



APPLYING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF MECHANICAL ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study investigated the communication strategies employed by Mechanical Engineering students in English communication and explored the reasons underlying their strategy preferences. Using a qualitative case study design, the research involved 42 Mechanical Engineering students of Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta during the 2021/2022 academic year. The primary data were obtained from recorded conversations between the students and English-speaking foreigners, while semi-structured interviews were conducted with four selected participants to identify the reasons for strategy use. The analysis was based on the communication strategies taxonomy proposed by (Dörnyei & Lee Scott, 1997). The findings revealed that *literal translation* was the most frequently used communication strategy, accounting for 73 occurrences (21%) out of 352 identified communication traits. In contrast, *word coinage*, *appeal for help*, and *clarification request* were the least frequently used strategies, each appearing only once (0.2%). Interview results indicated that the dominance of literal translation was influenced by students' limited vocabulary, insufficient grammatical knowledge, and reliance on their first language during communication. Meanwhile, the least-used strategies were associated with students' lack of confidence and limited English comprehension. The study concludes that first-language influence plays a significant role in shaping communication strategy use among Mechanical Engineering students and highlights the need for explicit instruction on communication strategies in English language learning.

Keywords: Communication strategies, English communication, EFL learners, literal translation, Mechanical Engineering students

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INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of learning English, as with learning any language, is to use it effectively for communication. However, many EFL learners encounter difficulties in oral communication because speaking requires spontaneous language production and real-time interaction. To overcome these challenges, learners need to maximize their linguistic resources, including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, while employing appropriate communication strategies to convey their intended messages effectively. According to Lestari et al. (2024), communication strategies help EFL learners manage communication breakdowns caused by limitations in communicative competence and enable meaningful interaction in online discussions.

Communication strategies refer to the techniques learners use to compensate for gaps in their language knowledge and to sustain interaction when communication problems arise (Demir et al., 2018). These strategies help learners manage breakdowns in communication and enhance the effectiveness of their spoken performance. Despite their importance, communication strategies are often not explicitly taught in speaking classes at Indonesian universities. Research has shown that strategy instruction can significantly improve learners' communicative effectiveness. For example, Fang et al. (2018) reported that students who received communication strategy training demonstrated better oral communication performance and greater confidence in using English. This finding suggests that integrating communication strategy instruction into EFL speaking courses can help learners communicate more successfully.

Numerous studies have investigated communication strategies among EFL learners (Cirit-Işıkılçıl et al., 2023; Demir et al., 2018; Panggabean et al., 2017; Sastromiharjo et al., 2025). However, most of these studies

were conducted in general EFL contexts and primarily involved English-major students. Research focusing on communication strategies in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) settings, particularly among non-English-major students, remains relatively limited. Since ESP learners are expected to use English in discipline-specific and professional contexts, communication strategies play an important role in helping them overcome communication difficulties and enhance their communicative competence. For Mechanical Engineering students, the ability to employ appropriate communication strategies is essential for effective interaction in future academic and workplace environments.

For Mechanical Engineering students, the ability to employ appropriate communication strategies is particularly important because English is frequently used in technical documentation, workplace interactions, international collaboration, and professional development. Although communication strategies have been extensively investigated among EFL learners, recent studies have mainly focused on identifying the types and frequencies of strategies used in general EFL contexts (Daflizar, 2024; Merbawani & Hartono, 2024). Research examining communication strategies among engineering students, particularly Mechanical Engineering students in ESP settings, remains scarce. Existing ESP studies in engineering education have predominantly addressed language needs, learning materials, and professional communication competencies rather than communication strategy use (Jannah, 2022; Kausar, 2025). Furthermore, while some recent studies have begun to explore factors influencing learners' strategic choices (Susilowati & Kusumaningtyas, 2025), the reasons underlying Mechanical Engineering students' preferences for specific communication strategies in ESP communication contexts remain underexplored. This gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of both the patterns of strategy use and the factors influencing their selection in ESP communication. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the communication strategies employed by Mechanical Engineering students in English communication, with particular attention to identifying the most and least frequently used strategies and exploring the reasons behind their use. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of ESP and communication strategy research by providing empirical evidence from a specific disciplinary context and offering insights that may inform the design of ESP instruction aimed at enhancing students' communicative competence in future professional settings.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the communication strategies employed by Mechanical Engineering students in English communication. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the most and least frequently used communication strategies among Mechanical Engineering students? and (2) What reasons underlie their preference for using certain communication strategies over others?

