



Perceptions of how foreign language instructional strategies may enhance adult learners' speaking skills

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Abstract

This article reports a qualitative action research study regarding the influence of strategies that may be used in oral conversation to avoid communication breakdowns. After analyzing college students' performance in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, the problem was that many adult learners exhibited poor oral English communication skills, which negatively affected their exit examinations and opportunities to earn a degree. Grounded in sociocultural and cognitive load theories, the purpose of this study was to explore adult learners' perceptions at a private university in Northern Colombia regarding the influence of compensation strategies on their English-speaking skills. A purposive sample of 20 intermediate-level students was taught how to use circumlocution, approximation, coining words, and self-repetition to preclude communication breakdown caused by knowledge gaps. Data collection instruments included journal entries and transcriptions from semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using thematic analysis aided by MAXQDA. The analysis discovered that compensatory strategies supported the enhancement of students' grammatical accuracy, fluency, and language learning motivation. Findings also showed that compensatory strategies did not influence the use of level appropriate vocabulary, and coining words was the least influential strategy. However, introducing the strategies helped reduce students' affective filter and boost their speaking performance. As a pedagogical implication, teachers should facilitate the intentional integration of compensation strategies to scaffold adult learners' confident and fluent communication.

Keywords: approximation, circumlocution, coining words, compensation strategies, EFL, self-repetition

Introduction

Interpersonal communication is central to human existence and critical to language learning and instruction (Bachelor, 2023; Ostovar-Namaghi et al., 2022). Communication is the primary goal of human interaction, the act of conveying information (Putri, 2013), and “a mode of the imparting or exchanging of messages by speaking, writing, or using some other medium” (Reddy & Gupta, 2020, p. 3793). Failing to impart or exchange an intended message results in poor communication (Chand, 2021), which may lead to varied outcomes. In foreign language education, teaching and learning non-native languages occurs in environments where they are not commonly spoken (Saud, 2019). A less inconsequential outcome of poor student communication in a foreign language could be delayed response. Meanwhile, a more serious outcome may manifest as low exam scores, course failure, and even missed career opportunities.

Poor communication may occur due to linguistic incapacities or non-verbal challenges (Syafryadin et al., 2020). When a communication breakdown is imminent, new or basic language speakers may resort to partial messaging avoidance by switching to their first language or adjusting the message to compensate for their language deficits (Oxford, 1990). In this sense, compensation strategies may be used to avert communication breakdowns—the partial or absolute failure to impart information (Rubis & Dumlao, 2013; Shofiya & Basuni, 2023). Resorting to alternatives that enable language users to compensate for a linguistic gap and communicate an intended message implies that, for some foreign language learners, effective communication hinges on their ability to employ learned compensation strategies.

Therefore, the general research question for this study is, “How do compensation strategies help adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners speak better?” Goh (2017) wrote that research findings on communication strategies have been over-applied in response to oral examination practices, as scoring rubrics often encourage students to paraphrase and compensate for lexical gaps. While Goh (2017) appeared critical of teachers’ misuse of encouraging compensation strategies to merely respond to examination questions, this study aimed to understand students’ perceptions of the influence compensatory strategies have on their speaking performance.

Compensation Strategies as Mediation

Grounded in the language classifications and descriptions put forward by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Companion volume, basic users of a foreign language have the lowest level of language competency (Council of Europe, 2020). According to Sweller’s (2022) cognitive load theory, these learners may also struggle to process the different linguistic branches of a target language due to diverse intrinsic or extraneous loads. Aligned with Sweller’s (2022) definition of intrinsic and extraneous loads, “social [and] environmental problems, course content, overuse of mother tongue, poor schooling, and classroom culture [are] the causal factors of [adults’] speaking deficiency” (Chand, 2021, p. 45). For adult EFL learners with basic language competencies, compensation strategies may provide ways to avoid communication breakdowns (Gül Peker & Erdemir, 2021). In this respect, compensation strategies can be seen as mediation tools to improve communication.

The CEFR Companion volume describes mediation as the social process through which the “user [or] learner acts as a social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 90). While mediation is widely interpreted to mean one user providing assistance to another user to facilitate communication (Corbett, 2021; Leung & Jenkins, 2020), in the context of this study, mediation is flipped to imply language users

recognizing their linguistic or non-linguistic deficits and employing compensation strategies as mediation tools to convey the same or similar meanings, thereby preventing a communication breakdown. This form of self-help mediation utilized during social interaction can be considered a metacognitive skill that supports communication (Oxford, 1990). As a result, improving the effectiveness of communication by employing compensation strategies can be examined through the social and cognitive lenses of foreign language learning and instruction (Adams, 2018; Sweller et al., 2022). This connection is discussed further in the theoretical framework section.

