

An Investigation of Communication Strategies across Different English Proficiency Levels among Senior High School Students

Apriyani Rovita¹⁾, Nani Mulyani²⁾, Zuhra Bhebe³⁾, Indah Maharani Febrianti⁴⁾.

^{1,2,3,4}**Universitas Indraprasta Pgri Jakarta Email:
apriyanirovita65@gmail.com**

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Published: September, 25 th 2024	<i>This study investigates communication strategies employed by senior high school students at SMA Negeri 1 Cibatu, Indonesia, across different English proficiency levels. Through a mixed-method approach, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected, using a language proficiency test and a picture description task. The findings reveal that students with lower proficiency levels rely more on basic strategies such as fillers and message reduction, while higher proficiency students use more complex strategies like approximation and circumlocution. The study highlights the significant impact of proficiency levels on the choice of communication strategies, providing insights that could enhance teaching methods to improve communicative competence in EFL classrooms.</i>
Keywords: : <i>Communication, English, Students</i>	

INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, effective communication plays a vital role in developing students' language proficiency. However, many EFL learners struggle with expressing their ideas clearly due to limited vocabulary, grammatical challenges, and lack of fluency. These difficulties often prompt students to use communication strategies to overcome language barriers and convey their intended message. Communication strategies, such as paraphrasing, guessing, and asking for clarification, help students manage communication breakdowns, especially in situations where they encounter unfamiliar language or ideas.

One useful method to elicit communication strategies from students is through picture description tasks. Describing pictures that are unfamiliar to students requires them to tap into their existing linguistic resources and use various strategies to keep the communication going. This task becomes more complex when considering students' English proficiency levels, as lower proficiency students may rely more heavily on basic strategies like repetition or gestures, while higher proficiency students may employ more advanced strategies such as circumlocution or code-switching (Saring, S., & Widiyanto, 2023).

At SMA Negeri 1 Cibatu, students come from a rural area with varying levels of English proficiency, which provides a unique opportunity to study how students with different language abilities utilize communication strategies when describing unfamiliar pictures. By analyzing these strategies, educators can gain valuable insights into how students navigate

communication challenges, which can inform the development of teaching methods aimed at improving communicative competence across proficiency levels.

1.2 Research Problems

This research seeks to address the following questions:

1. What communication strategies do students at SMA Negeri 1 Cibatuh use when describing unfamiliar pictures?
2. How do communication strategies differ between students with varying English proficiency levels?

1.3 Literature Review

Communication strategies have long been a focus of second language acquisition (SLA) research. According to Tarone (1980), communication strategies are tools used by language learners to compensate for communication difficulties. Faerch and Kasper (1983) classified these strategies into categories such as achievement strategies (e.g., paraphrasing, circumlocution) and avoidance strategies (e.g., topic avoidance, message abandonment). Dörnyei and Scott (1997) further expanded this framework by introducing a taxonomy that includes both problem-solving and problem-avoidance strategies.

English proficiency level is another key factor in understanding communication strategy use. Research by Ellis (1997) and Bachman (1990) indicates that language learners at different proficiency levels vary in their ability to utilize communication strategies. Lower proficiency learners may rely on simpler, more direct strategies such as repetition or gesture, while higher proficiency learners can use more complex linguistic strategies like circumlocution and reformulation.

The relationship between communication strategies and proficiency levels has also been explored in previous studies. Bialystok (1990) found that learners with lower proficiency levels tend to use more avoidance strategies, while more proficient learners use achievement strategies to maintain communication. Additionally, studies by Hsieh (2018) and Tuan & Mai (2015) reveal that task type, such as picture description, can further influence the kinds of strategies learners choose to employ.

1.4 Research Aim

This research aims to analyze the communication strategies used by students with varying English proficiency levels at SMA Negeri 1 Cibatuh when describing unfamiliar pictures. Specifically, the study will:

1. Identify the types of communication strategies employed by students during picture description tasks.
2. Compare the use of communication strategies between different proficiency levels.