Literature review

Communication Strategies

Communication strategies are generally understood as the techniques learners use to overcome communication difficulties and maintain interaction in a second or foreign language. According to Fang et al. (2018), communication strategies involve the strategic use of linguistic and non-linguistic resources to facilitate successful communication. Similarly, Demir et al. (2018) argue that learners employ communication strategies to compensate for limited language proficiency and to convey intended meanings effectively. More recently, Wahyuni Lestari et al. (2024) emphasized that Indonesian EFL learners use communication strategies to cope with communication breakdowns caused by limitations in communicative competence, particularly in online discussions. Strategic competence enables learners to sustain meaningful interaction and achieve communicative goals.

Although communication strategies have been defined in various ways, there is still no single universally accepted definition. Consequently, several taxonomies of communication strategies have been proposed, differing mainly in terminology rather than in the underlying strategic behaviors. Recent studies classify communication strategies into categories such as avoidance, compensatory, interactional, and time-gaining strategies, all of which help learners overcome communication difficulties and maintain conversational flow (Maldonado, 2016; Zhu et al., 2025).

Among the most frequently used communication strategies by EFL learners are circumlocution and appeal for help. Circumlocution refers to describing or explaining an unfamiliar word or concept using alternative expressions, whereas appeal for help involves seeking assistance from interlocutors when linguistic resources are insufficient. Studies have shown that these strategies enable learners to negotiate meaning, compensate for vocabulary limitations, and sustain interaction effectively in oral communication.

Communication Strategies Taxonomies

Recent studies have revisited and expanded earlier communication strategy taxonomies by examining communication strategies from cognitive, interactional, and sociocultural perspectives. Rather than focusing solely

on communication breakdowns, contemporary researchers view communication strategies as goal-oriented actions that help learners maintain interaction and achieve communicative purposes. Research by Lestari et al. (2024) showed that communication strategies support learners' participation and meaning negotiation in online discussions, while Gustine et al. (2025) recently reported that EFL learners employed a range of communication strategies during Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) activities, which supported intercultural interaction and improved their ability to communicate effectively with peers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Likewise, Adrian (2023) emphasized that communication strategies facilitate effective communication despite linguistic limitations, and furthermore, Chang and Liu (2016) reconceptualized communication strategies from a problem-oriented framework to a goal-oriented one. They argued that learners use strategies not merely to overcome linguistic difficulties but also to mediate communication and accomplish intended interactional outcomes. This perspective strongly supports the notion that communication strategies are integral components of purposeful communication. Similarly, Yang et al. (2022) described communication strategies as conscious techniques employed by language learners to overcome communication difficulties and sustain meaningful interaction. More recently, Su (2025) emphasized that communication strategy use is influenced by learners' proficiency, affective factors, cultural backgrounds, and technological learning environments. These studies suggest that communication strategies involve varying degrees of awareness and strategic decision-making depending on the communicative context and learners' objectives.

However, Bialystok's view that communication strategies are not necessarily conscious acts remains relevant in contemporary Indonesian EFL research. Recent studies have shown that Indonesian EFL learners frequently employ communication strategies automatically while attempting to maintain interaction and overcome linguistic difficulties. The use of strategies such as fillers, self-repair, repetition, and appeals for help often occurs spontaneously during communication, indicating that communication strategies are closely related to learners' communicative competence and language proficiency rather than solely to conscious planning. Studies by Yonata et al. (2019) found that fillers, repetition, appeals for help, and self-repair were among the most frequently used strategies in casual conversations among Indonesian EFL learners. Similarly, Susilowati and Kusumaningtyas (2025) reported that fillers, hesitation devices, self-repetition, and self-monitoring strategies were commonly employed to maintain communication and negotiate meaning during spontaneous interaction. Furthermore, the cognitive perspective proposed by the Nijmegen Group continues to receive support from studies in Indonesian EFL contexts. Research has revealed that learners' strategic choices are influenced by cognitive processes, confidence, interactional demands, and language proficiency, particularly when they negotiate meaning in authentic communication situations (Lestari et al., 2024). Communication strategies are therefore increasingly regarded as manifestations of strategic competence that enable learners to compensate for linguistic limitations and achieve successful communication. Contemporary Indonesian studies thus reinforce the argument that communication strategies involve both psycholinguistic processes and strategic competence, helping learners convey intended meanings effectively when communicative difficulties arise.