Teaching Compensation Strategies in EFL

Compensation strategies are mediation tools that assist learners in understanding or producing messages despite limitations in knowledge (Oxford, 1990). Other scholars described compensation strategies as alternatives used by native or non-native language users when they encounter challenges in imparting their intended messages (Ostovar-Namaghi et al., 2022; Syafriyadin et al., 2020; Taheri & Davoudi, 2016). For foreign language learning, Ehrman and Oxford (1990) described compensation strategies as learning behaviors that involve using the target language to compensate for knowledge gaps. Oxford (1999) later proposed that compensation strategies were those used to “compensate for or make up for missing knowledge” (p. 112). Oxford (1990) also posited that language learners primarily use compensation strategies to make up for their inadequate repertoire of grammar and vocabulary.

Guessing intelligently and *overcoming limitations in speaking and writing* are the two overarching sets of strategies in which compensation strategies can be clustered (Oxford, 1990). Using linguistic and other clues are the two named strategies that correspond to *guessing intelligently*. “Switching to the mother tongue, getting help, using mime or gesture, avoiding communication, partially or totally, selecting the topic, adjusting or approximating, coining words, and using a circumlocution or synonym” are the eight behaviors corresponding to the second set of compensation strategies (Oxford, 1990, p. 49). Since these strategies help language users bridge communication gaps, mastering them helps foster effective communication.

In this qualitative action research study, the compensation strategies taught as speaking interventions included using circumlocution or synonyms, approximation, coining words, and self-repetition. The first three were deemed the most appropriate for helping students develop fluency, build their vocabulary repertoire, and improve accuracy while compensating for missing knowledge (Oxford, 1990). Circumlocution is conveying meaning by describing an unknown word or concept (Faryadi & Panahi, 2022). An example is when a learner says, “I am going on vacation tomorrow with my wife’s mother,” when the term *mother-in-law* is unknown.

Approximation is using an alternative term or phrase with almost the same meaning as an unfamiliar word or phrase (Cirit-Işıklıgil et al., 2023). For example, a speaker may say, “My father recently bought a ship,” intending to say, “My father recently bought a sailboat.” Coining words, the third strategy taken from Oxford’s (1990) list of 10 compensation strategies, is inventing new words, such as *paper paste* for *glue*. Like circumlocution or approximation, new words are coined when the actual word is unknown.

Self-repetition, the fourth strategy, was adopted from Taheri and Davoudi’s (2016) quantitative study, where it was found to be the most widely used among adult EFL learners. Taheri and Davoudi (2016) further added that participants’ self-repetition increased alongside their language proficiency, indicating that self-repetition complemented Oxford’s (1990) *overcoming limitations in speaking and writing* classification. Self-repetition is reusing words and phrases when their synonyms are irretrievable or unknown. In a conversation, one speaker

may consistently use the same discourse marker, verb, noun, or any other word class to support the development of their verbal output. In addition, self-repetition may refer to when language users repeat “a word or string of words immediately after they were said in order to gain time to produce a lexical or structural target language item” (Taheri & Davoudi, 2016, p. 171). From a theoretical perspective, all four compensation strategies support the practice of autonomous language production—the ability to generate language using one’s own linguistic knowledge and creativity without relying on an interlocutor’s support.

Karbalaei and Negin Taji (2014) posited that EFL students who use compensation strategies have the advantage of “conserving the conversation, [comprehending] the target language, [dealing] with vocabulary and grammar shortcomings, or [obtaining] a higher score” (p. 91). Achieving these benefits was meaningful for students at the private Colombian university who performed significantly below their language course levels in speaking and writing. As a school-leaving requirement, influenced by the Colombian government’s globalized view of foreign language learning, students must achieve the university’s B1 level in English based on the international framework outlined by the CEFR. Despite not assessing participants’ writing due to the skill’s lower weighting in passing a university language course compared with speaking, perceptions of the influence of compensation strategies on speaking were sufficiently valuable for exploration.

Contextual Background: Globalization and EFL Policy

For over two decades, the Colombian government has regulated EFL teaching and learning primarily because English is the most dominant lingua franca used for international communication in research, business, and cross-cultural affairs (Guerrero, 2015; Jaramillo Jaramillo, 2024). Over the years, the country’s Ministry of Education has launched several bilingual programs to promote open borders, acquiring new knowledge, and understanding other foreign contexts (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016). However, one of the main challenges with Colombia’s bilingual programs has been the failure to provide practical strategies to improve learning a second language (Jaramillo Jaramillo, 2024).