1.5 Previous Research

Previous research on communication strategies has largely focused on adult learners or university-level students in EFL and ESL contexts. Tuan & Mai (2015) studied Vietnamese EFL students' communication strategies during speaking activities and found that learners with

lower proficiency used more avoidance strategies, while higher proficiency learners relied on paraphrasing and circumlocution. Similarly, Hsieh (2018) explored the communication strategies of Taiwanese learners and identified a strong link between task complexity and strategy use.

Another previous researcher about the topic was done by Xiao, R., Pang, C., & Liang, X. (2022). This study reviewed how different task types influence communication strategies (CSs) used by second language (L2) learners. They emphasized that tasks requiring open-ended responses lead to more frequent use of strategies like paraphrasing and clarification requests. Meanwhile Yan, H., & Li, S. (2024) investigates how teachers' emotional regulation and use of positive communication strategies, such as empathy and constructive feedback, impact student motivation and engagement in SLA. Through qualitative analysis involving interviews and classroom observations, the researchers found that when teachers employed positive reinforcement and empathy, students exhibited greater motivation and improved engagement in language tasks.

While these studies provide valuable insights, there is a noticeable gap when it comes to high school students, particularly in rural EFL contexts like Indonesia. Furthermore, little attention has been given to the use of communication strategies in picture description tasks, especially across different English proficiency levels in high school settings. By focusing on high school students in a rural Indonesian school, this study seeks to fill this gap.

1.6 Research Gap

Despite the extensive research on communication strategies, studies focusing on the use of these strategies by high school students in rural areas of Indonesia remain limited. Additionally, research on communication strategy use in picture description tasks, particularly in relation to English proficiency levels, is underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by examining how students with different proficiency levels at SMA Negeri 1 Cibatu use communication strategies in a picture description task. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how students' proficiency influences their strategic choices during communication, ultimately informing teaching practices aimed at improving communicative competence.

Contains the background of the research, research problems, literature review, research aim, previous research, and research gap.

METHOD

Research Design

This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the communication strategies used by students at SMA Negeri 1 Cibatu with different English proficiency levels in a picture description task. The quantitative component involves analyzing students' performance on 50 questions covering grammar, speaking, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. The qualitative component focuses on examining the communication strategies employed by students when describing two unfamiliar pictures. The use of Dörnyei and Scott's (1995) taxonomy of communication strategies allows for a detailed analysis of the strategies used by students during this task. This combination of methods provides a comprehensive analysis of both language proficiency and strategic language use.

2.2 Population and Sample

The population for this study consists of 12th-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Cibat. The sample was selected using purposive sampling to include 30 students with varying English proficiency levels, as determined by their previous English test scores and teacher assessments. The sample includes students classified into three proficiency levels: Beginner level: 10 students, Intermediate level: 10 students, Advanced level: 10 students

This selection ensures a representative distribution of proficiency levels, providing a balanced perspective on how different learners use communication strategies.

2.3 Instruments

Two primary instruments were used in this study:

1. **Language Proficiency Test:** A set of 50 questions was developed to assess the students' English proficiency. These questions were divided into four categories:
 - **Grammar:** 15 multiple-choice questions assessing students' understanding of basic grammar rules such as tenses, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure.
 - **Speaking:** Students were asked to choose responses to 10 multiple-choice questions designed to evaluate their fluency, pronunciation, and ability to express ideas in English.
 - **Vocabulary:** 15 questions assessing students' knowledge of common English words, including synonyms, antonyms, and word usage in sentences.
 - **Reading Comprehension:** Ten short reading comprehension questions in which students were asked to answer the correct answers.
2. **Picture Description Task:** Each student was provided with two unfamiliar pictures and was asked to describe what they saw in detail. The pictures were deliberately chosen to depict scenes that students were unlikely to be familiar with, such as a picture of a traditional culture and a surreal image of an unfamiliar food for them. The task was designed to stimulate the students' use of communication strategies, as they needed to describe unfamiliar objects or situations.