In this study, the writer applied communication strategies taxonomies proposed by Dörnyei and Lee Scott (1997) which have been using mostly by previous research studies as in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Communication Strategies Taxonomy of (Dörnyei & Lee Scott, 1997)

Strategy
1. Avoidance strategies
1.1 Topic avoidance (TA) : to avoid talking about a concept
1.2 Message abandonment (MA): To stop in mid utterances
2. Compensatory strategies
2.1 <i>Intra-actional strategies</i>
2.1.1 Word coinage (WC): To make up a non-existing new word to communicate
2.1.2 Code-switching (CS): To switch the language to L1 without bothering to translate
2.1.3 Foreignizing (For): To adjust L1 to L2
2.1.4 Use non-linguistic means (Uon): To replace a word with non-verbal cues
2.1.5 Self repair (SR): To make a self-correction of one's own speech
2.1.6 Mumbling (Mum): To mumble with inaudible voice
2.1.7 Use of all-purpose words (UA): To extend a general, empty item to the exact word
2.1.8 Approximation (App): To substitute the L2 term with the item which shares the same meaning
2.1.9 Circumlocution (Cir): To describe the properties of the instead of the exact target item
2.1.10 Literal translation (LT): To translate word from L1 to L2
2.1.11 Use of fillers/hesitation devices (UF): To use filling words to gain time to think
2.1.12 Self-repetition (Sr): To repeat words or phrases of one's own speech
2.1.13 Other-repetition (OR): To repeat something the interlocutor said to gain time

2.1.14	Omission (Omi): To leave a gap when not knowing a word or continue as tis was understandable
2.2 <i>Interactional strategies</i>	
2.2.1	Asking for repetition (AR): To ask for repetition when having comprehension
2.2.2	Appeal for help (AH): To request direct or indirect help from the interlocutor
2.2.3	Clarification request (CR): To request for more explanation to solve a comprehension difficulty
2.2.4	Asking for confirmation (AC): To request confirmation that something is understood correctly
2.2.5	Comprehension check (CC): To ask questions to check interlocutor's understanding
2.2.6	Expressing non-understanding (EN): To show one's own inability to understand messages

Even though these communication strategies taxonomies seem to be commonly applied by prior studies, it does not mean that other taxonomies of other scholars are not representative. The taxonomies have their own merits and demerits, it depends on the researchers themselves to select appropriate taxonomies according to the purposes of their research.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research work applied qualitative methods with case study design. According to Busetto et al. (2020), qualitative research commonly presents data in terms of words instead of numbers, and Clark et al. (2023) defined case study research as a predominantly qualitative approach aimed at developing an in-depth understanding of one or more bounded cases. They explain that case studies are particularly suitable for examining phenomena such as activities, programs, events, or processes within their real-life contexts. This research was aimed to shed light on the use of strategies by non-English major students in their English communication. There were 42 Mechanical Engineering students of Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, involved in this study held in the odd semester, academic year of 2021/2022.

In conducting the research, the writer, as English lecturer of the students, assigned them to practice their speaking skill with English speaking foreigners. They were free to talk about anything in a 3-5 minutes setting and required to record the dialogue in order to be analyzed by the writer, hence the main data of this research were students' conversation. In order to fulfill the first research focus, communication strategies of Dörnyei and Lee Scott (1997) were used. Additionally, In conducting this study, the researcher, who was also the students' English lecturer, asked 42 Mechanical Engineering students to practice speaking English with native or proficient English-speaking foreigners. The students were free to discuss any topic during a 3–5-minute conversation, and each interaction was recorded. These recordings served as the main source of data for identifying the communication strategies used by the students. To answer the first research question, the communication strategy taxonomy developed by Dörnyei and Scott (1997) was used as the analytical framework.