Being able to impart or exchange intended, if not similar, messages contributes to broader societal aspirations, such as globalization (Wang et al., 2021). The growing interdependence of world economies and cultures necessitates quality multilingual education (Stein-Smith, 2016), including identifying and remediating language teaching and learning gaps. As demonstrated by Colombia’s foreign language policies, the CEFR Companion volume defined multilingualism as “the coexistence of different languages at the social or individual level” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 30). This definition aligns with the construction of bilingual programs launched across Latin America to promote EFL learning and respond to the increasing demands of globalization (De Angelis, 2022).

In Colombia, foreign language instruction is mandatory in elementary, secondary, and tertiary institutions and is promoted as an opportunity to “insert the Colombian human capital into the global economy” (Gómez Sará, 2017, p. 139). Since the 1980s, EFL has been the predominant language taught across the country; however, due to unequal language learning access and levels of academic language achievement (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2023; De Angelis, 2022), Education First’s (2024) English Proficiency Index ranked Colombia under ‘low proficiency,’ 16th place among 20 Latin American countries, and 74th out of 116 countries where English is spoken as a foreign or second language. Education First is a for-profit company that generates global interest through its publication of an English proficiency index that categorizes countries as ‘very high,’ ‘high,’ ‘moderate,’ ‘low,’ and ‘very low proficiency’ based on the company’s online standard English test results.

Based on Education First's (2024) English proficiency index, approximately 26% of 116 countries are ranked as having 'moderate proficiency,' 27% 'low proficiency,' 21% 'very low proficiency,' and only 27% between 'very high' and 'high proficiency' in English. While caution is advised in analyzing these percentages, which coincide with Education First's business services (De Angelis, 2022), the social ramifications of the publication remain significant. Government and private stakeholders' analyses of these language proficiency reports influence policy, funding, and other decision-making (De Angelis, 2022). However, contrary to De Angelis's (2022) proposition that circulating these indices linked to for-profit companies is damaging to the "meaningful exploration of the quality of English language education" (para. 37), researchers have analyzed these and similar findings in conjunction with governmental frameworks and policies to highlight policy inconsistencies and recommend practical strategies to improve foreign language education (Correa Villegas, 2017), particularly because foreign language learners, as opposed to second language learners, require additional strategies and resources to manage communication in a foreign language.

Despite emerging from a private, for-profit company, Education First's (2024) English proficiency index is particularly relevant to this study since Colombia's EFL industry has mainly depended on its uses and other similar matrices as an assessment of its EFL development. One scholar explained, "The Colombian government has interpreted the privatization of EFL services as the most feasible and historically reasonable option for the country" (Correa Villegas, 2017, p. 70). Furthermore, analyzing reports and databases from state agencies has mirrored a similarly worrying picture of Colombians' English performance (Eliecer Benavides, 2020). "The level of English of future Colombian professionals is not only very low but also without improvement from its beginnings in 2007 to 2017" (Eliecer Benavides, 2020, p. 57). These language proficiency reports could imply that interested educational institutions worldwide have a significant task of realigning their foreign language programs to ensure that English language learners are equipped with tools to meet the intercultural demands imposed by globalization (Allen, 2021; Sheu & Manzie, 2024; Wang et al., 2021).

While previous paragraphs examined the issue of low language performance and its impact on English proficiency ranking, this qualitative action research study narrows down low language performance to poor communication in a Colombian university's EFL classroom. The connection between the above analyses and this study is that students at a private university in Northern Colombia have been participants of multilingual education with varying degrees of EFL exposure, candidates of Education First's English examinations, and emerging professionals willing to insert themselves into the global economy. However, most students exhibit low competence in EFL to exchange messages in the target language without experiencing communication breakdowns—a sign of ineffective or poor communication. As a remediation within a pilot group, the EFL curriculum was modified to teach compensation strategies.

Problem and Purpose

The background of the study is that the inefficient bilingual program being promoted in Colombia is far from the reality of the country's educational context (Jaramillo Jaramillo, 2024). Colombia's bilingual program is based on a hegemonic view of EFL, but few practical strategies are used to improve EFL teaching and learning. The problem was that many adult learners exhibited poor oral English communication skills, which negatively affected their exit examinations and opportunities to earn a degree. The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to explore adult learners' perceptions at a private university in Northern Colombia regarding the influence of compensation strategies on their English-speaking skills, specifically circumlocution, approximation, coining words, and repetition.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis processes:

1. What are the perceptions of adult EFL students regarding the direct teaching of compensation strategies?
2. What perceived influence do compensation strategies have on adult learners' speaking skills?

