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Teaching for Tests, Failure for Communication: A Study of Strategic Competence in Iranian ESP Classrooms

Faranak Nabi
Ph.D. Candidate of TEFL, Ah. C. Islamic Azad University, Ahar, Iran

Mohammad Reza Khodadust*
Assistant Professor of TEFL, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran

Nader Asadi Aidinlou
Assistant Professor of TEFL, Ah. C. Islamic Azad University, Ahar, Iran

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigated the communicative competence and communicative strategies employed by Iranian English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students and teachers, a context where curricula often prioritize linguistic knowledge over interactive proficiency. Data were collected from 150 Master of Arts (MA) engineering students and ten ESP instructors using a communicative competence questionnaire and audio-recorded classroom observations. The observations were transcribed and coded using an established taxonomy of communicative strategies, which demonstrated high inter-rater reliability. The results revealed a difference wherein students reported strong self-perceived interpersonal skills but exhibited significant difficulties in conversational smoothness and comfort. Analysis of classroom interactions showed that students relied predominantly on compensatory strategies, with a heavy use of code-switching, while teachers primarily used stalling strategies. A significant difference was found in the strategic patterns between the two groups, and more complex strategies like circumlocution were absent among the students. The findings point to a critical misalignment between students' sociocultural confidence and their strategic repertoire, underscoring a systemic neglect of oral proficiency and strategy training. The study concludes that a curricular shift toward explicit strategy instruction and authentic communicative practice is urgently needed in Iranian ESP education.

***Keywords*:** Communicative Competence, Communicative Strategies, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), ESP courses

***Corresponding author's email**: m.khodadoost@cfu.ac.ir

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized professional landscape, communicative competence in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is not a luxury but a necessity for non-native speakers to integrate into international discourse communities (Chan, 2018; Faucette, 2001). While the concept of communicative competence has been explored since the late 1980s, research within ESP contexts often remains skewed towards linguistic knowledge (grammar, lexis) rather than the development of interactive, strategic proficiency required for real-world professional interaction (Dos Santos, 2020). Prior research in Iran has highlighted sociocultural deficiencies and called for strategy instruction (Eslami & Eslami-Rasekh, 2008; Maleki, 2007). Consequently, ESP students frequently graduate with a mastery of technical vocabulary but are ill-equipped for the spontaneous, meaningful dialogue demanded in international settings, a disconnect they themselves attribute to an overemphasis on language usage over language use (Saptiany & Prabowo, 2024).

This pedagogical orientation reflects a fundamental oversight of strategic competence the crucial 'repair mechanism' that allows learners to maintain interaction despite linguistic limitations. Without this competence, even learners with strong grammatical knowledge remain ill-equipped to navigate the inevitable gaps in real-time professional dialogue (Canale & Swain, 1980). Therefore, investigating strategic competence, operationalized through the use of Communication Strategies (CSs), is not merely an exploration of learner tactics but a direct test of a foundational pillar of communicative language ability in a context where it is systemically neglected.

Empirically, studies across various EFL contexts confirm that learners heavily rely on compensatory strategies like code-switching, especially at lower proficiency levels (Ayuningtyas & Yufrizal, 2016; Hua, Mohd Nor, & Jaradat, 2012). However, a significant and persistent limitation in the literature, particularly within the Iranian ESP domain, is the lack of

comparative, mixed-methods research that simultaneously captures both teacher and learner strategic behavior within the same instructional ecosystem. Existing studies tend to focus either on learner strategies (e.g., Moattarian & Tahririan, 2013) or, less commonly, on teacher strategies (Notash & Karafkan, 2015), treating them in isolation. This fragmented approach overlooks the dynamic classroom interplay where teachers' strategic modeling (or lack thereof) directly influences students' strategic repertoire.

Furthermore, while students' self-perceptions of their communicative competence are a key predictor of their willingness to engage, these perceptions are rarely juxtaposed with objective evidence of their actual strategic performance. This creates a blind spot: We do not know if students who feel confident in their interpersonal skills possess the strategic tools to act on that confidence in L2 communication. Prior research in Iran has highlighted sociocultural deficiencies (Eslami & Eslami-Rasekh, 2008) and called for strategy instruction (Maleki, 2007), but none has systematically documented the specific strategic misalignment between teachers and students that may perpetuate the cycle of communicative under-preparation.

Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by introducing a novel diagnostic approach: a comparative, mixed-methods analysis that juxtaposes teacher and student strategic behavior within the same instructional ecosystem and links it to learner self-perception. This approach moves beyond cataloging isolated strategies to diagnose the systemic pedagogical misalignments that perpetuate strategic incompetence. The findings are intended to provide more than a local profile; they offer a transferable framework for understanding how educational cultures that prioritize linguistic knowledge over communicative use can systematically undermine a core component of professional preparedness, with direct implications for curriculum and teacher development policy in similar contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English for Specific Purposes: A Shift from Language Forms to Communicative Needs