2.4 Data Collection Technique

The data collection process was carried out in two stages:

1. **Stage 1: Language Proficiency Test:** The 30 students completed a 50-question language proficiency test during regular class time. The test was administered in google form questions. The entire test took approximately 90 minutes to complete.
2. **Stage 2: Picture Description Task:** Following the language proficiency test, the students were individually asked to describe the two pictures provided. Each student was given five minutes to observe the pictures and another five minutes to describe each picture. Their descriptions were recorded for analysis, and notes were taken to document the communication strategies they employed, such as paraphrasing, guessing, or asking for clarification.

2.5 Data Analysis Technique

The data from both the quantitative and qualitative components were analyzed as follows:

1. **Quantitative Analysis:** The students' responses were scored and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The mean scores, standard deviations, and proficiency levels were calculated to categorize students into beginner, intermediate, and advanced groups. A comparative analysis was conducted to identify patterns in grammar, vocabulary, speaking, and writing performance across different proficiency levels.
2. **Qualitative Analysis:** The recordings from the picture description task were transcribed, and the communication strategies were analyzed using **Dörnyei and Scott's (1995) taxonomy of communication strategies**, which includes three main categories; **direct strategies**, **indirect strategies**, and **interactional strategies**.

Each student's use of these strategies was categorized and analyzed, and the frequency and types of strategies employed were compared across proficiency levels to explore differences in how students managed communication challenges. The combined analysis of quantitative language proficiency and qualitative communication strategies provides insight into how students' proficiency influences their strategic choices in a picture description task.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Communication Strategies Used by All Students

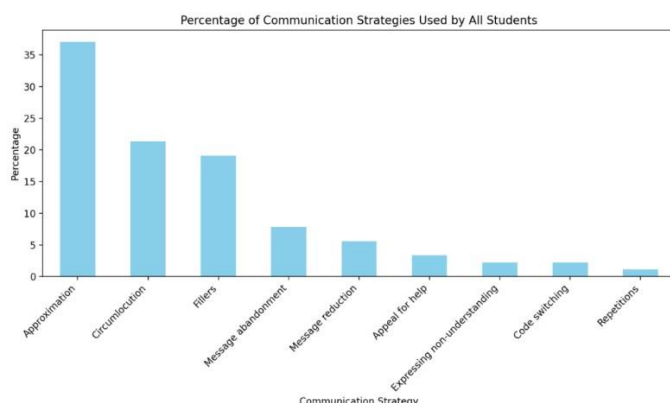


Diagram 1. Percentage of Communication Strategies Used by All Students

As Dörnyei and Scott (1997) stated, the strategy involves the learners the sample to indicate the maintenance of the communication by the intention of the words. The total of 35% represents that the learners use the approximate. However, on the lower level from the graph, the part of repetition is the lowest of all; it indicates below 5%. As the example from Adara Intan Fredellina said, "It is Japanese tea ceremonies" describes the unfamiliar cultural event. This shows the example of an approximation.

In the part, circumlocution indicates the percentage of 20% in the patterns. This part explains how the students explain something indirectly, like it can be simpler, but when it comes to explaining, it's harder for them to find the right word. As the example quoted by the data, Regina said, "I see a ship floating in the sky background, very beautiful," instead of saying, "I

see a plane." The meanings are the same, but Regina explains what she thought first rather than thinking it as it is. This is the demonstration of a gap in the lexicon.

The next part is that talking about Fillers, students do this in the condition where they find it hard to say something or to help them think better. As it has a percentage of 15%, most likely it helps them to gain additional time to process the communication. As the example of fillers, it can be like "you know," "er," "like," etc. From the data shown from intermediate level, "It a sport er called er, what is it? Er superball," and "Someone who is fishing in er cold temperature," it is quoted from Salsa Nur Zaskia. In those two sentences, it indicates that Salsa used the filler "er." As in the part of message abandonment and message reduction for 10%. To conclude, most of them use the strategy of approximation as the estimation of communication in all students.