Theoretical Framework

A previous point made in this study was that effective communication, understood as the delivery of information in which the receiver captures the original meaning from the sender (ARX Reads, 2020), mediated with compensation strategies, can be examined through the social and cognitive lenses of foreign language learning and instruction. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory highlights the pivotal role of social interaction and mediated learning in cognitive and communicative skills development. Sociocultural theory posits that learning is a social process where knowledge and skills are co-constructed through interaction with more knowledgeable others (Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). Within this social process of knowledge co-construction, Vygotsky (1978) introduced the terms *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) and *scaffolding*, which are applicable to the teaching and learning of compensation strategies to improve effective communication, conveying meaning through a "careful selection of the appropriate medium or combination of media available" (Ogili, 2005, as cited in Chinelo Obasi & Udofot, 2013, p. 82).

Compensation strategies such as circumlocution, coining words, and approximation are not usually employed automatically by all learners who struggle to maintain communication. These strategies often fall within learners' ZPD—language users requiring guidance on strategy use before independent practice. "Good language learners...make educated guesses. On the other hand, less adept language learners often panic [or] tune out...which impede progress toward proficiency" (Oxford, 1990, p. 48). Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD concept suggests that language learners are best served through explicit strategy instruction—the direct teaching of how to use a strategy. Receiving direct instruction from a more knowledgeable other (the teacher) on how to use compensation strategies ensures learners become aware of and practice compensation strategies before being able to use them independently. Furthermore, learners' independent use of compensation strategy increases through constant contextualized practices (scaffolding) provided by teachers and corrective support received through peer-to-peer social interaction.

Likewise, Sweller's (2022) expansion of cognitive load theory to cover second language instruction explains why explicit instruction on compensation strategies may support second language development in adults. Cognitive load theory contemplates that direct instruction responds to adult cognitive architecture, which involves a working memory that is limited in capacity (Sweller et al., 2019) and relies on the simplification and manageability of knowledge to achieve a desired learning outcome (Asma & Dallel, 2020). Cognitive load theory assumes that if intrinsic and extraneous loads are decreased and germane load increased through careful instructional design, language learning and communication will become more effective (Sweller et al., 2022).

Using circumlocution, coining words, approximation, and self-repetition is an attempt to reduce adult EFL learners' intrinsic load—their low linguistic proficiency or knowledge gaps.

Providing clear instruction, tailored scaffolding, and practical examples during classroom activities is an attempt to reduce extraneous load—B1 course difficulty, intimidation during social interaction, and speaking anxiety. Feedback, support, and self-mediation practices are elements that can increase learners' germane load—their ability to process and automate compensation strategies into long-term schemas. In other words, when learners become adept in using compensation strategies, they can employ them as needed (Oxford, 1990).

The opposing view of explicit instruction comes from Kellerman (1991, as cited in Rodríguez Cervantes & Roux Rodriguez, 2012), who posited, “There is no justification for providing training in [compensation] strategies in the classroom. Teach the learners more language and let the strategies look after themselves” (p. 115). Consistent with Oxford (1990) and Taheri and Davoudi (2016), Lewis (2011) countered Kellerman's argument, refuting that “[Teachers] need to decide which strategies are appropriate for students and how to introduce them in the classroom” (p. 49). Students should be able to adapt taught strategies and apply them to different situations as needed.

Assessing Speaking

Irrespective of the assessment context or condition, some categories or competencies must be assessed to ensure the results match what they purport and are comparable to international frameworks. Regarding speaking, the CEFR recognizes 12 categories related to oral assessment, for which they have developed illustrative scales for assessment: turn-taking strategies, co-operating strategies, asking for clarification, fluency, flexibility, coherence, thematic development, precision, sociolinguistic competence, general range, vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary control, and phonological control (Council of Europe, 2020). Attempting to assess all categories simultaneously is neither recommended nor possible, so institutions are expected to select and assess the skills relevant to their program outcomes.

This qualitative action research study was conducted at a private university, where accuracy, fluency, and vocabulary are the primary foci of assessing speaking. The selected compensation strategies were also described as useful for learners to develop their fluency, vocabulary repertoire, and accuracy (Oxford, 1990; Taheri & Davoudi, 2016). Addressing these three speaking subskills in this study, therefore, supported the objective of research alignment.

Accuracy

Accuracy refers to the correctness of speech or the lack of grammatical errors (written or oral) (Na et al., 2021). Grammar accuracy or syntax can, thus, be easily assessed as a speaker's ability to assemble words to form correct clauses. For a non-native speaker of a language, learning grammar could mean employing conscious efforts to study how words are properly constructed in sentences when the grammar pattern is used appropriately and predicting how the sentence will be interpreted. For some EFL adult learners, achieving grammar accuracy is tedious due to a lack of exposure to learning strategies or poor teaching contexts (Suseno et al., 2022). Moreover, poor syntax is a primary cause of communication breakdown (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2019).

