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## | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Factors Influencing the Oral Communicative Competence of Omani EFL Foundation Year Students

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## | ABSTRACT

The research investigates the factors influencing the oral communicative competence of Omani English as a Foreign Language (EFL) foundation year students. The research focuses on the influence of lexical competence, grammatical competence, and strategic competence (verbal and non-verbal communication strategies) on oral communication. Data were collected with the use of a questionnaire consisting of open- and close-ended questions and an observation checklist. The analysis revealed that psychological, language, and attitudinal barriers have an impact on the oral communication ability of students. The study brings out the significant role of language skill, attitude of the students, confidence, and familiarity with the actual use of the language. The findings of this study offer practical contributions to the challenges of Omani university EFL learners and suggest practical recommendations for better instruction in oral communication.

## | KEYWORDS

*Oral Communicative Competence; Omani EFL Foundation Year Students*

## | ARTICLE INFORMATION

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### 1. Introduction:

Oral communicative competence is the key to successful communication in English, particularly in an EFL environment, where the target language is not the most dominant spoken language. In Oman, the foundation year plays a vital role in cultivating language competence among students of universities, particularly to equip them for further studies. Though language learning is given ample focus, most students experience difficulty in oral communication of English, which also negatively impacts their academic and professional life. In this study, the variables influencing the oral communicative competence of Omani EFL foundation year students are examined, with particular emphasis on lexical competence, grammatical competence, and strategic competence. Through identification of the hindrances to such abilities, this study aims to illuminate the hindrances faced by the students and offer recommendations for how English language instruction can be enhanced.

### 2. Research Problem:

In spite of being an integral aspect of English language acquisition, the development of oral communicative competence is plagued with a variety of hindrances in the case of Omani foundation year students. Limited vocabulary, grammatical incompetence, and unsuitable application of communication strategies are some of the factors that affect their clear and confident use of English. These challenges arise from a list of barriers that encompass language capability, psychological issues, as well as students' disposition towards language learning. Therefore, the problem that this study aims to identify and solve is the factors influencing the oral communicative competence of Omani EFL foundation year students.

### 3. Research Objectives:

The primary research goals of this study are to:

1. Unveil the factors influencing Omani EFL foundation year students' lexical, grammatical, and strategic competence in oral communication.
2. Examine the impacts of language barriers, psychological barriers, and attitudinal barriers on the effectiveness of the students' communication.
3. Analyze the self-perception of Omani EFL foundation year students' oral communicative competence and compare it with their teachers' perceptions.
4. Recommend how to enhance Omani EFL foundation year students' oral communication skills based on the findings.

#### **4. Research Questions:**

The study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the determining factors of Omani EFL foundation year students' lexical competence in oral communication?
2. What are the variables influencing Omani EFL foundation year students' grammatical competence in oral communication?
3. What are the variables influencing Omani EFL foundation year students' strategic competence (verbal and non-verbal communication strategies) in oral communication?
4. How do language, psychological, and attitudinal barriers influence the acquisition of oral communicative competence among Omani EFL foundation year students?

#### **5. Research Limitations**

The current study has several limitations that should be considered:

0. The sample size may limit the results from being generalizable to all Omani EFL foundation year students.
1. The results depend on the students' self-reports, and these reports might be socially desirability-biased or influenced by self-perception deficits.
2. The observation checklist, as an objective instrument, can nonetheless be influenced by the observer's own subjective interpretation.

Despite the above constraints, the mixed-methods design gives a comprehensive picture of the predictors of oral communicative competence, and the findings are practical recommendations for improving the teaching of the English language at Omani universities.

#### **6. Research Methodology**

##### **6.1 Research Design:**

This study uses a mixed-methods design to investigate the variables influencing Omani EFL foundation year students' oral communicative competence. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, this study offers a better insight into the problems and challenges facing students in developing oral communication proficiency. This study employs both descriptive and exploratory research designs to investigate various variables influencing lexical competence, grammatical competence, and strategic competence in oral communication.