To explore the second research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted after the analysis of the recorded conversations. Four students were purposively selected to participate in the interviews based on the variety and frequency of communication strategies they demonstrated in their conversations. The interview data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the reasons behind their strategy use. To strengthen the findings, methodological triangulation was applied by combining evidence from the recorded conversations and the interview data. Each dataset was first analyzed separately, and the results were then compared to identify similarities and differences across the two sources. In addition, member checking was carried out by sharing summaries of the interview findings with the participants to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected their views and experiences. These procedures helped enhance the credibility and dependability of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis of this research was presented in percentages. Based on the analysis of students' communication from the recordings, it was found that most of the students applied the strategy of 'literal translation' (LT) in which out of 352 conversation traits, this strategy was used 73 times (21%). This finding was in line with Nurwahyuningsih et al. (2019) in which they also reported that one of the most frequently used strategies by ELT students was 'literal translation'. Likewise, Aziz et al. (2018) reported that learners frequently relied on literal translation to overcome limitations in vocabulary and grammar during oral communication. Meanwhile, there were three strategies least used by the students, namely: 'word coinage' (WC), 'appeal for help'

(AH), and ‘clarification request’ (CR) in which each of those three was only used once by the students (or, 0.2%). The following Figure 1 figures out the overall results of 352 traits found in the communication of the students.

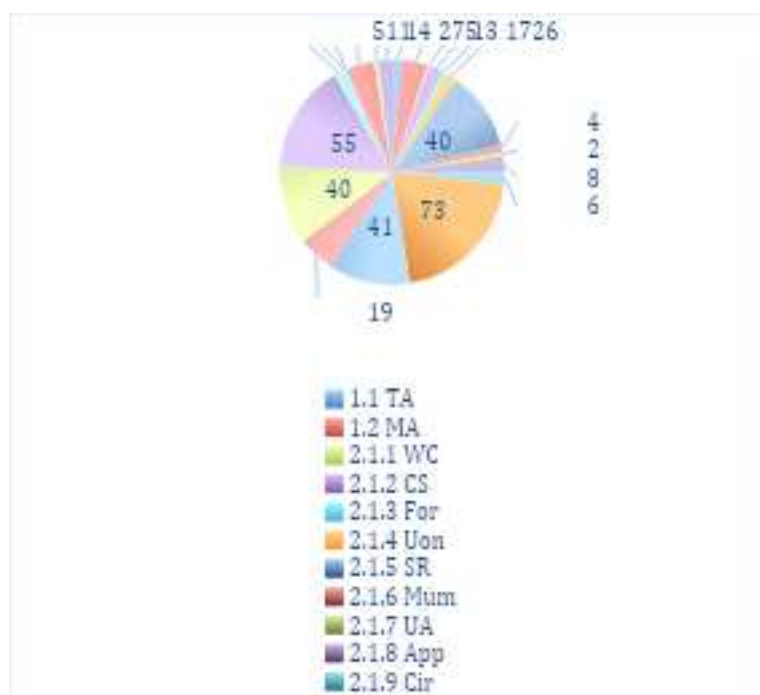


Figure 1. Communication strategies used by the students

Based on the interview, there were three reasons reported by the students of why they preferred to use ‘literal translation’ (LT). These three reasons were put under the theme of ‘the influence of L1 into English speaking’. It was found that the students gave the reasons as: 1) Limited vocabulary of English, then translating Indonesian words to English was the simplest strategy to use; 2) Lack of English grammar, then directly translated Indonesian sentence into English was the quickest strategy to use; 3) Using English means translating Indonesian utterances and expressions into English, thus, literal translation was the most appropriate strategy to use. From these findings, it can be deduced that in spoken language, the students do not really concern themselves with English grammar or structures. They thought that translating Indonesian words and or sentences into English appeared to be the best strategy to support their communication. As one of the excerpts taken from the communication of one male student who was saying: “*What do you think about here?*” to refer to “*Apa menurut anda tentang tempat ini?*”. Grammatically, the English sentence should be: “*What do you think about this place?*”. Interestingly, from the dialogue, the speaking partner of this student, i.e., the English-speaking foreigner, understood the message that this student would like to convey, since the person directly responded the question by saying: “*Well, this is the second time for me to come to Jakarta, and I think, Kota Tua is one of favorite places to visit. I love the view.*” Although this often resulted in grammatically inaccurate utterances, communication was generally successful because the interlocutors could still understand the intended meaning from the context. This supports the idea that successful communication is not always dependent on perfect grammar but on whether the message can be effectively conveyed and understood.