Vocabulary

Instruction for vocabulary learning helps students retain words (Khoirunnisa et al., 2018). Vocabulary instruction may be direct or indirect in that, language teachers may choose to use a direct method to teach vocabulary or, as Kellerman (1991) states, teachers need to “Teach the learners more language and let the strategies look after themselves” (as cited in Rodríguez Cervantes & Roux Rodriguez, 2012, p. 115). For this study, the explicit teaching of vocabulary

strategies was excluded not to determine whether Kellerman's preposition had any bearing on academic success, but since the focus was on teaching compensation strategies to make up for missing knowledge.

Fluency

In EFL education, spoken fluency has a long history of being considered "automaticity and speed of speech production" (Brand & Götz, 2011, p. 256) with minimal care for grammatical accuracy. Dissociating grammar accuracy from oral fluency caused a valid debate since a speech can comprise one or more ungrammatical sentences without interrupting communication. For example, the sentence, "He is the boy, which went to graduate the last year," has three errors: [which vs who, to graduate vs graduated, and the last year vs last year]. As a result, oral fluency was traditionally associated more with meaning and flow than syntactic rules. Council of Europe (2020) redefined fluency as a speaker's ability to construct utterances, maintain a lengthy production or conversation, and express themselves with ease and spontaneity, which is the guiding definition applied to this study.

Methodology

This research study followed Elliot's (1991) description of an action research design. The qualitative method was necessary since the study sought to explore human subjects' perceptions, an objective best achieved using unquantifiable data (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Likewise, action research was the most apposite design due to the inclusion of an intervention that converged understanding of a theory and wanting to make contributions through practical development (Elg et al., 2020).

Research Procedures

Adhering to Elliot's (1991) action research steps, this study included four essential stages of action: planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. Before planning the intervention plans, one objective of the first stage was to identify an area of performance requiring immediate pedagogical attention, which culminated with the problem statement of the present study. The second objective of planning was to identify and define the focus of the investigation—exploring whether Oxford's (1990), Lewis's (2011), and Taheri and Davoudi's (2016) recommendation for teaching compensation strategies in the context of Vygotsky's (1978) and Sweller's (2022) theories had any influence on the adult EFL learners' speaking skills. Therefore, in this study, the teacher-researcher designed six projects, each comprising five lessons. Four compensation strategies were incorporated across all six projects, which were developed in the acting phase, as outlined in Table 1.

As outlined in Table 1 and following the sample lesson plan provided in the appendix, the corresponding compensation strategies were explicitly introduced in each workshop through guided practice. First, the teacher explained the objective of the speaking activity and the compensation strategy to be used. Second, a detailed explanation of how to use each compensation was provided, using examples in simple sentences as models to scaffold students' understanding and use. Then, students were asked to complete speaking activities in groups with limited guidance to assess their ability to use the compensation strategies.

Each project represented a unit lasting one week. Classes were taught for two hours each working day (Monday–Friday), and the corresponding compensation strategies for each unit were explicitly taught only in the first lesson of the unit. The appendix shows a sample lesson plan of how a compensation strategy was taught. The other plans in which other compensation strategies were explicitly taught followed the sample format and teaching pattern.

Table 1 Summary of compensatory strategies project

Project	Title	Compensatory Strategies	Speaking Activities	Objective
1	Childhood habits	Circumlocution	Guided conversation & discussion	Talk about the past and habits.
2	Future plans	Approximation	Debate & guided conversation	Talk about plans.
3	Reporting message	Self-repetition	Simulation & narration	Inform what other persons have said.
4	Giving additional information	Circumlocution & coining words	Interview & role-play	Provide more details with relative pronouns.
5	Descriptions	Approximation & coining words	Role-play	Describe imaginary situations.
6	Expressing permission, doubt, & obligation	Self-repetition & approximation	Discussion & impromptu conversation	Express permission, doubt and obligation.

Note: The speaking strategies were selected based on the nature of the lesson objectives.

As each unit evolved, students were given explicit and timely reminders to use the strategies taught at the beginning of the unit. During their independent practice, students received teacher feedback and support from their peers to improve their oral outputs using compensatory productive strategies. Throughout the developing stage, the teacher-researcher reflected on the process to ensure that the compensation strategies were not added extraneous loads that affected students' ability to process and convert new knowledge into schemas.

Participant and Sample Selection

Using the purposive sample technique, the study included 20 college students (12 males and eight females) from a B1 level EFL course designed based on the CEFR language learning framework. A sample size of 20 is appropriate for qualitative research using purposive sampling since it allows for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives while maintaining data manageability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were between the ages of 18 and 45 from different undergraduate programs and demonstrated an A2 level in EFL.