##### **6.2 Participants:**

Participants of this study are Omani EFL students in the foundation year and their English language teachers. 150 students in a public university foundation year program were selected through stratified random sampling to have an adequate representation of students from diverse academic backgrounds. In addition, 20 English language teachers who have taught students in the foundation year were selected to provide comment on the students' weaknesses and strengths in speaking communication.

##### **6.3 Data Collection Methods:**

###### **6.3.1 Questionnaire:**

A mixed-mode questionnaire was completed by students and teachers. The questionnaire had closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions evaluated the students' self-assessment of their lexical, grammatical, and strategic capabilities. The open-ended questions allowed the students and the teachers to identify and outline the factors influencing oral communicative competence.

### 6.3.2 Observation Checklist

An observation checklist was also developed to gauge the actual performance of the students in oral communication. The researchers completed the checklist from observations in the classroom, which provided a more objective determination of students' competencies. It also gauged the same three areas of competence—lexical, grammatical, and strategic—on proper language use in real conversations, including pronunciation, vocabulary use, grammaticality, and use of non-verbal communication strategies such as body language, gestures, and eye contact.

### 6.3.3 Interviews

In addition to the questionnaire and observation checklist, some students and teachers were interviewed using a few semi-structured interviews. The interviews aimed to investigate in greater detail the views of the participants on the obstacles to oral communicative competence. The interviews provided richer qualitative data that complemented the findings of the questionnaires and observation checklists.

These three methods of data collection covered three important areas:

1. **Lexical Competence:** The students' ability for using appropriate words in speaking.
2. **Grammatical Competence:** Level of students' ability to utilize the correct grammatical structures in conversation.
3. **Strategic Competence:** Strategic use of verbal and non-verbal modes of communication in conversation.

### 7. Data Analysis:

#### 7.1 Quantitative Data Analysis:

Quantitative data gathered from the closed-ended questions of the questionnaire and observation checklist were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated for each item. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was calculated to ascertain the internal consistency of the observation checklist and Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to examine the interrelation between lexical, grammatical, and strategic competencies.

#### 7.2 Qualitative Data Analysis:

The responses to the open-ended questions of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews were interpreted using thematic analysis. The researcher established common categories and themes of the barriers influencing oral communicative competence, e.g., language barriers, psychological barriers, and attitudinal barriers. The themes were contrasted between both the students' and teachers' responses to identify common patterns and observations.

### 7.3 The Results of the Teachers' Questionnaire

#### 7.3.1 Reliability of the questionnaire

Competence	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Std. Deviation	N of Items
Lexical Competence	0.73	11.90	3.33	5
Grammatical Competence	0.47	11.86	3.55	4
Strategic Competence (verbal and non-verbal strategies)	0.39	23.09	3.43	9
All Statements	0.63	46.86	5.98	18

Table (7.3.1): Reliability coefficient of the questionnaire

As table (7.3.1) shows, in order to validate the data collection tool (questionnaire), Cronbach's alpha reliability test was run to measure its internal consistency. The questionnaire utilized scored is 63% on Cronbach's alpha scale that is a score deemed higher than 0.50 which is acceptable.

### 7.3.2 Pearson's Correlation Coefficient of the Questionnaire

Table (7.3.2): Pearson's correlation coefficients of the questionnaire

Statements	Pearson Correlation	Sig(2-tailed)
Lexical Competence	0.74**	0.00
Grammatical Competence	0.52*	0.01
Strategic Competence (verbal and non-verbal strategies)	0.73**	0.00

The above table presents the Pearson correlation coefficient of the three parts of the questionnaire. The sample of participants had the highest score of correlation coefficients in lexical competence (0.74), and the lowest calculated value was for strategic competence (0.52). Closely, grammatical competence obtained the average score (0.73). According to this statistical analysis, lexical competence, grammatical competence and strategic competence levels reveal positive correlations.

### 7.3.3 Results Addressing the Third Question:

- What are the variables that influence the oral communicative competence of Omani EFL foundation year students?