ESP is fundamentally distinguished from general English by its principled emphasis on learner-specific needs, making it a needs-based and learner-centered approach (Richards & Schmidt, 2013). It is characterized as purposeful language training designed for specific occupational or educational roles, a process that is grounded in thorough needs analysis and customized program design (Huhta et al., 2013). Moving beyond the mere mastery of language forms, ESP serves as a means for learners to engage with particular discourse communities, emphasizing authentic communication and purposeful social interaction within professional and academic contexts (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

The evolution of ESP as a teaching discipline reflects a significant shift from a narrow focus on language forms to a broader, more communicative paradigm. Early phases were dominated by register analysis, which concentrated on the sentence-level lexical and grammatical features of scientific and technical texts (e.g., Swales, 1995). This was followed by a shift toward rhetoric and discourse, which sought to understand how grammatical forms, such as the passive voice, served specific rhetorical functions within a field (Tarone, 1980). A pivotal development occurred with the advent of a learning-centered approach, championed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), who argued that effective ESP must consider not only the target situation but also the learner's cognitive processes, prior knowledge, and engagement in the learning process. This marked a definitive move towards a more holistic, communicative, and learner-centered philosophy.

This pedagogical evolution is complemented by a linguistic perspective that examines the nature of specialized language itself. As Matsumoto, 2019 notes, ESP can be viewed both as a teaching domain and as a subset of language characterized by its unique terminology and discourse conventions.

In contemporary scholarship, this is often discussed in terms of "academic and professional languages," a concept highlighting the specialized communication used by specific knowledge communities (e.g., lawyers, engineers) who share common genres, terminologies, and values to facilitate interaction within their fields (Motos, 2011).

Theoretical Framework: Communicative Competence and Strategic Performance

The theoretical underpinning of this study is the model of communicative competence established by Canale and Swain, 1980 and later refined by Canale, 2014. This model posits that effective communication requires the integration of four interrelated competences: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. While grammatical competence (knowledge of rules) has traditionally been the focus of exam-oriented systems like Iran's, the model argues that strategic competence is the enabling factor that allows the other competences to function under pressure (Dörnyei, 1995). It is the capacity to keep communication channels open, making it the most immediately visible indicator of a learner's ability to *use* language for communication, not just *demonstrate* knowledge about it.

This study positions strategic competence as the primary lens for analysis because it directly reveals the improvisational skill learners lack. To systematically analyze this competence, we employ Dörnyei's (1995) taxonomy of CSs (see Table 1). This framework is particularly apt as it was developed with pedagogical teachability in mind, aligning with our ultimate goal of informing instruction. It moves beyond mere description (e.g., Tarone, 1980) to categorize strategies (Avoidance, Compensatory, Stalling) in a way that allows for clear diagnosis of learner needs and pedagogical gaps.

A foundational model for deconstructing this complex construct was established by Canale and Swain (1980), who identified four interdependent competencies, as showed in Figure 1.

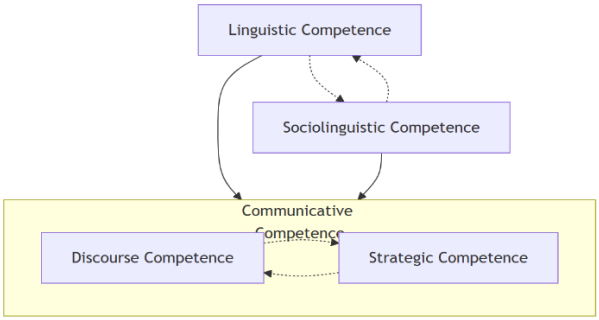

Figure 1. *Sub-categories of communicative competence*

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model that illustrates Communicative Competence as an integrated system. The model positions Linguistic Competence (grammatical accuracy) and Sociolinguistic Competence (contextual appropriateness) as the foundational pillars that enable Communicative Competence. Within this framework, Discourse Competence (coherence and cohesion) and Strategic Competence (problem-solving) are shown as core, interacting components, highlighted by a bidirectional arrow that signifies their dynamic interplay during communication. The model visually emphasizes that effective communication arises from the synergy of all these elements. Grammatical competence entails mastery of the language's code its phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Sociolinguistic competence involves the ability to produce and understand utterances that are not only grammatically correct but also socially appropriate, considering factors such as participant relationships and context (YAGCI, 2015). Discourse competence refers to the capacity to construct coherent and cohesive spoken and written texts, managing elements like turn-taking and rhetorical structure (Schmitt, 2005). Finally, strategic competence comprises the verbal and non-verbal strategies used to compensate for breakdowns in communication caused by limited linguistic knowledge or performance issues.

The dynamic interplay between these components is critical. As visualized in Figure 2, they do not operate in isolation but function as an integrated system during communication.