In terms of the least strategies used by the students; ‘word coinage’ (WC), ‘appeal for help’ (AH), and ‘clarification request’ (CR), the results of the interview also revealed three reasons expressed by the students under the theme of: “Lack of English comprehension”, as follows: 1) Lack of English words, hence it distracted the confidence to make-up new English words; 2) Asking for help was not become the choice since the students were afraid that their speaking partner would notice their weakness of comprehending English; 3) The preference of the students to pretend that they understood the message conveyed by their speaking partner than asking for the clarification. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that anxiety and low self-confidence often discourage learners from using strategies that involve direct negotiation of meaning. Mursyid (2021), for example, found that lack of vocabulary, anxiety, and low confidence significantly influenced learners’ communication strategy choices. Similarly, Nurdini (2019) reported that students’ self-esteem affected their willingness to seek assistance during communication. From these reasons, it can be said that due to their lack of English comprehension, the students were trying to use the strategies that would ‘save’ them in coping with English

speaking problems than the ones that would ‘trap’ their English comprehension weaknesses.

What communication strategies were most and least frequently used by Mechanical Engineering students in English communication?

The aim of this question is to find out the most and least used communication strategies by Mechanical Engineering students in their English communication. The researchers made the analysis on the recording of the students’ conversations using Dörnyei & Lee Scott (1997) classification of communication strategies. The results showed that the most frequently used strategy was literal translation (21%) and the least frequently used strategies were word coinage, appeal for help and clarification request (0.2%) . This question helps to understand the patterns of students’ use of communication strategies in real life communication situations.

Why did the students prefer to use literal translation and avoid using word coinage, appeal for help, and clarification requests in English communication?

This question is intended to explore the reasons behind the students’ choice of communication strategies. The semi-structured interview revealed that the use of literal translation is affected by the limited English vocabulary and grammar and the habit of translating directly from Indonesian to English. Compared to other strategies, students rarely use strategies such as word coinage, appeals for help and clarification requests. Students lack confidence, are afraid of exposing their weaknesses in English and prefer to pretend to understand the conversation rather than ask for help or clarification. This question enables us to have a better understanding of the factors that influence the communication behaviour of students in English.

The findings showed that the most used communication strategy in communicating in English among Mechanical Engineering students was literal translation. When students had limited English proficiency, they would often translate a word, phrase or sentence structure directly from their first language to English to continue the conversation. The least used strategies were the new words, appeal for help and clarification requests. These strategies were less common, as they require more interactional confidence and communicative competence than direct translation. The preferred strategy was the literal translation because it was the easiest and the most immediate one to overcome the vocabulary limitations. Meanwhile, the students had the same first language background, thus they could deliver their intended meaning without interrupting the communication by translating directly from Indonesian. Moreover, literal translation was useful for the students to maintain fluency and reduce the anxiety in speaking in English.

On the other hand, word coinage was not frequently used by students. The creation of new words in English demands linguistic creativity and confidence in English morphology which many learners may lack. Students did not often appeal for help as they might be ashamed or unwilling to let others know about their language difficulties. Just as rarely did students ask for clarification, perhaps because they were more interested in keeping the conversation going than in seeking further explanation, perhaps due to lack of confidence or fear of making mistakes. Literal translation was the easiest and most comfortable communication strategy to ensure interaction in English.

CONCLUSION

Communication strategies were used by EFL learners when they face problems during their English-speaking conversation in order to reach the communicative goals. In this research, students’ communication strategies were analyzed by using communication strategies taxonomies of Dörnyei & Lee Scott (1997), T‘literal translation’ (LT) appeared to be the most strategy used by the students with 73 traits or 21%. Meanwhile, three strategies, i.e., ‘word coinage’ (WC), ‘appeal for help’ (AH), and ‘clarification request’ (CR) were found to be the least used strategies in which each of them was only found in one trait or 0.2%. The interview results revealed that the students mostly used ‘literal translation’ (LT) due to the influence of their L1, in this case Indonesian language, towards their English. The students explained that their lack of English comprehension became the reason for them to avoid using ‘word coinage’ (WC), ‘appeal for help’ (AHA), and ‘clarification request’ (CR).

As this research study has limitations in terms of the variables, it recommends other researchers interested to do similar research to expand the variables, such as measuring communication strategies from gender, comparing one major with the other, or firstly classifying the students based on their English proficiency levels. The discussion might give different perspectives especially in terms of students’ prior knowledge of English in which those who are proficient might apply different communication strategies compared to the ones who are low proficient.

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