4.2 Communication of Strategies Used by Advanced Level

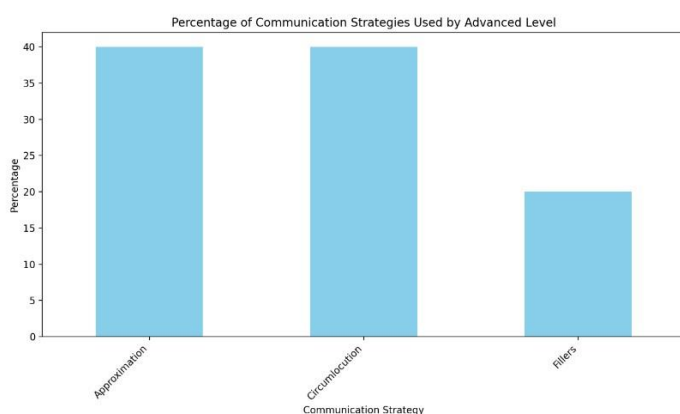


Diagram 2. Percentage of Communication Strategies Used by Advanced Level

There are two dominant aspects in the advanced level; both of them have a percentage of 40%, which are approximation and circumlocution, both of which show that the range of linguistic learners can describe the concept in detail in the advanced level. In the case of an advanced learner who stated, "This is like a Japanese cultural event, maybe related to tea," the student can describe that the Japanese event and tea are related to each other. They connect the knowledge and process it to maintain the communication. Like the other example of approximation from Leni Zaskya, "Ballet is the name of the dance technique with music." It explains ballet in details and how Leni manages to describe what ballet is. In exact terminology, Leni manages to be at the level of advanced. As Bachman (1990) stated, it shows how it demonstrates the unfamiliar situation in the most communicative competence way.

In the part of Fillers showing 20%, it appears that the intermediate students have better capabilities to control their fillers compared to the beginner level that used a lot of fillers. In this level, they have the capability to explain not only the literal meaning but also how to explain it better based on the examples. As the example one of the samples said, "This is a dish from the Semarang region, made of spring roll filled." With the advanced vocabulary, they manage to say it without fillers. Thus, to say, their strategies to communicate help to deliver the words better for the listener.

4.3 Communication Strategies Used by Intermediate Level

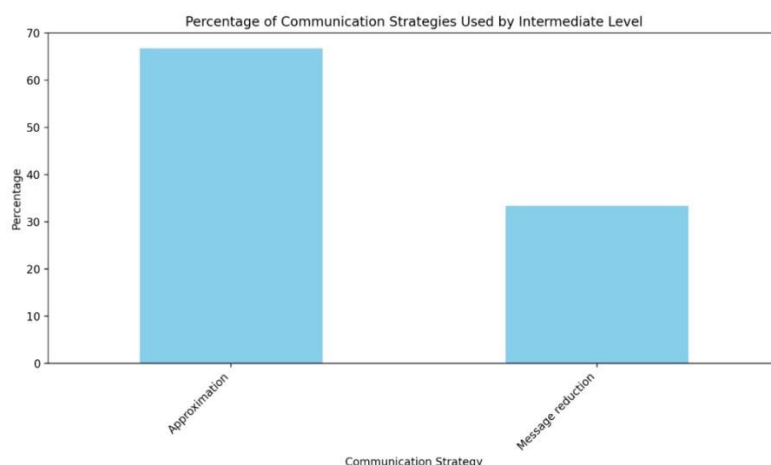


Diagram 3. Percentage of Communication Strategies Used by Intermediate Level

In the part of intermediate level, the biggest percentage goes to an approximate 65%. It is much higher than the advanced level. This shows how the intermediate students are still struggling with the choosing of the words and the precision. Taken from the example "Snow White is famous and beautiful," the struggle of this sample is like how Eva is struggling to describe the Snow White because the words "famous" and "beautiful" are adjectives that can't be used together for each other. There are gaps of grammatical error and vocabulary inside it.

In the part of Message Reduction (35%), it shows that the intermediate student often tries to simplify the message of communication because it's harder for them to think more of complex ideas. As Faerch and Kasper's stated, intermediate learners often make something simpler meaning because they are still struggling in order to communicate (Widiyarto, 2023). It is included in the communicative challenges and makes the message questionable(Widiyarto, S. 2023). Even if it reduces the meaning, it's still understandable because at certain points there is still elaboration. For example, "Like a Disney Cartoon I watched when I was little," this sample not only says "I like Disney Cartoon," but Nicky elaborates it by adding his experience inside to explain it better. Thus, to say, even in the part of fillers, they have it less than the beginner level.