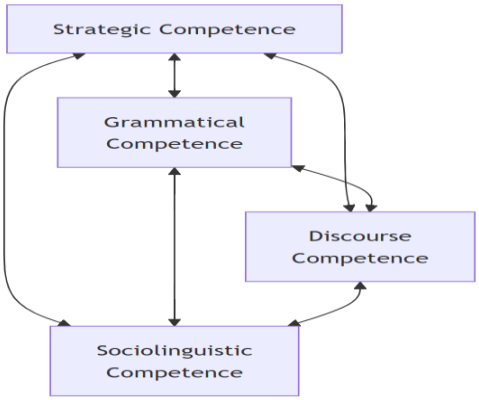

Figure 2. *Relationship in the aspects of communicative competence*

Figure 2 demonstrates how strategic competence (the focus of this study) serves as a crucial support mechanism, interacting with and enabling the application of grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies in real-time interaction. This model emphasizes a hierarchy and foundation. Grammatical competence forms the essential base. Discourse and Sociolinguistic competencies build upon it to create meaningful, appropriate communication. Strategic competence is not just another layer, but the flexible 'scaffolding' that surrounds and supports the entire structure, especially when the core components are unstable. This model underscores that a deficit in one area can be mitigated by the strategic application of another, a key concept for interpreting the communication patterns observed in the ESP classroom.

This comprehensive view of competence inherently incorporates pragmatic awareness language use in context and, given the demands of global interaction, intercultural communicative competence, which is the

ability to communicate effectively and sensitively across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997; Kurteš, Larina, & Ozyumenko, 2017).

It is the component of strategic competence that forms the direct analytical focus of this investigation. When learners encounter linguistic obstacles, they deploy CSs to overcome them. To systematically identify and categorize these strategies, this study employs Dörnyei's (1995) taxonomy. This framework, detailed in Table 1, organizes CSs into three primary categories: Avoidance or Reduction Strategies, Achievement or Compensatory Strategies, and Stalling for Time-gaining Strategies. This taxonomy offers a clear and operationalizable tool for analyzing the communicative behaviors of both teachers and students in the ESP classroom.

Table 1. Dörnyei's (1995) Taxonomy of CSs

Category	*Sub-category*	*Definition*	*Example*
Avoidance or Reduction	**Message Abandonment**	Leaving a message unfinished due to language difficulties.	*The function is to... never mind.*
	Topic Avoidance	Avoiding topics or concepts one lacks the vocabulary for.	*(Not observed in this study)*
Achievement or Compensatory	**Circumlocution**	Describing or exemplifying the target object or action.	*It's a tool you use to turn bolts" (for wrench).*
	Approximation	Using a similar-meaning or alternative term.	*ship for sailboat*
	Use of All-Purpose words	Using a general word to replace a more precise one.	*Thing for stuff*
	Word Coinage	Creating a non-existent L2 word.	*vegetarianist*
	Use of Non-linguistic Means	Using mime, gesture, or sound effects.	*(Not observed in this study)*
	Literal Translation	Translating word-for-word from the L1.	*(Not observed in this study)*
	Foreignizing	Using an L1 word but adjusting it to sound L2-like.	*(Not observed in this study)*
	Code-Switching	Using an L1 word or phrase in an L2 utterance.	*"We need the میخ.. the nail."*
	Appeal for Help	Asking for the correct term or structure.	*What is the word for...?*
Stalling for Time-gaining	**Use of Fillers**	Using hesitation devices to pause and maintain the floor.	*Well..., Actually..., Let me see...*

Note: The taxonomy is adapted from Dörnyei (1995). *Strategies in **bold** were those predominantly observed in the current study. L1 stands for first language.*

This taxonomy served as the primary analytical lens for the current study. The communicative strategies documented in Table 1 were used to code and quantify the interactions of both ESP teachers and students during classroom observations. The specific strategies that were predominantly observed, namely code-switching, appeal for help, and the use of fillers, are indicated in bold. This operationalization of Dörnyei's framework allows for a systematic comparison of strategic behavior between the two groups, directly addressing the second and third research questions.

Empirical Studies

Empirical research on CSs reveals that their use is highly sensitive to contextual factors such as proficiency level, task type, and sociocultural environment. A consistent international finding is the prominence of compensatory strategies, particularly code-switching, in oral communication tasks among EFL learners, especially at lower proficiency levels (Ayuningtyas & Yufrizal, 2016; Tarone, 1980). This trend is mirrored in the Iranian context, where studies confirm the influence of proficiency and task modality on CS deployment (Moattarian & Tahririan, 2013; Yarmohammadi & Seif, 1992).

However, a critical analysis of this corpus reveals two persistent limitations that constrain our understanding of strategic competence development in classroom settings, particularly for ESP. First, there is a methodological fragmentation**.** Studies predominantly focus on *either* learner strategies (e.g., Moattarian & Tahririan, 2013*) or*, less frequently, teacher strategies (Notash & Karafkan, 2015), treating these agents in isolation. This approach overlooks the dynamic interplay of the classroom, where a teacher's strategic modeling (or lack thereof) implicitly sets norms and directly influences the strategic repertoire students deem acceptable or effective. Second, and relatedly, there is a conceptual disconnect**.**

While Iranian research has effectively documented *what* strategies learners use and advocated for their teachability (Maleki, 2007; Nakatani,

Makki, Bradley, & Atai, 2012), it has seldom empirically linked these observed behaviors to learners' self-perceptions of their communicative competence. This creates a blind spot: we do not know if students who feel interpersonally confident possess, or are aware of, the strategic tools to act on that confidence in L2 communication.