Four participants were international students in an exchange program who might have been exposed to an EFL teaching methodology and teaching context different from Colombia's bilingual program and the institution's pedagogical practices. However, internal assessments ranked the four international students as A2, so one assumption in this study was that their previous language training did not give them an unfair advantage over the other 16 participants, nor were they at any disadvantage because of their similar language proficiency. This class was purposefully selected due to being ranked as the lowest-performing B1 class.

Adhering to ethical principles of conducting studies with human participants, students were informed about the intention to improve their speaking skills through an action research study. They were reminded of their rights, including the right to not partake in semi-structured interviews. However, all participants agreed to volunteer in the interviews by signing a consent form.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Primary data collection instruments included journal entries recorded by the teacher-researcher and an interview protocol comprising semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol included 10 open-ended questions designed by the teacher-researcher and vetted by four subject matter experts with doctorates in foreign language education and an average of 15 years of experience in the EFL field. Questions 1 and 2 asked about students' experiences learning to speak English; Questions 3 and 4 enquired about their awareness of compensation strategies before and after intervention; Questions 5 and 6 prompted participants to discuss their reactions to the direct teaching of compensation strategies; Questions 7 and 8 allowed participants to explain how they perceived compensation strategies impacted their speaking skills; and Questions 9 and 10 enquired about the difficulties participants encountered in using compensation strategies.

Individual interviews were scheduled at the end of the six-week project, conducted in an isolated room approved by the university to eliminate environmental distractions, and lasted approximately 25 minutes on average. In addition, since the interviews were not intended to assess students' speaking skills and were conducted in an out-of-class environment, they were conducted in Spanish to ensure participants were not intimidated or anxious about understanding or responding to the interview questions. The interviews were recorded on a password-protected computer and later transcribed and translated using Notta, an online transcription tool to convert audio to text.

Journal entries were written at the end of each class to reflect upon students' use of compensation strategies and overall speaking development. The prompts that guided each journal entry included discussing how students' speaking skills evolved using compensation strategy (identifying if and why a communication breakdown occurred); how students' speaking skills improved regarding fluency, accuracy, and vocabulary; and the challenges or limitations students displayed in conveying messages. Qualitative data were also enriched and complemented using the results from a pre- and post-test scoring rubric, which the teacher-researcher collected as a non-participant observer. Based on the journal prompts, these results were used to assess adult learners' speaking skills and reflect on the underlying reasons for such performance.

Findings and Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage data analysis procedure, which was facilitated using MAXQDA and manual coding. Stage 1 involved becoming familiar with the data through repeated readings of journal entries and interview transcripts. In Stage 2, initial codes were generated manually and with the support of MAXQDA. Stage 3 then entailed organizing codes into potential themes based on patterns of meaning and relevance to the study's focus. These themes were reviewed and refined in Stage 4 through iterative comparison with the coded data extracts and the full dataset to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness. In Stages 5-6, the final themes and subthemes were clearly defined, named, and ranked according to the frequency of occurrence to illustrate their prominence in participants' perceptions, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2 Identified major and sub-themes with frequency ranking

Major Theme	Sub-Themes	f	%	Supportive Evidence
Low affective filter	Increased confidence	35	18.9	“These strategies make me feel proud.” – IN. “Students were confidently correcting each other.” – JE.
	Positive attitude towards EFL	30	16.2	“Not knowing a word is not an excuse for not talking because I have the tools to substitute it.” – IN.
Enhanced communicative skills	Effective use of circumlocution	29	15.7	“I was able to replace unknown words with descriptive phrases.” – IN. “Students tried in various ways to explain words they did not know.” – JE.
	Effective use of approximation	29	15.7	“It was interesting to see how some of my classmates could quickly use a word to replace one that they did not know. They paused, but they communicated, and they blew my mind.” – IN
Reasonable accuracy	Improved grammaticality	16	8.6	“I believe that using circumlocution helped me avoid mistakes in grammar because before, I used to make a lot of mistakes that affected communication.” – IN. “Students managed to complete more thoughts without errors.” – JE.
	Avoidance of miscommunication	15	8.1	“[My classmates and I] managed to keep the conversation going with fewer errors and misinterpretations. I really plan to use this in future communications outside the classroom” – IN.
Limited vocabulary repertoire	Reliance on basic words	13	7.0	“Sometimes I had to use simple words because I didn’t know the right term or ask for help.” – IN “Some of the words used were too basic for B1.” – JE.
	Difficulty with complex vocabulary	10	5.4	“I feel like I don’t have enough words to express my ideas fully.” – IN
Improved fluency using compensatory strategies	Reduced pauses and hesitations	5	2.7	“Before, I had to think for a while before speaking, but now I can describe unknown names and maintain my fluency” – IN.
	Self-correction	3	1.6	“I often corrected myself when I made a mistake.” – IN. “Students correcting themselves was progress.” – JE.