4.4 Communication Strategies Used by Beginner Level

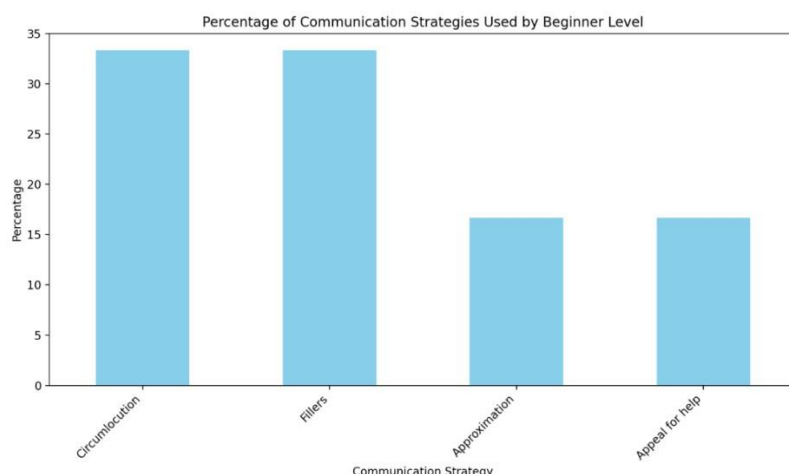


Diagram 4. Percentage of Communication Strategies Used by Beginner Level

The beginner level students in the diagram indicate the mistakes of Circumlocution and Fillers percentage 33%. This level mostly struggling to express their ideas in communication because the limit of vocabularies. As the example when the students being asked about Japanese cultural event, one of the samples said "Lumpia Semarang ...er best seller ...er snack in Ramadhan." The fillers inside and how the sample try to explain Lumpia Semarang, there is the indication of struggle inside it by Sri. The reliance of fillers showing how the pause of communication flows. The pressure for them to communicate as the part of struggle in realtime communication skill is obvious to see. (Hsieh, 2018)

Approximation and Appeal for Help (17%) indicates how the beginner-level students don't want to take a risk and are mostly going to take the help for communicating. Savignon (1972) stated the behavior of beginner-level students is lack of confidence in communicating, making the idea simpler, and being afraid, as in avoiding the conversation, because of the lack of knowledge in communication skills of language. The fillers also indicate how they are afraid of communicating at the beginner level.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that English proficiency significantly influences the communication strategies employed by senior high school students. Lower proficiency students tend to rely on simpler strategies such as fillers and message reduction to navigate communication challenges, while higher proficiency students use more advanced strategies like approximation and circumlocution. These findings suggest that educators should tailor their teaching methods to address the specific needs of students at different proficiency levels, incorporating tasks that encourage the use of more complex communication strategies. By doing so, teachers can help students improve their communicative competence, ultimately enhancing their ability to express themselves in English more effectively. Future research could explore the impact of other task types and the role of teacher feedback in strategy development.