Consequently, prior research offers a snapshot of strategic behavior but fails to provide a holistic diagnostic of the communicative *ecosystem*. It cannot explain how teacher practice and learner perception might jointly perpetuate a cycle of strategic poverty. Therefore, moving beyond descriptive accounts of isolated strategy use, this study argues that a comparative, mixed-methods investigation, juxtaposing teacher and student strategies within the same instructional space and linking them to student self-perceptions, is necessary to uncover the systemic pedagogical disconnects that hinder strategic competence in Iranian ESP.

As already noted, there is a dearth of mixed-methods research in Iranian ESP that integrates learner self-assessment with observational analysis of strategic behavior. More critically, no study has yet undertaken a systematic, comparative analysis of the CSs used by both teachers and learners within the same Iranian ESP classroom environment. This comparative lens is vital because the classroom is a co-constructed communicative space. Teacher awareness and modeling of CSs are often inconsistent and ad-hoc (Nakatani et al., 2012), yet their strategic choices set the implicit norms for interaction. Understanding the strategic profile of only one group provides an incomplete picture. Without comparing teachers and students, we cannot identify where pedagogical modeling fails to address learner needs or where students' strategic deficits mirror the limited repertoire demonstrated by their instructors. This gap is compounded by a general underrepresentation of studies that link sociocultural confidence (a perceived strength) with strategic competence (an often-unobserved weakness), a linkage that is crucial for designing effective interventions.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To address the critical gaps identified in the literature, this study employs a comparative, mixed-methods design to provide a holistic diagnosis of strategic competence in Iranian ESP classrooms. It moves beyond isolated descriptions by simultaneously investigating (1) students' self-perceived communicative competence and (2) the CSs empirically used by both teachers and students within the same instructional environment. By integrating perceptual data with observed behavior across both key participant groups, the study aims to uncover potential misalignments that reveal systemic weaknesses in current pedagogy. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

(1) How do Iranian master-level ESP students perceive their communicative competence across various dimensions and what specific areas of strength or weakness can be identified?
(2) What communicative strategies are commonly employed by Iranian ESP university teachers and ESP students based on Dornyei's Taxonomy?
(3) Are there any significant differences in the utilization of Dornyei's communicative strategies between ESP university teachers and students in Iranian contexts?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 160 participants were involved in this study. The student population consisted of 150 Iranian Master of Arts (MA) students (male and female) majoring in Mechanical and Computer Engineering from various universities in East Azerbaijan province. This regional focus allowed for the examination of a specific, homogeneous educational context within Iran's national system. A combination of convenience and purposive sampling was used to

select this sample. Convenience sampling was pragmatically necessary to gain access to intact ESP classrooms. Purposive sampling ensured the participants were information-rich cases, specifically targeting MA students in technical fields where ESP is a compulsory requirement, thus representing a key population facing the transition from academic to professional English use.

While a formal proficiency test was not administered, the study established a functional baseline for linguistic readiness. All students had successfully passed a university-level general English requirement, which typically involves coursework and exams aligned with intermediate-level objectives, thereby placing them at an approximate B1 level on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This was deemed a valid proxy for a standardized test as it reflects the institutional reality and the uniform entry point for the ESP program. This operational definition of proficiency, while not derived from a standardized test, is consistent with the institutional reality of the context and reflects the level at which students enter their discipline-specific ESP programs.

Their ages ranged from 27 to 38 years. The sample sizes were determined to ensure sufficient data for robust quantitative analysis (150 students) and to capture a representative range of instructor practices across key disciplines (ten teachers). The sample of 150 students provided a substantial dataset for reliable quantitative analysis of questionnaire responses and strategy frequencies. The inclusion of ten instructors, each observed across three sessions, ensured a representative sample of teaching practices and sufficient observational data to identify patterns in teacher strategy use.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Group	N.	Field of Study	Age Range	Sampling Method
ESP Students	150	Mechanical & Computer Engineering	27-38	Convenience & Purposive
ESP Teachers	10	Engineering, Mathematics, Law	33-47	Random Selection

In addition, ten ESP teachers were randomly selected from the professors of

Tabriz Azad University to obtain a representative sample of instructors from the faculty pool, minimizing selection bias. These instructors, aged between 33 and 47, taught a range of disciplines, including Engineering, Mathematics, and Law. The participating teachers were responsible for teaching ESP courses that focused on the reading and translation of technical texts, a common curriculum model in the Iranian context, with minimal dedicated oral communication practice. The same 150 students and 10 teachers who participated in the classroom observations also completed the communicative competence questionnaire. The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 2.

Instrumentation

Communicative Competence Questionnaire

The researcher used the Communicative Competence Scale developed by Wiemann (1977) to gather data on students' self-perceptions. This questionnaire contains 36 Likert-type items designed to assess various dimensions of interpersonal communicative competence. Despite its development date, the Wiemann (1977) scale remains a robust and widely cited measure in cross-cultural communication studies, and demonstrated high internal consistency in this sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). The validity of the instrument was confirmed by a panel of three ESP experts from Tabriz Azad University.