In the open-ended questions section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to name the factors influencing the use of lexical competence, grammatical competence, and strategic competence (non-verbal and verbal communication strategies) in oral communication. From the responses' analysis, the researcher categorized the factors into three thematic groups: language barriers, psychological barriers, and attitudinal barriers.

#### 7.3.3.1 Barriers to Lexical Competence

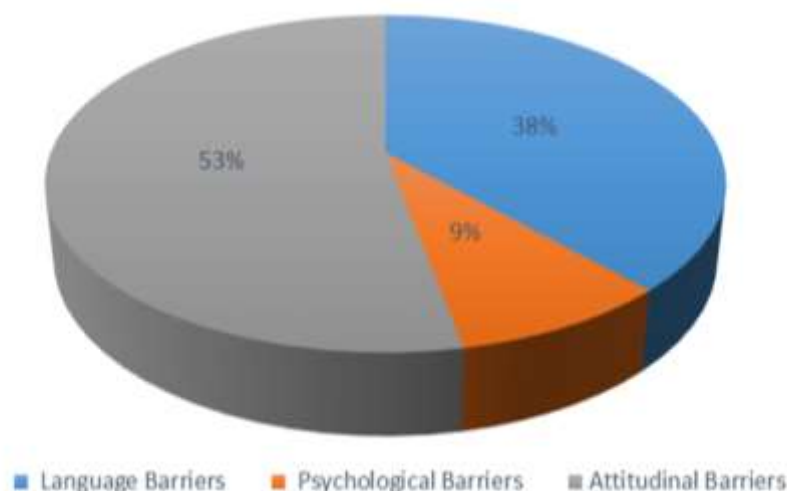


Chart (7.3.3.1): Barriers to Lexical Competence

As far as lexical competence is concerned, 38% of the teachers believed language to be a significant element that affects students' deployment of lexis in speaking. Teachers demonstrated that linguistic knowledge and language capability are central to lexical competence. For example, students' lack of vocabulary, which typically results from a lack of proper exposure to authentic reading and listening materials, as well as inadequate knowledge of parts of speech, word formation, and other linguistic matters, negatively impacts this competence.

Attitudinal barriers were mentioned by 53% of the teachers as another main factor influencing the lexical ability of the students. They are the behavior and attitudes of the students that hinder them from utilizing the language. Teachers noted that the majority of the students did not want to learn English in their university studies and even in school. Furthermore, students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation towards improving their language skills was often low. Teachers observed that a lack of competence in non-classroom and classroom speaking practice and a lack of practice for remembering new vocabulary and comprehension of target issues were responsible for poor lexical competence.

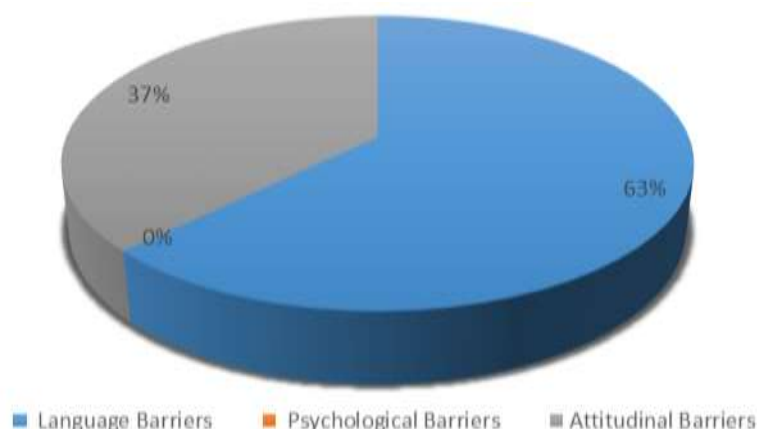
A lower percentage of teachers (9%) identified psychological barriers as contributing factors. These are associated with students' emotional and mental well-being, such as a deficiency in self-confidence, fear of error, reserve, stress, and anxiety about their ability in language, all of which thwart students' efficient use of grammatical competence.

