible for me to find out every word from the dictionary. As a result, first time I always try to understand unfamiliar SL words from my guessing power. Moreover, this technique is very helpful" (High-Proficiency Learner 15)

"Yes I do. I follow this to read new books" (High-Proficiency Learner 3)

Item no. 2: "When I can't think of a word during a conversation in the SL, I use gestures".

"It helps my audience to understand what I want to mean" (High-Proficiency Learner 13)

"Gesture, posture and sign language is beneficial. I always try to find the meaning of unknown words by Gesture during a conversation in the SL" (High-Proficiency Learner 6)

"It helps me to express my opinion" (High-Proficiency Learner 4)

Item no. 4: "I read SL without looking up every new word".
"I do it to continue the continuous reading" (High-Proficiency Learner 11)

The low-proficiency learners' most preferred compensation strategy was Item no. 1: "To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses" (66.66%). The participants' responses were similar to the quantitative data regarding this item.

"I always do it according to the situation". (Low-Proficiency Learner 6)

"I always do that. I feel that context helps me a lot to guess the very close meaning". (Low-Proficiency Learner 10)

"Because first I try to understand the concept of the topic and then guess the meaning of the unfamiliar SL words". (Low-Proficiency Learner 9)

"It's a familiar method to me for making a word's meaning". (Low-Proficiency Learner 3)

The next preferred strategy was Item no. 6: "If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing" (46.66%).

"I always do that as I prefer strategies in communicative competence". (Low- Proficiency Learner 11)

"Because sometimes it's difficult to remember all the word, so immediately I try to use other word or phrase". (Low-Proficiency Learner 14)

"Without doing this, the speech or the sentence will be meaningless". (Low- Proficiency Learner 12)

The third position holder strategies were Item no. 3: "I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in the SL" (33.33%) and Item no. 4: "I read SL without looking up every new word" (33.33%).

Item no. 3: "I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in the SL".

"Without this technique, my speech will be unclear". (Low-Proficiency Learner 2)

"Because most of the time I practice this way". (Low-Proficiency Learner 5)

Item no. 4: "I read SL without looking up every new word".

"Because if I look up every new word it takes long time to read, so I just read without looking up every new word". (Low-Proficiency Learner 13)

"It helps to continue the continuous reading". (Low-Proficiency Learner 8)

The findings indicate that high-proficiency learners preferred Item no. 6: "If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing" (40%). The next most preferred compensation strategies were Item no. 1: "To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses" (33.33%), Item no. 2: "When I can't think of a word during a conversation in the SL, I use gestures" (33.33%), and Item no. 4: "I read SL without looking up every new word" (33.33%). On the other hand, the low-proficiency students' most preferred strategy was Item no. 1: "To understand unfamiliar SL words, I make guesses" (66.66%). The second preferred strategy was Item no. 6: "If I can't think of an SL word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing" (46.66%). The participants' next used strategies were Item no. 3: "I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in the SL" (33.33%) and Item no. 4: "I read SL without looking up every new word" (33.33%).

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the high-proficiency learners used a word or phrase similar to a second language word but were unable to remember the word instantly. They also resorted to guessing to find out the meaning of unfamiliar words. Using gestures was one of their chosen compensation strategies that helped them to continue conversation. Without searching a word in the dictionary, they continued reading. The low-proficiency learners preferred strategies of guessing, finding out words almost similar to meaning, inventing new words, and avoiding finding out the meaning of each and every word. Except inventing new words for communication, all other items are similar in both groups. Strategy training can pave the way of success in language learning and make the learners autonomous. This result will help learners and teachers to develop the foreign language learning-teaching scenario. The researchers will also be able to find new avenues of research.

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