Classroom Observation

To investigate the use of communicative strategies, 30 classroom sessions (three sessions per instructor) were audio-recorded using a mini-sized voice recorder. The recordings captured whole-class interactions between the ten ESP teachers and their 150 students. The researcher also acted as a non-participant observer, taking field notes to supplement the audio data. The recorded interactions were later transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were analyzed and coded based on Dörnyei's (1995) taxonomy of communicative strategies (see Table 1 for the complete coding framework).

It is important to clarify that this study did not employ evaluative rubrics. Instead, perceptual data were gathered using the validated Wiemann (1977) scale, and observed communicative behaviors were analyzed using Dörnyei's (1995) taxonomy as a descriptive and analytical coding framework.

Data Collection Procedure

The study employed a mixed-methods data collection procedure. Data collection took place over one academic semester. First, the ten ESP teachers were observed and recorded during their regular teaching sessions. Recordings focused on teacher-led classroom discourse, including lectures, question-and-answer sessions, and discussions of technical texts, as these constituted the primary mode of interaction in the observed ESP courses. The audio recordings from these 30 sessions were transcribed. To ensure coding reliability, the transcriptions were analyzed by two raters: the researcher and an English language expert. Inter-rater reliability, calculated using Cohen's Kappa, was high (Kappa = 0.887, $p < 0.001$). Intra-rater reliability was also assessed, showing a very high agreement rate (Kappa = 0.966, $p < 0.001$). Any initial discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion between the raters until full consensus was reached. Following the observations, the Communicative Competence Questionnaire was distributed to the 150 ESP students in a separate session and collected for analysis.

Data Analysis

Following the identification and transcription of the data, raw frequencies and percentages of communicative strategies were calculated. The analysis procedure employed to analyze the obtained data in the present study was the Chi-Square test, relying on observed frequencies. This nonparametric statistic is used with frequency data to test the relationship between variables (Hall, 2010; Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). Specifically, Chi-Square was used for Research Question 3, and descriptive statistics was used for Research Questions 1 and 2.

RESULTS

Students' Perceptions of Communicative Competence (RQ1)

Analysis of the Communicative Competence Questionnaire (see Appendix A for full data) revealed a distinct pattern of self-perception among ESP students. Students reported high confidence in their interpersonal and empathetic skills, with over 90% agreeing or strongly agreeing with items such as 'I do not make unusual demands on my friends' (Item 18) and 'I enjoy social gatherings' (Item 26). Conversely, significant weaknesses were apparent in conversational fluency and comfort. Notably, only 47.2% agreed their 'conversation behavior is smooth' (Item 11), and a combined 36.1% reported not feeling 'relaxed and comfortable when speaking' (Item 16).

Communicative Strategies Used by Students and Teachers (RQ2)

The analysis of classroom observations identified the frequency and types of communicative strategies (CSs) used by both students and teachers, based on Dörnyei's (1995) taxonomy.

ESP Students: As shown in Table 3, ESP students employed 775 CS instances. Compensatory strategies were the most frequently used category (53.2%), followed by avoidance strategies (26.5%) and stalling strategies (20.3%).

Table 3. Distributions of CSs by ESP Learners

Communicative strategy	***Frequency***	***Percentage (%)***
Avoidance CS	205	26.5%
Compensatory CS	412	53.2%
Stalling CS	158	20.3%
Total	775	100%

A detailed breakdown in Table 4 shows that code-switching alone accounted for the vast majority of student strategies (402 instances, 51.8%). This was often observed when students encountered specialized vocabulary, for

example: "We need the میخ... the nail." Message abandonment (e.g., a student beginning "The function is to..." and then stopping with "never mind") was the second most common strategy (205 instances, 26.5%), while the use of fillers (e.g., "Um.....I'm not sure") represented 20.3% of the total. Notably, strategies such as circumlocution, approximation, and word coinage were entirely absent from the student data.

Table 4. Distributions of CSs' Sub-categories by ESP Students

Communicative Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Avoidance or Reduction Strategies		
Message abandonment	205	26.5%
Topic avoidance	0	0
Achievement or Compensatory Strategies		
Circumlocution	0	0
Approximation	0	0
Use of all-purpose words	0	0
Word coinage	0	0
Non-linguistic means	0	0
Foreignizing	0	0
Code switching	402	51.8%
Appeal for help	10	1.4%
Literal translation	0	0
Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies		
Use of fillers	158	20.3%
Total	775	100%

Note. Only utilized sub-strategies are listed for clarity.

***ESP Teachers*:** In contrast, the 10 ESP teachers used a total of 212 instances of CSs, with a very different distribution (Table 5). Stalling strategies, specifically the use of fillers, were dominant (134 instances, 63.2%). Compensatory strategies were the second most common (26.4%), followed by avoidance strategies (10.4%).

Table 5. Distributions of CSs by ESP Teachers

Communicative strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Avoidance CS	22	10.4%
Compensatory CS	56	26.4%
Stalling CS	134	63.2%
Total	212	100%

As detailed in Table 6, teachers' use of fillers (e.g., "Well...," "Actually...") was their primary strategy. Unlike students, teachers were also observed using a wider, though still limited, range of compensatory strategies, including code-switching (17.5%), appeal for help (6.6%), and circumlocution (2.3%). An example of teacher circumlocution was observed when a professor described a term: 'It's the set of rules that define the structure of a language,'" instead of using the word 'syntax.'