Note: JE means extracts were taken from journal entries and IN from interview transcripts.

Answering Research Question 1: What are the Perceptions Of College EFL Students Regarding the Direct Teaching of Compensation Strategies?

Motivation

Data analysis revealed that the teaching of compensation strategies did not increase students' level of frustration, which Sweller et al. (2022) warned was a hindrance to language learning. As illustrated in Table 2, most of the analyzed data showed participants had a low affective filter, primarily evidenced by increased confidence and a positive learning attitude toward EFL. In addition, every student interviewed commented that they believed that learning how to use compensation strategies helped them become more expressive and engaged in EFL classes.

Enhanced Communication

With the second-highest frequency rate of 29 occurrences, students believed compensation strategies were useful in conveying their intended messages. Most participants commented that they were amazed by their ability to describe unknown lexical items in the target language. Before being introduced to the compensation strategies, some students confirmed they would have resorted to Spanish and avoided discussing a topic if they felt insecure in their language ability. After learning to use compensation strategies, students praised learning about strategies like approximation and self-repetition compared to their previous learning experience of not being taught how to prevent communication breakdown. Four participants said that knowing they could repeat words and phrases without being severely scrutinized lowered their anxiety. During the intervention, participants were encouraged not to perceive repetition or any other compensation strategies as a strategy for failure but as one to aid communication. As a result, as noted in the journal entries, most learners successfully explained unknown jargon using simpler terms or words that were close in meaning or repeated lexical items to maintain conversation.

Fluency Gains

As the third influence, students believed their fluency was impacted more by circumlocution and repetition than by approximation and coining words. Before being exposed to compensation strategies, students noted they had to think more about what they wanted to express, but being able to describe or use words close in meaning reduced their thinking time, contributing to their willingness to communicate despite language barriers. As the projects advanced, the teacher-researcher observed that academically stronger students began using strategies before being instructed when or how to use them. Furthermore, while weaker students relied on much scaffolding and had more frequent pauses, they did not seem frustrated to complete their thoughts.

Answering Research Question 2: What Specific Influence do Compensation Strategies have on Adult Learners' Speaking Skills?

Improved Accuracy

Explicit instruction on using compensation strategies resulted in students' improved language accuracy. Most participants mentioned they had recognized that using strategies like repetition and circumlocution gave them time to organize their thoughts, which resulted in fewer grammatical errors. Notes from the journal entries further corroborated students' improved grammaticality, remarking that "when students repeated a phrase or a clause, it was evident they had a better control over language tenses." Improved grammar meant students could communicate

with fewer misinterpretations or instances of peer correction. Using compensation strategies to avoid miscommunication was a positive behavior mentioned by multiple students, indicating a noteworthy influence on their speaking skills.

Vocabulary Limits

The second influence was that overt instruction on compensation strategies highlighted some students' limited vocabulary repertoire. Many lower-level participants indicated they often had to rely on basic words because they lacked the appropriate vocabulary to express their ideas. Notes from the teacher-researcher's journal entries emphasized this limitation in stating that when students attempted to use compensation strategies like circumlocution, some words and phrases they resorted to did not convey their intermediate B1 level. Those participants who identified their lack of extensive intermediate-level vocabulary range also noted their reliance upon requesting help by asking their peers for English translation (a strategy not taught during intervention). Despite these challenges, there was no indication from the data that compensation strategies did not positively support learners' ongoing conversations. Furthermore, the data revealed minimal comments on the benefits of coining words.

Interpretations and Discussion

The findings from the data analysis indicate that explicit teaching of compensation strategies positively influences adult EFL learners' oral communication performance, aligning with previous studies that revealed the significance of integrating communication and performance strategies into second and foreign language teaching (Behroozian et al., 2023; Lewis, 2011; Ostovar-Namaghi et al., 2022; Sweller et al., 2022). Consistent with researchers like Faryadi and Panahi (2022) and Surahim (2021), students' improved grammatical accuracy and fluency in this qualitative action research study illustrate that compensation strategies facilitate effective communication. The pedagogical and policy implications for the institution are assessing when and how to integrate compensation and other performance strategies to promote academic success. Despite the limited number of compensation strategies introduced in this study, data analysis suggested that circumlocution, repetition, and approximation help learners reduce grammatical errors and long pauses in speech, supporting Surahim (2021) and Dörnyei and Scott (1997) regarding the impact on compensation strategies on second language learners' oral communication performance.