*Table (7.3.3.1): Means, standard deviations and estimation for the domain of students' lexical competence of the questionnaire*

N	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Estimations
1	Learners pronounce words correctly.	2.95	0.899	Moderate
2	They produce alternative words when encountering linguistic obstacles.	2.5455	1.1434	Low
3	They use idiomatic expressions in conversations.	1.6364	0.90214	Very Low
4	They give immediate responses when communicating.	2.5455	1.05683	Low
5	They use appropriate lexical forms while communicating.	2.2273	0.68534	Low

It appears from the table (7.3.3.1) which shows means, standard deviations and estimation for the domain of students' lexical competence, that the results were moderate on item 1, which means the teacher is not sure if the Omani foundation students' learners pronounce words correctly. Also, the average is very low on item 3, with an average between (1.00-1.79), which means that teachers disagreed that the Omani foundation students use idiomatic expressions in conversations. The average of items 2, 4 and 5 is low with an average between (1.80-2.59), which also means that teachers disagreed that the Omani foundation students use these lexical competences.

### 7.3.3.2 Barriers to Grammatical Competence



*Chart 7.3.3.2 Barriers to Grammatical Competence*

As illustrated in Chart 7.3.3.2, 62% of teachers indicated language command as the most prominent criterion that determines grammatical ability. Language command concerns, including grammar interference of L1 and L2, notably verb tense and word-for-word translation, are the greatest areas of difficulty reported by teachers. In addition, poor comprehension of language structures among students, combined with insufficient practice in applying the rules of grammar correctly in real communication, adds to these issues.

A further issue that was identified by 37% of teachers was attitudinal barriers. For example, teachers noted that learners were not very interested in English grammar practice outside class, and their limited exposure to learning grammar in school levels, often due to time, made them even less likely to grow grammatically. Moreover, teachers stressed that the lack of engaging, meaningful class exercises that foster effective grammar learning (e.g., problem-solving exercises and grammar games) was responsible for the low level of student interest and practice.

Surprisingly, none of the teachers listed psychological barriers as a significant issue in grammatical competence. Though psychological factors might take effect on language acquisition in general, teachers did not perceive them as the main barriers to students' grammatical skills.

Table (7.3.3.2): Means, standard deviations and estimation for the domain of students' grammatical competence of the questionnaire

N	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Estimations
6	They produce grammatical utterances when communicating.	2.6818	0.8937	Moderate
7	They adopt polite structures to show their agreement/disagreement.	3	0.8165	Moderate
8	They do not use appropriate language tenses to given situations.	4.0455	0.48573	High
9	They form correct questions while communicating.	2.1364	0.77432	Low

It appears from the table (7.3.3.2) which shows means, standard deviations and estimation of the domain of Omani EFL foundation year students, that they were high on item 8, with an average between (4.20-5.00). This means that teachers agreed that the students do not use appropriate language tenses to given situations. The average of items 6 and 7 is moderate, with an average between (2.60-3.39), which means that teachers are not sure if the foundation students adopt polite structures to show their agreement/ disagreement and produce grammatical utterances when communicating. The average in item 9 is low, which means that the teachers disagreed that the foundation students formed correct questions while communicating.