Table 6. Distributions of CSs' Sub-categories by ESP Teachers

Communicative Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Avoidance or Reduction Strategies		
Message abandonment	22	10.4%
Topic avoidance	0	0
Achievement or Compensatory Strategies		
Circumlocution	5	2.3%
Approximation	0	0
Use of all-purpose words	0	0
Word coinage	0	0
Non-linguistic means	0	0
Foreignizing	0	0
Code switching	37	17.5%
Appeal for help	14	6.6%
Literal translation	0	0
Stalling or Time-gaining Strategies		
Use of fillers	134	63.2%
Total	212	100%

***Note**. Only utilized sub-strategies are listed for clarity.*

Difference in CS Use between Teachers and Students (RQ3)

A Chi-square test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in the pattern of CS use between teachers and students. The results, presented in Table 7, were significant, χ^2 (1, N = 987) = 221.04, $p < 0.001$, with a large effect size ($\varphi = 0.47$).

Table 7. Chi Square Results on the Pattern of CS use between Teachers and Students

	CS rate
Chi-Square	221.043
Df	1

The results, presented in Table 7, were significant, χ^2 (1, N = 987) = 221.04, $p < 0.001$. This finding leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis, confirming a statistically significant difference in the utilization of communicative strategies between ESP teachers and students. As detailed in the previous sections, this difference is qualitative: Students relied heavily on meaning-compensating strategies like code-switching, while teachers primarily used time-gaining strategies like fillers to manage classroom discourse.

DISCUSSION

The primary insight emerging from this study's novel comparative lens is that strategic incompetence in exam-oriented ESP systems is not merely a learner deficit but a systemic condition, co-constructed by misaligned teacher practices and unaddressed learner self-perceptions**.** This misalignment manifests in three interrelated ways: (1) a disconnection between students' perceived sociocultural strengths and their actual strategic performance; (2) a divergent strategic repertoire between teachers and students; and (3) a pedagogical environment where neither party's strategies adequately foster strategic competence. The dissonance between students' high self-perceived interpersonal skills and their reported discomfort in L2 conversation can be interpreted through the lens of sociocultural theory. Their confidence likely stems from successfully developed sociolinguistic competence in their first language (L1) (Hymes, 1972), a competence rooted in Iranian collectivist cultural norms (Wilberschied Ph D, 2015).

However, this L1-based sociolinguistic confidence fails to transfer to the L2, where strategic competence has not been developed to support it. This finding critically extends the work of Eslami and Eslami-Rasekh (2008) on pragmatic deficiencies by quantifying a specific disconnect: a confident self-perception unsupported by the strategic 'toolkit' needed for performance (Eslami & Eslami-Rasekh, 2008). It underscores that communicative competence is not a unified whole but a set of components that can develop unevenly, with strategic competence being the critical laggard in this context.

This divergence between L1 sociocultural confidence and L2 strategic ability may be particularly acute in collectivist, exam-focused contexts like Iran. In more communicatively-oriented EFL settings, one might expect a closer alignment between self-perception and strategic skill, as classroom practice regularly exercises both. Our findings thus extend the international discourse on communicative competence by highlighting how specific sociocultural and pedagogical factors can exacerbate the compartmentalization of its components.

The practical manifestation of this anxiety is an impoverished strategic repertoire heavily reliant on code-switching, as starkly revealed by the observational data. This heavy reliance on code-switching aligns with patterns observed among learners at comparable proficiency levels in other EFL contexts (Ayuningtyas & Yufrizal, 2016; Hua et al., 2012), suggesting a universal tendency to seek the path of least linguistic resistance. However, the complete absence of intralingual strategies like circumlocution in our data presents a starker picture than often reported. While international studies note a *preference* for code-switching, they usually report at least some occurrence of other compensatory strategies. This near-total strategic poverty in our sample points to a uniquely constrained learning environment: one where the pedagogical focus on passive comprehension and exam translation provides neither the incentive nor the opportunity to develop richer, L2-internal workarounds. While code-switching efficiently bridges immediate comprehension gaps and can be a valuable bilingual resource (Domalewska, 2015), its dominance in this context has a stifling effect. The complete absence of more sophisticated, intralingual strategies like circumlocution and approximation indicates that students, when faced with a lexical gap, almost universally default to the L1 crutch rather than grappling with and expanding their L2 resources. This aligns with Khanji's (1996) observation that without explicit instruction, learners do not naturally develop a wide range of CSs (Al-Khanji, El-Shiyab, & Hussein, 2000). It also reflects the theoretical distinction between strategic competence as a core component of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980, and the reality that this

competence remains critically underdeveloped in this ESP context, leading to the "communicative failures" noted in earlier research (Benattabou, 2020). It should be noted, however, that the highly technical nature of the ESP subjects (e.g., engineering) may inherently limit opportunities for circumlocution compared to general English contexts, potentially constraining the students' displayed repertoire.