Interpreting the data analysis through the lens of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory shows that the interactive nature of teaching and guiding students to use compensation strategies fosters a collaborative environment in which enhanced skills for speaking are co-constructed. Instead of providing a formula for using compensation strategies, students are provided with explanations and examples that they must internalize and practice to develop their speaking skills, as speaking is not a formulaic skill that can be transferred from teacher to student or student to student. Each individual must independently develop their oral competencies, but they can benefit tremendously from instruction on how to maintain conversations. Based on the project's dynamics, students' successful use of repetition, circumlocution, and approximation demonstrates the pivotal role of scaffolding in their language learning.

Furthermore, the findings from the data analysis confirmed Sweller's (2022) cognitive load theoretical proposition that explicit instruction can manage students' cognitive load to help increase their academic performance. In this study, explicit instruction provided students with tools to simplify language processing tasks, which presumably helped eliminate extraneous

and intrinsic loads usually responsible for affecting performance and attitude toward learning (Hughes et al., 2021; Parong & Mayer, 2021). Sweller's (2022) proposition was confirmed based on students' positive perceptions of compensation strategies in terms of improved communication, increased levels of confidence, and reduced anxiety.

Pedagogical Implication

The findings underscore the practical value of integrating compensation strategies into EFL curricula, even before a diagnosis of persistent linguistic limitations. Beyond their immediate function in helping students navigate communication breakdowns, compensation strategies prompt learners to monitor, plan, and adapt their speech in real time, which is a common practice in real-life situations (Goh, 2017). Therefore, the result of applying compensation strategies extends beyond the classroom, equipping learners with communication tools for real-world interactions where vocabulary gaps or grammatical uncertainty are inevitable.

Pedagogically, this application demands a social-constructivist shift in EFL learning settings toward more strategy-based instruction in speaking activities, where learners are explicitly taught linguistic content and how to manage and sustain conversation. This shift aligns with learner-centered paradigms (Amna et al., 2021) and supports differentiated instruction, allowing teachers to scaffold learners based on their communicative competence and cognitive load (Goh, 2017).

Nonetheless, despite the positive influences highlighted in the findings of this study, one critical challenge was that compensation strategies did not positively impact students' B1 vocabulary repertoire. This finding validates Surahim (2021), who found that communication strategies did not contribute to students' mastery of English vocabulary. Nevertheless, as previously outlined, compensation strategies were not taught to improve vocabulary but to help students make up for missing knowledge. Furthermore, in this study, there was no indication that compensation strategies hindered their ability to engage in conversations. Instead, other compensation strategies like circumlocution and approximation provided a framework to navigate linguistic limitations.

Study Limitations

As a study limitation, despite the semi-quantification of data presented in this research report and consistent with the qualitative nature of this study, no inferences or generalizations can be made about the findings beyond the study sample. Another limitation concerns the study's small, purposively selected sample size of 20 participants. While appropriate for qualitative inquiry, this sample size limits the transferability of findings to broader EFL contexts, particularly those with different learner demographics, institutional structures, or proficiency benchmarks.

Furthermore, the study relied heavily on self-reported perceptions and teacher-researcher journal entries, which limits objectivity. However, this limitation was overcome with rich elicitation of qualitative data through interviews and quantitative data through speaking rubrics that facilitated data triangulation. Although the absence of a rigorous pre- and post-intervention speaking assessment as a data collection instruction means no comparison was reported, the impact of compensation strategies on learners' actual spoken performance could be empirically measured through the mentioned speaking rubrics that helped the teacher-researcher verify the reported improvement.

Conclusion

This study explored how compensatory strategies improved adult EFL learners' speaking skills, tackling poor oral communication proficiency. Adult EFL students' perceptions of the influence

of compensation strategies on their speaking skills were positive, which was corroborated by the teacher-researcher. Data analysis from the findings indicates that explicit instruction of such strategies as mediational tools to increase performance lowered students' affective filter and enhanced their confidence and engagement in EFL classes. More specifically, consistent with contemporary studies in EFL education, compensation strategies benefited students' grammatical accuracy and fluency despite the limited variation of compensation strategies introduced in this qualitative action research study.

The lack of impact of circumlocution, approximation, repetition, and coining words on students' vocabulary repertoire supports the need to align performance strategies with students' language needs (Oxford, 1990) but should not be interpreted as a negative influence. As a pedagogical implication, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers need to be intentional about integrating compensation strategies to prepare students for communication beyond the classroom (Goh, 2017). This intentionality may imply modifying the curriculum at the local, regional, and national levels to include explicit and specific compensatory strategies based on students' linguistic gaps.

Actioning the above-mentioned steps means further research is needed to assess the impact of an eclectic convergence of strategies (e.g., vocabulary-building and compensation) in enhancing language learners' linguistic skills. In addition, future researchers should consider a larger sample size with a mixed methods approach to identify any significant statistical relationships between compensation strategies and speaking while exploring how a large sample size perceives the strategies.

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