### 7.3.3.3 Barriers to Strategic Competence (Verbal and Non-verbal Communication Strategies)

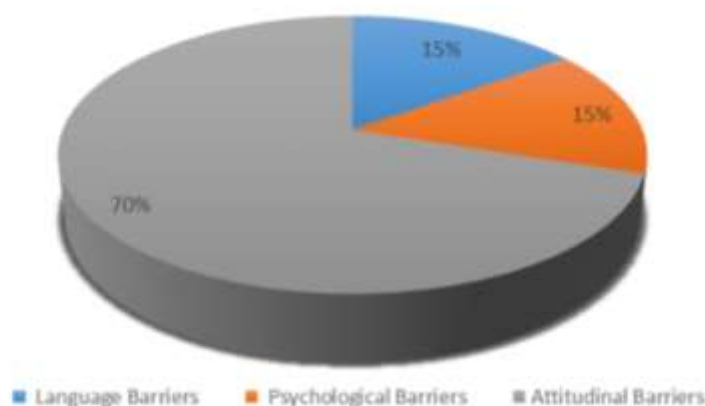


Chart 7.3.3.3 Barriers to Strategic Competence

Chart 7.3.3.3 indicates that attitudinal barriers were considered by 63% of teachers as the most significant factor influencing students' use of strategic competence, particularly verbal and non-verbal communication strategies. The teachers identified that students' attitudes towards language learning significantly impacted their motivation to use communication strategies effectively. For example, it is often unnoticed that most students don't realize how critical communication devices like verbal fillers or body language are in helping an individual communicate smoothly. The ignorance of realizing that such practices occur only occasionally, either at school or in reality.

Teachers also noted that students' use of strategic competence was affected by language barriers (15%) and psychological barriers (15%). Teachers noted that students were more concerned with conveying their ideas than with how to convey them, resulting in linguistic issues in oral communication. Also, the first language (L1) affected students' use of non-verbal communication cues, where students will carry over L1 communication strategies to L2.

Psychological limitations such as shyness, fear of errors, nervousness, and other emotions were also recognized as obstacles to effective verbal and non-verbal communication. The variables, instructors stated, led to students' difficulties in learning communication techniques and, consequently, in engaging in effective oral interactions.

*Table (7.3.3.3): Means, standard deviations and estimation for the domain of students' strategic competence of the questionnaire*

<b>N</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Estimations</b>
10	They know how to accept/ refuse invitations in a polite way.	2.5	0.59761	Low
11	They manage to keep the flow of speech in spite of linguistic issues.	2.4091	1.09801	Low
12	They know how to interrupt politely to speak.	2.6818	1.08612	Moderate
13	They ask questions for clarification.	2.7727	0.81251	Moderate
14	They know how to change the topic to redirect discussion towards a new one.	2	0.8165	Low
15	They articulate conversation filler words.	2.2727	1.12045	Low
16	They use gestures appropriately and naturally.	2.9545	0.99892	Moderate
17	They adopt appropriate body language while communicating.	2.8182	0.73266	Moderate
18	They keep effective eye contact with the audience.	2.6818	0.8937	Moderate

It appears from the table (7.3.3.3) which shows means, standard deviations and estimation of the domain of Omani EFL foundation year students, that they were low on items (10, 11, 14, 15) with an average between (1.80-2.59), which means that teachers disagreed that Omani foundation students can use these strategic competences. The average of items (12, 13, 16, 17, 18) is moderate, with an average between (2.60-3.39), which means that teachers are not sure if foundation students do these strategic competencies.

*Table (7.3.3.4): Means, standard deviations and estimation and the total response for the three competences of the questionnaire*

<b>Section</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Estimations</b>
<b>Lexical Competence</b>	2.3818	0.66736	Low
<b>Grammatical competence</b>	2.9659	0.47117	Moderate
<b>Strategic competence</b>	2.5657	0.38169	Low
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.60</b>	<b>0.33</b>	<b>Moderate</b>

Table (7.3.3.4) shows that the total response for the entire questionnaire achieved a mean of (2.6). This means that there is a moderate evaluation degree of Omani foundation students in all competencies and the lexical competence has the lowest average degree.