The significant difference in CS patterns reveals a classroom discourse ecology with misaligned goals. Teachers, acting as managers, primarily use stalling strategies (fillers) to control pacing and maintain the flow of instruction. This aligns with descriptions of Teacher Talk Time as a managerial tool (G. Hall, 2017). Students, positioned as linguistic strugglers, rely on compensatory and avoidance strategies. This divergence creates a pedagogical vacuum. While teachers *possess* a broader repertoire (e.g., using circumlocution), they use it infrequently and, crucially, without metacognitive commentary. Therefore, they are not modeling these strategies as teachable tools. This pedagogical vacuum, where teacher and student strategies exist in parallel but non-instructive realms, may be a distinctive feature of teacher-centered, transmission-mode classrooms common in certain educational cultures. In contrast, studies from more learner-centered, interactive EFL environments often show teachers using CSs more diagnostically or explicitly coaching strategies during tasks (Chamot, 1999; Nakatani et al., 2012). Therefore, our comparative analysis reveals not just ***which*** strategies are used, but how the classroom interactional structure itself a product of broader educational culture can prevent strategic competence from being effectively modeled or acquired. The classroom thus inadvertently reinforces a low-level strategic status quo: teachers manage talk with fillers, while students, lacking guided alternatives, default to L1-dependent compensation. This finding critically extends prior work on teacher strategies (Notash & Karafkan, 2015) by showing that mere *use* is insufficient; without explicit highlighting and explanation, teacher strategies do not become learner resources.

The findings offer three key contributions with broad relevance for the ESP knowledge community. First, they provide a new, evidence-based argument for policy shifts in similar educational contexts: curricular guidelines must explicitly mandate and resource the teaching of strategic competence as a core learning outcome, moving beyond the implicit hope that it will develop alongside vocabulary. Second, they propose a concrete pedagogical lesson: effective strategy training requires a dual focus: on designing tasks that create a need for strategic resourcefulness (reducing over-reliance on L1), and on equipping teachers to model and metacognitively unpack CS use, transforming them from unconscious speech habits into conscious learner tools. Finally, the study contributes a novel theoretical perspective by demonstrating that models of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) are not just descriptive but diagnostic; the severe underdevelopment of one component (strategic) can cripple the application of another (sociolinguistic), a dynamic acutely visible in contexts where high-stakes testing divorces language knowledge from language use. Thus, the study moves the field from *describing* strategy use to diagnosing the systemic conditions that prevent its development, offering a framework for intervention that is relevant to any ESP context struggling to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world professional communication.

Thus, the study's main contribution lies in this diagnostic shift, using a comparative mixed-methods lens to expose strategic competence not as a missing skill but as a symptom of a deeper pedagogical misalignment, thereby reframing the challenge from one of learner training to one of systemic educational redesign.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study illuminates a fundamental disconnect within an exam-oriented ESP system, serving as a diagnostic case study for similar contexts globally. It reveals that students enter the professional discourse community with a

sociocultural confidence that their strategic competence cannot support. The students' overwhelming reliance on code-switching, and the complete absence of intralingual strategies like circumlocution, starkly illustrates the underdevelopment of their strategic competence. This pattern is consistent with international findings on lower-proficiency learners (Hua et al., 2012). However, it gains greater significance when viewed through Dörnyei's (1995) taxonomy. Students are heavily using a compensatory strategy that relies on L1 resources, while entirely neglecting more sophisticated compensatory strategies that would stretch their L2 resources (e.g., circumlocution). This suggests their strategic behavior is geared toward immediate task completion (getting the word out) rather than long-term language acquisition (developing alternative means of expression). It echoes Khanji's (1996) assertion that a broad strategic repertoire does not develop naturally but requires instruction, a call that our data strongly substantiate.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the centrality of strategic competence within Canale and Swain's (1980) model by providing empirical evidence of its critical absence. It demonstrates that communicative competence models are not merely academic constructs but diagnostic tools; the severe deficit in one component (strategic) can cripple the application of others (sociolinguistic), leading to the "communicative failure" noted in pragmatics research (Thomas, 2006). Furthermore, by applying Dörnyei's (1995) pedagogical taxonomy, it moves CS research from description to diagnosis, offering a clear framework for intervention.

By documenting this strategic misalignment within a specific but representative exam-oriented system, the study offers a critical comparative case. It suggests that the global challenge of developing strategic competence is profoundly mediated by local pedagogical traditions, with systems prioritizing linguistic knowledge over use creating a particularly deep strategic deficit.

While this research provides a detailed profile of the Iranian ESP context, its findings are limited by its regional and disciplinary focus, the reliance on institutional placement rather than a standardized proficiency test, and its

specific regional and disciplinary focus. Future research should, therefore, pursue two main paths. First, longitudinal intervention studies are needed to quantitatively measure the impact of explicit CS training on students' oral fluency and communicative confidence. Second, qualitative inquiries into teachers' beliefs and knowledge about CSs could uncover the systemic barriers to implementing such strategy instruction, providing a crucial link between research and classroom practice.

Ultimately, bridging this strategic gap requires a conscious move from implicit to explicit pedagogy. For Iranian ESP to truly serve its purpose, it must evolve from teaching ESP to fostering the ability to communicate *within* them, equipping students with the strategic repertoire necessary for meaningful global engagement.