REFERENCE

- Abdulrahahm, L., Ismail, M. A. S. (2015). The Effect of Communicative Task and Speaking Proficiency on the Choice of Communication Strategies. *International Journal of Education*, 4(4), 2278-4012.
- Alawi, R.A.A. (2016). Communication Strategies used by Omani EFL Students. *Pyrex Journal of English and Literature*, 2(1), 001-011. Retrieved from <http://www.pyrexjournals.org/pjel>.
- Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford University Press.
- Bialystok, E. (1990). *Communication strategies: A psychological analysis of second-language use*. Blackwell.
- Boonsuk, Y., & Ambele, E. A. (2021). Towards integrating Lingua franca in Thai EFL: Insights from Thai tertiary learners. *International Journal of Instruction*, 14(3), 17-38.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-47.
- Chen, J., & Cheng, H. (2021). Exploring the impact of task complexity on communication strategy use in EFL learners. *Foreign Language Annals*, 54(3), 345-362.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Scott, M. L. (1995). Communication strategies: An empirical analysis with retrospective protocols. In J. S. Kroll & A. M. B. de Groot (Eds.), *Handbook of bilingualism: Psycholinguistic approaches* (pp. 173-210). Oxford University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Scott, M. L. (1997). Communication strategies in a second language: Definitions and taxonomies. *Language Learning*, 47(1), 173-210.
- Ellis, R. (1997). *Second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Fahrinawati. (2020). The Use of Communication Strategies by the Teacher in ESP Class at University of Muhammadiyah Malang. *An-Nadhah Journal*, 13(2), 232-245.
- Faerch, C., & Kasper, G. (1983). *Strategies in interlanguage communication*. Longman.
- Farahani, A. A. K., & Azadi, S. (2021). Investigating the role of self-efficacy in Iranian EFL learners' communication strategies. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 6(1), 1-15.
- Hsieh, L. T. (2018). A study on EFL learners' communication strategies: A case of Taiwanese university students. *English Language Teaching*, 11(1), 56-66.
- Ismail, S.A.M., & Abdulrahmahn, L. (2015). The Effect of Communicative Task and Speaking Proficiency on The Choice of Communication Strategies. *International Journal of English and Education*, 4(4).
- Jones, R. W., & Davis, M. C. (2022). Effective communication as a strategic imperative in the VUCA era. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 16(1), 45-62.
- Nakatani, Y. (2017). Exploring the relationships between language anxiety and communication strategies in the Japanese EFL context. *System*, 66, 81-91.

- Oliveros, E., Brailovsky, Y., & Shah, K. S. (2019). Communication Skills: The Art of Hearing What Is Not Said. *JACC. Case Reports*, 1(3), 446–449.
- Opitasari, D. (2021). Communication Strategies Used by Indonesian Teacher Toward Thai Students in Teaching English at Chariyatham Suksa Foundation School in Thailand. Institute College for Islamic Studies Curup, Indonesia. Retrieved October 2, 2023, from <http://etheses.iaincurup.ac.id/2552/1/DOLINSI%20THESIS.pdf>
- Rofiatun, I. (2018). Communication Strategies Used By English Teacher In Teaching And Learning Process. 2nd English Language and Literature International Conference (ELLiC), 2, 166–170.
- Saring, S., & Widiyarto, S. (2023). Problematika Manajemen Kurikulum Merdeka pada Siswa Taman Kanak-Kanak. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, 7(6), 7925-7932.
- Sastrawan, A.J. (2015). Communication Strategies Used by The Teacher in English as Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in North Bali Bilingual School. (Unpublished Thesis). Ganesha University of Education, Singaraja, Indonesia.
- Savignon, S. J. (1972). Communicative competence: An experiment in foreign-language teaching. *Language Learning*, 22(2), 113–128.
- Tarone, E. (1980). Communication strategies, foreigner talk, and repair in interlanguage. *Language Learning*, 30(2), 417–431.
- Tuan, N. H., & Mai, T. N. (2015). The effectiveness of teaching communication strategies to Vietnamese EFL students. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6(1), 145–152.
- VanPatten, B., & Williams, J. (2015). *Theories in second language acquisition: An introduction*. Routledge.
- Widiyarto, S. (2023). Learning To Write Explanatory Text Using The Picture-To-Picture Method For Students Of Mts Nurul Hikmah Bekasi. *Jurnal PAJAR (Pendidikan dan Pengajaran)*, 7(2), 314-322.
- Widiyarto, S. (2023). Penyuluhan Metode Paikem Bahasa Inggris Pada Guru Tk Islam Ruhama Kota Bekasi. *Community Development Journal: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat*, 4(1), 258-262.
- Yan, H., & Li, S. (2024). *The Role of Teachers in Emotional Regulation and Student Engagement in Second Language Acquisition: A Positive Psychology Perspective on Teaching Communication Strategies*. *International Journal of New Developments in Education*, 6(6), 106-113.
- Xiao, R., Pang, C., & Liang, X. (2022). *The Effects of Task Types on Communication Strategies in SLA: Looking Back and Forward*. *International Journal of Languages, Literature, and Linguistics*, 8(4), 324-329.