Table (7.3.3.5.): Means, standard deviations and estimation for the domain of students' strategic competence of the questionnaire

N	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Estimations
10	They know how to accept/ refuse invitations in a polite way.	2.5	0.59761	Low
11	They manage to keep the flow of speech in spite of linguistic issues.	2.4091	1.09801	Low
12	They know how to interrupt politely to speak.	2.6818	1.08612	Moderate
13	They ask questions for clarification.	2.7727	0.81251	Moderate
14	They know how to change the topic to redirect discussion towards a new one.	2	0.8165	Low
15	They articulate conversation filler words.	2.2727	1.12045	Low
16	They use gestures appropriately and naturally.	2.9545	0.99892	Moderate
17	They adopt appropriate body language while communicating.	2.8182	0.73266	Moderate
18	They keep effective eye contact with the audience.	2.6818	0.8937	Moderate

It appears from the table (7.3.3.5) which shows means, standard deviations and estimation of the domain of Omani EFL foundation year students, that their scores were low on items (10, 11, 14, 15) with an average between (1.80-2.59). This means that teachers disagreed that Omani foundation students can use these strategic competences. The average of items (12, 13, 16, 17, 18) is moderate, with average between (2.60-3.39), which means that teachers are not sure if foundation students do these strategic competences.

## 7.4

### 7.4.1 Reliability Statistics

Competence	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Std. Deviation	N of Items
Lexical Competence	0.42	1.64	0.37	4
Grammatical Competence	0.69	1.60	0.48	4
Strategic Competence (verbal and non-verbal strategies)	0.70	1.76	0.33	7
All Statements	0.82	1.69	0.32	15

### Students' Observation Checklist Results

Table (7.4.1): Reliability coefficient of the observation checklist

In order to test the reliability of the observation checklist to confirm the observation checklist, a Cronbach's alpha test of reliability was conducted. Results, as presented in Table 7.4.1, indicate the overall reliability of the observation checklist to be



0.82 and therefore is acceptable enough (more than the cut-off 0.50 standard). It confirms that the observation tool to assess students' oral competency has high internal consistency.

#### 7.4.2 Pearson's Correlation Coefficient

Statement	Pearson Correlation	Sig(2-tailed)
Lexical Competence	0.88	0.00
Grammatical Competence	0.81	0.00
Strategic Competence (verbal and non-verbal strategies)	0.83	0.00

Table (7.4.2): Pearson's correlation coefficients of the observation checklist

Table 7.4.2 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients for the three aspects of the observation checklist: lexical competence, grammatical competence, and strategic competence. All three aspects are highly positively correlated, with lexical competence showing the highest correlation coefficient (0.88) and grammatical competence and strategic competence both showing high correlations too (0.81 and 0.83, respectively). This suggests that improvements in one aspect of oral competence are likely to be associated with improvements in the others.

#### 7.4.3 Findings on the First Question: Lexical Competence

Statement	Frequency / Percent		
	Always	Sometimes	Never
She/he pronounces words correctly while communicating.	8	28	33
	11.6	40.6	47.8
She/he produces alternative words when encountering linguistic obstacles.	4	39	26
	5.8	56.5	37.7
She/he gives immediate responses when communicating.	4	33	32
	5.8	47.8	46.4
She/he uses appropriate lexical forms while communicating.	8	31	30
	11.6	44.9	43.5

Table (7.4.3): Perceptions of lexical competence

The answers to the observation checklist for lexical competence are presented in Table 7.4.3. It can be seen that the majority of students have problems with lexical competence, as the frequencies of students saying words correctly, generating substitute words when faced with linguistic barriers, or employing proper lexical forms during conversation are very low. Most students were found not to ever or rarely use these skills, which reflects the challenges Omani foundation year students have in this area.

#### 7.4.4 Findings with Respect to the Second Question: Grammatical Competence

Statement	Frequency / Percent		
	Always	Sometimes	Never
She/he produces grammatical utterances when communicating.	13	4	52
	18.8	5.8	75.4
She/he adopts polite structures to show their agreement/disagreement.	4	12	53
	5.8	17.4	76.8
She/he uses language tenses to given situations appropriately.	17	25	27
	24.6	36.2	39.1
She/he forms correct questions while communicating.	0	59	10
	0.0	85.5	14.5

Table (7.4.4): Perceptions of grammatical competence

As presented in Table 7.4.4, the responses to the observation checklist for grammatical competence reveal that the majority of students cannot produce grammatical sentences, use polite forms, use appropriate tenses, and form appropriate questions. These findings confirm that the majority of the students have critical difficulties with grammatical competence in oral communication, which further calls for solving the identified hindrances to improve their performance.