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ORCID

Faranak Nabi http://orcid.org/0009-0003-2424-4480
Mohammad Reza Khodadust http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4510-9005
Nader Asadi Aidinlou http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2284-8497

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Appendix A

ESP Students' Perceptions on Communicative Competence

Items	1 = Strongly disagree (SD)	2 = disagree (D)	3 = Neutral	4 = Agree	5 = Strongly agree (SA)
1. I find it easy to get along with others.	5(3.3%)	13(8.6%)	14(9.3%)	72 (48.2%)	46 (30.6%)
2. I can adapt to changing situations.	0	5 (3.3%)	5 (3.3%)	98(65.3%)	42(28%)
3. I treat people as individuals.	10 (6.6%)	16 (10.6%)	11 (7.3%)	65(43.3%)	48(32%)
4. I interrupt others too much.	118 (79%)	20 (13.3%)	7 (4.6%)	3(2%)	2(1.3%)
5. I am "rewarding" to talk to.	2 (1.3%)	0	18 (12%)	119 (79.4%)	1(0.6%)
6. I can deal with others effectively.	2 (1.3%)	8 (5.3%)	6 (4%)	122 (81.3%)	12(8%)
7. I am a good listener.	17 (12%)	4 (2.6%)	21 (14%)	98 (65.5%)	10(6.6%)
8. My personal relations are cold and distant.	99 (66%)	37 (24.6%)	6 (4%)	5(3.3%)	3(2%)
9. I am easy to talk to.	12 (8%)	9 (6%)	13 (8.6%)	88 (58.6%)	28(18.6%)
10. I won't argue with someone just to prove I am right.	8 (5.3%)	8 (5.3%)	9 (6%)	120 (80%)	5(3.3%)
11. My conversation behavior is not "smooth."	29 (19.3%)	3 (2%)	47 (31.3%)	64 (42.6%)	7(4.6%)
12. I ignore other people's feelings.	117 (78%)	29 (19.3%)	4 (2.6%)	0	3(2%)
13. I generally know how others feel.	0	4 (2.6%)	9 (6%)	122 (81.3%)	15(10%)
14. I let others know I understand them.	2 (1.3%)	3 (2%)	10 (6.6%)	87 (58%)	48(32%)
15. I understand other people.	0	0	4 (2.6%)	77 (51.4%)	69(46%)
16. I am relaxed and comfortable when speaking.	21 (14%)	33 (22.1%)	11 (7.3%)	65 (43.3%)	20(13.3%)
17. I listen to what people say to me.	2 (1.3%)	7 (4.6%)	17 (12%)	101 (66.8%)	23(15.3%)
18. I usually do not make unusual demands on my friends.	0	0	3 (2%)	143 (95.4%)	4(2.6%)
19. I am an effective conversationalist.	5 (3.3%)	19 (12.6%)	7 (4.6%)	70 (46.9%)	54(36%)

20. I am supportive of others.	0	0	23 (15.3%)	80 (53.5%)	47(31.3%)
21. I do not mind meeting strangers.	27 (18%)	75 (55%)	9 (6%)	19 (12.6%)	20(13.3%)
22. I can easily put myself in another person's shoes.	4 (2.6%)	9 (6%)	10 (6.6%)	127 (84.8%)	0
23. I pay attention to the conversation.	9 (6%)	21(14%)	20 (13.3%)	80 (53.5%)	20(13.3%)
24. I am generally relaxed when conversing with a new acquaintance.	22 (14.6%)	35 (23.4%)	10 (6.6%)	78 (52.1%)	5(3.3%)
25. I am interested in what others have to say.	2 (1.3%)	0	18 (12%)	119 (79.4%)	11(7.3%)
26. I enjoy social gatherings where I can meet new people.	0	1 (0.6%)	7 (4.6%)	140 (93.5%)	2(1.3%)
27. I am a likeable person.	0	0	37 (24.6%)	81 (54.1%)	32(21.3%)
28. I am flexible.	4 (2.6%)	4 (2.6%)	12 (8%)	55 (36.6%)	75(55%)
29. I am not afraid to speak with people in authority.	11 (7.3%)	8 (5.3%)	19 (12.6%)	66 (44%)	46(30.6%)
30. People can go to me with their problems	3 (2%)	2 (1.3%)	21 (14%)	49 (13.7%)	75(55%)
31. I generally say the right thing at the right time.	2 (1.3%)	7 (4.6%)	16 (10.6%)	55 (36.6%)	70(46.9%)
32. I like to use my voice and body expressively.	2 (1.3%)	0	18 (12%)	119 (79.4%)	11(7.3%)
33. I am sensitive to others' needs of the moment.	2 (1.3%)	4 (2.6%)	17 (12%)	109 (72.1%)	18(12%)
34. I do not follow the conversation very well.	6 (4%)	0	16 (10.6%)	94 (62.8%)	34(22.6%)
35. I like to be close and personal with people.	11 (7.3%)	17 (12%)	13 (8.6%)	79 (52.1%)	30(20%)
36. I generally know what type of behavior is appropriate in any given situation.	0	0	14 (9.3%)	67 (44.7%)	69(46%)