#### 7.4.5 Findings Related to the Third Question: Strategic Competence (Verbal and Non-verbal Communication Strategies)

Statement	Frequency / Percent		
	Always	Sometimes	Never
She/he manages to keep the flow of speech in spite of linguistic issues	6	60	3
	8.7	87.0	4.3
She/he interrupts teacher/ classmates politely to speak.	6	51	12
	8.7	73.9	17.4
She/he asks questions for clarification.	4	33	32
	5.8	47.8	46.4
She/he articulates conversation filler words.	0	52	17
	0.0	75.4	24.6
She/he adopts appropriate and natural gestures.	10	31	28
	14.5	44.9	40.6
She/he uses suitable body language while communicating.	8	37	24
	11.6	53.6	34.8
She/he keeps effective eye contact with the audience.	0	36	33
	0.0	52.2	47.8

Table (7.4.5): Perceptions of strategic competence

In the strategic competence section, responses in Table 7.4.5 show that while some students can sustain speech flow and utilize communication strategies like gestures and body language, most students do not use these strategies. Furthermore, aspects like asking for clarification and sustaining eye contact were often lacking, showing areas of improvement in students' verbal as well as non-verbal communication strategies.

Table (7.4.6) Means, standard deviations and estimation and the total response for the three competences of the observation checklist

Section	Mean	Standard Deviation	Estimations
<b>Lexical Competence</b>	1.6486	0.37456	Low
<b>Grammatical competence</b>	1.6087	0.48218	Low
<b>Strategic competence</b>	1.7619	0.32931	Moderate
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.6908</b>	<b>0.32155</b>	<b>Moderate</b>

Table (7.4.6) shows that the total response for the entire observation checklist achieved a mean of 1.6. This means that the foundation year students have a low evaluation degree in all competencies and the grammatical competence has the lowest average degree.

## 8. Summary of Results

Table 7.4.6 provides a summary of the means, standard deviations, and the estimates of the three competence areas assessed through the observation checklist. Overall, the lexical and grammatical ability of students was rated as "low," whereas their strategic ability was rated as "moderate." This indicates that while students demonstrate some ability to utilize strategic communication strategies, their lexical and grammatical abilities are domains of serious concern, suggesting the need for specific interventions so that these deficits can be improved in their oral communication skills.

## 9. Conclusion

The research has examined the multifaceted effects on Omani EFL foundation year students' oral communicative competence, spanning three of the most important linguistic sub-components—lexical competence, grammatical competence, and strategic competence. The findings point out that the students' ability to communicate successfully in spoken English is affected

significantly not only by their proficiency in the language but also by a host of psychological and attitudinal factors. Linguistic challenges such as weak vocabulary and grammatical flaws, along with psychological barriers such as anxiety and low confidence, were found to encroach on the communication skills of the students. The students' attitudes towards English and exposure to authentic communicative contexts also emerged as major determiners of oral proficiency.

The concordance between student self-assessment and teacher rating also highlighted discrepancies in the evaluation of communicative competence, pointing to the need for more open and more consistent criteria in evaluating oral proficiency. The evidence of the questionnaires and classroom observations confirms that while strategic competence—incarnated in the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies—can make up for linguistic weakness, its success is often curtailed by students' confidence and willingness to communicate.

The study concludes that the enhancement of oral communicative competence among Omani EFL learners must be an integrated endeavor aimed at linguistic competence and learners' emotional and psychological readiness. More communicative tasks should be included by curriculum designers and teachers, in addition to creating low-anxiety and supportive learning environments, and offering feedback and encouragement continuously. Furthermore, building students' exposure to authentic language use and strengthening positive attitudes towards English are essential steps in enabling learners to speak confidently and clearly. By addressing these interrelated factors, the oral communication skills of Omani foundation year students can be significantly improved, thereby better equipping them for academic and professional success.

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